

A Remnant of a Grand Tradition: An Analytical Reading of *Vanessa* (1958)

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Abstract

Even though *Vanessa* received a lukewarm reception at its European premier in 1958 and the opus' revival has been irregular, the opera still occupies a special place in the history of opera of the English language. Gian-Carlo Menotti and Samuel Barber's operatic collaboration follows the dramatic convention in the genre of music theater of the nineteenth-century in portraying its heroine. Furthermore, the setting of the opera also reminisces the theatrical themes from the previous century, and focuses on domestic conflicts and mysteries. As most part of the western world was still trying to come out of the horror of the WWII, such theatrical offering might not be able to entice its audience, who was eager to experience new form of artistic expressions. The essay will have a close reading of *Vanessa* and its association with the traditional operatic narrative. The genre of music theater is fascinated with the portrayal of female characters. Thus, through analysing the narrative construction and character depictions of the opera, readers can start to sense the dramatic function of a female character in an operatic narrative. Finally, the essay will also discuss the effect of applied postmodernism on the genre of music theater. Perhaps, it is because of this current intellectual paradigm that signals the decline of this unique art form.

Keywords

Music Theater, English Libretto, Post-War History, Feminism, Intersectionality

1. Introduction

Menotti and Barber's *Vanessa* begins with the premise of the heroine's submissive mentality within a patriarchal society (Heiland, 2004). The work highlights the delicate balance of the power dynamic in a relationship and emphasizes the characters' emotional bond. Vanessa has the beauty and wealth but emotionally

she still longs for a masculine figure in her life and is willing to suspend her life for twenty years for that to happen. By featuring a heroine with extreme wealth and beauty, the librettist intends to set the opera in a fantasy world of unconstrained glamour without the awkwardness of real decision and action.

Furthermore, the theme of the interiorisation of women's social and emotional needs can also be considered the main subject of Samuel Barber and Gian-Carlo Menotti's only collaboration, *Vanessa*. The work was arguably one of the most highly anticipated American works prior to its successful premier at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York on 23 January 1958. Distantly inspired by Isak Dinesen's (Karen Blixen) "The Old Chevalier" from her *Seven Gothic Tales*, this American opera is written by an American composer and an Italian librettist; the opus is conceived by following the conventional European "grand opera" style. As Barbara B. Heyman suggests, "*Vanessa* does epitomize the conventional lyrical style of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Romantic operas; but while its models derive from Verdi, Puccini, and Strauss, the musical ideas are always on Barber's own terms" (Heyman, 1992). Not only the musical style but also the literary manner in *Vanessa* can be seen to have been influenced by its European antecedents.

In practice, however, the opera is vague in establishing its genre. Clearly the Gothic and melodramatic elements are supposed to remove this from grubby realism into the land of romantic myth. But there is no sign to indicate the type of myth the opera belongs to and it is notable that most myths do not involve quite so much swooning music. The characterization of the heroine does not give her any symbolic value nor succeed in portraying her even as the stereotype of the female self-sacrificing figure as most of her nineteenth or early twentieth-century counterpart. Her initial renunciation of her happiness and youth looks more like extended pique than unfulfilled passion, and Vanessa eventually gains her "salvation" with Anatol junior who gives every indication of being profoundly untrustworthy. As the hero finally departs with his adroitly [re]claimed mistress, the music seems to endorse this improbable union of opportunism and self-delusion and *Vanessa* has managed to espouse the weakly conventional view of the female operatic character as passive receiver in a male dominated society.

Vanessa is set in an unspecified Northern European country during the winter season. The librettist deliberately uses the gothic elements to evoke not only a sense of romance but also an impression of unattainability throughout the narrative. The never ceasing snow and the coldness in the story also symbolize the heroine's emotion, which has been frozen in a time capsule since her lover's untimely departure. The dinner scene, which opens the opera, represents a daily routine of the household and captures not only the opulence of the family but also a sense of stillness indicating that very little has changed for quite some time. The first scene establishes the relationship between the three female characters: Vanessa is agitatedly waiting for her lover; Erika is collectedly carrying on

her daily routine and looking after her aunt while the Baroness' indifference and silence to the heroine are her strong protest against Vanessa's irrational behaviours. The arrival of a stranger suddenly awakens the heroine's emotions as she believes that he is her lover, Anatol. In fact, the stranger's name is Anatol—not the heroine's bygone lover but his son.

Anatol's startling presence appears to bring the heroine's household "alive" again. However, in the second scene the librettist also indicates the young hero's facile character and this creates a variation on a nineteenth-century romantic story. Anatol not only has successfully seduced Erika on the day of his arrival but has also managed to manipulate Vanessa into believing that she is in love again with him. The hero's fluid character arouses the Baroness' strong suspicion as to his motives but she nevertheless strongly urges Erika to be more assertive in her own interest. But after hearing Anatol's easy-going attitude to love, Erika realizes that he is not as committed to her as she is to him and decides to give him up on behalf of her aunt, even though she is already pregnant by him.

The second act further expands on the relation between Vanessa and Anatol with the announcement of their engagement. The seemingly ritualistic declaration of love in the act is strangely muddled with an unlikely love duet. "ANATOL: Love has a bitter core, Vanessa. /Do not taste too deep. /Do not search into the past. /He who hungers for the past will be fed on lies. /VANESSA: Love has a bitter core, Anatol, /but let me taste this bitterness with you. /I shall never take too much/if you will offer all." (*Vanessa*, Act II) The passage reveals the characters' different outlooks on their love affair. Anatol is quite bluntly telling Vanessa that his love is most likely to be insincere. However, the heroine still enthusiastically and blindly welcomes his love for her and expresses her willingness to suffer the consequences. The librettist is using Anatol and Vanessa's romantic proclamation to express a cynical view on the true motives within a conventional relationship. Furthermore, the ceremonial atmosphere for the scene is marred by the absence of Erika. The heroine's niece is heartbroken by Anatol's betrayal and she dashes out into the snowy evening, murmuring that Anatol's child "must not be born".

The first scene in act three is set in Erika's bedroom, a couple of hours after the engagement party. Even though the girl has been rescued by Anatol by being pulled out of a snowdrift and has suffered a miscarriage, Vanessa is tormented by the possibility that Erika is actually in love with Anatol. Vanessa demands an explanation from Anatol as to why her niece went out but Anatol's evasive response allows the heroine to believe he really loves her. As the scene comes to an end, Erika finally tells her grandmother that she miscarried on the night of Vanessa's engagement. Astounded by Erika's conduct, the baroness turns her back on Erika and abandons her just as she did to Vanessa. The final scene contrasts Vanessa and Anatol's preparation for their departure for their life in Paris with Erika's solemn lament for the loss of her love and youth. The opera concludes with Erika's words, "Now it is my time to wait!"

The structure of *Vanessa* relies upon a cyclic narrative form in which the fate of the heroine will eventually pass on to her successor, Erika. Although the relationship between Vanessa and Erika is bound by blood, their parallel fates have almost added a supernatural element throughout the whole piece. Although fate casts a formidable shadow for the heroine and her niece, the librettist also provides a dramatic twist to amplify the elements of this seemingly gothic romance. Like the character of Rodolphe Boulanger in *Madame Bovary*, Anatol is not only unconventional but also unsatisfactory as the hero of a romance. Even though he is naturally eager to meet the woman who “haunted” his family throughout his childhood, his actual intention and manner of the visit is something of a mystery. The baroness unreservedly speaks out her impression about the young Anatol, “but this Anatol, oh this cautious knight/who entered our house like a thief, /what kind of a man is he?” (*Vanessa*, Act I scene ii). The word “thief” combined with Anatol’s sudden and peculiar appearance and behaviour suggests the character is better to be described as an opportunist than a romantic hero. Without his family (it is unclear what has happened to them, except that Anatol the elder has died) and being alone in the world, Vanessa’s vast wealth immediately represents the obvious and the most plausible attraction for Anatol’s visit.

Although Anatol’s visit finally terminates Vanessa’s solitary longing for her previous lover, the young man also awakens Erika’s womanhood and inspires her to break away from being in her aunt’s shadow. This takes the form of her getting drunk and allowing herself to be seduced by Anatol on the first night of his arrival as the young hero alluringly utters, “Outside this house the world has changed. /Time flies faster than before; /there is no time for idle gestures. /I cannot offer you eternal love/for we have learned today such word are lies. /But the brief pleasure of passion, yes, /and sweet, long friendship.” (*Vanessa*, Act I scene ii) With her entire life entrenched in Vanessa’s isolated mansion, Erika has obviously very little experience in interacting with others. The appearance of Anatol the son not only resuscitates Vanessa’s unending aspiration for reunion with her past lover but also awakens Erika’s femininity and her craving for love. For her, Anatol represents the freedom of the outside world. Erika finds Anatol irresistible and yields to temptation. Allured by Anatol’s romantic talk, as illustrated above, Erika unwittingly inherits Vanessa’s fate and stays even more firmly under the shadow of her aunt.

The dramatic function of Anatol’s character exposes an unexpected source of confusion in understanding the opera. Menotti’s libretto clearly underlines the character’s unreliability, as immediately announced by the Baroness. Although the Baroness does not have many lines to sing, her grim presence throughout the piece has made her an authoritative (if somewhat eccentric) witness to the Vanessa/Anatol/Erika love triangle. Her strong suspicion of Anatol’s intentions behind the visit is the librettist’s initial indication which suggests a dramatic twist on this seemingly romantic plot of lost-love recovered. Menotti’s intention of undermining the conventionalities of plot in gothic romance find further evi-

dence in Vanessa and Anatol's love duet in the second act. "ANATOL: I did not ask for whom you were waiting/that night when first we met. /VANESSA: For you, Anatol, for you. /ANATOL: Not, not for me, for I was born that night." (*Vanessa*, Act II) Anatol clearly understands that it was not him that Vanessa is expecting, that it was in fact his father; in turn, Vanessa glosses over this detail in order to accept this specious declaration. The hero is merely an illusion of his father whom Vanessa in true Romantic fiction style dearly loved and can never forget. Nevertheless, with remarkably little effort, he beguiles the heroine into loving him and implores her to forget her painful past. Vanessa simply falls for this young re-embodiment of her former lover without questioning much about him. The heroine has been living in a delusional mental state since all she does in her desolated mansion is await the re-appearance of her Anatol. It is difficult to describe the exact tone of this libretto. At one level, through this unrealistic positioning of the main characters, the librettist intends that it should resemble something of a mythic narrative about a woman's steadfast virtue. On the other hand, there is a profoundly cynical strain running through the whole piece.

By employing gothic elements in the libretto, the librettist can transfer the plot from realism into the realm of fantasy, but quasi-realist considerations become insistent. Vanessa's hysterical response towards the appearance of young Anatol underlines Menotti's aim not only to establish the piece as a mythic fantasy but also to reflect the heroine's delusion state of mind. One might compare much of this to Proust, where love is so tied up with illusion and self-projection that the old romantic myth can no longer survive. However, Barber's music does not fully correspond with Menotti's intention of creating a distinctly odd dramatic entanglement between Vanessa, Anatol and Erika.

Furthermore, the composer does nothing to explore the caddishness in Anatol but simply depicts the character in the mode of a nineteenth-century romantic hero. It is typical of the score that the rich melodic lines in Vanessa and Anatol's love duet seem entirely without irony. Where the libretto has established dubiety or self-delusion, Barber's music persists in romanticising the plot as if it can be taken at face value. As a result, instead of composing the music for a gothic intrigue, the composer approaches the story as a piece of late romantic music theatre, such as Puccini's *Turandot* (1924). The composer's aim in connecting the twentieth-century American opera with European traditions has led the piece to be criticised as being not "American" enough. But this rather misses the point. One should rather question whether the main situation is at all coherent. Perhaps the comment reflects the shortcomings of the piece in which the composer and the librettist were too eager to recall the operatic tradition of the previous century but neglected a chance to explore either the implications of its own materials or embark on a new direction for the genre of music theatre in the twentieth-century.

In the opera, the young Erika is presented as Vanessa's mirror image as she reflects, "sometimes I am her niece/but mostly her shadow." (*Vanessa*, Act I scene i)

The young Anatol's appearance, therefore, initiates Erika's self-recognition. In the course of the piece the young lady has gradually evolved from a mere reflection of her aunt into a mature independent woman. However, in a re-enactment of the family fate, Erika, just like her aunt Vanessa before her, also chooses to sacrifice herself (and her child), in this case to deny a man whose integrity she no longer believes in—though the baroness thinks she should just get what she can. Rather she makes herself available for the future appearance of some possible ideal love. Like the heroine, Erika has surrendered to her destiny, which is to await the arrival of her future lover, as she delivers the ultimate phrase of the opera, “now it is my turn to wait!” (*Vanessa*, Act III, scene ii)

Although *Vanessa* did not succeed in captivating the Austrian critics at its European premiere at the Salzburg Festival in 1958, Barber and Menotti's collaboration nevertheless won over its first European audience. To quote Henrik Kralik's review in *Die Presse* after *Vanessa*'s Salzburg performance, the critic declares the opera is “an opera for the public and not for the intellectuals”. As with gothic fiction itself, one of its narrative appeals is to evoke a sense of nostalgia through capturing a fantasized version of the aristocratic past; *Vanessa*'s targeted audience would be the social bourgeois. By drawing on an exotic and lavish European setting, the opera seems designed to capture middle class America's nostalgic fantasy concerning the old world. Along with Barber's music, Menotti's libretto achieved critical acclaim in the United States, as a journalist notes, “Mr. Menotti's libretto is effective theatre, and by the time the composer has reached the fourth act he has conquered the problems of opera. He has educated himself *en route*, as it were, and the most significant lesson he has learned is that the surest way to reach the heart of the audience is to be true to his own deepest musical instincts” (Taubman, 1958).

The combination of Vanessa's blind and self-deluding love for Anatol, Erika's naivety and the insincere, deceiving character of the hero, demonstrates Menotti's intention to create an ironic reading of a conventional romance. Menotti was explicit in his writing of stage directions in the libretto, and this clearly represents an attempt to ensure that future productions would not distort his intentions and, in this way, reduce any misunderstanding by directors. Unfortunately, he seems not to have told his composer. One can only conclude that the clash of words and music in *Vanessa* is due to Barber and Menotti's miscommunication or even an unintentional rivalry. (On various occasions Gian Carlo Menotti has mentioned that he did this to try to ensure that his works would be presented in line with his intentions. He explained that like other composers, he wrote the music to reflect the text and set the scene for the piece. Menotti viewed certain “updated” operatic productions, which in accordance with the German school of “regie theatre”, to be an abomination. They destroy the composers' original intentions when the director ignored the written text.)

The ending of the opera arouses a degree of puzzlement as to intentions. In

the field of theatrical writing, the end usually goes some distance to defining the genre and confirming the audience's understanding of how they are expected to respond to the story. In this case, *Vanessa* concludes with the happy departure of the hero and the heroine, though whether we are meant to assume that Anatol and Vanessa will actually live happily ever after is something of a mystery. On the face of it, it seems improbable, calling into question any view of the opera as a conventional romance. Furthermore, although the opera is set during a three-month winter period, the plot and scenery arrangements provide a static tone for its dramatic actions. Everything appears to happen within a short period of time—Anatol suddenly arrives, then he and Vanessa fall in love and not long after that they leave the house to live together. The compressed timeline in the opera is presumably intended to quell the audience's doubts on the psychological motivation for the characters. The gothic element in the opera further removes the plot from any realistic attachment and gives the opera a sense simultaneously banal and mythic qualities. However, the final presentation of the piece is seriously marred by an apparent miscommunication between the librettist and the composer. It is clear from the music that, Barber intended to compose a romantic melodrama but he was given a much darker anti-romantic story as the base of the libretto.

Of course, the above must be modified in that there is obviously an attempt to fit this up in mythic terms as a cyclic narrative, and by the invocation of Gothic form—which is intended to remove it from the framework of realist narrative (within which it would become merely ludicrous and unconvincing). One aspect of the “gothic” element is that any sense of the real outside world has virtually ceased to exist and that we are therefore to be more concerned with rather strange inner states than with anything that could be regarded as everyday reality. The heroine's refusal to accept the elder Anatol's departure has caused her to preserve herself within a time capsule for the last twenty years, living in a house with all the mirrors covered and not speaking to her mother during the whole period. Erika, we are told, is Vanessa's niece—though what happened to Vanessa's sibling is not explained. That both Vanessa and Erika seem to have an inner need to sit around moping for years on end is odd enough—but odder (as it turns out) is that the plot does not seem to be based on any observationally convincing aspect of their psychologies. That is, they are responding to an impulse which is inner but not psychological in the sense of “Why did you do that?”—which is a question about identifiable (or even unconscious) motives. As the opera begins, it is a dark and stormy night. Not knowing that Anatol the son has used his father's signal, Vanessa's anticipation of her lover's return finally culminates in her extreme reaction on hearing of Anatol's arrival, “Do not utter a word, Anatol, /do not move; /you may not wish to stay. /For over twenty years/ in stillness, in silence, /I have waited for you.” (*Vanessa*, Act I scene i) And it is this strange inner need that connects the narrative both to the gothic and the mythic.

2. Female Characters in Early Twentieth-Century Music Theater/Opera

Like Giuseppe Giacosa, Luigi Illica and Giacomo Puccini's "tragedia giapponese", *Madama Butterfly* (1904), the theme of a heroine desperately expecting the return of her lover has formed the basic dramatic structure for *Vanessa*. "Tutto questo avverrà, te lo prometto. /Tienti la tua paura—io son sicura/Fede l'aspetto." (*Madama Butterfly*, Act II) In *Madama Butterfly*, the audience is presented with a theatrical portrayal of an innocent young oriental woman who is dishonestly betrayed. Because Cio-Cio-San firmly believes that her American husband Pinkerton will ultimately return to be reunited with her, she steadfastly refuses to believe any indication that her American husband could have intended that he was entering a sham marriage. After Butterfly pours scorn over Prince Yamadori's genuine proposal of marriage, the tragic conclusion of the opera is therefore unavoidable. She finally realizes Pinkerton's new marital status and as the heroine's world completely shatters, Cio-Cio-San decides to end her suffering by committing the ultimate Japanese sacrificial ritual, "seppuku" and dies with honour. Thus, Butterfly inherited not only the sacrificial weapon, but also her fate.

In *Madama Butterfly*, the librettists not only make use of an oriental setting but also feature a Japanese woman who fits the clichéd occidental image of a loyal, innocent and graceful character, in order to locate the action in a familiar space for its first European audience. Lehmann reflects, "exoticism inevitably conjures up images of sensuality [...] the *veni-vidi-vici* theme of Western boy meets Japanese girl was taken up by many writers of the day—and, over the decades, it became the most popular one" (Lehmann, 1984). Pinkerton is presented as the prototype of the Western explorer who imposes his cultural expectations on his Japanese "wife" who is supposed to be an emotionally fragile and physically delicate creature. Furthermore, by highlighting Cio-Cio-San's steadfast loyalty to her husband, the opera also reinforces the role of women in society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By setting the opera in the Far East, the composer and the librettist therefore have given themselves the license to incorporate the European audience's expectations into their narrative.

Both *Madama Butterfly* and *Vanessa* emphasise the nineteenth-century idea of the passivity of female characters and of their social function; then incorporate them into the literary expectations of twentieth-century western society. In both operas, the only occupation for the heroines is simply awaiting the reappearance of their long-lost lovers. They have been removed from any significant social obligations. The music in both works also reflect this nineteenth century view with an abundance of high romanticism in the music structure. By creating a myth surrounding the subject of the emotional dependency of women, Barber and Menotti are leaning heavily on the nineteenth-century's view of women and this will raise some interesting questions about expressive functions and audience's expectation in the middle of the twentieth-century, especially after the

second world war.

In conventional romantic literary portrayals, the main role in life for young upper-middle class women in the nineteenth-century was to marry well, or at least to form a useful or prosperous marital alliance for her family. Once they had achieved this goal and had found a suitable husband, their initial mission in life was accomplished and their individual personalities could henceforth be subsumed under that of their husbands. Significantly, their lives would lack of plots and they would be portrayed as leading a rather monotonous domestic life. This social phenomenon is well reflected in Jane Austin's works in which all the narratives are structured by the search for an ideal husband and conclude with happy marriages – there are no plots about married life, apart from the splendid Mrs Croft in *Persuasion* (1816).

It appears to be that a woman's life ceases to be appealing as the centre of narrative after they are married. Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* presents a terrifying account of the banality and emptiness for nineteenth-century women after entering wedlock. In order to escape from domestic boredom, Emma Bovary reads romances, albeit uncritically, and deludes herself into thinking that she might live like a romantic heroine. However, as her illusionary world collapses, Emma decides to end her life as a "noble" heroine and commit suicide. The female characters in *Vanessa* re-capture this nineteenth-century social phenomenon in that they all apparently just sit around the remote mansion years after year without seeming to do much. Whereas Emma Bovary at least seeks her illusionary life style, Vanessa and Erika submissively wait for the right person to come along. Even in a conservative twentieth-century society this presents problems concerning narrative motivation and whether these can be side-stepped by the invocation of a non-realistic genre remains to be seen.

After the late eighteenth-century, male characters in music theater have gradually lost the battle of popularity to their female counterparts who still fascinate librettists, composers and the audience to this day. (Clément, 1989) Since then composers and librettists have been more drawn to the pathos and conditions of tragedy in a drama than to representing historical or heroic deeds as did their Renaissance and Baroque predecessors. For this reason, the vulnerability of female characters in music drama has presented itself as a topic suitable to the artists' imaginations. However, unlike the masculine roles which predominately emphasize the militant facet of their characters; vulnerability and frequently even passivity in the face of human suffering are predominantly portrayed by the female characters (Pope & Leonardi, 1998).

Some aspects of this narrative function continue into the portrayal of women in twentieth-century works though there are subtle shifts in their evocation of pathos. Instead of drawing on the spectators' sympathy as in their nineteenth-century predecessors, writers in the twentieth-century focus more on the irony and horror which the heroines endure throughout the narrative. The comparison of the heroines' suffering between *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and Alban

Berg's *Lulu* (1939/1979) highlights the shift of the employment of pathos in music theatre. In *Lucia*, the audience will sympathize with the suffering heroine who has no choice but to surrender her mental stability in order to escape the demands from her family. The use of *bel canto* soprano emphasizes the composer's intention to conjure up the dramatic pathos throughout the entire work. On the other hand, the death of Lulu at the hands of Jack the Ripper comes at the end of a long downward spiral and is almost a relief for the spectators. Although they might be shocked by the final scene, Lulu's death appears to be the consequence of a series of horrible circumstances which she has been powerless to control even while exercising her function as seemingly autonomous agent. William Beers points out, "The ritual reenacts the terror of merger and separation [...] this reenactment gives men power [...] which was originally located in the experience of the maternal self-object. The cultural function and result of this transfer of power is that women are excluded from exercising cultural power [...] the need to sacrifice occurs when the male narcissistically invested social structures have their boundaries tested or threatened, that is, whenever self-objects intrude" (Beers, 1992). By creating women as the sacrificial victims, the subconscious self-anxiety and vanity within the male self in the modern patriarchal society has finally revealed its true nature. Therefore, through the sacrifice of female characters the librettists and composers are guiding their audiences to undergo a new aspect of dramatic catharsis through their musical and theatrical experience (Nuttall, 1996).

By contrast, in Menotti and Barber's *Vanessa*, the opera captures the heroine's submissive mentality towards gender roles established in a patriarchal society. (Heiland, 2004) The work highlights the delicate balance between power and sexual dominance in a couple's affectionate bond. Vanessa has the beauty and wealth but she displays her emotional dependence by her fixated desire for the one man in her life. By renouncing her happiness and youth, Vanessa seeks to gain her ultimate salvation by the presence of Anatol junior. As the hero is ultimately able to adroitly [re]claim his father's mistress, *Vanessa* has espoused the conventional romantic view on the female operatic character as a passive receiver in the male dominated society.

3. *Vanessa* and the Late Twentieth-Century Applied Postmodernism

Vanessa was one of the most anticipated shows before its European premiere at the Salzburg summer festival in 1958. The collaboration of Samuel Barber and Gian-Carlo Menotti marks a significant moment of both composers' artistic endeavours. Barber and Menotti have known each other since their time at the Curtis institute and have formed a strong connection. They thoroughly understand of each other's artistic style and aesthetic intuition. *Vanessa* marks the beginning of their operatic collaboration; in 1966 they both worked on Barber's second full-length opera, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, an adaptation after Shakes-

peare's famous play to commemorate the grand opening of the Metropolitan opera at the Lincoln center, NYC.

Menotti was already a celebrated composer in his own right with the works such as *The Medium* (1946), *The Consul* (1950) and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951). The Italian American composer would only write his own libretto for his work. Therefore, not writing the music for his own words would be a major departure from his own creative procedure. Even though, Menotti had mentioned that he had his own version of the music for *Vanessa*, of course it was never committed on paper, the composer has complete trust in Barber's version of the final presentation.

In spite of the fact that *Vanessa* received a warm and welcome reception at its world premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, the opera's European outing was far from desirable, as the work encountered serious disapproval and was deemed "unamerican". (Ashley, 2003) It could be argued that by the late 1950's and early 60's, European countries have gradually come out the shadow of the WWII and societies were enthusiastically embracing new aesthetic paradigm and expecting seismic change in artistic expression. With the emergence of the baby boomer's generation, the social and economic influence of the boomers have begun to make its mark around the late 1950's, hence the birth of "counter-culture" among the European and North-American countries. Theodore Roszak notes, "The counter culture is the embryonic cultural base of New Left politics, the effort to discover new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual norms, new kinds of livelihood, new aesthetic forms, new personal identities on the far side of power politics, the bourgeois home and the Protestant work ethic." (Roszak, 1968) With this new aesthetic framework based on the Left, Marxist leaning ideology and the rejection of the bourgeois society which was established during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, a narrative purely derives from a domestic setting destined to be faced with lukewarm reception from the critics and the audience alike. *Vanessa* would prove to be one the examples in which the work was not able to caught up with the general sentiment of the zeitgeist of the era.

It could also be argued that the lack of enthusiasm for Barber and Menotti's collaboration after its European premiere is not only the consequence of the narrative problem in the work but also the general perception of opera as an art form in the post-war era. It is true that western music theater did enjoy a period of boost in its popularity and demand as European nations, especially the German speaking region, used the art form as the binding force to unite the nation. Vienna State opera hastily reopened in 1955 with a gala performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Bavaria State Opera reopened in 1963 are the two examples in which each individual nation used music theater as a form of secular ritual to commemorate the past and indicate the arrival of a new era.

However, with the increasing dominance of the youth "sub-culture" and the emphasis on the employment of technology in art-work production, the tradi-

tional or even conservative style of performing art, western music theater in particular has gradually been demoted to be enjoyed only by a handful of niche audience. As Arthur Marwick notes, “the rise to positions of unprecedented influence of young people, with youth subculture having a steadily increasing impact on the rest of society, dictating taste in fashion, music, and popular culture generally...such was the prestige of youth and the appeal of the youthful lifestyle that it became possible to be “youthful” at much more advanced ages than would have been thought proper previously. Youth, particularly at the teenage end, created a vast market of its own in the artefacts of popular culture.” (Marwick, 2006) The ascendancy of the youth subculture throughout the second half of the twentieth-century has signaled the dwindling prestige which the western music theater once had among the social elite throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The cold reception of *Vanessa*’s European premiere perhaps reflects this unavoidable social change.

Another major issue which inadvertently hinder Barber and Menotti’s first collaboration to be admitted to the twenty-first century operatic canon could be the opera’s subject matter and its detachment from the contemporary discourse, the emphasis on post-structuralist conditions and the woke mentality. Not only the increasing influence of the youth subculture has gradually eroded western music theater’s cultural and social prestige away from the consciousness of the general public, but also the emergence of the use television as people’s primary source of entertainment has significantly obstructed the masses’ attention from performing arts. Marwick further notes, “the advent, as a consequence in particular of the almost universal presence of television, of ‘spectacle’ as an integral part of the interface between life and literature. The most rebellious action, the most obscure theories, the wildest cultural extremism, the very ‘underground’ itself: all operated as publicly as possible, and all, thanks to the complex interaction with commercial interests and media, attracted the maximum publicity. Thus, one extreme gesture accelerated into the next. Each spectacle had to be more extreme than the previous one” (Marwick, 2006). Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, as entertainment industry continuously depends on technology and slowly gravitates to sensationalism in order to appeal the masses, few newly commissioned works of art could be easily recognized and be appreciated as a result. *Vanessa* unfortunately falls victim of that social trend and only be remembered by a few ardent connoisseurs.

The disconnection from the twenty-first-century “society justice” movement, which derives from the post-modernist movement, in regard to its portrayal of female characters in the opus also restricts *Vanessa*’s reproducibility among major opera houses. The narrative of the opera follows the nineteenth-century operatic convention by focusing the story on domestic issues in a “northern country”, presumably in Scandinavia. Vanessa’s household is evidently wealthy with a footman, a butler and even an in-house doctor which reveals not only the characters’ social status but also their confidence in expressing their emotional tur-

moil and needs. However, these dramatic elements are not able to answer post-modernists' call for a more "equal" and "democratic", both in social, economic and racial term, society. James Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose states, "postmodern thinkers reacted to modernism by denying the foundations of some aspects of Modern thought... they rejected the underlying modernist desire for authenticity, unifying narratives, universalism and progress, achieved primarily through scientific knowledge and technology. At the same time, they took the modernists' relatively measured, if pessimistic, skepticism of tradition, religion, and Enlightenment-era certainty—along with their reliance on self-consciousness, nihilism, and ironic forms of critique—to extreme" (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). With an opera mainly focuses on its upper-middle characters' emotional yearning and inner struggles, *Vanessa* does seem to be rather old-fashioned in its dramatic theme and narrative.

Another issue which the modern audience might have when reading *Vanessa* would be the opus' insufficiency in addressing the current feminist concerns. A socially privileged heroine in a self-imposed exiled and doing nothing but patiently waiting her lover's return does not seem to reflect twenty-first century's fascination on "intersectionality", which focuses on gender, ethnic diversity and social pluralism. This new aspect of the more intricate dimension of feminism would place the protagonist's "standpoint" center stage and employs such model as the benchmark to evaluate the character's social value. Lindsay and Pluckrose further note, "in this new feminist paradigm, knowledge is "situated," which means that it comes from one's "standpoint" in society, by which they mean one's membership in intersecting identity groups. This, in turn, renders objective truth unobtainable and ties knowledge to power and both knowledge and power to the discourses that are believed to create, maintain, and legitimize dominance and oppression within society" (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). As a result, *Vanessa* can hardly satisfy contemporary audience's demand for "social justice" by following the grand operatic tradition of the nineteenth-century and is only been referenced as one of the American operas of the twentieth-century.

4. Conclusion

In Samuel Barber and Gian-Carlo Menotti's *Vanessa*, the narrative is focused on the concept of fate, destiny and the mirror image of the two female characters. By setting the story in a domestic confinement in a remote northern country, the audience is presented with a psychological music drama. The main characters in the opera ultimately fulfill their destiny, hence each of them could start again with a new life after the curtain fall. However, such narrative theme could hardly satisfy the contemporary audience's need for a more socially attuned and ethnically nuanced theatrical motif and the work has gradually been neglected by the modern audience.

The poor reception of *Vanessa* in the new millennium is not a single case among operatic opus. Opera composers and librettists can hardly emulate the

great success of their predecessors such as, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart/Lorenzo da Ponte, Giuseppe Verdi/Francesco Maria Piave, Richard Strauss/Hugo von Hofmannsthal and W. H. Auden/Igor Stravinsky. With the dominance of television as the primary entertaining outlet for the masses, music theater unfortunately is no longer the only ultimate representation of western civilization but merely an aspect of the colonialist white-elitist perception of the western cultural production. The rise of the youth subculture since the 1960s also contributes to the steady decline in western music theater/opera's social influence and cultural prestige. The general public would no longer be satisfied solely by the subtle melody and the intricate harmony which western classic music can provide and they are more likely to be drawn to music which can instantly gratify their senses and listening experience.

Apart from the unavoidable social changes in the late twentieth-century which sowed the seeds for western music theater's unfortunate demise; the music establishments itself could also be the blame for its own gradual collapse. The evolution of an opera singer requires time and constant awareness of singer's physical and mental development. However, under the current opera market, the younger generation of opera singers do not have the luxury to fully develop their instrument and, in many occasions, are even been encouraged to sing roles which are beyond their ability. If they fail to live up to the expectations, there will always be the next person who is willing to step in for a chance to shine.

Furthermore, there are some opera directors who are more than eager to redefine and reimagine the existing operatic canon for the audience. They would present the viewing public with a fanciful production of a classic music theater in hope of attracting a new and younger audience. However, in so doing those overly enthusiastic opera directors would normally impose their own world view and philosophy on the already established dramatical settings in an opera. "Regie Theater" as it is been called in German artistic scene, is a rather popular and wide spread practice in music theater. In most cases, such interpretations would not only alienate the audience but also spoil the original work. During the process of writing an opera, composers and librettists would already have a concrete image and idea of the artistic effects they are searching for, then commit them into words and music. The subsequent productions and interpretations should really honor the artistic integrity of its creators and serve the score to their best ability. Finally, it is the audience who will eventually judge the piece on its merits. A well-received work will undoubtedly be included in the western operatic canon; on the other hand, an ill-conceived piece will soon be forgotten by the general public.

The muted reception of Barber and Menotti's opera, *Vanessa* in the new millennium might reflect the ordinary people's indifference towards western music theater as an accessible form of performing art. It is true that the development of western music theater is the by-product of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment movement and is normally associated with the social elite. However, there

is hardly any other form of western art which can successfully fuse various artistic disciplines into an exuberant and intricate theatrical presentation. Although western music theater can be considered as an outdated art form in the twenty-first century, the traditions it manages to pass on and the aesthetic values it generates are still worth being preserved in this mercurial world. With the genuine intention and careful preservation in presenting such art form, the art loving audience may again enjoy going to an opera performance like those who attended the premier of *Vanessa* at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York City on the 15th January 1958.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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