

THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

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MUSICAL NARRATIVE IN THREE AMERICAN ONE-ACT OPERAS WITH  
LIBRETTI BY GIAN CARLO MENOTTI: *A HAND OF BRIDGE, THE TELEPHONE,*  
*AND INTRODUCTIONS AND GOOD-BYES*

By

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To someone I once knew...

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## ABSTRACT

The current study considers the interaction between the musical narrative and the dramatic narrative (provided by the libretti) in three short one-act operas: Samuel Barber's *A Hand of Bridge* (1959), Menotti's *The Telephone* (1947), and Lukas Foss' *Introductions and Good-Byes* (1959). The interpretive product of these two narratives, which I will refer to as "operatic narrative," will provide a rich and exhaustive interpretation of the opera that goes far beyond the understanding provided by consideration of the individual components. The main objective for the interpretations of these operas is the identification of a musical narrative that is supported by music analysis. The operatic narratives are supported by rigorous musical and dramatic analyses, in an attempt to render them more convincing to the reader.

The works included in the current study share three distinguishing characteristics. First, all three have only one act and are less than 30 minutes in length. Secondly, they are all realistic American operas composed during the post-war era between 1947 and 1959. Finally, all three have libretti written by Menotti. Menotti's libretti invite musical interpretation of dramatic elements, allowing musical narrative to play a crucial role in the formation of the operatic narrative. The completed compositions are not scaled down versions of full-length operas. They do not appear as merely an excerpt from a larger work. They are fully-formed musical-theatrical works that exploit to the fullest extent the narrative power of their words and music. This study examines how three different composers construct music that expresses the libretto's dramatic action of each short opera.

The analyses contained within this study serve not only to explain the musical constructs of each opera, but also to provide intellectually-based support for the musical narratives. In establishing a dualistic role for the analyses, the interdependence of the

operatic elements of drama and music is brought to the forefront. The relationship between the music and drama, however, is not static. Therefore a single musical-analytical tool would not necessarily divulge the most thorough account of the interaction between the two elements for every passage under scrutiny. Consequently, the methods of analysis for the current study, though carefully chosen, will vary from passage to passage in an attempt to maximize the result without jeopardizing the integrity of either single element. The methods, however, will be drawn from the rich and diverse history of operatic studies and music analysis, strongly influenced by Schenkerian-based linear analysis.

The musical narratives will be based upon Carolyn Abbate's approach as outlined in her 1991 text *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*. Further, historical perspectives of American society in the post-WWII era, the years in which the operas for this study were composed, inform both the musical and dramatic narrative. Themes inscribed within the libretti (sexuality, gender roles, societal etiquette, leisure activities, and family values) are all considered from this historical perspective.

In Chapter Three my analysis of Barber's *A Hand of Bridge* integrates a variety of analytical methods to build character sketches of each player. Barber's musical settings for the female characters layer multiple tonalities in the melody and accompaniment. This bifurcated tonality—setting a line with an accompaniment in a distinctly different key—allows Barber to characterize Sally and Geraldine on multiple psychological levels, showing both internal and societal conflicts.

My analysis of Menotti's *The Telephone* in Chapter Four illustrates the adaptation of a traditional analytic method for dramatic interpretation. Through strongly Schenkerian-based linear analysis, musical structures of each aria (telephone call) depict Lucy's tonal language. By considering the text that accompanies the structural (and non-structural) events, patterned associations between the music and the conversations become evident. These associations then form a foundation for dramatic interpretation, showing character development and plot forwarding through linear progression.

In Chapter Five, my analysis of Foss' *Introductions and Good-Byes* reveals a musical representation of the composer's description of the libretto. This association

requires the consideration of historical/biographical information, further supporting a multifaceted analytical approach. Reflexive narrative represents the composer's conceptual model for the opera and provides for a multi-level analytical design. With the limited dramatic narrative, music becomes the expressional device for setting, plot, and characterizations. Foss represents the party's venue and theme through the xylophone solo's open-spaced melody during the "Dry-Martini" music. Repetition and textural layering in the musical setting mimics polite conversations while stylistic features mark General Ortega y Guadalupe as the party's honored guest.

This study shows that even the shortest of stories, the most simple of plots contain multiple layers of meaning. Within these one-act American operas, music, through various methods, serves to enhance the dramatic events and further deepen the breadth of the characters. The works of Barber, Menotti, and Foss, shown in this study, exemplify that American operas since 1945 have a rich musical and dramatic framework worthy of analytical attention.