

Looking behind the faces in Samuel Barber's *A Hand of Bridge*

an essay by Elizabeth Smith

The characters of *A Hand of Bridge* are two couples. They are presented as separate individuals with unique desires. The only interaction between the characters is the actual playing of the card game. The "card music", which accompanies this action, introduces, intertwines, and even interrupts the brief arias with its jazz-influenced swung rhythms and a quasi-walking bass line. While the music communicates a relaxed atmosphere, it is more appropriately interpreted as a "poker face" for each character is fronting their happiness. Barber uses a melodic link, which through careful construction, allows the passage to blend with a variety of music—essential as the card music occurs at various points throughout the opera. The repetitions within the music suggest not only that the game is a common, everyday occurrence, but also reflect the cyclical nature of the actual card game.

With meticulously planned text expressed over the card music, Menotti foreshadows the underlying themes of the opera, suggesting conflicts within the characters' lives that have occurred outside the timeframe of the opera. These ideas are cloaked within the coded communicative properties of the bidding process in the game of bridge. For Sally and Bill, their bids of hearts represent their desires to be loved. Sally's bid, raising to two in the same suit, could indicate that she is only somewhat satisfied with her partner's suit—her husband's love. Sally's exclamation "The Queen, You have trumped the Queen," suggests her awareness of Bill's actions. Her scrutiny of his misplay of trump, which is hearts, signifies her observations of Bill's misuse of his desires for love. Therefore, the game itself suggests that Sally consciously allows Bill to indulge his mistress without confrontation as she continues to "bid" for her husband's love.

In a striking contrast, neither Geraldine nor David speaks of hearts. As Geraldine's aria will reveal, her life is as loveless as her bridge hand is heartless. Traditionally in bridge, passing to your partner's initial bid, as David has done, communicates a lack of support for the bid. Here it can be interpreted quite literally as representing David's lack of support (no love) for his wife. With the cards stacked against her, bidding from the bottom of the barrel with clubs, the lowest ranking suit in this game, Geraldine continues to make the best out of the cards she has been dealt, the life that she has been given. Nonetheless her bid is an un-winnable contract; her marriage is without love. Finally, when offered a perfect opportunity to speak of love following Sally and Bill's statements of "Hearts," David says "Trump!" As hearts have been declared trump for this game, David has chosen a term expressing his desires for authority and power over one of love.

The opening bids of this game of bridge show the four characters intensely long for unattainable desires. However, only three distinct passions are communicated: Sally and Bill exude a desire to be intensely and intimately loved, Geraldine longs for a loving platonic relationship, and David dreams of a life in which he is a ruler with power and authority over the masses who are to serve and respect him, both socially and sexually. Barber's structural division of the opera supports the interpretation of this three-part thematic schema. The first section contains both Sally's and Bill's aria, the second Geraldine's aria, and the third David's aria. The sections are separated by card music interludes and each section lasts approximately three minutes. While Menotti has saturated the opening text of the opera with the fundamental themes via the bidding process, the text and music of the arias illustrate explicitly the characters' unfulfilled desires.

Sally

Sally's aria features two markedly different sections. The first has an almost obsessive, driving, repetitive eighth-note melody, which sets the words "I want to buy that hat of peacock feathers." The dramatic narrative of the first section has a tri-fold construction. On the surface, Sally is desperate to buy a hat of peacock feathers. Sally's obsession with materialistic pleasures is, on the middleground, a substitution for the intimacy of her marriage. Sally's underlying background-level longing is to be the object of her husband's desire. Sally seems to have lost her identity in the real world and escapes to a fantastical world centering her attentions on buying a hat of peacock feathers. Sally's observation of her husband's affair seems to have sparked a narcissistic response. In her self-admiration, Sally obsessively and fantastically takes to the task of adorning herself with a hat of peacock feathers, a symbol of vanity. It seems unlikely that Sally would confront Bill about the affair for the confrontation would require admittance that Sally was, for some reason, physically undesirable.

Barber sets Sally's melodic line with an accompaniment in a distinctly different key. This bifurcated tonality expresses Sally's internal conflict. The resulting dissonances are accented by leaps in the melodic line that coincide with the word "peacock." The music mimics Sally's dramatic narrative of aggravation and frustration with a gradual increase and subsequent explosion of dissonance in the musical narrative.

The second section is more melodic than the first rhythmic and percussive section. This second section functions to connect Sally's projection of desire toward a material object as an intoxicatingly euphoric escape from the brutal reality of her husband's affair. Sally's melody represents her psychosis as her melody dances blissfully in C-flat major despite the accompaniment and key signature that suggest A-flat major. The contrasting section supports that Sally is aware of her husband's affair. Its pleasurable world of fantasy suggests a reality worthy of escape. Sally's desires have three levels. The text focuses on Sally's obsession with hats. The music creates a feeling of fantasy that can be interpreted as Sally's substitution of materialist goods for her emotional desires. Finally, the combination of card play, text, and music suggests that Sally is in search of her husband's love.

Bill

Bill's monologue describes his longing for the intimate company of his mistress Cymbaline. Like Sally's music, Bill's also exemplifies characteristics of an obsessive fantasy. While Sally's aria exhibits tonal conflict through its dissonance and percussive rhythmic scheme, Bill's music is a danceable, flowing melody. The fanatical temperament of the fantasy is written out in the repetition of the three-note scalar passages while the libretto further expresses his fixation via the string of six questions that Bill states during the aria as well as the list of names of other possible suitors for his mistress. Although he states that he would like for Cymbaline to be his wife, the continuation of the fantasy music in both the melody and the accompaniment suggests that this statement is spurious. The physical nature of Bill's desire is supported by the change in the accompaniment from the consonant, tonal harmonic structure of the fantasy music to one that features oscillation of dissonant intervals as he expresses his physical desires to take Cymbaline home and quote "strangle in the dark!"

As Bill and Sally seem to have similar desires the question still remains: why are Bill's desires not directed at his wife? Both characters have been given music that suggests notions of obsession and fantasy. The crucial factor, however, is the direction of these obsessions and fantasies. Sally's monologue is a product of the reality with which she is faced. It is not her actual desire, but rather a temporary escape from her unfulfilled desire. Bill, on the other hand, wants his imaginary world to be the reality. He longs for an imaginary scenario, and therefore, it can never become reality.

Geraldine

Geraldine's monologue expresses her desire to love her mother who is deathly ill. In her aria she sings of her desire for not only someone to love her, but also for someone to love. Geraldine cannot relate to the people in her life on a personal level. She remembers her father not as a person, but as a faded photograph, and associates her husband and son with the stock market and football, respectively. Her psychological conflicts are played out in the tonal conflict between her G major melody (Geraldine's emotional state) and the B-flat major accompaniment (her unfulfilling life). The half-step motion in the melody reflects Geraldine's emotional struggle—never quite stable.

As Geraldine's aria turns to the subject of her gravely ill mother, she achieves a moment of stability as the melody stays in B-flat major for six measures. In the absence of a bifurcated tonality, we can suspect Geraldine has found someone to love her. Unfortunately, Geraldine's wish to experience her mother's love is doomed. As she sings, "hatching for herself the black wings of death," the B-flat major tonality is abandoned, returning to her earlier G major. The accompaniment also returns to its earlier pattern. Thus, neither Geraldine nor her unfulfilling life has changed. Geraldine's aria concludes with the words, "I am learning to love you." Her end is not without struggle, as Barber musically depicts requiring both a poco allargando and diminuendo with the approach to the highest pitch of the aria. Unfortunately, Geraldine falls short of attaining love as her climatic pitch descends to conclude her aria.

David

David, too, is without love; however, love is not the object of his desires. David's aria expresses his desires to be rich and powerful: "a Rockefeller, the King of Diamonds, a Sultan of America." These desires suggest that his current social status prevents him from achieving happiness. As David has virtually no relationship with his wife, his desires for power suggest the need for a relationship with someone else.

The musical setting of these desires is not forceful or empowering, but rather a lamenting fixation on the drudgery of his life. David's melody is built on the pentatonic scale G-A-B-D-E (sol-la-ti-re-mi) while the accompaniment drones the pedal tones E and B (mi and ti). Adding to the ethnic sounds of the pentatonic melody and drone bass, the notion of exoticism is expressed in the libretto with reference to a Nubian slave. It is more prominently played out stylistically in the instrumentation of the winding "snake charming" countermelody scored in the oboe and clarinet parts as well as the delicately added percussion featuring castanets and triangle.

Singing of twenty naked boys and twenty naked girls, it seems evident that David's sexual fantasies are purely physical—and perhaps deviant—with no intimate love. Barber's use of exoticism in this aria is an exploitation of David's cross-over gender characteristics, which could also suggest that his marriage is not "traditionally" functional. Just as David's fantasy has no outlet for personal intimacy, his marriage has no outlet for him either. Menotti's libretto tells us that David hides his own book by Havelock Ellis, which in the mid-twentieth century, was popular for its discussions of the psychology of sex in society and marriage. This hidden book could be a symbol for David's suppressed deviant sexual desires. Barber supports this notion in the musical narrative as the rhythmic setting of this text appears to resemble an anxiety-ridden secret through the rhythmic dissonances played out with triplets and syncopated sixteenth dotted-eighth rhythms.

Barber's setting of the second portion of David's aria further depicts David's social displacement. Here his music moves bombastically from chord to chord without functioning in a key. Metrically, David's melody shifts from groupings of threes to twos, rarely supporting the notated bar line. These musical features reflect David's interaction with his wife Geraldine. David executes his daily activities with no consideration to his wife or her desires. David and Geraldine do not relate to each other as a couple and have completely different desires. Consequently, their arias have contrasting musical styles and they bid opposing suits in their card game.

Conclusion

Looking at just the surface of Menotti's libretto, Sally would simply want to buy a hat; Bill would be just another adulterous husband; Geraldine a depressed housewife; and David your average worker dreaming of riches. Instead, the text and the music, the librettist and the composer, all coalesce to create a rich and multi-layered narrative of *A Hand of Bridge*. The opera becomes an exciting tale of thwarted desires expressed through the communicative properties of bridge as the characters mask their internal conflicts with their best poker-face.