



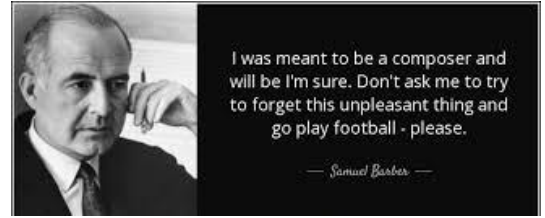
SURE ON THIS SHINING NIGHT

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Text: James Agee (1909-1955)

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ANALYSIS

BROAD DESCRIPTION/TYPE: Choral arrangement of an American art song

CONTEXT (Curated & Meaningful to Teaching Plan):

Samuel Barber and James Agee were contemporaries, born in 1910 and 1909, respectively. Both grew up near large American cities (Barber near Philadelphia, and Agee near Knoxville), and the neighborhoods of their youth were similar in size, demographic, and economic standing. The family similarities were exciting for Barber, and in a letter to his uncle, he wrote: "It reminded me so much of summer evenings in West Chester, now very far away, and all of you are in it!" Both also studied at private American institutions of higher education (Agee at Harvard, Barber at the Curtis Institute of Music). Both men were deeply drawn to the other's medium. Barber had a strong affinity for text: "I have always had a sense of the written word, and have sometimes thought that I'd rather write words than music." Similarly, Agee also had a strong passion for music: "Often, I feel I'd give anything to have forgotten everything but music, because I want so to compose. I really think I could have done it—possibly better than writing."

"Sure on this Shining Night" is the third song in the collection entitled *Four Songs* which was published by G. Schirmer in 1940, with the text based on an untitled lyric from Agee's first published collection of poems, *Permit Me Voyage* (1934). The two eventually met and formed a lasting friendship with the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, but that was not until after Barber set Agee's *Knoxville, Summer of 1915* in 1948.

Barber's compositional style has often been referred to as "neo-Romantic," full of lyricism and expressiveness. In many ways, Barber's music recalls the harmonic language of Brahms, whom he studied in great detail. One of his distinguishing trademarks is canonic imitation, a technique which utilizes the same theme for both the melody and "accompaniment," producing a cohesive structural unity. Barber's genius lies in his ability to fuse romantic-style melodies, homophony and polyphony, and complex musical textures into a coherent, yet expressive work.

Critic Paul Henry Lang once said of Barber's style, "He may be inspired by good examples, but he never borrows." In 1971, near the end of his career, Barber stated: "When I'm writing music for words, then I immerse myself in those words, and I let the music flow out of them...I'm not a self-conscious composer...it is said that I have no style at all, but that doesn't matter. I think that's what's been holding composers back a great deal is that they feel they must have a new style every year. This, in my case, would have been hopeless...I just go on doing, as they say, my thing. I believe this takes a certain courage."

FORM

Barber employs a loose ABA' form, which the poem implies (but does not complete), and a short codetta. Agee's poem contains irregular line length, enjambment of lines, and no formal rhyme scheme, so Barber mirrors these traits by obscuring the formal sections, (ie. overlapping text) varying each section's length, and adding a short codetta of his own. The flexibility of the musical form underscores its role as background scenery to the main characters of melody and texture.

A m. 1-10 "Sure on this shining night..."
B m. 11-20 "The late year lies down the north..."
A¹ m. 21-30 "Sure on this shining night..."
Codetta m. 31-34 "On this shining night."

MELODY

Originally a solo art song, the almost completely diatonic melodic line evokes the gentle, awe-filled mood of the text. It is almost entirely comprised of steps and thirds (with only two exceptions, and even these larger leaps of a fifth feel gentle and easy). The motif of ascending and descending thirds figure prominently throughout Barber's melodic line, occurring no less than 12 times in 34 measures of music.

The contour of the melodic line in the A and A¹ sections is gently descending, almost “sigh” like, and reminiscent of the contemplative outer stanzas of Agee’s poem. These contrast nicely with the slow upward arching of the more celebratory B section. The high point of the melody occurs in the B section of the song (where the E natural accidental is employed) at measure 13 and coincides with the natural zenith of the text, “All is healed, all is health, hearts all whole” underscoring the contentment and gratitude of the poem’s speaker.

From here, the melodic contour gradually and gently descends and, in the art song, would end on its lowest point, after the text “wand’ring far alone...” is sung. However, in the choral arrangement, Barber ends with two hopeful leaps of a third on the text, “On this shining night.”

RHYTHM

Accompaniment - The lulling, hypnotic, heart-beat-like 8th note pulse is ever present throughout this short work and acts as a motor to gently propel the listener onward. However, with Barber’s employment of *espressivo*, *ritardando*, *a tempo*, *rallentando*, and *morendo*, the energy is never robotic or stiff; indeed it’s an incredibly natural “motor,” subject to the interpretation of each ensemble. The quarter rest at m.32 is notable because it’s the first pause in the action for all vocal lines and accompaniment; a silence and chance to breathe before the final conclusion.

Voices - Barber unifies the composition by employing a wonderful rhythmic motif.



Throughout the work, a longer tone (quarter, dotted quarter, or half note) followed by 4 to 5 eighth notes is heard and recognized by the listener in canon and by accompanying voices in each formal section, yet it is varied enough so as not to bore or become mundane; the variations sound like natural outgrowths of the initial motive. Barber’s masterful ability to subtly alter these rhythmic motives (while retaining the essence of the original idea) allows the listener to hear each motive as a small part of a greater whole.

Also notable are measures 9-10 and 17-20 in which Barber changes meter to accommodate the irregularity of Agee’s poetic syllables, thus providing a smooth transition between lines (the sonic equivalent of poetic enjambment) breaking up the monotony of the ¾ time, and highlighting a significant line of text, “Hearts all whole.”

HARMONY

The A section begins in Bb major and primarily employs major tonalities (Bb, Eb) before shifting to the mediant (d minor) in the second half. Any dissonance (major 7ths, major 2nds, suspensions) is handled delicately, and then resolved quickly, allowing the listener to feel slightly on edge, yet at peace.

Section B harmonically ‘wanders’ further from Bb major through e minor (a traditionally “colder” sharp key, used just after singing “the late year lies down the north”) and A major (“All is healed”) before returning to Bb major at “High summer...” After traveling further away from the Bb tonal center and having crescendoed to a musical climax on e minor and d minor, the “pull” back to the familiar Eb and Bb sonorities gives the listener a profound sense of comfort, right as the choir is singing, “Hearts all whole,” a beautiful synthesis of text and tonality. Because of this harmonic contrast between sections, Barber is also able to subtly highlight the differences between the first-person melancholy (“I, me”) of Agee’s first and third stanzas and the unifying-nature (“all, hearts, whole”), possibly lending his own commentary to Agee’s poem.

The A¹ section is similar harmonically to A, with less focus on d minor and more repetitions of the Bb and Eb sonorities. Barber uses a sequence of three specific chords - g minor, Eb major, and Bb major* - in three of the most significant moments of the work: the initial line (“Sure on this...”), immediately after the climax when he transitions back into A’ (“High summer...”), and on the final three measures (“On this shining...”), a subtle unifying of sonorities.

Barber’s use of this meandering harmonic landscape focuses on repeated plagal relationships and refrains from any functional cadences until the very end. The sonorities flow incredibly smoothly from one to another: the chords Barber employs* almost all share two or three notes, so the listener hears gradual and very effortless change. Again, here is Barber’s mastery at work: the chord progressions are anything but traditional, and the song wanders far away from the original Bb major tonality, yet because of the shared tones and control of dissonance, the listener never feels uneasy or on edge. It is quite the opposite. He’s created harmonies that are mysterious, compelling, and yet sonically fulfilling.

TIMBRE

Barber's choral arrangement takes its cue from the solo art song - rarely are the vocal lines in extremes of their respective tessituras (though the alto and bass, mostly used in a harmonic, accompanying context, do reach down to a low G). This creates a calming, tranquil, and contemplative mood for the listener. The key of Bb allows for the full vocal range to be employed, with the high point of the melody on an achievable high "G" for vocalists. Only at the climax on m. 13 do the sopranos ascend to a high G for almost a measure, and then slowly return to a more comfortable tessitura.

TEXTURE

Perhaps the most intriguing and unique aspect to this work, the texture is neither fully homophonic nor fully polyphonic. Almost never* do all 4 vocal lines sing the same word at the same time. By presenting the text polyphonically, Barber increases the effect Agee's poetic alliterations, obscures downbeats (thereby adding to the ethereal mood), and brilliantly highlights the both the "individual" in the poem (stanzas 1 & 3: "me, I" = very polyphonic) and the "universal" (stanza 2: "all, hearts, whole" = more homophonic).

The accompaniment and 3 to 4 vocal parts are omni-present throughout the work except for the opening measure and m. 31, where everything comes to a glorious pause on beat 4, where Barber allows us to bask in the warmth and beauty of the moment before the final conclusion. *All four vocal parts finally sing together in the last 2 bars of the work, where the chorus declaims "On this shining night" homorhythmically after a dramatic "breath" (literally and figuratively at m. 31) which gives the listener a profound sense of closure and "whole-ness."

Furthermore, in the original art song, Barber placed the vocal melody in canon with the right hand of the piano, lending the work a "polyphonic-like" feel. In the choral arrangement, the Soprano melody is in canon with the Tenor voice throughout most of the work, with the Alto and Bass voices accompanying with slower moving lines and piano providing rhythmic and harmonic support throughout. Though technically homophonic, Barber creates a unique texture, essentially marrying Palestrina-esque vocal lines with Schubertian accompaniment, which again leaves the listener with filled with awe, simultaneously hearing four vocal lines (and their repeated keywords and consonant sounds). The overall effect is analogous to gazing at the stars on a clear night: overwhelming yet calming, as if the experience allows you gain perspective and feel at one with nature.

DYNAMICS

Barber employs the dynamics of "Sure On This Shining Night" to subtly enhance the mood and message of Agee's poem. In the "A" section, the Soprano melody and Tenor canon are *mp* while the accompanying alto/bass voices are *p*, which establishes a tranquil, calm, introspective mood. The first real dynamic change comes in the "B" section, as all parts crescendo through *mf* to *f* on as the poem/song climax on the text "All is healed" (which again emphasized a faith in nature: winter is past, spring means renewal, and "high summer" is the place where "hearts [are] whole"). Throughout these measures, there are two instances of *subito p* followed by a *crescendo* to *mf*, as if the singer/performer realized their own outburst of joy but couldn't quite contain it. This dynamic of *mf* continues into the beginning the "A'" section, and slowly decrescendos as the work concludes. In the final measures, Barber employs a *pp* dynamic and the term *morendo*, effectively capturing the reverence and serenity of Agee's poem.

HEART

The heart of "Sure on This Shining Night" is the awe-filled melody soaring atop smooth, peaceful harmonies which together evoke a sense of wonder and gratitude for life "this side the ground."

INTRODUCING THE PIECE

Knowledge Outcome

Poem vs. Recipe "How is repetition artfully conceived & used?"

1. In each of these, you'll hear repetition. How is the repetition different?
2. Poets & even Musicians use repetition to their advantage, to help their audiences understand something, to highlight themes, to help make connections.
3. Students read/post poetry term signs

OUTCOMES

SKILL - Students will recognize and refine the capacity, connection, and consistent airflow necessary to sing in tune at a slower tempo.

STRATEGIES

1. **"Is There a Problem?"**
 - a. Reminders: Singing as an individual within a choir. How easy it is to cheat.
 - b. "You are your own best teacher. Are you actively learning from yourself?"
 - c. Sing a "normal" warm-up but slow it way down.
 - i. What makes singing at a slower tempo so much harder? - TPS discussion
2. **Capacity**
 - a. "Seat the breath" - students need to know what a full breath really feels like
 - b. Exhale fully on "pssss" - laser beam, don't "break the goblet," then let air come in "like a wave, from the top down, expanding all parts"
 - c. "In For/Out For" - successively use less time for inhalation, keep exhalation consistent OR pulse
 - d. "Nail in the Tire" - choir exhales on "hsss," my thumb/finger stops air, choir feels "support"
3. **Connection** (sometimes known as 'support')
 - a. Definition: "The sensation of the air being continually engaged to create a steady, energized sound"
 - b. "Imagery" - See an owl. Surprise breath & hold to see if you're safe. Sigh deeply.
 - i. Inner tube around waist, hold it there, stay in place as you exhale.
 - ii. Roots of a tree. Iceberg under water. - "Seat the breath" & remember it's lower than you think
 - iii. "Hook-In" - Use interlocking forefingers hooking around each other, center of body, lower than belly button - refresh each measure to remain engaged
4. **Consistent Airflow**
 - a. Pinwheels - ask students to consistently monitor breathflow by keeping a pinwheel moving
 - b. Ask singers: other images to help you think of constant spinning out? (candle, bowl of hot soup, etc)
 - c. "Singing vs. Exhaling" - one group sings the passage, one group follows along that vocal line, exhaling on "sss" or "pff" (more difficult!) exactly in time with the singing group. Switch roles.

ASSESSMENTS

1. **Marking the Score** - blue highlighter, places to breathe, compare with neighbor, On/Off within sections to see if you actually breathed where you were supposed to (informal)
2. **Reciprocal Teaching** - each student performs it for the other, feedback given, practice again, more feedback, then 1-2 demonstrate for class, group feedback, then put into practice with song
 - a. record performance of a line on the phone, journal space - Evaluate your capacity, connection, and consistent airflow in this passage (formal)
3. **Listening Analysis/Evaluation** - Listen to a rehearsal "take" of our choir, complete worksheet (informal)

KNOWLEDGE - Students will discover how repetition creates meaning in poetry and music.

STRATEGIES

1. **Terms** - Hang posters with clear, concise definitions of the following terms: consonance, assonance, rhyme, rhythm, motif, imagery
2. **"Poetry Mechanics"** - analyze, discuss in groups of 6
 - a. "Windy Nights," "April," "The Eagle," "The New Colossus"
 - b. James Agee's "Sure on This Shining Night" -
 - i. 1) Consonance/Assonance, 2) Rhyme/Rhythm, 3) Motif/Imagery
3. **"How Music Makes Sense"** - Give for HW or take 5 min in class

- a. Key Points: literal vs. varied repetition, repetition without redundancy, maximize the minimum
 - b. Transfer: quick musical examples from Hallelujah Chorus
 - i. www.wiley.com/go/whatmakesitgreat - Chapter 3, videos
 - ii. Musical examples of repetition: pitch, rhythm, motif, layering themes
4. **“Musical Detectives”** - Students will analyze “Sure on This Shining Night” groups of 6, analyze: melody only, voices only, accompaniment only (more musical experience=accomp. role)
- a. (qs: examples of repetition? intervals, rhythms, chords, sounds (remember consonance/assonance?))
 - b. “Where can you find examples of repetition without redundancy?”
 - c. Journal - How was Barber most effective in using musical repetition? (ie. melodically, between the voices, with the voices vs. the accompaniment, other example?) How did this musical repetition support the mood or meaning of Agee’s poem?

ASSESSMENTS

1. **Class Discussion** of poems from “Poetry Mechanics” Strategy (informal)
2. Completed **group worksheets** on “Sure on This Shining Night” from “Poetry Mechanics” Strategy (formal)
3. Completed **group worksheets** and individual journal responses from “Musical Detectives” Strategy (formal)

AFFECTIVE - Students will evaluate how variations in diction, dynamics, and tempo can enhance or detract from musical mood and affect choral performance.

STRATEGIES

1. **“Clear Definitions”** - TPS with informal class discussion. What do (diction, dynamics, tempo) mean?
2. **“Wonder Warm-Up”**
 - a. SMFRMDRTLTS - Sung on each successive 2-line phrase of Agee’s poem.
 - b. Informal discussion of individual musical intuition: What words stick out to you? What sounds do you want to bring out (vowel/consonant)? What notes could you make longer to emphasize a word? Could dynamic contrast play a role?
 - c. Alter an existing melody, using “Sure” text w/diction, dynamics, tempo, then class performs & evaluates
3. **“Messiah Masterclass”** – Singing “For the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth” line from “Messiah”
 - a. Day 1: two singers (spoken to before class), perform very vanilla version and very over-the-top version, class evaluates: How well did this performance support the mood of the music and text?
 - b. Day 2-?: random volunteers perform, varying articulation, tempo, & dynamics, class evaluates
4. **“Expressive Listeners”** – Selecting specific students (or groups of students) to listen/comment during rehearsal
 - a. Early: sections with “down time” can focus on a particular category, write on 3x5 card, discuss
 - b. Middle: Individual students informally provide feedback to the whole group, each take different category
 - c. Later: Visual Meter for each category; both director and students can evaluate group & move meter
5. **“Auto-Pilot is the Enemy”** - How can we overcome the “boredom” of doing the “same thing” each day?
 - a. Fist to Five - self evaluation
 - b. On/Off within row & discuss - “What was it like to listen to communicative singing? The opposite?”
 - c. Experiment hand/arm movement - “Can movement help us communicate the mood more effectively?”

ASSESSMENTS

1. **Class Discussion** from “Messiah Masterclass,” “Auto-Pilot,” and “Expressive Listener” Strategies (informal)
2. **Journal** - In “Sure on This Shining Night” m. 10-20, as a choral communicator, how does your awareness of articulation and dynamics affect how the audience’s experience? (formal)
3. **“Wonder Warm-Up 2.0”**
 - a. “4 bar warm up” from above Strategy (informal)
 - b. Final Project: write a 4-bar melody, based on the text (poem, lyrics) of your choosing, with dynamics, & tempo changes (if necessary). Short explanation detailing how your performance would enhance the mood of the music/text. (formal).