Introduction
When preparing an art song, understanding its text is essential to a meaningful performance. The texts of some songs are simple, others are complex, and still more seem easy to understand while hiding a deeper meaning underneath the surface. It is for this reason that I began my research. The writing of Irish author James Joyce can be complicated to understand; but layered under all the seemingly unintelligible passages of his writing deep meaning can be found. The music of Samuel Barber, a leading 20th century American composer, fits well with the writing of Joyce.

Excerpt from text of “Now Have I Fed and Eaten up the Rose”

Rain has fallen

James Joyce

I hear an army

The Development of Artists
The first six songs Barber composed that feature texts by James Joyce use Joyce’s first published work, his book of poems entitled, Chamber Music. These representational works by both men show their initial tendencies towards styles and ideas that would become standard for them later on.

For Joyce, it is the use of the theme of relationships being tested and failing, as well as his stylistic quest for aesthetic ideals that are carried through to his later writing. In Barber’s later work he is well known for shifting meters in order to fit the flow of the text. He does this in all of the six songs but one. Also, his characteristic use of piano accompaniment to embody the meaning of the text is shown strongly in two of the six songs. Lastly, we see Barber’s affinity for texts about the complexity of love which he would continue to set throughout his career.

The text of the song, Nuvoletta, is from Joyce’s final masterpiece, his novel entitled Finnegans Wake. In this novel, Joyce wanted to represent the experience of dreaming, and to do so he created essentially his own language, referred to as, ‘dream speak’. Joyce’s last novel takes the reader through writing full of illusions and double meanings to create a world that could truly be considered an encyclopedia of human history. Nuvoletta could be considered a masterpiece for Barber as well. Through his use of accompanimental patterns, standard tonality mixed with added chord tones, and a melodic setting meant to complement the sound of the written text, he creates a dramatic piece that embodies the dreamlike quality and sense of excitement found in the passage.

Conclusion
After examining these nine songs as well as the texts they came from I’m reminded that great artists have growth, and not all of their work is created equal. In the beginning of Joyce’s work we find an idealistic young man with a passion for words, while in his final novels, readers discover an innovator creating fiction that represents the macrocosms and microcosms of our culture, history, and humanity. Looking at Barber’s early songs we find a love of words and sound, while his later compositions show true understanding for the wedding of text and music through the complexity of his writing and his dedication to the expression of our humanity.

References

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