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The Great Gatsby: From Novel into Opera

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
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THE GREAT GATSBY: FROM NOVEL INTO OPERA

by

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of opera, works of literature have provided inspiration for opera composers. John Harbison's 1999 adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* is a particularly significant and interesting example. Not only is the novel highly esteemed by scholars and familiar to much of the general public, it is strongly associated with America's Jazz Age and therefore expressive of both the heady era of the 1920's and a distinctive musical genre. The novel provides the composer/librettist with complex, larger-than-life characters for operatic treatment, a mythic story of love and death, and a distinctive musical era from which to draw inspiration. Harbison has in turn created an independent work of art that remains true to the spirit of Fitzgerald's novel. Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* and Harbison's corresponding opera provide fertile ground for the exploration of the transition that occurs when a composer adapts a literary work for the operatic stage. This study focuses on this transition by juxtaposing the opera and its literary source.

The first section of the study explores the genesis of Harbison's opera and the evolution of the libretto from the early drafts through the final form. Particular attention is paid to elements borrowed directly from the novel and the alterations Harbison made in crafting the libretto. There follows a comparison of the literary source with the libretto focusing on the treatment of structure, conveyance of the thematic elements of the novel, the psychology of the characters, and the overall tone of the narrative.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Literature has been a fertile source of inspiration for composers since early in the history of opera. Many works of the giants in the world of literature have provided ideas for some of the best-known and -loved operas of the current day. The world of opera would be much poorer without Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the plays of Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais and William Shakespeare, and the fictional works of Friedrich Schiller, Sir Walter Scott, and many others. In some cases, operatic adaptations of literary works are better known today than their original sources; Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* and Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* being prime examples. Operas derived from literary sources are found throughout the history of the genre, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century literature continues to provide frequent inspiration. The last decade of the twentieth century alone saw premieres of operas based on such diverse sources as Beaumarchais, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Mary Shelley, Louisa May Alcott, Thomas Mann, Frank Norris, Oscar Wilde, Octavio Paz, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Judith Rossner, and Virginia Woolf.

Early operatic adaptations of literature focused primarily on epic poetry as source material. However, as the genre of the novel evolved, it became a favorite resource for composers. While one does not wish to discount the contributions to the repertoire from playwrights such as Shakespeare, Beaumarchais, Arthur Miller, and others, fiction is in many ways better suited to operatic treatment. As language is the primary expressive force in both drama and poetry, rare is the genius that is able to fashion music that serves the text without overwhelming it. A play is often impractical as a ready-made libretto since it is a more tightly controlled form than a novel and does not easily accommodate the added time necessary for musical expression. Fiction,

however, is typically more psychological in nature and explores the inner life of motive and desire and consequently allows latitude for music on these emotional and psychological levels.¹

Within the body of American opera librettos based on extant literary sources, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry James are among the authors of nineteenth century American literature who most frequently provide inspiration. In the twentieth century popular fiction was appropriated for use in both opera and musical theater. Examples include James Michener's *Tale of the South Pacific*, Damon Runyon's *Guys and Dolls*, James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree*. Composers and librettists have also used more established authors of the twentieth-century literary canon. The fiction of John Steinbeck, Robert Penn Warren, Willa Cather, and F. Scott Fitzgerald falls into this category.²

The choice to create an opera based on a beloved and well-known classic is an interesting and courageous one. Not only has the work been thoroughly analyzed by scholars, but much of the general public has a personal relationship with the text and strongly held ideas about the story's characters and plot developments. Audiences' emotional attachments to the story and characters may make it impossible for them to accept the work as filtered through the understanding of the composer. Thus the composer runs the risk of not finding a receptive audience for his work. John Harbison's 1999 adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel *The Great Gatsby* is an especially fascinating example of such a choice. Not only is Fitzgerald's novel known to almost every high school graduate, but also it has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly research and criticism. Further, Fitzgerald's novel represents the ultimate Jazz Age story, portraying a colorful and heady era in American history. Perhaps more importantly, it is associated with jazz itself, a distinctive musical genre not frequently heard in the opera house.

John Harbison was born in Orange, New York, in 1938. He studied at Harvard University under Walter Piston, in Berlin with Boris Blacher, and at Princeton with Roger Sessions and Earl Kim. He is the recipient of numerous awards and commissions

¹ Peter Conrad, *Romantic Opera and Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 1.

² Jennifer Marshall, "The American Libretto in the 20th Century," *Miscellanea Musicologica: Adelaide Studies in Musicology* 10 (1979): 133,154-155.

including the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his cantata *Flight into Egypt*. *The Great Gatsby* is the third of Harbison's operas following *Winter's Tale* (1974) and *Full Moon in March* (1977).³

Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of artistic director James Levine's debut, *The Great Gatsby* had its premiere on 20 December 1999. Based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel of the Jazz Age, the opera tells the tragic story of Jay Gatsby, a mysterious millionaire known for his lavish parties. Gatsby is in love with Daisy Buchanan who is married to the philandering Tom. Gatsby enlists the aid of his acquaintance, Nick Carraway, in an attempt to win Daisy for himself. The action reaches its climax when Daisy, driving Gatsby's car, accidentally kills Tom's mistress, Myrtle. Gatsby protects Daisy by not revealing that she was at the wheel when the accident occurred. Myrtle's husband vows revenge, shoots Gatsby and then turns the gun on himself. Nick is left to contemplate what has happened.⁴

Harbison's connection to the novel *The Great Gatsby* began in his youth. "I grew up in what was still sort of Fitzgerald's Princeton," Harbison explains. As a teenager he began earning money playing jazz piano on weekends in the same Princeton social clubs frequented by Fitzgerald before World War I.⁵ Harbison describes himself as a "life-long recreational jazz player and pop song writer,"⁶ musical styles which play an important role in an operatic version of a novel strongly associated with the Jazz Age. The idea for the opera first occurred to Harbison in the early 1980's, but he was unable to obtain access to the book rights. In 1992 the Metropolitan Opera selected Harbison to compose an opera to commemorate the 25th anniversary of its music director, James Levine. By then the novel was about to move into the public domain, so he found it easier to gain permission to adapt the novel. Initially Harbison tried to find a collaborator to craft a libretto from Fitzgerald's novel. However, he eventually found that his musical ideas had advanced too far and he had already been writing rough versions of a *Gatsby* libretto to keep pace. Further, he had experience with libretto

³ Henry Fogel, "John Harbison," in Brian Morton and Pamela Collins eds., *Contemporary Composers* (Chicago: St. James Press, 1992) 367.

⁴ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, libretto (New York: G. Schirmer, 1999), 4-7.

⁵ Paul Leiberman, "Green Light for an American Dream: Composer John Harbison Brings *The Great Gatsby*, the F. Scott Fitzgerald Classic Exploring Themes of Love and Betrayal, to New York's Operatic Stage," *The Los Angeles Times*, 19 December 1999, Calendar: 8.

⁶ G. Schirmer, "The Great Gatsby Q&A," http://www.schirmer.com/composers/harbison_gatsby_qa.html; Internet; accessed 22 July 2000.

writing, having written those for his first two operas, so ultimately it seemed best for him to continue in that fashion. In order to capture the correct flavor of popular music of the period, Harbison composed twenties-style songs and dances for the opera with lyrics by Murray Horwitz.⁷ Harbison's decision to include idiomatic music emphasizes the novel's strong connection to the Roaring Twenties and gives the opera a truly American flavor.

Harbison's opera has aroused both public and scholarly interest as an operatic rendering of one of the greatest and most revered novels in the canon of American literature. This paper will examine Harbison's operatic treatment of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* with the intention of answering the following questions: Is the novel well suited to musical treatment and operatic convention? How does the libretto serve as a bridge between the literary medium and the operatic one? What choices did Harbison make in terms of structure, plot, and characterization in order to bring about this transformation? Is the essence of the novel well served by musical interpretation, and, if so, in what ways does Harbison achieve this end? This study will begin with the genesis of the opera and the evolution of the libretto. It will continue with an exploration of the structure, themes, characters, and tone of the opera, including a synthesis of the scholarly discussion of corresponding elements in the novel. Since Harbison's choices as librettist were motivated by compositional demands, a discussion of key musical elements as they pertain to the literary adaptation are included as well.

Although Harbison sought the input of others in crafting the libretto, by acting as his own librettist he alone made all of the creative decisions pertaining to the construction of the opera. The creative process is not always a linear and objective one, and the discussion and dissection of this process is complex and multi-faceted. This study draws heavily on conversations with the composer conducted by the author as well as interviews Harbison gave to the media prior to the opera's premiere.

⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER ONE
GENESIS OF THE OPERA

John Harbison's interest in creating an opera based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* began in the early 1980's. Like many other fans of the novel, he was attracted to the strong characterizations and the mystique of Fitzgerald's masterfully crafted and multi-faceted work, and simultaneously drawn to the challenge of bringing its one oblique and enigmatic character, Jay Gatsby, to life on the operatic stage. He was cognizant of the musical possibilities of the work, yet aware that the mystique of the novel would provide a stimulating challenge to a composer, as it would be difficult to transfer this quality to the operatic medium. Although he wrote an initial scenario for an opera and made a number of musical sketches, his inability to get beyond an initial screening with the managers of the Fitzgerald estate frustrated his early efforts to gain permission to adapt the novel into an opera.⁸ Eventually he used some of the musical material for a commission from the Atlanta Symphony entitled *Remembering Gatsby*.⁹

In October 1992 Harbison received a letter from James Levine, artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera, commissioning an opera for the 1999-2000 season.¹⁰ While he was considering possible subjects, Harbison realized that by 2000 *The Great Gatsby* would move into the public domain, which facilitated his reaching an agreement with the Fitzgerald estate.¹¹ Given Harbison's initial difficulty in securing permission for an

⁸ John Harbison, interview by author, 29 January 2001, Tallahassee, Fla., tape recording. Transcript available upon request.

⁹ Paul Lieberman, "Green Light for an American Dream: Composer John Harbison Brings *The Great Gatsby*, the F. Scott Fitzgerald Classic Exploring Themes of Love and Betrayal, to New York's Operatic Stage," *The Los Angeles Times*, 19 December 1999, [newspaper on-line]; available from <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/>; Internet; accessed 7 November 2004.

¹⁰ James Levine to John Harbison, 27 October 1992, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia, S.C., Folder 9.

¹¹ G. Schirmer "The Great Gatsby Q&A," http://www.schirmer.com/composers/harbison_gatsby_qa.html; Internet; accessed 22 July 2000.

operatic treatment of the novel, it is ironic that Matthew J. Bruccoli, a Fitzgerald scholar and longtime advisor to Fitzgerald's daughter, Scottie Fitzgerald, also saw the operatic possibilities in the novel and was very receptive to the idea of an operatic treatment of *The Great Gatsby*.¹²

Harbison's initial plan was to work with an independent librettist, and in the summer of 1994 Harbison communicated with two possible collaborators: playwright A. R. Gurney and novelist Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Jhabvala seemed a logical choice, having created screen adaptations of novels such as Henry James' *The Europeans* and *The Bostonians*; Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*; and E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, for which she received an Academy Award.¹³ In September 1994, Jhabvala sent Harbison a scenario that took a number of liberties with the ordering and location of events. Harbison ultimately decided it was too cinematic.¹⁴ During this time period Harbison also met with Gurney to discuss collaboration, but on November 9, 1994, he wrote to both Gurney and Jhabvala to say that he had decided to produce his own libretto:

The gestation period of some of this music has been very long, and has become precise enough in many cases for me to conclude that negotiation with my verbal self, and the criticism and help of friends and advisors is my best prospect. ...I think that with a heavy reliance on F. Scott Fitzgerald's wonderful words and some good advice I can get a structure which [sic] can support the fine music which [sic] is already emerging.¹⁵

From the time of the *Remembering Gatsby* commission, Harbison had wanted to incorporate newly composed twenties-style pop music as part of the ambient backdrop of the opera, and his lifelong experience with jazz made him well qualified for the task. He realized fairly early, however, that he was not able to write the lyrics for the pop songs used in the opera. Mark Lamos, who had been selected to direct the new work, recommended Murry Horwitz for the job.¹⁶ Among his varied and interesting credits, Horwitz was a co-creator of the 1978 Tony Award winning musical *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

¹² Lieberman, "Green Light for an American Dream."

¹³ The Movies of Merchant Ivory, "Ruth Praver Jhabvala," <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/2850/mi.html>; Internet; accessed 3 July 2003.

¹⁴ Harbison, interview by author; Jhabvala scenario, 9 September 1994, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C., Folder 7.

¹⁵ John Harbison to A. R. Gurney, 9 November 1994, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C., Folder 2.

¹⁶ Mark Lamos to John Harbison, 16 January 1995, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C. Folder 5.

As part of that project, Horwitz collaborated on lyrics for some previously uncompleted Fats Waller songs used in the show. The show, a critical and box office success, earned Horwitz song-writing awards from American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers.¹⁷ Horwitz and Harbison agreed that although newly-created, the songs should be believable as relics from the twenties with appropriate text, rhyme scheme, and form. They also agreed that the song texts should have some relationship with their placement in the structure of the drama and that they should have some resonance with contemporary audiences as well. While none of the principle characters sing the songs, the composer intends to symbolize the drama as well as the time and place.¹⁸ The final score contains six songs, five with lyrics by Horwitz and one additional song set to a poem by Fitzgerald.¹⁹ Harbison's integration of popular music styles within the opera is an important component in his musical realization of the Jazz Age novel and is discussed at length later in this paper.

¹⁷ Ralph Blumenthal, "Grab Your Baby and Dance by the Pale Moonlight," *The New York Times*, 20 December 1999 [newspaper on-line]; available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 31 July 2000.

¹⁸ Mario R. Mercado, "Green Light for Gatsby," *Opera News* 63, no. 12 (June 1999); available from ephost@epnet.com, accession no. 1918353, accessed 24 June 2003.

¹⁹ Blumenthal, "Grab Your Baby..." Horwitz later wrote lyrics for the popular tunes that appear in the opera only in instrumental form. The entire collection is available from G. Schirmer under the title *Gatsby Songs*.

CHAPTER TWO
EVOLUTION OF THE LIBRETTO

The libretto went through five drafts between 1993 and the summer of 1995. In exploring the development of the libretto from the first scenario to the final draft, it will be useful to have, as a starting point, a summary of the final version of the libretto. Using this as a departure point, the major changes in each draft are discussed along with pertinent input made by Harbison’s various advisors.²⁰

Table 1, *The Great Gatsby* by John Harbison, Plot Summary.²¹

<p>Act I, Scene 1 The drawing room of the Buchanan’s home.</p>	<p>Nick Carraway arrives to visit his distant cousin, Daisy Buchanan, and her husband, Tom. Daisy’s friend Jordan Baker is also present. Jordan’s inquiry about Nick’s neighbor Gatsby evokes an anxious reaction from Daisy. A blustering Tom expresses his theories about the decline of civilization.</p> <p>The phone interrupts Tom’s sermonizing and he rushes to answer it. Daisy follows anxiously and Jordan reveals that Tom is having an affair. The tension continues to mount as the couple returns. Tom decides to show Jordan his horses and while they are gone, Daisy tells Nick that she is unhappy. She has become “sophisticated” and jaded. She misses the old warm world of her youth in the South.</p>
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²⁰ The Fitzgerald Collection of the University of South Carolina library contains extant correspondence and documents the input of Mark Lamos and Michael Nott as well as Patrick J. Smith who contributed to the Plaza Hotel scene (II:3). The composer also acknowledges several additional people including Sara Billinghamurst, Susan Feder, Michael Fried, Rose Mary Harbison, Ruth Jhabvala, and James Levine for their suggestions. John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby Libretto* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1999) 3.

²¹ Harbison, *Libretto*, 4-7.

Table 1, continued.

<p>Act I, Scene 1 cont.</p>	<p>Tom and Jordan return from the stables and she reads from the <i>Saturday Evening Post</i>. Nick expresses his unease about his companions and Eastern society in general. Tom wonders who Gatsby is.</p>
<p>Act I, Scene 2 Wilson's Garage</p>	<p>Tom drags a reluctant Nick into Wilson's garage to "meet his girl." First, Wilson is sent off to take Tom's car for a drive. Myrtle appears and she and Tom dance to the radio. Nick's embarrassment increases as Myrtle describes her first meeting with Tom. Myrtle taunts Tom by insisting on talking about Daisy. Finally, he hits her and bloodies her nose, then cruelly leaves the scene.</p>
<p>Act I, Scene 3 Gatsby's house and lawn</p>	<p>Gatsby is found staring across the bay at a green light. Preparations are being made for a party and guests soon begin to arrive. As the party begins, Nick and Jordan meet and wonder about their enigmatic host. Nick makes inquires of a man in the crowd who reveals himself to be Gatsby. On the verge of asking Nick a favor, Gatsby is called away to the phone. The revelry increases until the sound of an auto accident causes the crowd to disperse.</p> <p>As the party breaks up, Gatsby's business associate, Wolfshiem, appears to warn him of trouble: "Philadelphia" and "Detroit" are demanding that their debts be paid in full. Unconcerned, Gatsby sends him away. Gatsby enlists Nick's help in arranging a meeting with Daisy. Finally alone, Gatsby is transfixed by Daisy's green light. He reminisces about their love of five years ago in Louisville and plans with complete confidence to win her back.</p>
<p>Act I, Scene 4 Inside Nick's cottage</p>	<p>Nick and Jordan make a game of reciting Gatsby's summer guest list. Jordan tells Nick about Gatsby's history with Daisy and about her wedding to Tom. Gatsby appears agitated and nervous. When Daisy arrives, she and Gatsby are awkward and embarrassed, and Nick finally leaves them alone.</p> <p>Gatsby's and Daisy's old feelings begin to resurface. Gatsby proudly shows off his grand house and then impetuously begins to plan their future together. He invites her to tour the mansion. When Nick returns they have retreated into a world of their own.</p>

Table 1, continued.

<p>Act II, Scene 1 Gatsby's house and lawn</p>	<p>A party is in full swing. Rumors abound about the host's shady past. Tom and Daisy arrive and Gatsby introduces himself to Tom. Daisy and Gatsby dance while a band vocalist sings. Gatsby tells Tom that he fears Daisy is not having a good time. Nick cautions Gatsby that he cannot repeat the past. Daisy enlists Nick to distract Tom so she and Gatsby can be alone.</p> <p>Gatsby shows Daisy his beautiful collection of shirts - a symbol of his success, and she begins to cry. Gatsby attempts to convince Daisy that they can repeat the past. Rumors about Gatsby's business dealings continue to circulate, and Nick defends Gatsby to Tom who is looking for Daisy. Tom invites Gatsby to the Buchanan's house the following Sunday.</p>
<p>Act II, Scene 2 Buchanan's drawing room</p>	<p>Daisy and Jordan recline in the afternoon heat of the Buchanan's drawing room as the radio plays. Gatsby and Nick, ill at ease, stand at the window. Jordan and Daisy mention that Tom is talking to his mistress on the telephone. Daisy flirts with Gatsby and the tension mounts. They decide to go to New York to escape the heat. Daisy and Gatsby leave in Tom's car, and Tom vents his fury to Jordan and Nick before the three leave together in Gatsby's flashy yellow car.</p>
<p>Act II, Scene 3 A suite at the Plaza Hotel</p>	<p>The group has taken a suite at the Plaza Hotel. Strains of the Wedding March from Felix Mendelssohn's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> filter up from a party below. Tom confronts Gatsby and Daisy defends him, seeming to side with Gatsby. Tom reminds Daisy of the good times they have had and insists she make a choice.</p> <p>Daisy falters and once again longs for the simpler past. She decides to stay with Tom, and Gatsby tries desperately to change her mind. Daisy begs to go home and Tom, triumphant, suggests she and Gatsby ride back together in Gatsby's car. As they leave, Nick remembers it is his thirtieth birthday.</p>

Table 1, continued.

<p>Act II, Scene 4 Wilson's garage</p>	<p>Myrtle expresses her loneliness and longing for Tom, having seen him stop for gas earlier in the day in Gatsby's car. Wilson is suspicious of his wife's behavior. Suddenly Myrtle sees the car Tom was driving earlier and rushes out. A loud crash is heard. Tom, Nick and Jordan enter and discover Myrtle has been killed. Tom identifies the yellow car that hit her as Gatsby's. Wilson vows he will find the driver of the car.</p>
<p>Act II, Scene 5 Gatsby's lawn</p>	<p>Movers are emptying Gatsby's house of furniture. Nick and Jordan arrive in search of Gatsby. Jordan observes that their dreams are over and leaves to go to her golf match. Gatsby appears and Nick accuses him of driving the car that killed Myrtle. Gatsby reveals that Daisy was driving the car and that he intends to take the blame for the accident.</p> <p>Gatsby is waiting for Daisy to signal him with the green light. He recalls his youth and his time with Daisy in Louisville before the war. At the end of his soliloquy, Wilson appears and shoots Gatsby; then he turns the gun on himself.</p>
<p>Act I, Scene 6 Gatsby's lawn</p>	<p>Nick and Jordan meet before Gatsby's funeral. Nick remembers his youth in the Midwest and implies that he is planning to return home. Nick and Jordan part without acrimony. Wolfsheim arrives, not as a guest at the funeral, but to assure himself that the house is free of any incriminating evidence.</p> <p>Gatsby's father arrives and is impressed by his son's apparent success. He shows Tom Gatsby's boyhood plan for self-improvement. Partygoers arrive, and finding no party, depart as the minister conducts a brief service. Nick is left alone to reflect on what has happened. As the opera ends, only Daisy's green light is visible.</p>

When Harbison received the commission from the Metropolitan Opera, he began by revising the scenario he had done prior to the composition of *Remembering Gatsby*. This principle scenario is dated 1985 with a note from Harbison indicating that it was

“slightly revised” in January 1993.²² The scenario and the accompanying draft of the libretto vary from the final draft in the following important ways:

Table 2, *The Great Gatsby* by John Harbison, differences between principle scenario and final draft.²³

Act I, Scene 1	<p>The initial interactions between Nick and Jordan are more flirtatious, and Daisy and Tom are more argumentative.</p> <p>Tom has an aria about the blacks taking over the world. (This incident was drawn from the novel but Harbison thought it was too offensive and replaced it with Tom’s comments about the decline of civilization.)²⁴</p>
Act I, Scene 1 cont.	<p>Daisy’s talk about how romantic it is outdoors is missing as is most of the “Where is the old warm world?” aria.</p> <p>This scene ends rapidly, omitting the final ensemble where Jordan reads from the <i>Saturday Evening Post</i>.</p>
Act I, Scene 2	<p>This scene opens with an aria for Wilson asking Tom when he will sell him his car.</p> <p>Myrtle sends Wilson to retrieve her glasses from T. J. Eckleburg. (This incident is neither in the novel nor the final libretto. Later Tom takes charge of getting rid of Wilson.)</p> <p>In addition to taunting Tom by talking about Daisy, Myrtle also angers him by mentioning Gatsby. (This is another deviation from the novel.)</p> <p>This scene also contains a short monologue for Nick describing the Eckleburg sign and the valley of ashes.</p>

²² John Harbison, “The Great Gatsby Libretto, Draft 1, 1993,” Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C., 1.

²³ Harbison, *Gatsby Libretto Draft 1*.

²⁴ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925; Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1992), 17; Harbison, *Gatsby Libretto Draft 1, 2*.

Table 2, continued.

<p>Act I, Scene 3</p>	<p>The party scene opens with the chorus reporting on rumors about their host, Gatsby. (A version of this later moves to the opening of Act II. The rest of this speculation about Gatsby is given to Jordan in the final version and appears later in the scene.)</p> <p>Jordan and Nick arrive as a couple. (In later drafts they meet at the party.)</p> <p>After meeting Nick, Gatsby fades into the crowd instead of being called to the phone.</p> <p>The chorus then creates a ground swell for an appearance by Gatsby. Gatsby has an arioso welcoming the crowd.</p> <p>Gatsby does not request that Nick arrange a meeting for him with Daisy.</p> <p>Gatsby's aria at the close of this scene is shorter and less developed.</p>
<p>Act I, Scene 4</p>	<p>The guest list appears as something of a catalogue aria sung by Nick. (This later becomes a duet between him and Jordan.)</p> <p>There is some friction about Jordan's being unreliable and Nick's stodginess.</p> <p>Jordan mocks Gatsby's unease prior to her departure from the scene.</p> <p>At the close of the scene, Nick is left alone to reflect on the magic of Daisy's voice and the fascination of the green light.</p>
<p>Act II, Scene 1</p>	<p>The party scene, which begins the act in the final draft, has not been added yet. Thus, Act II, Scenes 1-4 in this draft correspond roughly to Act II, Scenes 2-5 in the final draft. This scene, which takes place on the Buchanan's veranda and lawn instead of in the drawing room, is very much like later versions of II:2.</p>
<p>Act II, Scene 2</p>	<p>The Plaza Hotel scene also bears some resemblance to II:3 of the final. Daisy sings an aria as she is trying to decide between Tom and Gatsby. Nick makes no mention of his thirtieth birthday. (Daisy's conflicts and choices are not yet well defined, and the scene has not achieved the level of tension found in the final version.)</p>

Table 2, continued.

Act II, Scene 3	This scene is much like II:4 of the final.
Act II, Scene 4	Nick tells Gatsby that Daisy is through with him. Otherwise this scene bears a strong resemblance to II:5. Gatsby's aria is less developed than in the final version.
Act II, Scene 5	Daisy and Tom appear early in the scene. Wolfsheim does not appear in the scene, and the guests arrive at the end of the funeral looking for a party Nick reflects on the distances traveled by these transplanted Midwesterners and on the tenacity and grandeur of Gatsby's dream. (These thoughts are later distilled into his final aria.)

This draft makes it apparent that a number of Harbison's early ideas were quite a departure from the novel. One of these differences has to do with the entrance of the title character, which is usually an important moment in an opera. Introducing a shadowy yet charismatic character like Gatsby with all the extravagance opera traditionally demands presents particular challenges. Harbison initially based his solution – a grand welcoming of the crowd anticipated by the chorus – on operatic paradigms, such as *Otello*, familiar to the composer and audience alike. However, he eventually found that adopting the strategy of the novel was a better approach.²⁵

There are a number of relatively inconsequential line and/or word ordering changes as the libretto moves from first draft to final edition, however, several items greatly impact the overall tone. One of these concerns Nick's line at the close of Act I, which reads in the final: "I don't believe they know I am here. / Lost in a spinning world of their own. / A world apart, Lord help them now."²⁶ In the first draft, Nick closes the act with the following line: "I don't believe they *knew I was here*. But I was, witness to the power of the green light / to the music of a woman's voice / pure insanity,

²⁵ Harbison, interview by author.

²⁶ Harbison, *Gatsby Libretto*, 39.

intense life.”²⁷ This change of tense is particularly interesting because it seems to indicate an early inclination to maintain Nick’s function as narrator, which Harbison later abandoned. This shift away from the use of Nick as a filtering intelligence in the reporting of events represents one of the most important ways in which the opera diverges from the novel and has a great impact on both the structure of the libretto and the characters themselves.

The second draft of the libretto, dated October 12, 1994, reflects suggestions offered by Michael Nott in June of the same year.²⁸ A number of these suggestions adhere more closely to events in the novel. In the second scene of the opera, Nott states that he does not think that an aria for Wilson so early in the opera is consistent with Fitzgerald. He also suggests having Tom dispose of Wilson instead of Myrtle. Additionally, he suggests the inclusion of a scene based on the incidents in Tom and Myrtle’s New York apartment. Nott’s notes to Harbison say that he misses having Tom and Myrtle provocatively disappear as they do in that scene of the novel. Further, he finds the recklessness and disregard for propriety apparent in that scene missing from the libretto. He suggests the addition of Myrtle’s sister Catherine and even offers a draft of the proposed scene.²⁹ While the proposed scene does not appear in any subsequent drafts, Harbison apparently agreed with Nott that the incident was, in Harbison’s words, “a lot to give up, particularly since Myrtle in the opera is a bigger character than in the book.”³⁰ Nott’s suggestions from this period also include transforming the listing of Gatsby’s guests from a catalogue aria to a duet between Nick and Jordan and, more importantly, the addition of the party scene at the beginning of Act II. This scene includes the meeting between Gatsby and Tom and incorporates items from chapters IV and VI of the novel.³¹

In addition to the above changes, Tom’s racist comments in the first scene have been replaced by a concern about the rise of the lower classes. Harbison includes Daisy’s speech about its being romantic outdoors, which he draws largely from the

²⁷ Harbison, *Gatsby Libretto Draft 1*, 23. Italics added.

²⁸ Musicologist Michael Nott is also the husband of soprano Dawn Upshaw for whom the role of Daisy was written.

²⁹ Michael Nott to John Harbison, 15 June 1993, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C., Draft 2 Folder.

³⁰ Harbison, interview by author.

³¹ Michael Nott to John Harbison, 21 June 1993, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C., Draft 2 Folder.

novel; however her aria is still not fully formed. The first scene closes with Jordan and Nick talking about meeting again and speaking of Gatsby; however, this personal interaction is later cut. Scene 2 still contains Nick's evocative description of the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg that the composer also omits in later drafts. This shifts the symbol's emphasis to the second-act garage scene just prior to Myrtle's death. The third scene of Act I does not yet contain Horwitz's song lyrics, but the opening chorus more closely resembles the final. In the last scene of the act, the list of guests has evolved into a duet, and the duet between Gatsby and Daisy is closer to its final form. Significantly, Nick is now speaking in present tense at the close of the act, removing the impression of an aside to the audience or of his possibly functioning as a narrator of some kind.³²

The third draft of the libretto contains a number of smaller changes as Harbison refines and polishes the text. The idea of having Jordan read from something of Fitzgerald's surfaces here with the inclusion of an excerpt from his short story "Winter Dreams." Act I, Scene 3 now includes Gatsby's request that Nick arrange a meeting between him and Daisy. Also of note, the party scene that opens Act II makes its first appearance in this draft.³³

Of perhaps greater interest are the notes from Michael Nott that accompany this draft. While Harbison's half of the correspondence is missing, Nott's letters, apparently faxed from Santa Fe in July 1994, give insight into some of the issues Harbison was grappling with at the time. One discussion has to do with whether or not Daisy should reappear on stage following the deaths of Myrtle, Gatsby, and Wilson. Harbison apparently felt this had a great deal of operatic potential. Nott, however, points out that in the novel she does not make another appearance. He offers as a solution having Daisy confess to Nick and receive absolution from him since he is, in Nott's words:

...the most honest person we have ever known....This probably won't do much to expiate her feelings of guilt; but I think it will be her salvation in the audiences eyes – in addition to making for a potentially wonderful theatrical moment.³⁴

³² John Harbison, "The Great Gatsby Libretto Draft 2, 1994," Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C.

³³ John Harbison, "The Great Gatsby Libretto Draft 3, 1994," Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C.

³⁴ Michael Nott to John Harbison, July, 1993, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C., Draft 3 Folder.

Nott also advises against including the shirt episode in the party scene at the opening of Act II. In the novel this scene occurs during Gatsby and Daisy's initial reunion in the novel, and in Nott's view, including it in the party scene contradicts the idea that Daisy has been to Gatsby's often. Nott takes issue with having Jordan say in the final scene, "I came as soon as I could," which implies a warmth and sensitivity in her character not found in the novel. This is also a factor if Jordan reports on Tom and Daisy's plans:

...care needs to be taken that Jordan's accounting of Tom and Daisy conveys as much as possible about the couple's mindset on the one hand, but does not do so in a way that makes Jordan a more sympathetic character on the other. As I read it in the draft, it almost seems as if Jordan is assuming Nick's moral perspective.³⁵

Further, Harbison's attempt to have Nick and Jordan part as friends, in Nott's words "alters the balance of the novel."³⁶ Nick recognizes Jordan as part of the degenerate culture of the East, and only Gatsby is exempt from this judgment. In the end, Harbison retains the shirt episode but abandons the other lines of thought. Daisy does not appear after Myrtle's death as is the case in the novel. Harbison also dispenses with Jordan early in the final scene, emphasizing her lack of illusions about her affair with Nick.

The next draft of the libretto, dated January 29, 1995, bears the title "Toward 4" and contains a good many pencil notes by an unidentified person. When asked who this individual might be, Harbison was uncertain but said it could have been his wife Rose Mary Harbison, his publisher Susan Feder, or Michael Nott. By this point, Act I is very near its final form, but the second chorus in I:3 is still taking shape, and the song lyrics are still missing. Act II, Scene 3, the Plaza Hotel scene, has not yet reached its final form. The most significant addition in this draft is the appearance in handwritten form of Gatsby's final aria.³⁷

Draft five of the libretto is dated May 27, 1995, and for the first time contains Murry Horwitz's song lyrics. The pencil revisions to this text take it very close to the final version. The final chorus section of I:3 is written in and many other details have

³⁵ Michael Nott to John Harbison, Undated "Re: Daisy Problem," Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C., Draft 2 Folder.

³⁶ Michael Nott to John Harbison, Undated letter, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C., Draft 2 Folder.

³⁷ John Harbison, "The Great Gatsby Libretto Draft 4, 1995," Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia S. C..

been ironed out. Act II, Scene 3 has also reached its final form presumably with the help of Patrick Smith.³⁸

Interestingly, as the libretto evolves, it actually becomes more like the novel rather than less so. This was not necessarily Harbison's intention, and he has admitted some surprise at the out-come. As the text developed, however, it became clear to Harbison that the novel provided a number of useful hints for the structure of the libretto. This should not imply, however, that Harbison felt a particular loyalty to Fitzgerald or his text. Harbison remarked:

I wasn't worrying about Fitzgerald at all....I don't owe the authors and the poets anything in terms of preserving their work. That what I'm trying to do is make something that stands up well and that in that sense speaks well for what they do. But in terms of loyalty to even the detail or even the larger intent, that's not a musical issue. So that I found that when I was leaning on Fitzgerald I was getting dramaturgical help or narrative help from somebody who knew the material obviously very well. And because the novel was worked over really such a long period of time and in such detail, I think more than many other novels there was a lot of very useful understructural work that is already done by Fitzgerald. So I think I would have been kind of obtuse to ignore certain very clever notions....³⁹

That said, it is significant that approximately forty percent of the lines in the opera either come directly from or bear a strong resemblance to text in the novel.

³⁸ Although no correspondence from him is available in the University of South Carolina archive, note from Harbison to Matthew J. Brucoli specifies Smith as "consultant on II:3." John Harbison to Matthew J. Brucoli, 27 July, 2000, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia, S.C., Folder 1.

³⁹ Harbison, interview by author.

CHAPTER THREE

NOVEL INTO OPERA: JUXTAPOSITION OF ELEMENTS

In order to explore adequately the relationship between the novel and the opera, some independent discussion of the novel is desirable.⁴⁰ Critics and scholars have examined the structure and characters of the novel from a wide range of viewpoints. It is not this study's intention to add to or comment upon that body of work. It is useful, however, to explore the work of Fitzgerald scholars in order to better understand the relationship between the novel and the opera in terms of structure, important themes, and characters. The purpose of this discussion is not to provide a direct comparison between the opera and novel, for both works of art stand on their own. The purpose of this study is to explore how the deeper, less tangible elements of a novel may or may not surface in an operatic adaptation and in what manner they might do so. In spite of Harbison's declared independence from an allegiance to Fitzgerald's novel, the substance of the opera seems to indicate that the composer was committed to a musical realization of the novel that went beyond a mere co-opting of character and plot. With this in mind, it will be helpful to juxtapose a discussion of the literary with an exploration of the choices made by the composer/librettist.

Structure

Among the most notable features of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* are its compact structure and the author's meticulous manipulation of the order of the events of the plot. Milton Hindus points out that Fitzgerald's painstaking attention to structure is

⁴⁰ For a plot synopsis of the novel see Appendix A.

evident in the many drafts that he made of almost every scene in his novels.⁴¹ The events of *The Great Gatsby* do not proceed chronologically, and the novel relies heavily on foreshadowing and flashback, which diverts the reader's attention from the somewhat tawdry nature of the plot. Fitzgerald's achievement is all the more significant in that he manages to make the characters convincing by piecing together the truth about them gradually over the course of the novel. *Gatsby*, for instance, could be perceived as outlandish and unreal to the point of being ridiculous were it not for the genius of Fitzgerald's manipulation of events in the novel.⁴²

The following diagram constructed by James E. Miller helps to illustrate the non-linear nature of the plot. If X stands for the straight chronological account of events in the novel and A, B, C, D, and E represent the major events of *Gatsby's* past, the novel's nine chapters may be charted thus:

Table 3, Chronology of events in the novel⁴³

Chapter 1	X
Chapter 2	X
Chapter 3	X
Chapter 4	XCX
Chapter 5	X
Chapter 6	XBXCX
Chapter 7	X
Chapter 8	XCXDX
Chapter 9	XEXAX

In addition to this gradual revelation of *Gatsby's* story, the simple yet evocative use of atmosphere and suggestion gives the novel a sense of being longer than its some fifty thousand words.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Milton Hindus, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), 38.

⁴² Brucoli, p. 223.

⁴³ James E. Miller, "Boats Against the Current" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Great Gatsby,"* ed. Ernest H. Lockridge (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968) 26.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Eugene Eble, *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1963) 89.

The filter of Nick Carraway's narration provides the perfect manipulative device for both the structure and themes of the novel. Through Nick, Fitzgerald is able to "express that delicately poised ambiguity of moral vision" that lies at the heart of the novel.⁴⁵ All of the characters and events of the story are presented with Nick's judgments and prejudices attached. Thus, the nature of his temperament provides a prism through which to view all of the events and from which the tone of the novel derives. Nick sets the moral tone of the story and gives it both unity and meaning. He attempts to establish his moral position early by saying he is "inclined to reserve all judgments" because he knows that "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parceled out unequally at birth." However, he is also quick to point out that his tolerance has a limit.⁴⁶ As the novel progresses, Nick reveals himself to be corrupt enough to be attracted to the morally bankrupt, yet he remains held back by a certain superiority and moral decency. Jordan, the Buchanans, and his own lifestyle simultaneously attract and repel him.⁴⁷ In Nick's judgment Gatsby is elevated above the moral and emotional corruption of the other characters. Gatsby is a very isolated individual as seen through Nick's eyes. He is the host of fabulous parties, but never a participant in the mindless gaiety, which simply and elegantly sets him apart and makes him appear larger than life to the reader.⁴⁸ Further, Nick's sympathetic response to him is based on a belief that they share a romantic hopefulness, which Gatsby represents.⁴⁹ *The Great Gatsby* is, in a sense, Nick's story. As he gradually exposes the corruption at the heart of Daisy and Tom's life of privilege, he uncovers the vitality and romantic hopefulness of Gatsby's dream. As Nick narrates the evolution of his judgments, he guides the reader to the thematic essence of the novel.⁵⁰

Harbison opts for a simpler, linear plot line for the opera, facilitated by his desire to achieve "fluidity of motion through big trajectories of uninterrupted music." "To me," Harbison says, "opera is about large scale, large scope, and accumulation. The

⁴⁵ W. J. Harvey, "Theme and Texture in *The Great Gatsby*" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Great Gatsby"*, ed. Ernest H. Lockridge (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968) 91.

⁴⁶ Fitzgerald, 5-6.

⁴⁷ Hindus, 40-41.

⁴⁸ John B. Chambers, *The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989) 104.

⁴⁹ David H. Lynn, "Within and Without: Nick Carraway" in *Gatsby*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1991) 180.

⁵⁰ Miller, 30.

way I heard this work was in two big arcs.”⁵¹ Thus the opera is structured in two symmetrical acts. Each act contains a party scene, a small-scale salon scene, a scene in the Wilson garage, an automobile accident, a major aria for Gatsby, and a finale that centers on the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. The scenes flow from one to the other via a series of orchestral interludes providing a sense of unity and motion from location to location.⁵²

Harbison employs jazz idioms throughout the opera that not only contribute to the atmosphere but also provide an important structural element. These references to vernacular music, all newly composed by Harbison, appear first as a fox-trot in the overture and later as radio “tunes” and party music. At times this “pop” music provides a counterpoint or backdrop for the characters’ dialog. At other times, the popular songs are sung by characters who provide entertainment at Gatsby’s parties or by the chorus. It is important to stress that the composer intends all of these situations to have an element of realism – the singer performing with the band or the chorus joining to sing the latest dance tune. In *Unsung Voices*, Princeton University musicologist Carolyn Abbate makes a distinction between phenomenal music, which exists in a character’s world, and noumenal music, which is not part of a character’s perception.⁵³ Beyond the appropriateness of frequent jazz references in an adaptation of the “great Jazz Age novel,” Harbison’s juxtaposition of phenomenal and noumenal music also provides an interesting structural component. The presence of phenomenal music increases in frequency and intensity through the course of Act I while Act II is something of a mirror image. The orchestra subtly hints at popular music idioms in I:1. The radio music of I:2 firmly establishes the presences of phenomenal music, which then dominates the party scene of I:3. The progression of phenomenal music breaks in I:4, and gives way to the noumenal music of Daisy and Gatsby’s romantic reunion. In Act II the sequence reverses itself. The act begins with a large party that is again filled with phenomenal music. The drawing room scene of II: 2 presents phenomenal music on a more intimate scale, again using the radio. The paradigm shifts in the climactic Plaza Hotel scene, however, where the intermittent intrusions of the public, phenomenal

⁵¹ David J. Baker, “The Sound of Gatsby,” *Opera News*, 64, (December, 1999) [magazine on-line]; available from ephost@epnet.com, accession number 2595189, accessed 24 June 2003.

⁵² Baker, “The Sound of Gatsby.”

⁵³ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 119.

music of the wedding party accentuate Daisy's internal struggle. This signals a breach in the relationship between noumenal and phenomenal music, and from this point on, phenomenal music almost disappears.⁵⁴ Thus, phenomenal music provides a framework for the opera itself. Its presence contributes to the dramatic trajectory of each act, while its absence signal the points of greatest emotional depth.

Perhaps the most important structural shift from novel to opera is the elimination of the narrator. While Fitzgerald inextricably places the events of the novel in Nick's consciousness, in the opera, it is the music that provides this filter for the audience's understanding of the work as a whole. Nick remains an important character in the opera, but he is no longer responsible for guiding the audience's perception of characters and events. Thus, the opera does not have to carefully balance the "delicately poised ambiguity of moral vision."⁵⁵ Additionally, the exclusion of the narrator dispenses with elements of foreshadowing and flashback, thus creating a more linear plot line.

The focus of the drama, therefore, shifts from Nick to Gatsby and the melodrama of his story. Now it is Gatsby who reveals the major elements of his past with Daisy in the arias at the close of I:3 and in II:5. In Harbison's opinion, this change occurs not only because Nick's relationship to the story has changed, but also because Gatsby has been given a voice – an element that is discretely missing in the novel:

(T)he opera shifts an awful lot onto Gatsby in terms of what to make of his story,...and whether he really understands that Daisy has dumped him at the end. I think all of those things come more to the foreground when you have to deal with him as a voice.⁵⁶

It is interesting to observe, that in the final scene of the opera the audience suddenly recognizes Nick as the potential narrator of the novel. This transformation is brought about in two important ways. The first lies in the shift in Nick's relationship with the phenomenal and noumenal music around him. Just before the minister begins to read the funeral service, the members of the chorus enter singing the ironic refrain "If they ask you, say I'm doin' fine."⁵⁷ Gradually, this phenomenal melody shifts to

⁵⁴ Martin Brody, "'Haunted by Envisioned Romance': John Harbison's *Gatsby*," *The Musical Quarterly*, 85, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 449.

⁵⁵ Harvey, 91.

⁵⁶ Harbison, interview by author.

⁵⁷ John Harbison *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, (New York: Associated Music Publishers, Inc. 2001), 318.

the orchestra where it takes on a noumenal aspect that represents Nick's reflection on the singing he has just heard. This music, which evolves into Nick's final aria, reflects an emerging wisdom and capacity for reflection on his part, concurrent with the sense that he is, for the first time, aware of the noumenal music. Nick then sings a condensed version of the final two paragraphs of the novel, which reflects his new-found wisdom. One can almost imagine the opera as a prelude to Nick's sitting down and writing the novel.⁵⁸ At the close of the opera's first scene, Nick indicates that he feels as if he is an outsider in this Eastern upper-crust society. It was Harbison's intention to underscore more strongly that Nick, a Midwesterner, does not fit in and never will.⁵⁹ Nick's awareness of the noumenal world points to a more mature acceptance of the human condition.⁶⁰ Thus, the juxtaposition of phenomenal and noumenal music and Nick's newfound perception highlight the coming-of-age aspect of the novel.

At the heart of the "tight inevitability" of the novel's construction lies Fitzgerald's use of language, which is at once simple and direct, yet forceful and evocative.⁶¹ Fitzgerald achieves this tightness through the repetition of key words and phrases, the poetic lyricism of certain passages, and the presence of compelling symbols. Throughout the novel, his repetition of words like "lurch," "riotous," "glitter," and "romantic" gives them the depth of meaning and the unifying force of a leitmotiv. Of these, both the narrator and the other characters use the word "romantic" most frequently.⁶² This choice is of particular interest since "romantic" is a word fraught with various meanings, and serves to underscore both the sentimentality of the characters and their ultimate lack of feeling. In addition, the poetic intensity of the writing provides a feeling of distilled emotion and experience. The descriptions of the Buchanan's estate, of the valley of ashes, of Gatsby's beautiful gardens, and of his courtship with Daisy all exemplify this poetic intensity on a large scale.⁶³ On a smaller scale, one cannot ignore the evocative lyricism of passages such as the description of Gatsby's first party:

⁵⁸ Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 449-50.

⁵⁹ Harbison, interview by author.

⁶⁰ Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 422.

⁶¹ Eble, 89.

⁶² Hindus, 36-37.

⁶³ A. E. Elmore, "The Great Gatsby as Well Wrought Urn," in *Modern American Fiction: Form and Function*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 59.

The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher."⁶⁴

This passage illustrates two distinct ways in which Fitzgerald uses language in a poetic rather than merely descriptive manner. The combination of the noun "earth" with the verb "lurches" subtly, yet forcefully, evokes an out-of-control, drunken world. Further, the use of a visual word to describe something perceived non-visually – "yellow cocktail music" – contributes to the intensity of the images.⁶⁵ Fitzgerald often employs this device, and it becomes particularly interesting in the context of a musical adaptation of the work.

In addition to the evocative and poetic quality of language, Fitzgerald makes use of three particularly strong visual symbols: the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, the valley of the ashes, and the giant, unblinking eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg's billboard. The first of these is the image on which Gatsby focuses his gaze in preparation for his reunion with Daisy. It initially represents his belief that he will realize his dream; later it becomes a reminder that she has left him for good. In a broader sense, the green light, a symbol that signals that a traveler may proceed, provides an ironic symbol for "man in pursuit of a beckoning but ever-elusive dream."⁶⁶ The second visual symbol is the desolate valley of ashes, which serves as a backdrop for the tragic events of *The Great Gatsby*. It symbolizes the dismal, colorless environment of the Wilsons and their social class, and by extension, it underscores the emptiness of Tom's relationship with Myrtle. Watching over this wasteland is the third symbol: the brooding eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. As with the valley of ashes, which evolves from a grim setting into the origin of the novel's final tragic series of events, the ever-watchful billboard accumulates meaning as the novel progresses. After Myrtle's death, Wilson fixates on the eyes as he confesses his suspicions of his wife's infidelity and says, "God sees everything."⁶⁷ It is not difficult for the reader to imagine that he is also referring to the driver who has killed his wife as well as foreshadowing his own murderous act.

It has already been noted that in crafting the libretto Harbison has chosen to borrow a great deal of Fitzgerald's language. This is truer of the short sections

⁶⁴ Fitzgerald, 44.

⁶⁵ Hindus, 36; Elmore 63.

⁶⁶ Miller, 34.

⁶⁷ Fitzgerald, 167; Miller 35-36.

of dialog found in the novel than of Nick's descriptive narration, which forms the core of the novel. Descriptive language does not typically lend itself well to opera since it can impede the flow of the drama and become redundant in the presence of musical elements. Harbison's elimination of the narrator, however, allows the music to communicate on its own terms instead of merely imitating Nick's narration. This is consistent with Harbison's musical priorities, and although he does honor the poetic language of the book, the essential poetic work is done by the music instead of the libretto.⁶⁸

The first-act party scene contains an example of this. Fitzgerald's description of the party is both poetically and musically evocative and offers great possibilities in terms of musical realization:

The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher."⁶⁹

Besides the self evident "opera of voices pitched a key higher," there is opportunity for "lurching" harmonic and rhythmic figures as well as the more subjective and enigmatic possibility of "yellow cocktail music." The essence of the first part of the above quote may be found in the interlude between the scene in Wilson's garage (I:2) and the party scene (I:3). Harbison achieves this "lurching" via a series of rapidly shifting dissonant chords accompanied by a scale-like flourish based on a pattern of whole steps and thirds. The scenic shift from the dark and colorless set of the Wilson's garage to the bright, colorful atmosphere of Gatsby's party occurs during this music, which completes the aural/visual analogy. (See example 1, p. 27)

As one might expect, this party scene contains a significant amount of the phenomenal music found throughout the opera. A stage band accompanies twenties-style dance tunes sung by a band vocalist, a tango singer, and the chorus. The progression of dances, interspersed with and at times overlapping the principal characters' dialog, increases in tempo and activity, building the tension of the scene. The progression culminates with the car crash, signaling the dissolution of the party.

⁶⁸ Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby."

⁶⁹ Fitzgerald, 44.

358 **Animando**
Tpt., Cl., Ob., E.H. *sf*

Violins
Ped.

363 Picc., Fl.

367 **Più mosso** $\text{♩} = 116$
sf

372

377

Ex. 1, *The Great Gatsby*, interlude between Act I, Scenes 2 and 3, mm. 358-381.⁷⁰

In order to explore fully the structure of the novel in juxtaposition to the structure of the opera, it is important to examine which of the novel's incidents

⁷⁰ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 67.

Harbison omits entirely or rearranges for inclusion and which of the opera's scenes he invents. It is not surprising that in adapting a work of literature for the stage, a good deal of material must be cut both for the sake of time and in order to conform to the practical considerations of the theater such as scenery and costuming. Many of the choices Harbison makes have to do with these practical considerations. One example of this is the combination of the first episode in the Wilson's garage with a version of the events that take place at Tom and Myrtle's apartment in New York. Harbison combines these by eliminating Myrtle's sister and the couple who joins them for drinks at the apartment and setting the scene in Wilson's garage. Though compressed into a much simpler format, the basic components of the episode remain: the tension and emotionless nature of Tom and Myrtle's relationship, Myrtle's desperation, and Nick's disgust with the whole affair. Another character that Harbison chooses to eliminate is the drunken party guest who is fascinated by the fact that Gatsby's books are real. He also omits Nick and Gatsby's lunchtime trip to New York and their brief but unexpected encounter with Tom as well as Tom's surprise appearance at Gatsby's while on a horseback ride with two of Gatsby's regular party guests. In the novel, Nick learns many of the story's details during trips between New York City and West Egg. However, with the elimination of the narrator, flashback and the filling in of back-story are no longer necessary, and the characters are liberated to tell their own stories.

The shift away from a narration of events facilitates a reordering and compression of events in the opera libretto. In Harbison's mind, part of the function of the libretto was to open up some space in which the characters could come to life.⁷¹ One such situation occurs in Nick and Jordan's teatime conversation at the Plaza Hotel, which Harbison omitted from the opera. Harbison shifts much of the background information Jordan conveys to the beginning of I:4 with the important exception of her request on Gatsby's behalf that Nick arrange a meeting between him and Daisy. Instead, Gatsby personally makes this request near the end of the first party scene. Additionally, Gatsby himself presents the story of his youthful romance with Daisy in his aria instead of the more indirect reportage of Jordan to Nick. Since Gatsby's obsession with winning Daisy back is both the driving force of the plot and the origin of the persona he has created for himself, it is essential in Harbison's eyes that the listener

⁷¹ Harbison, interview by author.

come to terms with Gatsby directly, not through the filter of Nick's reportage, and recognize the intensity with which this character is living in the past.⁷²

Harbison rearranges some events to serve both musical and dramatic needs. For example the chorus delivers rumors about Gatsby's business dealings more forcefully in the opening scene of the second act than does Nick in the novel. The only remnant of Nick and Gatsby's lunchtime meeting with Wolfsheimer is his brief appearance near the end of the Act I party scene and the macabre revelation that his cufflinks are made of human molars. Yet another incident that the composer moved is the scene involving Gatsby's many beautiful shirts, which he pridefully shows to Daisy, sparking her strong emotional reaction. For musical reasons, Harbison chooses to insert this into the Act II party scene in order to underscore Gatsby's desperation to impress her.⁷³

Harbison makes other changes to heighten the dramatic tension. One such incident occurs when Gatsby relays his preposterous autobiography, which includes a wealthy family, Oxford education, art career, and heroic war record not to the somewhat sympathetic Nick but to rival Tom Buchanan. Tom is openly incredulous and rude, thus injecting a new tension into these revelations.⁷⁴ Another important change concerns Daisy's line "Where is the old warm world?" which occurs in her aria in the first scene and reveals her unhappiness in her marriage. A recognizable portion of the text returns, ironically, during the Plaza Hotel scene in the second act, at the point when Daisy decides to choose Tom over Gatsby. The line appears in the novel in a different context however, as part of Nick's narration following the death of Myrtle Wilson and just before Wilson kills Gatsby:

No telephone message arrived but the butler went without his sleep and waited for it until four o'clock – until long after there was anyone to give it to if it came. I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost *the old warm world*, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream (emphasis added).⁷⁵

While both Daisy and Nick, in the novel, embrace the nostalgic idea of a simpler, happier past, Daisy, in the opera, expresses herself in more sentimental terms. Thus,

⁷² Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby."

⁷³ Harbison, interview by author.

⁷⁴ Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby."

⁷⁵ Fitzgerald, 169.

Harbison embellishes and reassigns the evocatively poetic text to serve his dramatic needs.

In addition to changing the order or context of components in the novel, Harbison also elaborates on elements that Fitzgerald only touches on briefly in the novel and at times invents new material. In the opening scene of the opera, Jordan reads to the others from the *Saturday Evening Post*. While the novel only makes a passing mention of this incident, Harbison uses it as part of a quartet that closes the scene. The text for this quartet, taken from Fitzgerald's short story "Winter Dreams," forms a counterpoint to Nick's musings about feeling out of place with the moneyed crowd and Daisy's romantic daydreams.⁷⁶ The quartet helps to establish both Daisy's susceptibility to romantic suggestion and Nick's position as an outsider in this society.

Perhaps the most important of Harbison's digressions from the novel's text occurs in the love duet between Daisy and Gatsby. In the novel, Nick does not witness this scene; consequently, he leaves the details of their reunion to the reader's imagination. In the opera, Harbison creates a duet using text mostly of his own invention along with a few borrowings from Nick's narration. Of course, a love duet is completely in keeping with operatic convention, and the scene provides a stirring conclusion to the first act.⁷⁷

In the context of scenes that the composer expanded or invented, the party scenes of the opera are worthy of special mention. While extant in the novel, both are manipulated to conform to operatic convention. This occurs primarily with regard to the use of the chorus. In the first act, the chorus music is full of gay dance tunes that underscore Gatsby's fabulous yet fabulously artificial life. The second party scene (II:1) is much darker, with rumors circulating through the crowd about Gatsby's business dealings and a sense that they will only stay as long as the champagne is flowing:

Chorus I: Rumors, more rumors, something rotten at the core...
Newspapers asking where the money comes from.
Chorus II: We don't care as long as Gatsby's lights are on.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), 224.

⁷⁷ Another important feature of this duet is the complete absence of any of the pop idioms, or phenomenal music, that is such an important aspect of the preceding scenes. Instead, the music seems to be "resounding in their heads, overwhelming all else," and Nick, while unable to hear this music, describes Gatsby and Daisy as "Lost in a spinning world of their own." Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 441; Harbison, libretto, 39.

⁷⁸ Harbison, libretto, 44-45.

Even the band vocalist's song seems out of place: "And if they ask you, say I'm doin' fine; I've made up my mind never to pine no more."⁷⁹ Tom's sneering, confrontational attitude toward his host and Gatsby's attempt to convince Daisy that they can repeat the past complete the multilayered complexity of the scene.

Before leaving the discussion of individual scenes, it is important to examine two scenes, which, while not radically different from the novel, presented particular challenges in the opera. The first of these is the climactic Plaza Hotel scene in which Tom confronts Gatsby and forces his wife to make a choice between the two of them. This scene is potentially problematic in two ways. The first lies in the dramatic arc of the scene. Tensions among the characters run high, and Daisy experiences complex and conflicting emotions. The text must create a dynamic dramatic arc while serving Harbison's musical needs. Harbison derives much of the text directly from the novel, but early drafts of the libretto indicate that it took some time for Harbison to strike the right balance.⁸⁰ The second challenge lies with the presence of Nick and Jordan in the scene. Once the confrontation between Tom and Gatsby begins, it becomes increasingly difficult for Harbison to inject them into the trajectory of the scene. This leaves the two of them as awkward observers of the increasingly tense exchange.⁸¹

The final scene is also challenging to stage. Harbison thinks of the scene as an epilogue that functions as a thematic summary of the opera. It is the lack of action attendant with this recapitulation that has drawn criticism. Harbison was advised to cut most or all of the final scene, but he ultimately went against that advice and retained almost all of the material. Adjustments were made to the staging for the Chicago production, which, in Harbison's opinion improved the effect. The most obvious change moves partygoers into the scene from their original role as offstage chorus.⁸²

The larger issue, however, lies with the musical trajectory of the final scene and its relationship to the preceding material. Following Gatsby's final aria and death, the orchestral interlude between the two scenes surges toward a dramatic climax. It then dissolves into a spare, limping waltz as the final scene begins, sidestepping anticipated

⁷⁹ Harbison, libretto, 43.

⁸⁰ In a draft of acknowledgments Patrick J. Smith is specifically credited for his contributions to this scene. "Acknowledgments" handwritten note by John Harbison, Fitzgerald Collection, University of South Carolina Library, Columbia, S. C., Folder 1.

⁸¹ Harbison, interview by author.

⁸² Harbison, interview by author.

musical catharsis. The events in the scene are a condensed version of those in the final chapter of the novel. Harbison uses them to summarize the major themes of the opera: Gatsby and Nick as outsiders and the impossibility and transcendence of Gatsby's dream. There is irony in the absence of guests at Gatsby's funeral and in the falsely optimistic text sung by the chorus during their brief entrance. The appearance of Gatsby's father and the reading from Gatsby's boyhood diary serve the same ironic yet poignant function in the opera as they do in the novel. After the funeral procession has moved off, Nick is left alone to deliver a condensed version of perhaps the most famous text of the novel:

Blessed are the dead.
Gatsby believed in the green light.
The green light...
The orgasmic future that recedes before us –
run faster, stretch our arms further,
and one fine morning, –
So we beat on, boats against the current,
borne back ceaselessly into the Past.⁸³

The opera thus veers from the romantic to the philosophical. Beginning with the preceding interlude, the final scene evokes the conventions of romantic opera. By sidestepping the ethereal, transcendent "operatic" climax, Harbison subtly underscores yet another of the opera's important themes. Daisy's nostalgic and romantic shell ultimately gives way to reveal the cold emptiness underneath. She too evokes the romantic and then evades it. While the closing music of the opera is in no way cold or hollow, it is highly abstract in nature and results in a more esoteric ending.

Major Themes

Since the opera closely adheres to the novel's plot, many of the main themes remain intact. One of the most important aspects of Fitzgerald's work is the atmosphere of mythology that he creates. This can be seen in Gatsby's larger-than-life quality, the epic nature of the clash between Buchanan and Gatsby, and the apparent inevitability

⁸³ Harbison, libretto, 70.

of the outcomes. The story moves toward a seemingly fateful conclusion, and in the end, each character gets what he or she deserves. This sense of mythology lends a universality that transcends the emotional hollowness of the characters and the sordid details of the story.⁸⁴ The opera takes this mythological aspect to greater heights. The various colors and sounds produced by a large orchestra and the urgency of the sung voice along with the chorus, sets, and costumes combine to give opera a sense of existing in some heightened reality. Given a first-person voice, the title character of *The Great Gatsby* becomes even grander. The characters' struggles take on a new exigency with the addition of music that underscores and heightens the universality of the story.

The musical component also has a great impact on two more of the novel's themes. Much attention has already been given to Nick Carraway's importance to the structure and atmosphere of the novel. It is through Nick that Fitzgerald conveys the futile and hollow quality of reality that permeates the novel.⁸⁵ With the absence of Nick in the role of narrator, this idea might also be lost if it were not for the pervasive unreality that the musical element supplies. The musical element also affects the emotional poverty of the characters. Examples of this appear in the apparent lack of passion in Tom's relationship with Myrtle and in Daisy's cynicism and seemingly artificial emotion. In this case, the musical element alters the audience's perception of these characters. While they may remain unsympathetic, the mere fact that they are expressing themselves musically makes them less barren emotionally.

In interviews preceding the opera's premiere, Harbison concisely summed up the work's main themes: "...longing, ...the idea of some great majestic fantasy... [and] the great American archetypal theme of the impostor," along with "the endless capacity for romantic, irrational hope that is part of our national character, the inevitable mutability and loss that overtake that hope."⁸⁶ The most striking example of the first of these themes is found in Gatsby's Act I aria, which follows the first of the party scenes. Alone, Gatsby gazes at the green light on Daisy's dock across the bay and reminisces about an evening he spent with Daisy five years before. The text for the first half of the aria is principally Harbison's invention and stresses Gatsby's longing for Daisy, culminating with the text "It's not too late. Everything will be the way it was before."⁸⁷ This

⁸⁴ Chambers, 121-122; Hindus, 49.

⁸⁵ Chambers, 120.

⁸⁶ Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby"; Mercado, "Green Light for Gatsby."

⁸⁷ Harbison, libretto, 31.

provides the first glimpse of Gatsby's determination to win her back. The portion of the aria that follows describes in detail the walk in the moonlight that culminates in their first kiss, which Harbison draws, with very few alterations, from the novel.⁸⁸ Harbison further stresses Gatsby's longing by including an obbligato oboe line in the aria. The mournful sound of the oboe and its lyrical, wandering melody provide an effective musical expression of Gatsby's yearning for Daisy and all that she represents.



Ex. 2, *The Great Gatsby*, Act I, Scene 3, mm. 399-403⁸⁹

The notion of longing is intimately connected with Harbison's idea of the "great majestic fantasy." More than being a self-made man, Gatsby is a self-invented man. His name, the various versions of his past, and his money and social status are all creations born of a desire to be something other than the poor midwestern boy Jimmy Gatz. This pattern of self-creation begins before he meets Daisy and picks up momentum after he loses her. She becomes for him the ultimate symbol of the wealth and respectability to which he aspires. Ultimately, he creates a life of wealth and parties in the fervent belief that he can win her back. It is his conviction that their earlier love affair represents a transcendent, mystical union and that this union can be resurrected that forms the core of Gatsby's "great majestic fantasy."⁹⁰

Both the novel and the opera are concerned with what Harbison calls the "American archetypal theme of the imposter."⁹¹ The imposter may be defined as one who pretends to be something or someone that he is not in order to insert himself into

⁸⁸ Fitzgerald, 117.

⁸⁹ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, full score, Act I, Vol. 2, Scenes 3 and 4, (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 2002) 361.

⁹⁰ Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby."

⁹¹ Ibid.

a situation to which he does not belong. In the opera, as in the novel, both Gatsby and Nick function as outsiders. Gatsby is naturally an outsider by virtue of his poor, working class roots and his shady business dealings. Further, he remains an outsider in the world he creates for Daisy's benefit as epitomized by the fact that he throws fabulous parties but does not actively participate in the revelry. While Nick does not explicitly say so, much of his sympathy for Gatsby in the novel is based on the fact that both men are outsiders to the Eastern nouveau-riche social order. Harbison preserves this theme of the Western outsider in part by placing Nick squarely in the texture of the opera and not requiring that his character retain the objective status of a narrator.⁹² He establishes Nick's separateness as a misplaced Midwesterner early in the opera via the ensemble that closes the first scene of Act I. Jordan reads to the others from the *Saturday Evening Post* in a non-melodic recitative while Tom and Daisy comment on what Jordan is reading. In keeping with the blunt nature of his character, Tom's interjections are short and infrequent while Daisy provides a more rhapsodic commentary. In contrast, Nick provides a textual and musical counterpoint to the others that clearly exemplifies his outsider status. His text gives the impression of an inner monologue and his vocal line, though somewhat obscured by that of the other characters, is more substantive and reflective:

So, here I am with two old friends I scarcely know,
two who drift here and there unrestfully
wherever people play polo and are rich together.
And one new friend,
less gentle than she seems.
When I came back restless from the Great War,
the middle west, my warm center of the world,
suddenly seemed the ragged edge of the universe.
Will I stay here?
Fringe member of a secret society
to which I may never belong?...⁹³

⁹² David Benedict, "A Novel Way With All That Jazz," *The Independent* (London), 20 December 1999 [newspaper on-line]; available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 31 July 2000.

⁹³ Harbison, libretto, 14-15.

Tranquillo (l'istesso tempo)

430 *p* *cantabile*

Jordan: We were here: "My name is Ju - dy

Nick: So here I am with two old friends I scarce - ly

Piano: *p*

434 *pp*

Daisy: "A

Jordan: Jones and I live in a house o - ver there on the is - land, and in that house is a man wait - ing for me

Nick: know, two who drift here and there un - rest - ful - ly when -

Pno.

438 *pensoso*

Daisy: man

Jordan: wait - ing for me

Nick: "When he drove up at the door I dove out of the dock be - cause he says I'm

Pno.

ev - er peo - ple play po - lo and are rich to - geth - er And one new friend, - less gen - te

Ex. 3, *The Great Gatsby*, Act I, Scene 1, mm. 430-461.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 36-40.

442

Daisy "His i - deal."

Jordan his i - deal." "There was a fish jump - ing and a star shin - ing and the

Nick than she seems.

Pno.

446

Daisy

Jordan lights a - round the lake were gleam - ing then she was in the wa - ter," "swim - ming

Tom "She was in the wa - ter."

Nick "In the wa - ter!"

Pno. When I came back rest - less from the Great War, the mid - dle west my

450

Daisy

Jordan with a sin - u - ous crawl, her arms burnt to but - ter - nut stab - bing the path a - head."

Tom "A sin - u - ous crawl."

Nick warm cen - ter of the world sud - den - ly seemed the rag - ged edge pf the

Pno.

Ex. 3, continued.

454

p *3* *dim.* *pp*

Daisy "A sin - u - ous crawl."

Jordan Watch - ing her was with - out ef - fort to the

Tom *p* That's good.

Nick *f* un - i - verse. Will I stay here?

Pno.

458

Daisy

Jordan *3* eye, watch - ing a branch wav - ing, or a sea - gull fly - ing. "What's your name," she shout - ed.

Tom

Nick Fringe mem - ber of a se - cret so - ci - e - ty to which - *3* I will ne - ver be long.

Pno.

Ex. 3, continued.

In Harbison's opinion, the theme of the outsider is of greater importance in the opera than in the novel. He returns to this theme at the end of the opera via Nick's decision to return to the Midwest. Harbison summarizes his intentions in this way:

...I wanted Nick's departure - his idea to go back to the Midwest to be a decision taken much more strongly and affirmatively than in the novel. ...I really wanted the effect of it [to be] that he breaks up with Jordan because

she's one of them and then he is going back and his vision of the train's going back and so forth is a kind of affirmative American vision that some people don't belong here.⁹⁵

The opera ends with Nick's impending departure for the Midwest, which effectively underscores Nick's status as an outsider. Further, the fact that Nick is the only one who remains for Gatsby's funeral clearly links the two characters by virtue of their not truly belonging to the East.

Juxtaposed against the American archetype of the imposter is the equally American capacity for hope that forms an important thematic thread in both the novel and the opera. All of the characters who possess a strong measure of hope are destroyed in one way or another. For example, Myrtle falls into this category. While her relationship with Tom is perhaps base and tawdry, it does represent her hope of deliverance from the colorless grit of her life in the valley of ashes. One could even go so far as to say that her flinging herself at this hope, as represented by Gatsby's yellow car she has seen Tom driving, results in her brutal death. Similarly, Gatsby's hope manifests itself in the realization of the American Dream. He has gone from low beginnings to wealth and an aura of status by virtue of his own charisma and determination. The fact that the greatest number of Gatsby's accomplishments result from his goal of winning back Daisy best reveals his hope's ultimate expression. His blind, unfailing belief that he and Daisy will reunite remains with him until the end and sets him apart in a world of emotionally empty relationships. On the other hand, Nick, while not physically destroyed by his own hopes, is forced to come to terms with the fragility and unlikely nature of hope. Interestingly, although he begins both the novel and the opera on some sort of moral high ground ("My own instinct was to telephone immediately for the police"⁹⁶), wisdom ultimately tempers his cynicism. The final images – the green light, which represents the ideal "orgastic" future man continues to reach for, and boats beating against the current, "borne back ceaselessly into the past"⁹⁷– demonstrate this curious balance of hopefulness and fatalism. By contrast, part of what makes Tom and Jordan emotionally corrupt is their self-satisfaction and their apparent lack of any guiding desire. Finally, Daisy, in her romantic sentimentality, seems to

⁹⁵ Harbison, interview by author.

⁹⁶ Fitzgerald, 20.

⁹⁷ Fitzgerald, 189.

possess a certain nostalgic hopefulness. She ultimately turns her back on it, however, in favor of the relative security of her life with Tom.

The balance of fate and hope manifests itself musically as well. The overture of the opera begins with sustained chords that are carried forward by chromatic ascending accented sixteenth notes. The chords, with prominent ninth relationships, rise laboriously with frequent setbacks. They are accompanied by brooding octaves in the bass, which descend as the treble chords rise, foreshadowing the heavy hand of fate that will make its mark upon the opera's characters.

Ex. 4, *The Great Gatsby*, Overture, mm. 1-8⁹⁸

This foreshadowing manifests itself in a recurrence of rhythmic and intervallic elements of this opening theme. By virtue of its reappearance prior to both party scenes, this theme will come to be associated with Gatsby's longing for Daisy and the theatrical exhibitions of wealth he manages on her behalf.⁹⁹ For example, in the opening of the

⁹⁸ Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 3.

⁹⁹ Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 424-425.

second act, the music is characterized by groups of two measures in which the treble chords at the start of each measure ascend step-wise and then return to their place of origin, while the octaves in the bass move in contrary motion. Additionally, the chords are made up of major triads with an added sixth above the tonic thus creating the same ninth relationships found in the opening chords of the overture. Further, the bass motion upwards in fifths in measure two is quoted from measure eight of the overture and rounds out the evocation of the opening music. In the party scene that follows Tom voices his suspicions about Gatsby, setting in motion the series of events that will lead to Gatsby's downfall.

Ex. 5, *The Great Gatsby*, Act II, Prologue, mm. 1-4.¹⁰⁰

A similar series of chords also accompanies the closing text of Gatsby's first-act aria. Here again the key interval in the treble chords is the ninth. These chords have a more open structure than those in the overture or the Act II prologue, and the pervasive use of tritones creates tension and a sense of longing. In addition, Gatsby sings an ascending sixth on the words, "We kissed" that recalls the ascending sixths found in the bass in mm. 2 -3 and mm. 6 - 7 of the overture. (ex. 4) This, combined with the high tessitura of the vocal line, conveys both Gatsby's intense hope and the sense that he will overreach the bounds of what he may hope for.

¹⁰⁰ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 176.

700 (♩ = 54) *f* (♩ = 76) *meno f* *cedendo*

Gatsby

We kissed. We kissed.

700 *sf* *p subito* *cresc.*

Piano

705 *meno mosso* (♩ = 69) *dim.*

And we will kiss

705 *p subito*

Pno.

710 *p* *a tempo* (♩ = 76)

a - gain.

710 *pp* *8^{va}*

Pno.

Ex. 6, *The Great Gatsby*, Act I, Scene 3, mm. 700-715¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 127.

The impact of Fitzgerald's use of language has already been discussed in the context of the novel's structure. It is important to remember, however, that the novel's language also has thematic implications. Fitzgerald's careful and repeated use of words such as "restless," "drifting" and "romantic" has, in addition to a poetic impact, a thematic one as well. Indeed, part of the genius of the novel lies in the manner in which Fitzgerald expresses the novel's themes in the texture of the prose.¹⁰² Opera, however, does not have the luxury of such subtlety. The finer nuances of text are often lost when they are forced to compete with orchestral and theatrical effects. Perhaps more importantly, the time necessary to deliver sung text is almost always significantly longer than that of spoken text as well as average reading speed. This expansion changes the impact of the words themselves. While the addition of music provides a connective element for the text, it also alters its cognitive impact. The experience becomes one of the aural/visual/dramatic whole instead of the specific impact of words or phrases. Certainly, Harbison borrows generously from Fitzgerald's text, but the impact is more poetic and less thematic.

Clearly Harbison's close adherence to the content of novel yields strong thematic parallels. It is also true that these themes are in some ways more clearly delineated in the operatic treatment because of the concise text that the genre demands. While the addition of music adds a new dimension to the extant themes, much of the subtlety of the written word must be sacrificed in order to accommodate music. As a result, the opera more clearly presents the novel's strongest thematic threads while the musical and theatrical elements supplant some of the novel's more subtle textural aspects.

Characters

While exploration of plot and thematic elements has already led to some discussion of the characters in both their literary and operatic incarnations, the difference between these two works impacts the reader's or listener's perception of the characters perhaps more than any other element. In the novel, the characters emerge as part of Nick's story, and the reader's understanding of them is colored both by Nick's judgments and by the elements of flashback and foreshadowing Fitzgerald employs. The reader achieves a rather oblique understanding of the characters based solely upon

¹⁰² Harvey, 98.

Nick's reportage. The relative lack of dialogue in the novel underscores the perception that the characters are rarely allowed to speak for themselves. Rather, the narrator reports on their activities and motives.

In many ways the operatic genre represents the opposite extreme because the essence of opera is the expressive quality of the human voice. Thus, in Harbison's opera, the characters speak for themselves, and Harbison's choices in the creation of the libretto and the music, rather than Nick's reports, color the listener's perceptions of them. Musical elements such as voice type and orchestration also influence the listener's perception of the characters and how each one functions within the framework of the story. These choices and their juxtaposition with the novel are key to understanding the opera in relation to its literary source.

When Harbison began imagining the sound of the various characters' voices, he found that his imagination responded strongly to traditional operatic prototypes.¹⁰³ Thus his choice of voice types for the various characters relied heavily on operatic convention. The hero and heroine are cast as a tenor and soprano respectively, even though Fitzgerald describes Daisy's voice as "low."¹⁰⁴ Harbison conceived Myrtle as a Carmen-type mezzo-soprano, while George, her gruff husband, is a bass. As is typical of supporting roles, the roles of Jordan and Nick are sung by a mezzo-soprano and a baritone respectively. Harbison's chief deviation from this standard format is the choice of a heldentenor for Gatsby's chief rival, Tom. The conventional choice of voice types places the characters in a recognizable context for the operatic genre while placing the two rivals in the same voice range. This arrangement increases the aural and dramatic tension between the two characters.

Perhaps the most challenging role to translate from the literary to the operatic medium was that of Gatsby. In the novel, one of Gatsby's most notable characteristics is that he seldom speaks. He has not read the books in his large library – they are there only for show. He apes an upper-class familiarity by his constant use of the outdated phrase "old sport," which is symbolic of the absence of his authentic self-expression. Despite this, he commands the attention of narrator and reader alike by virtue of some intangible sense of himself and his enormous potential.¹⁰⁵ Naturally, a huge shift occurs

¹⁰³ Harbison, interview by author.

¹⁰⁴ Fitzgerald, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Hindus, 42-43.

in the creation of an operatic hero from a man of so few words. Harbison offered significant insight into this in an interview with Charles McGrath for the *New York Times*:

I sometimes think that Fitzgerald put Gatsby there for the reader to invent... In the opera it seemed I had no choice. For better or worse, Gatsby had to be brought forward; he had to be a presence. So what you get, I suppose is my invention of Gatsby – you get who I think he is, which is most of all someone who feels things very deeply. That's why I made him a tenor – in opera terms, he just seemed to be classically tenorish.¹⁰⁶

In spite of Gatsby's lack of verbal expression in the novel, his character possesses other characteristics that easily translate onto the stage. As is a self-invented man, Gatsby is an actor in a play of his own imagination, playing out scenes that he stage-manages himself. When one stops to wonder how a man of Gatsby's background has achieved this level of material and social success without actually being able to pay for it all, one must assume that it is the work of someone with impressive powers of persuasion. Further, as the motive for Gatsby's flamboyant lifestyle becomes clear – his hope that one-day Daisy will appear – it becomes even clearer that he has, staged it all in order to gain her attention. In keeping with the view of Gatsby as an actor, Nick constantly describes Gatsby in terms of various idealized, romantic tableaux. Nick first encounters his neighbor alone in the darkness with his arms stretched toward the green light across the bay. Nick later describes Gatsby at the close of one his parties: "A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell."¹⁰⁷ And later still, Gatsby engages in an almost sacred moonlight vigil outside the Buchanan's house, where Nick leaves him "watching over nothing."¹⁰⁸ Viewed in this way, the enigmatic, inarticulate Gatsby takes on the grandiose, larger-than-life quality of a stage hero, and it is easy to imagine him in his operatic incarnation. In addition, the romanticized tableaux are easily adapted for dramaturgical purposes.

¹⁰⁶ Charles McGrath, "Giving Voice to Gatsby," *The New York Times Magazine*, 28 November 1999 [newspaper on-line]; available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 31 July 2000.

¹⁰⁷ Fitzgerald, 60.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 153.

One of the ways by which Harbison achieves Gatsby's captivating, flamboyant essence is by having him sing more extravagantly than the other characters. In contrast to Tom's shorter phrases and Nick's generally more dissonant vocal line, Gatsby's arias are characterized by long, soaring vocal lines with a high tessitura.

605 *p* *f* dim. *p*
 Gatsby Ev-ery-one was here but the one who mat-ters.

605 *p* cresc. *p* *f* dim. *p*
 Piano

610 *f* *p* cresc. poco
 Gatsby And she lives there a - cross the bay, by the green light

610 *f* dim. *p* *p* *f* *p*
 Pno.

615 *f* rit. *p*
 Gatsby that haunts my dreams.

615 a poco cresc. *f*
 Pno.

Ex. 7, *The Great Gatsby*, Act I, Scene 3, mm. 605-617.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 120-121.

Although this presentation is a departure from the novel's enigmatically silent character, it achieves a similar goal by drawing a clear distinction between his character and the others as well as establishing him more firmly at the center of the story. Harbison's *Gatsby* also magnifies the character's theatrical inclinations.

Of course, this is due in part to the nature of the operatic medium. On a deeper level though, the character's actions and motivations reflect a high level of control and planning. The two lavish party scenes are clearly staged productions in *Gatsby*'s world, complete with props and an entire chorus of backup singers. Yet, in Nick's words, "He keeps himself apart, not drinking, not dancing."¹¹⁰ The first party scene provides *Gatsby* the opportunity to ask Nick the favor of engineering a meeting with Daisy. *Gatsby* also reveals that he has been hoping she might just appear at one of his parties. In the Act II party scene, *Gatsby* has clearly invited Daisy in hopes of having some time alone with her. In spite of his nervousness, when he and Daisy reunite, the events unfold in keeping with his fantasy. He only loses control of the situation during the Plaza Hotel scene of Act II when Daisy refuses to leave Tom. After this occurs, *Gatsby* shifts from controlling an elaborately manufactured dream to being mildly delusional in his expectation that Daisy will leave Tom.

Harbison underscores *Gatsby*'s relative inauthenticity with the setting of the character's often-incanted "old sport." The text occurs eight times in the course of the opera, and in all but one case it is set as a descending perfect fourth. This choice of interval is significant and reflects, as does the text, *Gatsby*'s attempt to sound familiar. In spite of being a perfect interval, this descending fourth sounds false and insincere as if it does not quite reach the intended destination. Each time this textual and musical phrase appears, it works with the orchestra to provide subtle information about *Gatsby*'s mental and emotional state. For example, when *Gatsby* is unsure of himself, as in his first meeting with Nick, the Plaza Hotel confrontation with Tom, and as he waits for Daisy in the scene following Myrtle's death, the accompanying chords provide dissonance and instability. The rhythmic settings of the text play a key role as well. Five of these exclamations begin on an off-beat or are characterized by a syncopated rhythm that increases the sense that it is an affectation. *Gatsby*'s first utterance of the words particularly exemplifies this. It occurs a full three and a half beats after his

¹¹⁰ Harbison libretto, 26.

previous phrase, which makes it appear to be a nervous reaction, thrown in to fill an awkward silence. Further, the relative consonance of the harmony under the words “This is better don’t you think,” followed by the dissonant setting of “old sport” suggests Gatsby’s discomfort or vulnerability.

The image shows a musical score for a scene from *The Great Gatsby*. It consists of two staves: a vocal line for Gatsby and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The score begins at measure 285. The vocal line starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. There is a full bar rest, followed by a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note F4. The lyrics are: "This is bet-ter don't you think, old sport?". The piano accompaniment features a complex harmonic structure with many chords and triplets. The lyrics are: "This is bet-ter don't you think, old sport?".

Ex. 8, *The Great Gatsby*, Act I, Scene 3, mm. 285-288.¹¹¹

Interestingly, the only time Gatsby sings the phrase as anything other than a perfect fourth is during his reunion with Daisy. Nick interrupts their duet, and Gatsby responds with “Hello, old sport” sung as a perfect fifth before turning his attention back to Daisy. Again, the words serve as an unconvincing attempt to fill space. However, in this case, Gatsby is not quite himself and thus overshoots the interval in his distracted state. Here, the harmonies are highly consonant and the effect is a kind of distracted joy.

Fitzgerald’s Gatsby, is a mysteriously quiet figure whose sheer force of will propels the drama forward, while Harbison’s operatic incarnation of Gatsby is more extravagant in his verbal expression as well as more theatrical in his presence. Yet many of the basic elements remain the same. Both characters share a shadowy past and an elaborate dream of the future, possess an almost inexplicable charisma, and personify

¹¹¹ Harbison, *The Great Gatsby* vocal score, 90.

the mythical tragic hero. Harbison's Gatsby is, simply put, more operatic in keeping with the extravagance of expression and gesture intrinsic to the genre.

While the operatic Gatsby is essentially cut from the same cloth as his literary predecessor, the operatic Daisy is more of a departure from her literary source. Fitzgerald's Daisy appears to be gay, shallow, and careless. She expresses herself in artificially romantic, sentimental terms, yet she ultimately remains detached. Nick's reaction to Daisy's thoughts about her daughter and how "sophisticated" she has become establishes this aspect of her character:

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged.¹¹²

However, it is possible to interpret Daisy's behavior not in terms of a lack of emotion but as a means of deliberately repressing feelings with which she is unable to deal. Daisy affects a superficiality and artificial gaiety as a defense mechanism in order to avoid the pain of genuine emotion.¹¹³ Ultimately, whether one views her as emotionally frozen or merely immature, Fitzgerald's Daisy is not a particularly sympathetic character.

Fitzgerald was never quite satisfied with the character of Daisy and even attributed the book's lack of financial success to the absence of an important female character at a time when women controlled the fiction market.¹¹⁴ Fitzgerald's misgivings about Daisy centered on the Plaza Hotel scene in chapter seven:

...Chapter 7 (the hotel scene) will never quite be up to the mark – I've worried about it too long and I can't quite place Daisy's reaction...It's chapter VII that's the trouble with Daisy and it may hurt the book's popularity that it's *a man's book*.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Fitzgerald, 22.

¹¹³ Sarah Beeby Fryer, "Beneath the Mask: The Plight of Daisy Buchanan," in *Fitzgerald's New Women: Harbingers of Change*, Studies in Modern Literature, ed. A. Walton Litz, no. 86 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc., Research Press, 1988), 44.

¹¹⁴ F. Scott Fitzgerald to Maxwell Perkins, 24 April 1925, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull, (London, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1963), 180.

¹¹⁵ Fitzgerald to Perkins, 20 December 1924, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull, (London, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1963), 172-173.

Yet it is in this scene that Daisy ultimately exhibits some integrity when, during the confrontation at the Plaza Hotel, she finally says: “Even alone I can’t say I never loved Tom...It wouldn’t be true.”¹¹⁶

Harbison freely admits that in adapting the character to the operatic stage, he had to make Daisy more sympathetic than she is in the novel. To achieve this, he creates a Daisy who is dreamier, more nostalgic, and a “Madam Bovary kind of character,” given to expressing herself in a kind of sappy romance novel language.¹¹⁷ While this treatment makes for a slightly different story than the one in the novel, Harbison feels it is necessary for several reasons. First, he describes the Daisy of the novel (and of the subsequent film with Mia Farrow in the role of Daisy) as having an inner soulless quality but outwardly being rather flighty, which he “couldn’t hear that singing very well somehow.”¹¹⁸ Harbison points out that Fitzgerald tries to justify her appeal based on “descriptions of her voice and her mysterious allure.” Yet, based on her actual words and actions, it is hard to imagine why anyone would put up with her.¹¹⁹ This seems to Harbison a departure from the traditional operatic heroine. Although Tom is openly cheating on Daisy, she is not really a “wronged” woman in the traditional operatic sense in that she is not manipulated and victimized by other characters or outside circumstances. Her motives and actions are more complex than the typical operatic ingénue, and while she may not always know what she wants, she is more self-directed than many of her operatic ancestors. She is susceptible to sentiment and romanticism because her own marriage is not very satisfying, yet she stays with Tom for very practical reasons. This complexity makes it impossible in Harbison’s mind to make her as “hard” as she is in the novel.¹²⁰ Finally, Harbison feels a scene for the reunion between Gatsby and Daisy is necessary even though it occurs “off stage” in the novel. Making Daisy a more sympathetic character was also necessary to this love duet as, in Harbison’s words, “a very remote, kind of false Daisy would be very hard to manage through that.”¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Fitzgerald, 140.

¹¹⁷ Harbison, interview by author.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

When considering the character's transition to the lyric medium it is significant that on more than one occasion Fitzgerald mentions the tone and quality of Daisy's voice. In the first scene of the novel, Nick is impressed by its musical quality:

I looked at my cousin who began to ask me questions in her low thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again.¹²²

By writing the part for a soprano instead of a mezzo-soprano, Harbison does not interpret Fitzgerald's description of Daisy's voice literally, but her music does sustain this image of captivating lyricism.

Daisy's music supports her dime-store romantic vision by taking a nostalgic tone. Much of her music is in a waltz-like rhythm and is filled with sad, yearning melodies that seem to be reaching back into the past. Harbison points out that in the novel Daisy talks about how wonderful everything was back in the South. However, his Daisy actually believes her illusion. Her first aria conveys this yearning via a harmonic progression that does not push strongly toward resolution. The wandering quality of the vocal line and the frequent high notes also contribute to the quality of nostalgia. (See Ex. 9, p. 52.) This melody and text appear again in the Plaza Hotel scene in a much more somber version. At this point, Harbison points out, Daisy is engrossed in her nostalgic frame of mind, even to the point of actually believing her own grief for a time.¹²³ Martin Brody argues that in keeping with this longing for the past, Daisy's music is often reactive, consisting of fragments of things she has heard previously. Her music often echoes the popular music around her, and she even hums along with the band during the party scene in Act II.¹²⁴

Harbison communicates Daisy's flightiness and nervousness through her most frequently used vocal gesture, the trill. Harbison also employs trills in the orchestra for other aspects of the opera that particularly relate to Daisy. For example, trills sound in the orchestra during times of emotional insecurity, such as when Daisy and Gatsby are first left alone in I:4 and during the height of Gatsby's confrontation with Tom in the Plaza Hotel scene. One also hears trills when Daisy's green light appears or is mentioned.

¹²² Fitzgerald, 13.

¹²³ Harbison, interview by author.

¹²⁴ Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 422, 433.

356 *Con Moto* $\text{♩} = 48$ *p* *cedendo* *f* *p* *cresc.*

Daisy

Where is the old warm world we re - call from

Piano

pp *f* *pp* *cresc.*

362 *mf* *p* *animando*

long a - go and where are the soft and balm - y

Pno.

p dim. *pp*

369 *Più animato* $\text{♩} = 56$ *cresc.*

nights when we danced un -

Pno.

cresc.

372 *ritardando* *f* *dim.*

til the dawn glowed in our tired eyes?

Pno.

mf *dim.*

Ex. 9 *The Great Gatsby*, Act I, Scene I mm. 356-376.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Harbison, *The Great Gatsby* vocal score, 33.

Harbison's use of trills also provides an interesting link between Daisy and Gatsby. Trills sound in the orchestra when Gatsby mentions his own wealth or possessions, such as when he points out his house to Daisy and Nick at the close of I:4. Trills are also present at the close of II:1 when Gatsby, telling his most transparent lie of the opera, tries to impress Tom by saying that he comes from wealth and privilege. The following exchange appears in essentially the same form in the opera as it does in the novel and makes explicit Daisy's association with money in Gatsby's mind.¹²⁶

Nick: Her voice is indiscreet. It's full of...
Gatsby: It's full of money.¹²⁷

This exchange follows one of Daisy's trills, which rounds out the association. Thus the trills associated with Daisy become linked to Gatsby's wealth and the relationship between the two in his mind.

While Daisy's operatic incarnation differs somewhat from the novel's, Jordan is much like her literary counterpart. Harbison found what he calls Jordan's "consistent hardness and athleticism" easier to translate into music. She does quite a bit of dancing and is either in motion or completely inert, making her somewhat detached from what goes on around her.¹²⁸ Jordan provides a dry cynicism that contrasts with Daisy's nostalgic sentimentality. Unlike her friends the Buchanans, Jordan seems to have a demanding occupation. She is, in Nick's words, "the famous golfer."¹²⁹ Yet ultimately, Nick leaves Jordan because she has become part of the same corrupt, soulless culture of the East that he has come to despise.

Of particular interest is the choice of a heldentenor for the role of Tom, the story's closest thing to a villain. This effectively pits Gatsby's full lyric voice against a similar, yet more weighty and powerful, counterpart and underscores the conflict between the two men. Gatsby's high, soaring vocal lines at times seem to be striving for the power and drive of the heldentenor voice, which communicates the aspirations of his character and evokes an emotional response from the listener.¹³⁰ Scoring the role of Tom for a Heldentenor is also important as it provides a musical manifestation of

¹²⁶ Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby."

¹²⁷ Harbison libretto, 51-52.

¹²⁸ Harbison, interview by author.

¹²⁹ Harbison libretto, 12.

¹³⁰ Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 424.

his outstanding characteristics. Fitzgerald's Tom is an intellectually barren man who confuses names and facts but who is so forceful in his manner that he does not seem to be bumbling. He is given to pushing people around and is constantly interrupting people's conversations.¹³¹ Casting Tom as a heldentenor achieves the same effect in an aural sense as the physical power of his voice is always waiting to overpower the others. This affect is particularly evident in the frequent octave jumps found in Tom's vocal line, demonstrating his aggressive nature. Harbison also found the part easy to score, for he did not have to worry about the power of the orchestra. The forceful orchestral sound that accompanies Tom enhances the sense that he is something of a blowhard, someone perfectly willing to bully others into getting what he wants.¹³²

Perhaps the biggest departure from the novel in terms of characterization lies with Tom's girlfriend, Myrtle Wilson. Fitzgerald's Myrtle is something of a harlot, but he does not provide a great deal of detail about Myrtle or George Wilson or their world.¹³³ This omission is probably a reflection of Nick's distaste for these vulgar people and especially Tom's tawdry affair with Myrtle. Further, Nick is not in a position to know the Wilsons well and consequently cannot report much from their perspectives. He is far more knowledgeable about and comfortable with the characters nearer to his own class and social standing. In the opera, Myrtle only appears in two scenes, but she provides such a strong contrast to the other characters that she emerges as a much more important character than she does in the novel. In Harbison's words:

Myrtle in the opera is a bigger character than in the book. And I thought of her as representing a tremendously important kind of grounding or earthy element, which is actually very unusual in Fitzgerald's writing anyway. This sort of pedal tone is really from quite a different world and I wanted more of it than the novel has.¹³⁴

Myrtle's music is bluesy and imbued with all the sensuality and sexual energy she reflects. Vernacular music plays a particularly important role in her scenes and is one of the tools Harbison uses to communicate the contrast between her and the cool, refined Daisy. Together, the two garage scenes produce a web of important contrasts.

¹³¹ Hindus, 39-40.

¹³² Harbison, interview by author.

¹³³ McGrath, "Giving Voice to Gatsby."

¹³⁴ Harbison, interview by author.

First, while Daisy's music may be viewed as reactive to the phenomenal music in her world, Myrtle, and by extension, her husband George, have a more direct relationship with the vernacular music of the opera. This presentation underscores the Wilsons' common, low-class stature by providing a contrast to the way the other characters relate to the phenomenal music in their world. It also provides an earthy, sexual element, which contrasts with Gatsby's idealized love for Daisy. Secondly, in the first-act garage scene, the chipper and somewhat falsely upbeat pop music of the Roaring Twenties is used to accompany much of the singing. The radio provides these tunes, which are not always related to the text. This becomes particularly striking when Myrtle taunts Tom about Daisy and the tension begins to mount textually, although it is still set to the light-hearted dance music. After Tom hits Myrtle, the music catches up with the mood of the text and segues into the interlude to the party scene at Gatsby's house. While the characters borrow phenomenal music at other times in the opera, they never use it as accompaniment to the extent that occurs here. This clash of phenomenal and noumenal music creates a tension and falseness that clarifies the bloodless passion between Tom and Myrtle, as well as the pair's lack of any lofty or idealized goals.

The jazz idioms in the second-act garage scene, are employed in an entirely different manner. Phenomenal music does not play a role here, but Harbison provides the most gritty, jazzy music of the opera, so these idioms take on an entirely different meaning. First, they establish something particularly squalid and volatile about the pair. One must remember that while the wealthy party set of the 1920's may have embraced jazz, the genre was still viewed by many as morally corrupt and a product of the lower classes. In addition, the blues were a product of the rural, African-American culture of the South. Myrtle's bluesy swinging vocal lines in II:4 are not only an appropriate reflection of her emotional state – she is quite literally singing the blues – they also place her firmly in the ranks of the lowborn. Finally, Harbison's use of soprano saxophone, muted trumpets and trombones, and pizzicato articulations in the low strings contributes to the jazz feeling and by extension adds a sexual energy that contrasts sharply with the preceding Plaza Hotel scene.

♩ = 76 Moderato

p *f*

Myrtle He stopped to-day for gas, in a new yel-low

sop. sax

Piano *f* *dim.* *p*

vla. *dim.* *p*

vc.

4 Myrtle but he did-n't stop for me.

car.

4 oboe

Pno. *mf* *dim.* *p* *f* *dim.*

vla. *dim.* *p*

vc.

muted tbn

7 Myrtle The days stretch out with out him.

p *cres.* *f*

clarinet

Pno. *p* *f*

10 Myrtle Wait ing, wait -

f *rit.* *p* *f*

Pno. *dim.* *p* *cresc.*

horn

Ex. 10, *The Great Gatsby*, Act II, Scene 4, mm. 1-20, vocal score p. 269-270.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 269-270.

A tempo

Myrtle 13 *p* *f* *p* *f* *p*
 ing by the win - dow, watch - - - -

Pno. 13 *sf* *p* *sf* *sf*
 cla muted tpt
 pizz vc.
 cb.

Myrtle 16 *f* *p* cresc.
 ing by the door, dream - - - - ing of us to -

Pno. 16 *sf* *sf*

Myrtle 19 *f*
 geth - er, to - geth - er.

Pno. 19 *sf* *sf* horn

Ex. 10, continued.

Myrtle's unique and clearly delineated musical identity results in her emergence as a counterweight to Gatsby's romantic, idealized vision. While both characters risk a great deal by pursuing their dreams, Myrtle is more cognizant of her risks and less idealistic in her aspirations. Harbison clearly shows this in the contrast between the two

characters' key phrases. Gatsby fervently believes the phrase he utters more than once in the opera: "You can repeat the past."¹³⁶

599 Gatsby: appassionato Daisy: 8 We can re - peat the Past. Re - peat the

599 Piano

604 Gatsby: Past? We can re - peat the Past, dai - sy.

604 Pno. *f* *sf*

Ex. 11, *The Great Gatsby*, Act II, Scene 1, mm. 599-608.¹³⁷

On the other hand, Myrtle's motivation is summed up in the tritone-infused line, "You can't live forever."¹³⁸ The fatalistic aspects of the text are obvious and the frequent tritones, found in the orchestra as well as in Myrtle's line, communicate a recklessness and lack of conformity about her character.

¹³⁶ Harbison libretto, 44, 47, 48.

¹³⁷ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 209.

¹³⁸ Harbison libretto, 19.

242 *p* intenso *cresc.*

Myrtle
"You can't live for - e - ver," "You can't live for - e -

242 *p* *cresc.*

Piano

246 *f*

Myrtle
ver," "You can't live for - e - ver."

246 *mf*

Pno.

Ex. 12, *The Great Gatsby*, Act I, Scene 2, mm. 242-249.¹³⁹

Moments later, after Tom has bloodied her nose, Myrtle's wailing echoes this line and overlaps into the orchestral interlude leading to the first party scene at Gatsby's mansion. Harbison thus brings Myrtle's visceral sexuality into contrast with Gatsby's idealized passion. Harbison remarks:

The reason that it's projected into the interlude is that I wanted to get that sort of sensual imperative to take you to the green light, where it becomes more idealized in the hands of Gatsby. Gatsby's rendering of that would be exalted, kind of grand and romantic, whereas Myrtle – she knows what this is about. This is sex, desire and that's the element, I think, that the richer characters don't know how to give as strongly as she does. She really comes out with her longings [whereas] Gatsby idealizes them.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 61.

¹⁴⁰ John Harbison, quoted by Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby."

In dealing with some of the smaller roles in the opera, Harbison admits to having had some difficulty in communicating his ideal vocal timbre. He says that at some point he would like to hear “a really dense voice for Wolfshiem with a lot of grain to it.”¹⁴¹ Harbison feels this might be particularly helpful in the problematic final scene when Wolfsheim comes to be sure Gatsby’s house is “clean”:

I think people would hear that scene more clearly if they heard a Wolfshiem with a scarier, more kind of underground voice. Because obviously he’s not needed in there in terms of plot but I think the driving of the plot is not the issue in the final scene of this opera at all.¹⁴²

The ideal voice for Gatsby’s father has also remained somewhat elusive. Harbison characterizes Gatz as a very ardent and simple Midwesterner. He describes that voice as “sort of a timberly lower Gatsby” but not necessarily an older voice.¹⁴³ Interestingly, both Gatz and Wolfshiem also appear in the opera’s final scene, which created challenges in staging and which Harbison was advised to cut. This seems to suggest that the scene’s difficulties lie not only with the epilogue’s potential for dramatic anticlimax, but also with the presence of minor characters for whom Harbison has not yet found the ideal sound.

Before leaving the discussion of the opera’s characters, it is appropriate to discuss the function of the chorus. Obviously, the novel contains no such specific component. It is easy enough, however, for the chorus to play the role of party guests. This arrangement makes it possible for the production team to recreate some of the visual images from the novel, such as the “two girls in twin yellow dresses,” without having to devote unnecessary attention to them.¹⁴⁴ In the first-act party scene (I:3), Harbison confines the chorus to festive bacchanalia, which both establishes Gatsby as the wealthy and generous host and provides a background for his first interaction with Nick. He expands the function of the chorus in the second-act party scene (II:1) to include speculation and commentary on Gatsby’s shady past and suspicious business dealings. In this way, Harbison is able to convey rumors about Gatsby without having to make any of the principal characters do the reporting. As a result, the opera has much the same feel as the novel, where Nick mentions rumors he has heard or things he observes

¹⁴¹ Harbison, interview by author.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Fitzgerald, 47.

happening next door. Here, as with their brief appearance at the close of the opera, the chorus interjects an ironic component to the story. They may be judgmental of Gatsby, but as long as the champagne is flowing, they are all too happy to call him friend. In this way they also help to fill in the picture of the morally corrupt Eastern society to which the Buchanans belong and which Nick comes to despise.

Predictably, it is in the chorus scenes that Harbison inserts the greatest amount of popular-style music. To add to the realism, either the band vocalist or the tango singer perform the songs. The band vocalist is a tenor in the classic style of the twenties jazz singer while the tango singer's mezzo-soprano voice is reminiscent of female pop singers of the era. Occasionally the chorus picks up one of the songs and uses it to lead into a song-and-dance number along the lines of those found throughout American Musical Theater. Thus, although the chorus does provide the audience with some information about Gatsby, Harbison uses it in a fairly traditional way to provide color and excitement and also as a conduit for many of the jazz idioms included in the opera.

In translating the novel's characters into the operatic medium, Harbison creates a balance between his dramaturgical and musical needs and Fitzgerald's carefully-drawn individuals. In some cases, Harbison slightly redraws the characters to suit his musical needs. This is most notable in the female characters: Daisy becomes more nostalgic and sentimental, and Myrtle's earthy sensuality provides a counterbalance for Gatsby's idealized longing. The addition of music transforms all of the characters, however. More importantly, our perception of the characters is transformed, as Herbert Lindenberger points out:

The fact that an operatic character sings rather than speaks and that music accompanies virtually every word that the character utters leads us to perceive him or her – at least initially – as a more mythical, more heroic, more sublime being than we would a literary character.¹⁴⁵

This holds true for all of the characters of *The Great Gatsby*, but it is a particularly apt description of the title character. Fitzgerald has created a twentieth-century myth imbued with the tragic heroism one expects. It is this aura of mythology that makes Gatsby the perfect centerpiece for an opera and allows all of the characters to adapt well to musical treatment.

¹⁴⁵ Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera, the Extravagant Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 44.

The Tone of the Opera and the Novel

The tone of an opera or work of literature is more difficult to isolate and describe than some of the more concrete building blocks of a story. One hopes that the detailed exploration of plot, theme, and character has provided a framework for the exploration of the subtly complex qualities of characteristic style or atmosphere. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is often referred to as the "great Jazz Age novel," for it is set against the background of the Roaring Twenties amidst the empty revelry of the idle rich of Eastern society. This background, an evocation of an era drowning the horrible memories of World War I in contraband whisky while getting rich off the stock-market boom, gives the novel an undercurrent of frenetic energy. Perhaps nothing represents the feverish activity of the twenties better than the jazz music with which it has come to be identified. Fitzgerald mentions jazz several times in the novel, so it is only fitting that the key link between the tone of the novel and its operatic counterpart is found in Harbison's use of jazz and twenties-style popular music.

Harbison uses period-style popular music as part of the character's external world, providing an atmospheric backdrop. This places the characters firmly in the heady world of the upper class in the twenties. The pop-style music evaporates when the characters become more reflective, and the subtlety of these transitions enhances the effect of the phenomenal sections. Both the phenomenal and noumenal musics share common motivic and harmonic elements. Thus the motives and harmonies of the noumenal music are found in the pop tunes while the phenomenal music contains remnants of the harmonic structure of the noumenal music.¹⁴⁶ At times the result is pop-style music that is a little edgier than its historical counterparts might have been and noumenal music that is a modern descendent of the jazz-influenced work of composers such as Erik Satie and Francis Poulenc.¹⁴⁷ Harbison does not hesitate to include a swing rhythm in the noumenal music of Myrtle's second-act aria or to introduce harmonic chaos into a Charleston as the first-act party breaks up. These gradual transitions and the borrowing between genres lend all of the music in the opera a commonality that ultimately serves the Jazz-age tone of the opera.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Dyer, "The Great Harbison: His Dream of Making an Opera from 'Gatsby' is Coming True," *The Boston Globe*, 19 December 1999; [newspaper on-line]; available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 31 July 2000; Harbison, interview by author.

¹⁴⁷ McGrath, "Giving Voice to Gatsby."

Harbison's use of phenomenal music goes beyond merely serving as a coloristic device. It also enhances the listener's understanding of the characters and contributes to the work's dramatic arc. It is interesting that the interactions of Nick and Jordan, whose relationship is fairly shallow and emotionless, often contain a significant amount of phenomenal music. In contrast, Daisy and Gatsby's love duet contains none at all. This juxtaposition clearly places Daisy and Gatsby in a different world than that of Nick and Jordan. Phenomenal music also underscores the difference between Daisy and Myrtle. Myrtle's music is the most sensual and earthy of the opera, and she is comfortable in both the noumenal and phenomenal worlds. Daisy's music, on the other hand, retains a more conventional, upper-class expressive mode that, while not devoid of phenomenal references, does not dirty itself with the jazzy rhythms and bluesy harmonies of her rival's music.

The ways in which the phenomenal and noumenal music interact also provide dramatic tension within the opera. This tension occurs for the first time in I:2, the first of the two garage scenes. Tom has dragged Nick into the Wilson's garage to "meet his girl." As the scene develops, Tom turns on the radio and he and Myrtle dance to a chipper love song; Myrtle then changes the radio station and finds a faster foxtrot. Myrtle turns off the radio at the opening of her aria, but Tom turns it back on again, seemingly to stop Myrtle's musing and to get her to dance. This restless and intermittent use of phenomenal music reflects Tom's and Myrtle's restive longing for one another as well as Nick's obvious discomfort with the situation. It is significant as well that Myrtle turns off the radio during her introspective aria about her first meeting with Tom and that contrastingly, he turns the music back on as a means of bringing her out of her reverie.

The interplay between the two types of music also figures strongly in the Plaza Hotel scene. Here Harbison quotes the wedding march from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* – the only quote of familiar music in the opera – which provides an ironic backdrop for the scene that is about to unfold. An offstage band first plays the wedding music in a traditional version that ignites Daisy's memories of her own wedding. The music suddenly shifts to a jazz version that spurs Tom to shut the window, thus shifting from phenomenal to noumenal music. The noumenal music that follows:

...hammers away at the distinctive first two chords of the wedding march in persistent harmonic sequences... This unyielding music, a set of developing variations unfurling from fragments of the wedding march, seems to resound in all the characters' minds, as the two tenors, Tom and Gatsby, exclaim previously unspeakable things....¹⁴⁸

As the scene progresses, the atmosphere becomes more claustrophobic until Jordan finally opens the window. This time the music from the ballroom is a cool, genteel dance number. The reintroduction of music associated with conventional upper-class values signals a turning point in the scene. Daisy retreats unhappily from her romantic visions, and Gatsby's desperate entreaties become increasingly hopeless.¹⁴⁹

As one might imagine, the orchestra is an essential element in conveying the tone. Unlike music that is sung, music produced by the orchestra does not carry the predetermined meaning associated with text. Thus it is free to communicate more subtle qualities of atmosphere, emotion, and thought. While both the vocal and orchestral lines work together in intricate ways to give shape to the whole, the orchestra is in a unique position to provide abstract elements and convey layers of meaning. Harbison uses the orchestra to convey tone in the opera by assigning it the primary role in conveying the abundant phenomenal music of the opera in addition to its more traditional role with the opera's internalized music. Here again the interplay between the two is an essential element of the opera's tone.

Harbison sets up this interaction in the overture. As previously mentioned, when Harbison was unable to obtain rights for *The Great Gatsby*, he composed a short orchestral piece entitled *Remembering Gatsby*. A somewhat condensed version of this work is used as the overture for the opera. It is written in a slow-fast format beginning with an ominous chromatic ascent that, according to Harbison, is emblematic of Gatsby's yearning.¹⁵⁰ This brooding music is interrupted by a seemingly carefree fox-trot orchestrated to evoke a 1920's dance band, establishing opposing types of musical language. One is highly chromatic, noumenal, and "elevated" while the other is blithe, tonal, and "popular." Once the spirited dance tune is firmly established, a more rhythmically active version of the opening music intrudes upon it.¹⁵¹ The key moment in this unstable dialectic comes near the end of the overture as the dance music vainly tries to reassert itself, each time seemingly getting snagged in remnants of the more

¹⁴⁸ Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 444.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Lieberman, "Green Light for an American Dream."

¹⁵¹ Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 424-425.

introspective and ominous music. These gestures effectively create a microcosm of the opera's main themes and conflicts and establish a tone for the music that follows. The musical world this creates does not simply pit the noumenal against the phenomenal but exploits the expressive potential created "when a fox-trot is cracked open."¹⁵²

Therefore, in addition to providing phenomenal music that is strongly identifiable with the novel, the orchestra sets up the opera's most essential conflicts and establishes for itself an important role in the proceedings. Brody points out:

In this world, the principals all find their ways of hearing (and appropriating or ignoring) the overt music of romance as well as the 'inner' (noumenally projected) music of their unspoken fantasies. As the geometry of Gatsby's romantic coupling unfolds, overt and covert desires collide in various ways. The relationships between realistic background music, its paraphrases, sung dialogue, and noumenal orchestra music incessantly recombine under the pressure of these collisions.¹⁵³

The music of the first scene picks up where the overture leaves off in terms of creating a balance between a jazzy, pop-influenced sound and a more 'high-minded', traditionally operatic idiom. The scene opens with Daisy and Jordan lounging around as Nick arrives to spend the evening with them. Initially, the orchestra seems to match the casual banter between the characters with its own quasi-jazz-style riffs. However, the dissonant chords and the asymmetrical rhythm underscore the undercurrent of tension that runs through the scene. Fairly quickly the audience becomes aware that Daisy's cheerfulness is an affectation and that she is well aware that her husband is cheating.¹⁵⁴ The vaguely unsettled harmonic and rhythmic quality of the orchestra's music supports Nick's increasing discomfort. The orchestra more directly takes on a narrative role at the first mention of Gatsby's name. The dialog is spare:

Jordan: (to Nick) You said you live in West Egg.
You must know Gatsby!

Daisy: Gatsby?
(long pause)¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Ibid, 428.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Anthony Tommasini, "'Gatsby' as Opera, Fox Trots and All," *New York Times*, 20 December 1999 [newspaper on-line]; available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 31 July 2000.

¹⁵⁵ Harbison libretto 9-10.

The long pause in the orchestra expresses Daisy's reaction to the mention of Gatsby's name after so many years. The music conveys her emotion via a lengthy trill, passed back and forth between the flute and harp and set over a series of arpeggios, portending the motive that will come to be associated with Gatsby's yearning.¹⁵⁶

The musical score is divided into four systems. The first system (mm. 114-117) features Jordan's vocal line with the lyrics "You must know Gats - by?" and a piano accompaniment with a long trill in the strings. The second system (mm. 118-121) features Daisy's vocal line with the lyrics "Gats - by - ?" and instrumental parts for xylophone, viola, and soprano saxophone. The third system (mm. 122-125) continues the instrumental parts for piano and soprano saxophone. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (sf, f, p), articulation (cresc.), and performance instructions (8va, xyl., vla., sop. sax).

Ex. 13, *The Great Gatsby*, Act I, Scene 1, mm. 114-125¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby."

¹⁵⁷ John Harbison, *The Great Gatsby*, vocal score, 18.

In Fitzgerald's novel, Gatsby's yearning is symbolized by the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. Harbison fittingly provides a musical counterpart to the visual symbol of the green light. This theme, which has its genesis in Daisy's music, recalls Gatsby's fervent desire and mystical devotion in both triumph and defeat.

[The green light on Daisy's dock becomes distantly visible]

Ex. 14, *The Great Gatsby*, Interlude between Act I, Scenes 2 and 3, mm. 387-393.¹⁵⁸

This motive originates with Daisy's music and is linked with Gatsby's wealth as well as his desire for Daisy, and it undergoes very little alteration throughout the course of the opera. Brody points out that, "the leitmotivic music associated with Daisy's East Egg harbor is ephemeral. Its motives, harmony, and color will not be paraphrased or developed; they do not resound portentously in any of the characters' minds."¹⁵⁹ Ultimately, a fragment of the theme and its accompanying visual symbol are all that remain at the close of the opera, providing a sense of unity and musical trajectory to the work.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 68.

¹⁵⁹ Brody, "Haunted by Envisioned Romance," 425.

¹⁶⁰ Baker, "The Sound of Gatsby."

It does not come as a surprise that an opera that adheres so closely to the plot of the novel would, by extension, retain much of the overall feeling and tone of the source as well. Harbison achieves this in a variety of ways. First, he includes a large portion of twenties-style phenomenal music, which firmly places the characters in a particular time and place and underscores the lifestyle of the era in which the story is set. Second, he treats the interactions between the phenomenal and noumenal music with great care. While each affects the other, the phenomenal clearly functions in the characters' external worlds, while the noumenal reflects the internal. Finally, Harbison makes use of several recurring musical themes, or leitmotifs, which, in addition to providing unity to the opera, also provide aural cues analogous to various thematic and textual components of the novel.

CHAPTER FOUR
EVALUATION AND REVISION

Premiere Performances

Many commentators have pointed out that the Metropolitan Opera, America's flagship opera house, has been reticent to commission new works. From the 1966 premiere of Samuel Barber's *Anthony and Cleopatra* until the 1991 debut of John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles*, the Met premiered no newly-commissioned operas.¹⁶¹ Philip Glass's *The Voyage* followed *The Ghosts of Versailles* in 1992. John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* opened at the Metropolitan Opera on 21 December 1999 and marked the final premiere of the twentieth century. The subject of the opera, along with the importance of the commission in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of music director James Levine's debut, garnered much media attention prior to the opening. Critical reception to the work was mixed, however, and ran the gamut from rhapsodic praise to utter condemnation. The production moved to the Lyric Opera of Chicago the following year and then returned to the Metropolitan Opera in 2002. Harbison made some revisions to the score prior to the Chicago performances, for which some of the staging was altered as well.

Currently, it is impossible to determine whether Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* will find a permanent place in the repertoire. It is also inadvisable to attempt to determine the relative success of the adaptation based on the critical reactions to the premiere and the subsequent performances in Chicago (2000) and New York (2002). Throughout opera history there exist prolific examples of works that critics or audiences initially

¹⁶¹ David Mermelstein, "The Great Ghastly," *New Criterion*, Vol. 18, Issue 6 [journal on-line] available from ephost@epnet.com, accession no. 2760265, accessed 24 June 2003; Archivist, Metropolitan Opera Archive, July 8, 2004.

rejected, but which later proved to be seminal works of lasting appeal. Critical and public response does offer an important perspective on the opera, however; for it provides some indication as to the efficacy of the work as a piece of theater. This is particularly true for those critics who reviewed the Metropolitan Opera premiere and later published reviews of the subsequent Chicago or New York performances. Following a brief overview of the critical response to the opera, this chapter will explore the changes made to the opera following the Metropolitan Opera premier using the critical response as a guide.

Of the twenty-seven reviews of the first performances collected for this study, eleven may be classified as generally positive, eleven predominately negative, and five as mixed, offering praise for Harbison's compositional ability while finding fault with the work as a whole. Harbison is both praised for creating "the finest new opera by an American composer in decades"¹⁶² and damned for an opera that "lacks even a hint of musical or dramatic individuality, character or point of view."¹⁶³ Some critics commend Harbison's respectful rendering of the novel; others accuse him of not understanding Fitzgerald's intentions. A number of reviewers find the opera musically sophisticated, attractively orchestrated, and respectfully depicting the flavor of the novel, yet others claim that the music is static and bland, that the orchestration is anemic, and that the work affirms that great literature seldom makes great opera.¹⁶⁴ As a result of the high-profile premiere of *The Great Gatsby* and the attendant media attention, it is not surprising that the opera itself attracted a great deal of critical attention. Nor is it surprising that, given the iconic nature of the subject, critical response to the opera was sharply divided. The diversity of opinions about the opera's premiere makes few definitive conclusions regarding the opera's success possible; however, after reviewing the body of criticism of the premiere, several common threads emerge. The first of these concerns the efficacy of Harbison's music. Many critics who responded well to the opera did so because they found the music to be sophisticated and skillfully crafted. Critics praise Harbison's orchestral writing as well as his skillful integration of twenties-

¹⁶² Barbara Zuck, "'Gatsby' Captures Flavor of Classic Novel," *The Columbus Dispatch*, 23 January 2000 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 20 July 2000.

¹⁶³ T. J. Medrek, "Harbison offers lesser 'Gatsby,'" *The Boston Herald*, 22 December 1999 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 20 July 2000.

¹⁶⁴ David Mermelstein, "The Great Ghastly."

style popular music references into the score.¹⁶⁵ Others, however, find Harbison's orchestration fairly commonplace and the songs lacking in vitality and fault the popular songs for stopping the action of the story.¹⁶⁶ Yet it may be said that several critics who did not find the opera successful overall still express respect for Harbison as a composer and are particularly impressed with his handling of the score's jazz idioms.

Reaction to the dramatic elements of the opera provides another common thread of criticism. Generally speaking, critics do not view the dramatic structure and pacing of the opera to be its strongest element. Even some reviewers who are generally positive criticize the opera for being over-long and lacking in dramatic momentum.¹⁶⁷ Reaction to Harbison's libretto is an important aspect of the reaction to the opera as a theatrical work as well. Several critics mention Harbison's apparent respect for his source, and though some believe that his combination of libretto and music captures the tone and characters in an intelligent, insightful way, others fault him for being either too faithful to the novel or not faithful enough.¹⁶⁸

Related to the pacing of the drama is the critical reaction to the final scene of the opera. Several critics agree that the scene following Gatsby's death should be shortened or eliminated altogether. *Columbus Dispatch* critic Barbara Zuck attributes the inclusion of this scene to Harbison's devotion to the details of the novel, but Sara Bryan Miller says in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* that "everything after the accident feels like an anticlimax."¹⁶⁹ Since director Mark Lamos and others advised Harbison to cut or

¹⁶⁵ Mark Swed, "A Moody, Lyrical 'Gatsby'; The Met's Cast is Stronger than the Production of John Harbison's Thoughtful Transformation of the Fitzgerald Novel," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 December 1999 [newspaper on-line] available from <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/>; Internet; accessed 20 July 2000; Joshua Kosman, "'Gatsby' Tries to Recapture Past Magic; Impressive opera unable to reinvigorate the genre," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 December 1999 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 31 July 2000.

¹⁶⁶ Mermelstein, "The Great Ghastly;" Sara Bryan Miller, "The Great Gatsby Doesn't Lend Itself to Stage, So Opera Suffers at Met," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 16 January 2000 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 20 July 2000; Medrek, "Harbison offers lesser 'Gatsby.'"

¹⁶⁷ Bernard Holland, "Opera Review; Music Catering to the Words of Fitzgerald," *The New York Times*, 22 December 1999 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 20 July 2000.

¹⁶⁸ Richard Dyer, "'Gatsby' A New American Classic Born of Another," *The Boston Globe*, 22 December 1999 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 20 July 2000; Philip Kennicott, "'Gatsby's' Snoring Twenties; Fitzgerald's Magic Missing at the Met," *The Washington Post*, 22 December 1999 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 31 July 2000; Mermelstein, "The Great Ghastly."

¹⁶⁹ Zuck, "Gatsby Captures Flavor of Classic Novel;" Miller, "The Great Gatsby Doesn't Lend Itself to Stage...."

shorten the final scene, this thread of criticism is particularly noteworthy.¹⁷⁰ However, one of the opera's greatest admirers, *The Boston Globe's* Richard Dyer, calls Nick's aria in the final scene "some of the greatest music in any American opera."¹⁷¹

Three critics who reviewed the Metropolitan Opera premiere also reviewed the Chicago performances the following year and/or the opera's return to the Metropolitan in 2002. These critics provide interesting insight into the effectiveness of the changes made to the score as well as to the production following the premiere. Thus it is desirable to provide a summary of their initial reactions to the opera before discussing the subsequent performances.

The most unconditionally positive of these reviews comes from Peter G. Davis in *New York* magazine. He praises Harbison for making "all the major creative decisions" and hails the opera's potential staying power.¹⁷² Davis appears to have none of the misgivings about the opera's pacing which abound in other reviews of the opera, and he praises Harbison's music for setting the tone of the opera as well as defining the characters and driving the dramatic action.¹⁷³

Like Davis, Heidi Waleson of *The Wall Street Journal* praises Harbison's sophisticated score saying it "captures the sleek, tinny surface of the Jazz Age, and it also manages to translate into sound the volcanic sensuality and longing that drive the brooding millionaire Jay Gatsby and his beloved Daisy Buchanan into bitterness and pain."¹⁷⁴ She is, however, more reserved in her praise of the opera and notes that the chronological structure, combined with the fleshing out of Daisy and Gatsby, clarifies some aspects of the story but contends "the clarity has brought an ungrateful glare to the tale."¹⁷⁵ Further, in her opinion, the opera lacks dramatic spark on stage:

Important moments got lost in bigger choral and orchestral textures, and the all-important confrontation scene in which Gatsby and Tom battle verbally over Daisy...was difficult to follow. The sinister dissonances of the musical language overwhelmed the story and dragged it down too soon.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ Anthony Tommasini, "Second Acts: Jay Gatsby's Self-Invention, Reinvented," *The New York Times*, 1 May 2002 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 8 July 2004.

¹⁷¹ Dyer, "Gatsby' A New American Classic..."

¹⁷² Peter G. Davis, "Great Scott," *New York*, 10 January 2000, 49.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Heidi Waleson, "Opera: 'Gatsby' Lights Up Met Stage," *Wall Street Journal*, 27 December 1999, Sec. A, p.16 Microfiche.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

While she praises Harbison's music, her ultimate sense is that the opera lacks dramatic clarity.

New York Times critic Anthony Tommasini perhaps best sums the mixed critical reaction to the opera:

I find the music continually rewarding. The lazy, lapping duet for the two women friends, Daisy and Jordan, is haunting. The extended ensemble scenes are intricate and richly textured. The mix of vernacular and modern musical styles is almost always seamless. Playing through the piano-vocal score at the keyboard affords musical pleasures on every page.

On the stage, the opera does seem overextended and, in places, dramatically miscalculated. At roughly 2 hours and 40 minutes, the score is long, at least by modern sensibilities.¹⁷⁷

Tommasini goes on to voice his agreement with critics who suggested that Harbison should have been less sparing in making cuts to the novel. He also contends that Nick's final aria "undermines the effect of Gatsby's long soliloquy, delivered just before his death."¹⁷⁸

Lyric Opera of Chicago Performances

Following the opera's premiere in 1999 the production moved to Lyric Opera of Chicago in the fall of 2000. This second set of performances was part of an exchange agreement whereby *The Great Gatsby* was presented in Chicago while William Bolcom's opera *View from the Bridge* (commissioned and premiered by Chicago in 1999) was scheduled for performances at the Metropolitan Opera in the 2002 season. These performances presented Harbison with the opportunity to make changes to the score based upon what he learned from the New York premiere. Harbison cut some material from the score and also worked with conductor David Stahl to assure that the tempos adhered more closely to those marked in the score. These changes trimmed

¹⁷⁷ Anthony Tommasini, "How Long, Opera Is Too Long?" *The New York Times*, 30 January 2000 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>; Internet; accessed 20 July 2000.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

twenty minutes off the running time from the length of the Metropolitan Opera performances.¹⁷⁹

In addition to these changes, the staging of Plaza Hotel scene and the final scene of the opera underwent revision. In the Plaza Hotel scene the problem lay with Nick and Jordan's roles as observers once the confrontation began. Harbison said, "As that was laid out in the libretto and as we first staged it I think it created a real problem for the audience."¹⁸⁰ In Harbison's opinion the Chicago performances improved on this, and the characters were able to remain reactive to the events in the scene in appropriate ways.¹⁸¹ Harbison was also sympathetic to audiences' difficulties with the final scene in the opera. In this case he went against others' advice to cut more of the final scene. He remarked:

In Chicago this was a place where I just had to go against everyone's advice to retain as much as I did of the final scene. It was somewhat shortened, but very little. It divides the beholders rather strikingly. It tends to be the thing about the piece they like the most or least and it's a very, very sharp division. Also, we re-attacked it onstage to its great benefit. [The Chicago performances] had some partygoers actually come into the scene. That didn't happen at the Met, and the fact that it did [in Chicago] enhanced the flow of that scene tremendously.... It's a question of trying to understand how visual a contemporary audience is in an unfamiliar piece.¹⁸²

Reviews appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune*, with an additional review by the *Chicago Tribune* reviewer John von Rhein published in the January/February edition of *American Record Guide*. All of these credit the cuts made to the score and the quicker tempos with improving the overall effect of the opera. In her second review of the opera, the *Wall Street Journal's* Waleson maintains that the opera still suffers from patchy vocal writing and dramatic climaxes that arrive too soon and are too brief.¹⁸³ However, in the *American Record Guide*, John von Rhein states that as a result of the cuts along with "a general refocusing of director

¹⁷⁹ Anthony Tommasini, "The Second Time Around: Tweaking 'Gatsby,'" *The New York Times*, 1 November 2000, Sec. E p. 1, Microfiche.

¹⁸⁰ Harbison, interview by author.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Heidi Waleson "A Spooky 'Queen of Spades' a Patchy 'Gatsby,'" *Wall Street Journal*, 1 November 2000, Sec Op. p. 24, Microfiche.

Mark Lamos's original production and a noticeably improved performance by tenor Jerry Hadley in the title role, *Gatsby* emerged a stronger work than it seemed at the Met."¹⁸⁴ Anthony Tommasini sums up his *New York Times* review by saying that "*The Great Gatsby* has enough fine music and dramatic inspiration in it to warrant additional productions and revisions."¹⁸⁵

Metropolitan Opera Revival 2002

The *Great Gatsby* returned to the Metropolitan Opera in 2002. Criticism from this set of performances follows the same lines as that of the Chicago run and is generally positive. Tommasini's review credits the cuts to the score and the tempo adjustments with giving the opera a "tauter flow and greater urgency."¹⁸⁶ Writing for *Opera News*, Leighton Kerner praises Harbison's score, rather than the story, for carrying the dramatic weight. He finds this particularly true in the interaction of the vocal line with the orchestra in both the love duet and Nick's final aria. He also expresses the opinion that additional cuts might be beneficial.¹⁸⁷ Peter G. Davis, who wrote a very positive review of the premiere in the magazine *New York*, notes that he remains impressed by the opera and feels that none of the musical material is superfluous.¹⁸⁸ He, along with Tommasini, finds fault with Jerry Hadley's performance in the title role, which, in Tommasini's words, "may be undermining the opera's impact."¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ John von Rhein, "Another go at 'Gatsby,'" *American Record Guide*, Vol. 64, Issue 1, January/February 2001 [magazine on-line] available from ephost@epnet.com, accession no. 3991974, accessed 24 June 2003.

¹⁸⁵ Tommasini, "Tweaking 'Gatsby.'"

¹⁸⁶ Anthony Tommasini, "Second Acts."

¹⁸⁷ Leighton Kerner, "In Review: New York City," Opera review of John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*, *Opera News*, Vol. 67, no. 2, August 2002, 69.

¹⁸⁸ Peter G. Davis, "American Beauties," Review of John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*, *New York*, 20 May 2002, 48-49.

¹⁸⁹ Davis, "American Beauties;" Tommasini, "*The Great Gatsby* After Its Tryout," *The New York Times* 28 April, 2002 [newspaper on-line] available from <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, Accessed 8 July 2004.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that critical response cannot serve as a barometer for an opera's long-term success. Many operas, such as *Carmen*, were sharply criticized at their premieres, yet went on to critical and public acclaim. Critical reaction does, however, provide interesting information about the success of the work as a dramatic whole. It is not uncommon for composers to reevaluate their work following the initial performances, and it is clear that Harbison made thoughtful cuts to the score in an effort to strengthen the opera.

While it is unlikely that Harbison made revisions to the score of *The Great Gatsby* as a result of criticism of the opera's pacing, it is apparent from Harbison's comments that he was aware of some of the issues raised by critics following the premiere. It is also clear that he feels the changes made prior to the performances in Chicago improved some of the opera's most problematic scenes. The criticism of the Chicago and Metropolitan opera revivals also supports the notion that judicious cuts, along with quicker tempos and adjustments to the staging, partially addressed the issues surrounding the dramatic pacing of the opera.

It is probable that future productions of the opera will have to grapple with these issues as well. Whether or not the dramatic pacing will be improved by future productions remains to be seen. Only time will reveal the ultimate fate of Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*.

CONCLUSION

The adaptation of a canonized literary work into an opera presents particular problems. First, the novel must be made to adopt conventions of the operatic genre and to suit the technical demands of the stage. In order to conform to these musical and dramaturgical requirements, composers and librettists must often consolidate or abandon certain details in a novel. They may shorten or omit scenes, adjust or eliminate characters, and invent monologues and dialogues to provide dramatic continuity and a simpler framework for the expressive quality of the music. Inevitably, one eliminates certain elements of the story. One hopes that a new work of art emerges that stands on its own and offers an independent view of the characters, plot, and themes of the source, and allows audiences to view it in a different light. Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* and Harbison's corresponding opera provide fertile ground for the exploration of the transition that occurs when a composer adapts a literary work for the operatic stage.

Harbison has found in *The Great Gatsby* a novel uniquely suited to operatic treatment. The novel's strong association with an era representing a particular musical style becomes a distinct asset in Harbison's musical treatment. Instead of ignoring the novel's connection with the Jazz Age, Harbison capitalizes on it by incorporating a great deal of newly-composed period-style material. The title character of the novel also easily makes the transition. Lindenberger points out that opera characters are generally defined by a single, obsessively passionate emotion.¹⁹⁰ This description is a strikingly accurate depiction of Fitzgerald's Gatsby. In this respect, this single-minded, hopeful, tragic hero who has become a part of American mythology is ideally suited for the elevated world of operatic expression.

The creation of a viable libretto is essential to the metamorphosis from literary work into opera. It provides a bridge between the literary source and the operatic

¹⁹⁰ Lindenberger, 43.

score, however, it does not really belong to either genre. Opera librettos typically do not stand on their own on the basis of their literary merit, and thus do not belong to the domain of literature. Yet the music of an opera does not depend entirely on the poetic craftsmanship of the text – the frequency with which operas are performed in translation underscores this point. While the text is important to the drama and may be beautifully expressive in the sung context, it is not truly integral to music.¹⁹¹ The libretto provides a framework for the opera, and the nature of this framework reflects the priorities of the librettist. In the case of a composer who acts as his own librettist, it is likely that the priorities are musical instead of literary; this is certainly the case with Harbison. In fact, he abandoned his plans to work with a librettist because his musical ideas were becoming so fully developed that he felt it better to “negotiate with (his) verbal self.”¹⁹² By creating his own libretto, he serves his musical vision.

Harbison’s libretto closely adheres to the tone and themes of the novel and frequently borrows directly from its text. Harbison is deft at creating arias and small ensembles from the novel’s various scenes and at eliminating unnecessary episodes. The novel provides ample material for two party scenes, which allows for the inclusion of large chorus and dance numbers without contrivance. Harbison selects items from the novel that serve both operatic convention and his own musical needs. His most significant deviation from the novel, the invention of a love duet for Gatsby and Daisy, provides the only conventional operatic element that the novel does not readily supply. While Fitzgerald leaves the exact details of Gatsby and Daisy’s reunion to the reader’s imagination, Harbison capitalizes on it and creates a love duet. This serves the truncated plot of the opera by establishing the characters’ affair while providing Harbison with a situation that supports musical expression. The duet also provides the only conventional operatic element that the novel does not readily supply.

Operatic convention also plays an important role in the choices Harbison makes about the individual characters. Gatsby must be more verbal to meet the dramatic considerations of the opera, and the operatic character also becomes a grander, more heroic, more mythic version of himself as a result of the lofty nature of his means of expression. Harbison’s Daisy is a more sentimental, nostalgic, and appealing character

¹⁹¹ Léonard Rosmarin, *When Literature Becomes Opera: Study of a Transformational Process*, Chiasma 8, ed. Michael Bishop, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 155.

¹⁹² Harbison to Gurney, 9 November 1994, Folder 2.

than is her counterpart in the novel. This choice reflects Harbison's belief that the opera needs a more engaging heroine than the novel provides and that having her sing rather than speak somewhat softens her character. Daisy's wistful emotion in the libretto also provides a clearer set of emotional conflicts and motivations that better serve the operatic genre. By making her less emotionally bankrupt, the opera may communicate in the broader gestures integral to the medium. Finally, the elimination of the narrative aspect of Nick's role also serves operatic convention. While there are operas that employ narrators, doing so becomes a contrivance that breaks down the barrier between the audience and the action on stage. This device would not serve the mythological nature of *The Great Gatsby* where much of the interest lies in the sense that these characters are larger than life and inhabit another place and time.

It is Harbison's apparent respect for operatic convention and the preponderance of material in the novel that is readily adapted to suit these conventions that make the opera an independent yet authentic depiction of the story. The libretto aids in this transition by providing a simplified framework that incorporates the basic aspects of the plot, characters, themes, and symbols of the original, as well as borrowing some of the novel's poetic language. However, it is the music that allows all of these elements to become fully developed and bears the largest responsibility for communicating the subtleties of the work. This music takes two distinctive forms: noumenal music, which belongs to the character's internal world and expresses the opera's more "lofty" aspects, and phenomenal music, which functions in the characters' external world. The abundant and ingenious use of this phenomenal music gives the opera a distinctive flavor and does a great deal to convey the atmosphere of the novel. The ways in which this music contrasts and interacts with the noumenal music of the opera create a musical world that communicates the essence of the novel in its own uniquely operatic terms.

Harbison has provided an interesting and thoughtful translation of the novel into the operatic medium. His stated priorities are musical and not literary. However, his close adherence to the letter of the novel and frequent borrowing of Fitzgerald's text indicates a thoughtful respect for the source material. This is combined with music that depicts the unique historical setting of the novel while expounding musically upon the characters and themes of the novel. The result is an independent work that, while bearing a strong resemblance to its source, gives a musical voice to the novel's basic elements.

APPENDIX A

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S NOVEL: INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in the summer and fall of 1924 while he and Zelda were living on the French Riviera. He made revisions to the novel in the winter of 1924-25, and the novel was published in April 1925.¹⁹³ Although the reviews of *The Great Gatsby* were better than those for any of his other books, few critics thought it was a magnificent story.¹⁹⁴ H. L. Mencken dismissed the story as “a glorified anecdote” but praised the writing and the accuracy of Fitzgerald’s social commentary.¹⁹⁵ Many reviewers thought the novel showed a greater maturity than Fitzgerald’s two previous novels, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), as Laurence Stallings’s review demonstrates:

The Great Gatsby evidences an interest in the color and sweep of prose, in the design and integrity of the novel, in the development of character, like nothing else he has attempted. If you are interested in the American novel this is a book for your list.¹⁹⁶

In spite of the favorable press, the novel was not a commercial success. The first printing of 20,870 copies earned \$6,261, the bulk of which canceled a \$6,000 debt Fitzgerald had to his publisher, Charles Scribner’s Sons. A second printing of 3,000 copies appeared in August, 1925, some of which were still in the Scribners’ warehouse when Fitzgerald died in 1940.¹⁹⁷ In a letter to his editor Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald attributed the weak sales to two causes:

¹⁹³ Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), xxviii.

¹⁹⁴ Bruccoli, 221.

¹⁹⁵ H. L. Mencken, “As H. L. M. Sees It,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 2 May 1925, p. 9 in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer, (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., Inc. 1978.) 211-213.

¹⁹⁶ Laurence Stallings, “The First Reader – Great Scott,” *New York World*, 22 April 1925, p. 13, in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Critical Reception*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer, (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., Inc. 1978.) 203.

¹⁹⁷ Bruccoli, 220-221.

First, the title is only fair, rather bad than good.
Second *and most important*, the book contains no important woman character, and women control the fiction market at present.¹⁹⁸

Fitzgerald's writing relies heavily on description and symbolism. Fitzgerald scholar Matthew Bruccoli points out that the novel "contains scenes and descriptions that have become touchstones of American prose."¹⁹⁹ He goes on to say:

Within these scenes Fitzgerald endows details with so much suggestiveness that they acquire the symbolic force to extend the meanings of the story.²⁰⁰

Fitzgerald uses three strongly visual symbols throughout the novel. The first of these is the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. This is the image on which Gatsby is fixated when Nick first sees him, and it remains a focal point for Gatsby as the novel progresses. The green light is an appropriate image for the force that draws Gatsby toward Daisy. Green is the color of money, which Gatsby believes will give him the power to overcome his social status and reunite him with Daisy. The second symbolic image is the valley of ashes, the gray wasteland between Long Island and New York that is the home of Myrtle and George Wilson. This barren and desolate expanse sets up a stark contrast between the colorless life of the lower-class Wilsons and the gay, vibrant life of the privileged class of the Buchanans. The visual image not only represents their present circumstances, but also their hopes for the future. Further, the image is emblematic of Tom Buchanan's passionless affair with Myrtle Wilson. The third and final recurring visual symbol of the novel is the billboard that features the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg gazing over the bleakness of the valley of ashes. The two gigantic blue eyes staring ceaselessly out of a pair of faceless spectacles are all that remain of the optometrist's billboard. The image gives all of the characters that pass through the Wilson's garage a sensation that some greater being is watching them. This culminates when George Wilson, despondent over Myrtle's unfaithfulness and accidental death, senses that the unblinking eyes belong to God.

Nick Carraway, a character who tangentially participates in the action, narrates the events in the novel. His judgment acts as a filter for all of the events, thus creating

¹⁹⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald to Maxwell Perkins, 24 April 1925, *Letters* ed. Turnbull, 180.

¹⁹⁹ Bruccoli, 222.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

a first-person perspective that maintains a certain distance from the story. The title character, Jay Gatsby, is a man with a shadowy past who has amassed a fortune in the hopes of winning back his former lover, Daisy. Gatsby and the other characters in the novel represent the American Dream both at its most grandiose and at its most dissolute. As a result, “Gatsby becomes an archetypal figure who betrays and is betrayed by the promises of America.”²⁰¹

Synopsis

Chapter 1

In the opening of *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator, Nick Carraway remembers that his father advised him to resist criticizing others, especially those who have had fewer advantages. Nick uses this opportunity to establish himself as a man “inclined to reserve all judgments”²⁰² and thus serve as a trustworthy narrator of the events that happened over a year ago. He intimates that the tale he is about to relate has had a profound impact on his sense of moral justice. Nick discusses his privileged upbringing in the middle-west, education at Yale, participation in World War I, and his subsequent decision to move to the east to enter the bond business. He describes the communities of East and West Egg and his home in West Egg next to Gatsby’s mansion.

Nick goes to the more fashionable village of East Egg to visit his cousin Daisy Buchanan and her husband Tom, whom Nick knew while attending Yale. Daisy is a luminescent socialite from Louisville. Her husband is an athletic, aggressive man from a tremendously wealthy Chicago family. Nick is introduced to Jordan Baker, a childhood friend of Daisy’s and a professional golfer. The four make small talk about Chicago and the advantages of living in the east. Upon finding out that Nick lives in West Egg, Jordan asks if he knows someone named Gatsby which elicits a strong but quickly suppressed reaction from Daisy. There is an undercurrent of tension between the Buchanans as Daisy needles Tom about being “hulking.” Tom reveals his racist and reactionary politics in blaming society’s ills on the “coloured” races. During dinner Tom is called to the phone and Daisy eventually follows. Jordan divulges that Tom

²⁰¹ Ibid, 223.

²⁰² Fitzgerald, 5.

has a mistress in New York. Later, Daisy reveals her unhappiness and cynicism about the world to Nick. As the evening draws to a close, Daisy lightheartedly attempts to interest Nick in dating Jordan.

Upon returning home, Nick observes his neighbor Gatsby gazing across the water. Nick starts to call out to him but realizes Gatsby prefers to be alone. As Gatsby stretches his arms out toward the darkness, he appears to be trembling. He seems to be reaching toward a green light at the end of a dock across the bay, but by the time Nick looks back, Gatsby has disappeared.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 opens with a description of the desolate gray wasteland known as the valley of ashes half way between West Egg and New York. Rising above the lifeless expanse are the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg – “blue and gigantic” staring not out of a face, but out of a huge pair of yellow glasses. They are part of a forgotten billboard for an oculist that “dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.”²⁰³ It is here that Nick meets Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson.

The two men are headed to New York when Tom insists they get off the train so Nick can “meet [his] girl.” They enter an auto repair garage owned by Myrtle’s husband, George. Tom talks briefly with George about the possible sale of a car when Myrtle appears. She is a stout yet sensuous woman in her mid-thirties. She quickly sends George to fetch chairs for their guests. Tom and Myrtle agree to meet later that afternoon. She departs under the pretext of visiting her sister in New York and joins Tom and Nick outside the railway station in the city.

Myrtle impulsively buys a dog for the apartment she and Tom keep in New York. The three proceed to the apartment where they are joined by Myrtle’s sister and their neighbors, the McKees. Myrtle’s sister, Catherine, confides to Nick that it is Daisy’s Catholic faith that keeps her and Tom from divorcing and Nick is taken aback by the lie. Myrtle tells about how George married her in a borrowed suit and then relates the story of how she and Tom met. Finally, Myrtle taunts Tom by mentioning his wife, and he bloodies her nose. Nick gets drunk during the course of the afternoon and finally finds

²⁰³ Ibid, 28

himself “lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning ‘Tribune’ and waiting for the four o’clock train.”²⁰⁴

Chapter 3

Nick begins with a vivid depiction of the lavish festivities Gatsby hosts every weekend during the summer. He describes the food, decorations, music, and revelry in very colorful and evocative terms but from the perspective of an outside observer. Typically, Gatsby’s party guests arrive uninvited, but one morning Gatsby sends his chauffeur with a handwritten note inviting Nick for the following Saturday. Upon arriving at the party, Nick first tries to find his host but is unable to do so. Eventually, he runs into Jordan Baker with whom he spends most of the evening. The two drift from conversation to conversation and Nick learns some of the stories circulating about Gatsby’s mysterious past, among them the rumor that he once killed a man. They go looking for their host and find themselves in Gatsby’s well-appointed library where a very drunken guest marvels at the fact that Gatsby’s books are real and not cardboard fakes.

After several glasses of champagne, Nick finds himself conversing with a man who turns out to be Gatsby himself. The two determine that they served in the same division during the war, and Gatsby invites Nick to go out on his hydroplane the following day. Nick describes Gatsby as possessing “...one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance...an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd.”²⁰⁵ As the party draws to a close, a drunken guest has a minor auto accident at the end of the drive. The party episode ends with Nick describing Gatsby’s house after the guests’ departure: “A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell.”²⁰⁶

Not wanting to give the impression that the three events related so far are his only occupations that summer, Nick relates some of his other activities, which include working, a casual affair with a co-worker, and dinners at the Yale club. He has begun to

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 42.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 52,53.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 60.

like New York and the “racy, adventurous feel of it at night,”²⁰⁷ but he is also haunted by loneliness.

Nick reconnects with Jordan Baker and the two begin to see more of each other. At times Nick thinks he might be in love with her but realizes that he has more of a “tender curiosity” about her.²⁰⁸ He is reminded of a scandal surrounding her first big golf tournament when others accused her of cheating, and the two have a small quarrel concerning her driving. He comes to the realization that she is an “incurably dishonest” and careless person. This opinion is in contrast to his view of himself as both careful and “one of the few honest people I have ever known.”²⁰⁹

Chapter 4

Nick provides a catalogue of Gatsby’s party guests. It is clear that Gatsby’s parties draw a fashionable crowd of debutantes, celebrities, hangers-on, and other famous and infamous characters. One morning, late in July, Gatsby arrives unexpectedly at Nick’s door and announces that they are having lunch together and he will drive Nick to the city. By this time Nick has come to the disappointing conclusion that, despite the intrigue surrounding Gatsby, he actually has little to say.

Gatsby’s purpose for giving Nick a ride is a desire to set the record straight about his past because, as Gatsby reveals, Jordan will soon ask a favor of Nick on Gatsby’s behalf. Gatsby claims he is from a very wealthy family in the middle west and was Oxford-educated. Nick doubts the veracity of the story from the beginning, and his suspicions are confirmed when Gatsby names San Francisco as the mid-western city where he was raised. Gatsby explains that after his family died, he was left with a great deal of money. He drifted around Europe for a while “collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little...and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to [him] long ago.”²¹⁰ Gatsby describes his heroic acts in the war and even produces a medal from Montenegro and a picture of himself at Oxford to support his story. As further proof of Gatsby’s status, when he is pulled over for speeding, he is let go after he produces a card from the police commissioner.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 61.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 62.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 64.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 70.

At lunch later that day, Nick meets Meyer Wolfsheimer, a professional gambler and business associate of Gatsby's and the man said to have fixed the 1919 World Series, who clearly has links to the world of organized crime. Wolfsheimer is an oddly sentimental man who is, at the same time, eager to show off his cuff links made from human molars. Near the end of lunch, Nick notices Tom across the restaurant and introduces Gatsby. Gatsby seems unaccountably embarrassed at the introduction and disappears quickly after the meeting.

Later that day, Nick is having tea with Jordan when she recounts the events leading up to Daisy's marriage to Tom. She tells of having seen Daisy one afternoon with an unknown officer who looked at her "the way that every young girl wants to be looked at sometime...."²¹¹ The unknown officer turned out to be Jay Gatsby. Apparently Daisy's family did not approve of the match, and eventually, she became engaged to Tom. On the eve of their wedding, however, Jordan found Daisy drunk and in tears saying that she was going to call off the wedding. After a bath and some smelling salts, the incident appeared to be over, and the next day Daisy married Tom "without so much as a shiver."²¹² Upon returning from her honeymoon, Daisy seemed to be enraptured with her husband. However, evidence of his infidelities soon began to surface. Daisy seemed to have all but forgotten about Gatsby until Jordan mentioned his name the evening Nick joined the Buchanans for dinner.

Apparently, Gatsby's move to West Egg is far from a coincidence. He has deliberately chosen his house because of its proximity to Daisy's. Now Gatsby has asked Nick to arrange a meeting with Daisy by inviting her to tea. Gatsby does not want Daisy to know that he will be there, but he does want her to see his grand house, so Nick's cottage is the perfect place for the rendezvous.

Chapter 5

Nick arrives home that evening to find Gatsby's house ablaze with light but no party in sight. Gatsby tells Nick he has just been "glancing into some of the rooms."²¹³ He is eager to know if Nick will arrange a meeting with Daisy, and Nick assures him that he will telephone her tomorrow to invite her to tea. Knowing that Nick does not

²¹¹ Ibid, 80.

²¹² Ibid, 81.

²¹³ Ibid, 86.

make much money, Gatsby offers to set him up to “pick up a nice bit of money” on the side.²¹⁴ Assuming this would involve criminal activity, Nick declines.

The following day, Nick telephones Daisy with an invitation to come with the stipulation that she come alone. When the agreed-upon day arrives, Gatsby sends his gardener to cut Nick’s grass and later sends over a profusion of flowers. Gatsby arrives an hour before the specified time clearly nervous and unsure of himself. Daisy arrives, and Nick ushers her into the house only to find it empty. Gatsby has apparently left via the back door but reappears moments later at the front door looking pale and wretched. Initially, the reunion is tense and overformal, but the tension eases as the three prepare tea. Nick discreetly excuses himself, but a nervous Gatsby follows him. Nick sends Gatsby back to the room with Daisy, then sneaks out the back and spends thirty minutes waiting in the yard.

When Nick returns, he finds Gatsby and Daisy entirely changed. She is tearfully joyful, and Gatsby has shed his previous nerves and seems to glow with exultation and happiness. Gatsby suggests that the three visit his mansion, and the splendor of his estate enchants Daisy. The threesome wanders from room to room and finally ends up in Gatsby’s suite. Gatsby takes on an aura of wonder at Daisy’s mere presence in his house. He shows her his well-appointed closet, yet another example of the material stability he strives to convey to Daisy. Moved by his stunning array of beautiful shirts, she buries her head in them, weeping. Nick vaguely intimates that Daisy might not be able to measure up to the magnitude of the fantasy Gatsby has built over the last five years. He leaves the two, seemingly unaware of his existence, alone.

Chapter 6

Gatsby’s notoriety has grown to the point of being almost newsworthy, and along with this comes a certain air of suspicion. According to Nick, Gatsby found the legends attached to him a source of satisfaction. Nick then relates the story of Gatsby’s real background – a sharp contrast to the splendid tale Gatsby manufactured for Nick earlier in the novel. Originally from North Dakota, James Gatz was the son of “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” to whom he never really felt he belonged.²¹⁵ Nick describes Gatz as a “son of God” in “service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious

²¹⁴ Ibid, 88.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 104.

beauty.”²¹⁶ His idealistic, self-absorbed fantasy led him to develop a new identity completely focused on the destiny of his dreams. Thus, Gatz was prepared to take on a new name and a new persona when, at the age of seventeen, he met and was subsequently employed by Dan Cody. Cody was a multi-millionaire as well as a famous drunkard and womanizer who took the newly minted Jay Gatsby under his wing and later left him a small inheritance. Ultimately, however, Cody’s mistress duped Gatsby out of his share of the estate.

Nick loses sight of Gatsby for several weeks, in part because Nick is spending time with Jordan. Finally, Nick calls on his neighbor, and while he is there Tom arrives unexpectedly along with another man and a woman who have attended Gatsby’s parties. The three have been on a horseback ride and have stopped in for a drink. They engage in small talk, and Gatsby tells Tom that he knows Daisy. The group invites Gatsby and Nick to join them for dinner, and they seem somewhat surprised when Gatsby accepts, since the invitation was not in earnest.

Tom and Daisy attend a party at Gatsby’s house the following Saturday. In an effort to impress the Buchanans, Gatsby proudly points out all of the celebrities in attendance. He insists on introducing Tom as “the polo player” which makes Tom uneasy.²¹⁷ Daisy and Gatsby dance and later go sit on Nick’s steps, leaving Nick on guard, “in case there’s a fire or a flood...or any act of God.”²¹⁸ The two rejoin the group as dinner is served, but Tom asks to eat with another group. Aware of Tom’s real intentions, Daisy remarks that the girl is “common but pretty.”²¹⁹ Except for the half-hour she has spent solely with Gatsby, Daisy finds the party offensive and unnerving. Alone with Nick at the end of the night, Gatsby worries that Daisy did not enjoy the evening. He talks about the past and the life changing moment of their first kiss. Nick cautions Gatsby that he cannot repeat the past to which Gatsby replies, “Why of course you can!”²²⁰ Nick finds himself both attracted and disgusted by the “appalling sentimentality” of Gatsby’s words.²²¹

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 111.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 112.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 112.

²²⁰ Ibid, 116.

²²¹ Ibid, 118.

Chapter 7

Just as curiosity about Gatsby reaches its zenith, Gatsby's elaborate parties cease. Nick also learns that Gatsby has abruptly dismissed his servants and replaced them with people connected to Wolfsheimer in order to prevent the servants from gossiping about his afternoon trysts with Daisy. At Daisy's invitation, Nick and Gatsby join the Buchanans and Jordan for lunch on what turns out to be the hottest day of the year. The heat exacerbates the tension and discomfort of the situation. When Tom leaves the room to make drinks for the group, Daisy boldly kisses Gatsby. Later, after Daisy suggests that the group go to town, Tom observes his wife and Gatsby exchanging an intimate look. His suspicions confirmed, he abruptly agrees that the party should move to town.

Tension mounts as the group starts for the city. Tom bullies Gatsby into taking Tom's car and allowing him to drive Gatsby's. Meanwhile, Daisy insists on riding alone with Gatsby. Seeing that Gatsby's car is low on gas, Tom pulls in to the Wilson's garage and finds Wilson looking unwell. He has learned of Myrtle's having an affair although he does not know with whom, and he tells Tom he is taking his wife west in a few days. Before the group drives away, Nick notices Myrtle Wilson staring fixedly at the car and realizes that she has mistaken Jordan Baker for Tom's wife. Doubly enraged at the prospect of losing both his wife and his mistress, Tom maliciously questions Gatsby once the group has assembled at the Plaza Hotel. Tom has conducted an investigation of Gatsby's background, and confronts Gatsby, first about his claim to have been educated at Oxford and then about his affair with Daisy. Gatsby refuses to be intimidated and tells Tom that Daisy does not love him and that she never loved him. Daisy, however, cannot honestly say that she never loved Tom, especially after he reminds her of some of the good times they have had together and tells Gatsby, "Oh, you want too much!...I love you now – isn't that enough?...I did love him once – but I loved you too."²²² Distressed by this departure from his carefully constructed dream, Gatsby tries another tactic, telling Tom that Daisy is leaving him. Tom responds that Daisy will never leave him, "Certainly not for a common swindler who'd have to steal the ring he put on her finger."²²³ After Tom reveals more about Gatsby's shady business

²²² Ibid, 139-140.

²²³ Ibid, 140.

dealings, he orders his wife and Gatsby to leave for home, this time in Gatsby's car.

Nick's narration now pieces together information gained from Wilson's neighbor, Michaelis. Late in the afternoon Michaelis found George Wilson in his garage looking very ill. After hearing a furious noise above, Wilson explained that he had locked his wife in the upper apartment until the two could move away. A few hours later he heard Myrtle's voice, then saw her break away from her husband and rush into the roadway. She was struck by a car that failed to stop. Tom, Nick, and Jordan arrive on the scene shortly thereafter, and Tom is grief-stricken when he learns of Myrtle's violent death. Tom learns that the car that struck Myrtle matches the description of Gatsby's, and as the group leaves the garage all he can do is whimper "The God Damn coward!...He didn't even stop his car."²²⁴

After the group returns to the Buchanans', Nick declines to wait for his cab inside the house, as he is feeling sick of all of them. He finds Gatsby outside the Buchanans' house, waiting for a signal from Daisy. Gatsby asks if there was any trouble on the road, and Nick learns that it was Daisy, not Gatsby, who was driving the car that struck Myrtle. Gatsby says that he will take the blame for the accident, however, and Nick leaves Gatsby keeping watch over Daisy's house in the event that she needs assistance dealing with Tom.

Chapter 8

After a sleepless night, Nick hears Gatsby returning from his all-night vigil. He feels compelled to tell Gatsby something, although he does not know what it might be. Concerned that Gatsby's car might be traced, Nick suggests he leave town for a while. Gatsby refuses to consider this because as he still has hope that Daisy will leave Tom. The illusion of his past shattered, Gatsby tells Tom about his youth and his courtship with Daisy. The two fell deeply in love in spite of the fact that she was his social superior. During this time they made love, and this act of intimacy created a bond that left him feeling married to her. Soon after, military obligations sent Gatsby to Europe, where he distinguished himself in battle. At war's end, he tried to get home to her but the army sent him to Oxford for a time instead. She grew impatient, and in her impatience met and married Tom Buchanan. As Nick and Gatsby finish

²²⁴ Ibid, 149.

breakfast, Gatsby instructs the gardener not to drain the pool since he wants to use it that afternoon. Nick does not want to leave Gatsby, and as he departs for work, he tells Gatsby, "They're a rotten crowd.... You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."²²⁵

Nick feels uneasy as the day drags on. Jordan phones, but Nick does not want to see her. He tries to phone Gatsby, but when he is unable to reach him he decides to head home early. The narration then fills in the details of George Wilson's movements that afternoon. Michaelis spent a long night watching over a despondent George Wilson. After day broke, Michealis went home for a few hours of sleep. When he returned, he found George Wilson gone. Wilson's movements took him to Port Roosevelt, Gads Hill, West Egg and finally to Gatsby's house, where he apparently found Gatsby floating on an air mattress in the pool. Convinced that Gatsby is responsible for his wife's death, Wilson shot Gatsby and then turned the gun on himself. Nick returns from work to find Gatsby's body floating in the pool. The gardener discovers Wilson's corpse in the grass nearby.

Chapter 9

Following Gatsby's death, police and paparazzi invade the mansion. Nick is surprised to find himself handling Gatsby's funeral arrangements, and he tries unsuccessfully to involve others who knew Gatsby. He calls Daisy to tell her of Gatsby's death and learns that she and Tom have left on a trip leaving no itinerary behind. Nick sends a letter to Gatsby's business partner Meyer Wolfshiem, but the older man sends a note refusing to be involved with Gatsby's funeral. Three days after Gatsby's murder, Nick receives a telegram from Henry Gatz, Gatsby's father, requesting that the funeral be postponed until he arrives. Gatz refuses to take his son's body back to the midwest, saying that Gatsby always preferred the east. Fearing there will be no mourners at the funeral, Nick visits Wolfshiem's office in a final attempt to convince him to attend the funeral, but he refuses once again.

Nick returns to Gatsby's to find Mr. Gatz going through his son's house and marveling at the wealth he has accumulated. He shows Nick a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* in which a young Jimmy Gatz had outlined his plan for self-improvement. Shortly after,

²²⁵ Ibid, 162.

the funeral begins with only a few servants, the mail carrier, the minister, Nick, and Mr. Gatz in attendance. Nick finds it bitterly unjust that Gatsby's death is so solitary when so many people were willing to take advantage of Gatsby's hospitality.

Nick reminisces about traveling West as he returned home from school in his youth. As the train moved west, he became more comfortable and sure of his place in the world. He has now come to view the West as superior to the moral corruption of the East. As the Autumn grows colder, he has decided to return home. First he sees Jordan in order to conclude their relationship. She quickly tells him she is engaged to another man, and their exchange leaves Nick feeling "angry and half in love with her, and tremendously sorry."²²⁶

Later, Nick runs into Tom Buchanan walking along Fifth Avenue. At first Nick refuses to shake hands with Tom. Nick learns that it was Tom who told Wilson that Gatsby owned the car that killed Myrtle. At the end of their conversation, Nick has the feeling that he is talking to a child and shakes Tom's hand.

On the night before leaving West Egg for his trip West, Nick wanders over to Gatsby's house and sits on the beach, looking out over the water. Most of the houses are closed for the season so there are very few lights. Nick contemplates the vastness of Gatsby's dream and his hope for the future. He realizes that the boats, beating against the current, are an apt analogy for Gatsby's story.

Conclusion

Harbison's libretto draws elements from each of the novel's nine chapters. This is perhaps as much a testament to Fitzgerald's economy of means in telling the story as it is to Harbison's close adherence to the events of the novel.

²²⁶ Ibid, 186.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Laura Storm earned her Bachelor's Degree at Austin Peay State University and her Master's Degree at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She has studied voice with Sharon Mabry, Janet Parlova, Karen Anderson and Stanford Olsen and has coached with Kathy Cathcart, Robert Schwartz, Timothy Hoekman and Douglas Fisher. She is a member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing and Pi Kappa Lambda.

In the summer of 1999 she won third prize in the Concurso Internacional de Canto Lírico in Trujillo, Peru which led to concerts with the Trujillo Symphony at the Teatro Municipal in Trujillo and the Museo de la Nación in Lima.

While at Florida State University Ms. Storm appeared with the Florida State Opera as Alice Ford in *Falstaff*; Desirè Armfeldt in *A Little Night Music*; and Rosalinda in *Die Fledermaus*. Other roles include The Governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, Anne Egerman in *A Little Night Music*, and Nellie Forbush in *South Pacific*. Ms. Storm has been featured as the soprano soloist in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Tallahassee Symphony and has performed John Harbison's *Mirabai Songs* under the direction of the composer.

Ms. Storm is currently Assistant Professor of Music at Henderson State University where she teaches Applied Voice, Italian and German Diction and Vocal Pedagogy.