

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

an opera in two acts

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A Final Project  
Submitted  
to the Temple University Graduate Board

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By  
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## ABSTRACT

*The Age of Innocence* is an opera based on the 1920 novel by Edith Wharton. Set in New York high society of the 1870's, it tells the story of Newland Archer, a young lawyer, his fiancée May Welland, and her cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, who has returned to her native New York in an aura of scandal, having left her husband, the dissolute Polish Count Olenski, in Europe. Although Archer and Ellen fall in love, he nevertheless follows the expectations of his family and marries the lovely but conventional May. For her part, while she sees a life with Archer as an escape from her loneliness, Ellen cannot allow herself to betray her cousin, insisting that she and Archer can love each other only if they remain apart. This love triangle is unique because of the social pressures placed upon Archer: he is a product of New York society, which has taught him to believe in the factitious idea of female innocence, as personified by May. Though he questions this and other conventions of his society, he is unable to bring himself to abandon the safety of these social norms that govern every aspect of proper behavior in New York. It is Archer's love for Ellen that prompts him to challenge these standards, pointing out New York's hypocrisy in welcoming May's cousin back to America while at the same time treating her as a pariah for abandoning her husband in Europe. None of their objections to Ellen is explicitly stated, however, for this is a world which has a morbid fear of "the unpleasant"—that is, anything that would disturb the calm surface of society's politesse and social grace. It comes as no surprise, then, that Archer's desire for Ellen (especially after he marries May), becomes a potential social nightmare for his family and all of New York, as they ruthlessly plot to drive the two apart, and send Ellen back to Europe.

The main challenge in creating an opera out of this story, in addition to streamlining a lengthy and complex plot, was to delineate both in the libretto and the music the realms of the said and unsaid—that is, what the characters say in public, and what they say to themselves or to others that represents their innermost feelings. In the libretto, this was achieved by drawing upon Wharton’s dialogue and narration in the novel in order to create these private and public utterances, in the form of recitatives, arias, duets, or ensemble pieces. The language of the libretto has been fashioned to serve these different musical forms, with dialogue from the novel employed in moments of recitative; and freely-metered verse, with a modest use of rhyme, for the “numbers” of the opera. The music, meanwhile, employs a system of codes to define the realms of the said and unsaid—motives, sonorities and key relationships that bring into focus the interactions of the characters, especially Archer, Ellen and May as their drama plays out under the ever-watchful eyes of New York society. The music has also been rendered to bring out the stresses and meter of the text, and heighten the import of the words as sung by a particular character.

I have attempted in my opera to bring to life the timeless themes of Wharton’s novel: unfulfilled love, the individual versus society, the potential corrupting influence of desire, and the moral choices that human beings face as they wrestle with these common issues. Opera, through the language of music, is one of the few art forms capable of fully realizing these themes in a dramatic context—in this sense, it is just as relevant to our time as it was to Wharton’s, and therefore remains a viable medium for the twenty-first-century composer.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first and foremost acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Maurice Wright, for his wise guidance as I took on the rather intimidating task of writing a full-length opera. His belief in my abilities as a composer has helped me to believe in myself as an artist and follow through on the idea I had for over a decade of dramatizing Wharton's great novel. I also note my debt to the late Professor John Douglas of the Boyer Opera Department, who served on my dissertation committee before his passing, and was one of the first people to help me in the process of adapting *The Age of Innocence* into an opera. Sandy James has been infinitely patient with my computer-related needs, and I'll be forever thankful to her for refraining from yelling at me for printing 1,600 pages in the Rock Hall lab when I so richly deserved to be yelled at. Joe di Donato and Professor Stephen Willier were of great help with the translations from Italian to English, and vice-versa. I'm also grateful to the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, which provided six peaceful weeks in the fall of 2010 to work solely on my opera—I can honestly say that without that time, I would not have been able to complete my dissertation by the end of this academic year. My friends have been unfailingly supportive of my work, taking me out for a drink when I didn't even realize how much I needed to get out of the house—these terrific people include Annie Neikirk, Ryan Olivier, Andrew Litts, Adam Vidiksis, Julia Alford-Fowler and Andrew McPherson. (I thank Ryan in particular for pointing out a certain tritone in the opera, making me realize I'm more clever than I had thought.) Finally, I'm very grateful for the love and support I have received from my mother and father all of my musical career—I would not be where I am today without them.

## DEDICATION

For Kelly—

who knows better than anyone else that this is all due to Regina Beaufort.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Perhaps more than any other of her works, *The Age of Innocence* represented for Edith Wharton a look back to a vanished past, to the time of her childhood and early adolescence in New York of the 1870's, a "safe, narrow, unintellectual, and hidebound world, but from the tremendous distance of time and history, an endearing and honorable one."<sup>1</sup> It was in this world she set her story of quiet restraint about the thwarted love of Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, two individuals torn apart by a society determined to preserve itself and its values, even if its ideals were arguably suffused with the basest cruelty. The "honorable" aspect of such a society could be found in Wharton's belief that "the civilized order of life must never be violated ... it is not too much to say that, for her, the fate of society—as the embodiment of civilization—hung upon every important moral decision."<sup>2</sup> The novel therefore "offers a profound critique of the world it describes, even as it finds value in the sacrifices made to ensure the stability of the quietly violent ranks of the 'New York four hundred' [the most exclusive group of New York society, so called because it was the number of people who could fit into the Astors' ballroom]."<sup>3</sup> Another significant influence on the novel was its being written in 1920, in the wake of World War I, which brought about a cataclysmic change in Wharton's world view. The life she knew before the war was

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<sup>1</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 424.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>3</sup> Candace Waid, introduction to *The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2003), xvi.

obliterated by the mass world, a world without taste, a world without an aristocracy of intellect ... [it] was a catastrophe that threatened one's ability to make a world. For a novelist who made fictional worlds and for a woman who created aesthetic spaces ... the loss of control was potentially devastating. The First World War ushered in the true end of the age of innocence.<sup>4</sup>

It might be said, then, that in writing *The Age of Innocence* Wharton was seeking to both reaffirm her creative powers and bridge the gap between the ordered world she once knew and a post-war, uncivilized society. Remarking on the book's depiction of "Old New York" (the novel's working title), Wharton's friend Walter Berry said, "Yes; it's good. But of course you and I are the only people who will ever read it. We are the last people who can remember New York and Newport as they were then, and no one else will be interested."<sup>5</sup> Berry perhaps overstated his case here—the book was in fact a tremendous success, selling over 100,000 copies in North America and England within a year of its publication in October 1920. But with the exception of some insightful critics of the time, he was probably one of the few people who understood the significance of Wharton's accomplishment in reconstructing a vanished past. William Lyon Phelps, one such critic, wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that "New York society and customs in the [eighteen] seventies are described with an accuracy that is almost uncanny; to read these pages is to live again." He ends by prophetically affirming that *The Age of Innocence* is "one of the best novels of the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> Carl Van Doren, in *The Nation*, commented that "[i]n lonely contrast to almost all the novelists

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Price, *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1964), 369.

<sup>6</sup> William Lyon Phelps, "As Mrs. Wharton Sees Us," review of *The Age of Innocence*, *New York Times Book Review* (October 17, 1920): 1, 11.

who write about fashionable New York, [Wharton] knows her world ... she brings a superbly critical disposition to arrange her knowledge in significant forms. These characters who move with such precision and veracity through the ritual of a frozen caste are here as real as their actual lives would ever have let them be.”<sup>7</sup> Other reviews were similarly positive: the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote that “the historic setting of the story has made the story—made it by being just what it is, strong and fine, ripely matured and absolutely sure of itself,”<sup>8</sup> while *The Saturday Review* felt that “[f]rom a literary point of view, this story is on a level with Mrs. Wharton’s best work.”<sup>9</sup> The novel went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for the year 1921, though not for the reasons Wharton would have wished: the award’s criteria stated that it would be granted to “the American novel which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood.”<sup>10</sup> To so completely miss the extreme irony of the novel was to misunderstand its achievement as not only a portrait of “Old New York,” but also its depiction of the complexities of the human psyche, and the moral choices faced by the men and women of a socially reserved, tradition-bound society.

For our part, 140 years removed from the era of *The Age of Innocence*, and nearly a century after its publication, we may well ask what relevance the novel has for us, and indeed how it might be justified as the basis for a twenty-first century opera. This notion

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<sup>7</sup> Carl Van Doren, “An Elder in America,” review of *The Age of Innocence*, *The Nation* 111, no. 2887 (1920): 510.

<sup>8</sup> “The Age of Innocence,” review of *The Age of Innocence*, *Times Literary Supplement* (November 25, 1920): 775.

<sup>9</sup> “The Innocence of New York,” review of *The Age of Innocence*, *The Saturday Review* (December 4, 1920): 458.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, 433.

of relevance seems to bear much relation to the popularity of dramatized versions of Wharton's works. This tradition began as far back as 1906, when, after the tremendous success of *The House of Mirth* the previous year, Wharton was approached by the playwright Clyde Fitch, who expressed an interest in collaborating on a stage version of the book. The resulting play, premiered in Detroit on 17 September 1906, was praised by Midwest critics, and then panned when it came to New York the following month. This experience seemed to confirm Wharton's first misgivings about the entire venture—as she noted in *A Backward Glance*, “Once ‘The House of Mirth’ had started on its prosperous career I was of course besieged with applications to dramatize it; but I refused them all, convinced that (apart from the intrinsic weakness of most plays drawn from books) there was nothing in this particular book out of which to make a play.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, she acquiesced to a dramatization of not only *The House of Mirth*, but also *The Age of Innocence*, the latter proving a great success during its run in New York and subsequent tour throughout the eastern United States in 1928. Wharton also consented to film adaptations of *The Age of Innocence* in 1918 and 1934, as well as *The House of Mirth* (1918) and *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1923). Closer to our own time, *The Age of Innocence* again found its way to the screen in a version directed by Martin Scorsese in 1993, followed by *Ethan Frome* that same year directed by John Madden, and *The House of Mirth* in 2000, directed by Terence Davies.

It seems, then, that despite Wharton's reservations about the suitability of her novels for the stage, her works have an inherent sense of drama which has appealed to

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<sup>11</sup> Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 160.

audiences for over a century. This dramatic element tends to focus on the conflict of society versus the individual, driving the latter into a psychological prison of sorts, leading ultimately to his or her subjugation to the strictures of society and family, or even (as in the case of Lily Bart, the heroine of *The House of Mirth*) to her death. As readers, we become aware of the characters' sense of entrapment when they talk or think to themselves, or when Wharton narrates their psychological predicaments. Such a situation may be found in book 2 of *The Age of Innocence* when Newland Archer, finding himself trapped in his listless marriage to May Welland, and completely in love with the Countess Olenska, leans out of the window of his drawing room one winter evening to catch a breath of fresh air and escape the stifling atmosphere of his home:

After he had leaned out into the darkness for a few minutes he heard [May] say: "Newland! Do shut the window. You'll catch your death."

He pulled the sash down and turned back. "Catch my death!" he echoed; and he felt like adding: "But I've caught it already. I *am* dead—I've been dead for months and months."

And suddenly the play of the word flashed up a wild suggestion. What if it were *she* who was dead! If she were going to die—to die soon—and leave him free! The sensation of standing there, in that warm familiar room, and looking at her, and wishing her dead, was so strange, so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity did not immediately strike him. He simply felt that chance had given him a new possibility to which his sick soul might cling. Yes, May might die—people did: young people, healthy people like herself: she might die, and set him suddenly free.<sup>12</sup>

The main difficulty to overcome, then, in adapting a Wharton novel is how to express these psychological predicaments in a dramatic context. Clyde Fitch himself confessed to such difficulties in his adaptation of *The House of Mirth*:

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<sup>12</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2003), 178.

To take a book whose whole drama was *wholly* psychological, and whose story of value was against every rule of the drama seemed appalling to begin with. The one hope, it seemed to me, was ... to make it as *real* as possible, and like to its source as the two and half stage hours' traffic would allow. So far as we can judge, [Mrs. Wharton and I] *seem* to have succeeded, at least beyond what I dared hope.<sup>13</sup>

What emerges from Fitch and Wharton's adaptation, however, is a play that instead of living up to the psychological power of the novel, presents a drama in which "a single foible of character becomes the determining factor in the protagonist's [i.e., Lily Bart's] life on stage. Oversimplification of motive cramped Mrs. Wharton's dialogue and made the characters less believable than they are in the novel."<sup>14</sup> Martin Scorsese's film adaptation of *The Age of Innocence* seems to have been more successful in delineating the characters' internal conflicts, though he seemed unable or unwilling to convey the undercurrents of feeling and conflict solely through the filmmaker's craft: the movie uses a voice-over narrator to clue the audience in to these unspoken thoughts; as Scorsese put it, "That's one of the reasons why I wanted to use the narration from the book, sections of the book read over the images, because of [Wharton's] insight."<sup>15</sup> In point of fact, the above quote from the novel is related almost word-for-word in the film. Though Scorsese is to be admired for his overall fidelity to the novel, it seems to me that the voice of the narrator actually takes us one step further *away* from the psychology of the characters—

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<sup>13</sup> Clyde Fitch, *Clyde Fitch and His Letters*, comp. Montrose Moses and Virginia Gerson (Boston: Little Brown, 1924), 323.

<sup>14</sup> Glenn Loney, "Edith Wharton and *The House of Mirth*: The Novelist Writes for the Theatre" in *The House of Mirth: The Play of the Novel*, by Edith Wharton and Clyde Fitch (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1980), 33.

<sup>15</sup> "Daniel Day-Lewis – 'The Age Of Innocence' Documentary Part 2," YouTube video, 9:12, from a 1992 Home Box Office documentary, *Innocence and Experience: The Making of The Age of Innocence*, posted by "EmmaGennaro," August 16, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtiWcgPLAY4>.

every time we hear the narrator's voice (standing in for the voice of Wharton herself) we are reminded that this is in fact a piece of fiction, and thus the characters become more like figures to be objectively observed than real people with whom we can identify. It seems Fitch's tendency to reduce Wharton's many-layered psychological portraits to more one-dimensional characterizations also plagued Scorsese.

It is curious then, given the power of music to convey the unspoken thoughts and feelings of a character, that (according to my research), none of Wharton's novels has yet been adapted into an opera. (The only opera having anything to do with Wharton was Roger Hannay's *The Journey of Edith Wharton* from 1982, based on the play *E*, by Russell Graves.) What most interested me about *The Age of Innocence* as the basis for an opera was its depiction of two individuals' struggle for freedom to love one another in the face of a society that will tolerate no betrayal of its moral code, and how to translate this struggle into musical terms. In her study of the novel, Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes this conflict as Wharton's "intense moral scrutiny [of] the problem of the right to individual 'freedom' as measured against the binding sanctity of the commitment to the institution of marriage."<sup>16</sup> Both Archer and Ellen are faced with a moral choice in light of their present situations: Ellen is a married woman, while Archer, after refusing May's offer to release him from their engagement because she suspects he loves "someone else," follows through with his decision to marry May. Once Ellen and Archer fall in love with each other, however, they must decide whether they are above the moral considerations of the society that has given them both (especially Archer) meaning and

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<sup>16</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 313.

structure to their lives. While Archer dreams of finding a world that evades these difficult questions, Ellen refuses to be led astray by such illusions—so in reply to his question of what her plan is “for us,” she tells says,

“For *us*? But there’s no *us* in that sense! We’re near each other only if we stay far from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise we’re only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska’s cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer’s wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them.”<sup>17</sup>

Archer and Ellen’s predicament is further complicated by the pressure of a society that welcomes Ellen back to America, and at the same time fears her foreign (European) influence, including her marriage to a Polish count. Though all of New York is aware that the Count Olenski is a philanderer, and that divorce in France at that time (where the two lived) was illegal, they still regard Ellen as a woman who has deserted her husband, and, worse still, they know of her running away with his secretary to live with him for a time in Lausanne. New York’s desire to banish Ellen from their ranks for her unconventional behavior is foreshadowed in chapter 5, when Archer defends Ellen’s past actions:

“Living together? Well, why not? Who had the right to make her life over if she hadn’t? I’m sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots.”

He stopped and turned away angrily to light his cigar. “Women ought to be free—as free as we are,” he declared, making a discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences.

Mr. Sillerton Jackson stretched his ankles nearer the coals and emitted a sardonic whistle. “Well,” he said after a pause, “apparently Count Olenski takes your view; for I never heard of his having lifted a finger to get his wife back.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 175.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

The idea of the individual versus society is, of course, a theme prominent in Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*. What Peter Pears had to say about the character of Grimes could apply in some degree to Ellen in *The Age of Innocence*:

He is very much an ordinary weak person, who, being at odds with the society in which he finds himself, tries to overcome it, and, in doing so, offends the conventional code, is classed by society as a criminal, and destroyed as such.<sup>19</sup>

It is not quite accurate, of course, to speak of Ellen, or indeed Archer, as an "ordinary person," though they both have their weaknesses, and indeed offend codes conventional to New York society, thus ensuring their permanent separation. Archer comes to realize just how much he and Ellen have trespassed New York's standards of behavior at his and May's farewell dinner for Ellen:

And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to "foreign" vocabularies. He guessed himself to have been, for months, the center of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears, he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything, and that the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer's natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin.

It was the old New York way of taking life "without effusion of blood": the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than "scenes," except the behavior of those who gave rise to them.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Pears, "Neither a Hero Nor Villain" in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, comp. Philip Brett, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 152.

<sup>20</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 200–201.

This is a moment of maturation for Archer—a final understanding that the society upon which he bases his whole life (by way of his marriage to May) has made impossible the fulfillment of his unrequited love for Ellen.<sup>21</sup> The pursuit of the unattainable is a theme to be found in another Britten opera, *Death in Venice*. Concerning Aschenbach’s pursuit of Tadzio, Clifford Hindley writes that

Tadzio is a symbol for physical perfection, but little more. He has no character, beyond that expressed in occasional flirtatious glances, and when Aschenbach fails to develop a relationship, eros moves from being a response to an aesthetic ideal to become an uncontrollable, destructive passion.<sup>22</sup>

While Archer’s relationship with Ellen goes beyond mere physical attraction, his pursuit of her has the potential to destroy his marriage as well as his capacity to become a genuine human being, as Wolff points out:

[I]f the passion that Ellen has finally released in him is eventually thwarted by his failure to effect a relationship with her, then he might not manage to attach these emotions to any part of life he actually leads ... he might drift back into idle, empty dreaming. He might never attain the capacity for sustaining deep and meaningful bonds with others. He might

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term “unrequited love” in a particular way as it applies to *The Age of Innocence*: while it is true that Archer and Ellen confess their love for each other at the end of book 1 of the novel (act 1 of the opera), it is important to note that Archer’s love must mature before it can be completely reciprocated by Ellen. As she tells him in chapter 18: “[Y]ou hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference...don’t let’s undo what you’ve done...I can’t love you unless I give you up” (Ibid., 107). For the rest of the novel, Archer stubbornly refuses to give up Ellen, and contemplates abandoning May so that he might be with Ellen—indeed a great cruelty to someone else. This is the kind of impure love that Ellen cannot return; it is only when Archer realizes, at the age of fifty-seven, that he acquiesced to May’s (unspoken) request that he “[give] up the thing you most wanted” (Ibid., 214) that his love for Ellen is purified and thus fully reciprocated.

<sup>22</sup> Clifford Hindley, “Eros in Life and Death: *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 162.

become a hollow man altogether. This danger is the central problem he faces.<sup>23</sup>

Just as Britten found the themes of the individual's persecution by society and the destructive consequences of pursuit for the unattainable ripe for operatic treatment, I too found these themes, as depicted by Wharton with her penetrating insight, as compelling subject matter for an opera. (It will become clear later on just how much a debt I owe to Britten in my opera, and how his dramatic technique has influenced my own in bringing Wharton's characters to life.) The passion experienced by both Archer and Aschenbach rouses them from a listless existence and makes them face their darkest desires. The moral choice they must make in light of these revelations is the principal point on which their stories turn. For Aschenbach, the wrong choice leads to corrupted passion and a betrayal of all he stands for as an artist. For Archer, the wrong choice means giving up the possibility of experiencing a real life in the only society he has ever known, and will ever know. In this sense, he risks experiencing the banishment from society that New York imposes on Ellen. It is only by reconciling the love he has for both Ellen and May that he becomes a complete human being—one worthy of the love of these two women. To have this choice writ large in a dramatic context was the challenge I set for myself in writing both the libretto and music of this opera, both of which I will now discuss.

#### A Note on Copyright

It was essential that the issue of copyright as it pertains to *The Age of Innocence* be settled before I began work on my opera. My research has established that, after its initial publication in 1920, the novel's 28-year copyright term was renewed in 1948 for

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<sup>23</sup> Wolff, 318.

another 28 years; this renewal period was changed to 47 years with the Copyright Act of 1976, making the total term of copyright for the novel 75 years. *The Age of Innocence* thus entered the public domain on January 1, 1996.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This is corroborated by a 1995 article from *The New York Times* on the expiration of copyright for *The Age of Innocence* and other literature of the 1920's. See Mary B. W. Tabor, "Publishers Wince as 1920's Classics Go Public," *New York Times*, May 29, 1995.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LIBRETTO

As with any adaptation of a literary work for the operatic stage, the creation of the libretto for *The Age of Innocence* was more a process of subtraction than addition. Several elements of the plot, various minor characters and different locales of the action had to be streamlined or done away with altogether in order to maintain practical boundaries for a staged production. I divide the discussion of the libretto into three areas: the condensing of the novel's plot and the placement of scene divisions for each act; the treatment of the characters; and finally the language of the libretto, as derived from and inspired by the novel, employing different speech styles for recitative and the "numbers" of the opera (aria, arioso, ensemble pieces, etc.). Given the complexity of each of these issues and the intricacies of the novel itself, discussion of these topics will necessarily overlap with one another, though I hope this division of labor will help clarify the description of the libretto's genesis.

#### The Plot and Scene Divisions

I began my adaptation with the belief that, to ensure the greatest emotional and dramatic impact for the opera, the narrative structure of the novel should be preserved. I took on this premise not without some trepidation, knowing very well that following the novel's narrative too closely would result in an overly-complex libretto with too many scenes and too many staging logistics to overcome. I did, however, take heart in knowing that there is a precedent for a relatively complex narrative for an opera, *Death in Venice*, which has seventeen scenes, involving several locales. The opera is so structured that the

first act ends on the emotional high point of Achenbach confessing (to himself) his love for Tadzio, while the second act charts the consequences of Aschenbach's obsession, leading to his death from the choleric plague. Taking this as my example (as well as the similarity of Aschenbach's and Archer's predicaments mentioned above), I followed the same broad outline for *The Age of Innocence*: all the plot elements of act 1 lead up to Archer and Ellen's confession of their love, and the impossibility of its consummation, while in act 2 the consequences of this realization are played out, with special relation to Archer and his process of emotional maturation. This antecedent/consequent structure is reflected on a smaller level in act 1— that is, what Archer experiences up to the end of scene 8 affects his actions in the remaining three scenes: he learns of the gossip surrounding Ellen (scene 1); he makes a public vow to uphold honor and family (scene 2); he finds himself drawn toward Ellen, while at the same time insisting that he and May be married as soon as possible (scenes 5 and 7); and when he prevaricates about dissuading Ellen from divorce, Mrs. Mingott reminds him of his duty to the family (scene 8). As a consequence to these events, in scenes 9 to 11, he convinces Ellen to drop the divorce case, he travels to Florida to see May (who suspects he has feelings for another woman), and finally tells Ellen he loves her. To heighten the irony of May's news that the wedding date has been advanced, in scene 8, I add something of my own to Wharton's story: Mrs. Mingott tells Archer she will influence May's mother to advance the wedding date provided that he dissuade Ellen from divorcing. This places Archer in a highly interesting psychological dilemma: he feels obligated, out of duty to his family, to convince Ellen to drop the case, knowing all the while that this very action will guarantee

his marriage to May, thus removing any possibility of him and Ellen being together. Finally, in the last scene of act 1, I have Archer recount to Ellen his and May's conversation in Florida, with May appearing on the opposite side of the stage as a figure in Archer's memory. Not only does this eliminate the need for another scene change, but it brings into greater relief May's suspicions that he cares for someone else: though she guesses the wrong person, the real object of Archer's affections is actually on the other side of the stage. I will have more to say about the relationships amongst Archer, May and Ellen in the discussion of the libretto's characters, below.

Act 2, like book 2 of the novel, chronicles a journey ever deeper into Archer's psyche, as he contends with the suffocating atmosphere of his marriage and his unrequited love for Ellen, all the while losing track of the societal forces closing in on him and Ellen. It is Archer's very obliviousness to the danger around him, and his blind desire for Ellen, that drives the drama forward, leading to the climactic moment of scene 7, when Ellen finally asks, "Shall I come to you once, and then go home?" A smaller-scale antecedent/consequent structure is present in this act, recalling the structure of act 1: the antecedent events here include Archer seeing Ellen in Boston, where she tells him she will not go back to Europe as long as they keep away from each other; the financial panic and Mrs. Mingott's stroke, which brings Ellen back to New York, and allows Archer to see her again; and Archer's growing sense of imprisonment in his marriage. Each of these events pushes Archer ever closer to a moral crisis: once he agrees to Ellen's proposal in scene 7 that they have one night of passion together, he is in effect consenting to a violation of his society's moral code. The ensemble section of scene 7 (entirely my own

invention), which includes Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Archer, Lefferts, Jackson and the chorus, demonstrates the gravity of Archer's situation, as well as his blindness to it: just as all of the Borough's rage is turned upon Peter in act 3 of *Peter Grimes*, so too does all of New York turn on Archer and Ellen, demanding they be completely separated and that she return to Europe. An entire day passes during Archer's aria at the end of scene 7, as he dreams about the consummation of his and Ellen's love, after which, he predicts, she will not be able to part from him. The consequent of the act begins with scene 8, when upon his return home, May tells Archer that Ellen will be going back to Europe in a week. The farewell dinner party for Ellen (making up for the canceled welcoming dinner in act 1) follows, and finally, just when Archer is about to again ask May for his freedom, she tells him what she told Ellen a week ago (that is, during the day that transpired during Archer's aria in scene 7): she is pregnant. The consequent is made complete in the final scene, when Archer's son tells him the day before his mother died, she said "she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you, you gave up the thing you wanted most." A deeper bond of love between Archer and May is thus revealed, allowing him to reconcile the love he has for both his wife and Ellen. As Wharton writes, "It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, someone had guessed and pitied. . . . And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably."<sup>25</sup> The subtleties of this love triangle are indeed many, and I now turn to the formation of the characters' roles in the libretto, beginning with Archer, May and Ellen.

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<sup>25</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 214.

## The Characters

As should be clear by this point, Archer is the nucleus of all that happens in the story; in many ways, he is a blank canvas filled in and given life by May and Ellen, but also by the larger forces of New York society, on whose conventions and morals he relies more heavily than he is willing to admit. Again, to quote Wolff in her analysis of Archer:

*The Age of Innocence* is Wharton's most significant *bildungsroman* ... In it she traces Archer's struggle to mature, to become in some continuous and authentic way—himself. She lays before us the present and possible in such a way that the middle-aged man who concludes the novel seems an admirable and significant outgrowth of the untried youth at the beginning.<sup>26</sup>

I have tried to place Archer in situations throughout the opera in which he comes face to face with forces that challenge (what he believes to be) his free-thinking ways, as well as his conflicting desires for a marriage to the staid May Welland, and a passionate affair with the unconventional Ellen Olenska. Seeing how Archer is so much of a blank slate, a person who is more acted upon than one who acts, it is best to understand him as he relates to those around him, particularly May and Ellen. May is established from the outset of the book as a feminine ideal, the type of woman all New York approves of, and in whom Archer takes no small amount of masculine pride. Even so, he suspects a certain amount of artifice in this image, as Wharton writes:

[W]hen he had gone the brief round of her he returned discouraged by the thought that all this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product. Untrained human nature was not frank and innocent; it was full of the twists and defenses of an instinctive guile. And he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a

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<sup>26</sup> Wolff, 314.

right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow.<sup>27</sup>

These are the very traits that Archer reflects upon in his aria, “From childhood ever on” in the middle of act 1, scene 10. This moment is as much about Archer as it is about May, and all the young women like her, whose innocence proves to be only a sham; an innocence that Archer begins to wonder whether he wants at all. Added to this, with reference to the words that end the aria, “I didn’t suspect she’d know,” is the revelation (related in the following scene) that May is ready to give Archer up to another woman—an offer he refuses, thus exposing himself to dire consequences in the second act.

If May represents all that Archer has been taught to believe about this image of young womanhood, then Ellen Olenska is a force that pulls him in an opposite direction: a mix of female sexuality and intellectual independence unlike anything he has ever encountered. His first reaction to her, as she takes her seat in the Wellands’ box at the opera, displays an awareness of Ellen’s erotic appeal as well as anxiety in seeing his fiancée exposed to such a violation of “taste”:

He saw that Mrs. Welland and her sister-in-law were facing their semicircle of critics with the Mingottian *aplomb* which old Catherine had inculcated in all her tribe, and that only May Welland betrayed, by a heightened color (perhaps due to the knowledge that he was watching her) a sense of the gravity of the situation. As for the cause of the commotion, she sat gracefully in her corner of the box, her eyes fixed on the stage, and revealing, as she leaned forward, a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing, at least in ladies who had reasons for wishing to pass unnoticed.

Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offense against “Taste,” that far-off divinity of whom “Form” was the mere visible representative and vicegerent. Madame Olenska’s pale and serious face appealed to his fancy as suited to the occasion and to her unhappy

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<sup>27</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 29–30.

situation; but the way her dress (which had no tucker) sloped away from her thin shoulders shocked and troubled him. He hated to think of May Welland's being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste.<sup>28</sup>

But it is Ellen who raises in Archer's mind doubts about New York's moral standards. At first, his defense of her and criticism of New York's moral hypocrisy springs from a desire to show solidarity with May's family, but soon—especially after his first visit to Ellen's house—it turns into genuine pity, and then love for Ellen. In my libretto, in act 1, scene 1 Archer overhears Sillerton Jackson and Lawrence Lefferts gossiping about Ellen's shady past in Europe. As in the novel, he leaves their box to join the Wellands in theirs, where he has his first encounter with Ellen. Her effect on him is revealed at the end of scene 2, when in response to Jackson and Lefferts's gossip about Ellen living with her husband's secretary in Europe, he bursts out, "Living together? Well, why not? Who had the right to make her life over if she hadn't? What hypocrisy is it that would bury a woman alive if she refuses to return to a blackguard of a husband?" (These words are derived from the dialogue in chapter 5 of the novel, quoted above; Jackson's "sardonic whistle" and bemused comment, "Well, apparently Count Olenski takes your view; for I never heard of him lifting a finger to get his wife back" are likewise drawn from the book.) This is the first of Archer's many challenges to his society's standards—his love for Ellen and sympathy for her plight makes him realize the hypocrisy that lurks behind these standards, while at the same time his pursuit of Ellen while married to May reveals his own hypocrisy. Such behavior makes all of New York begin to question where

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10–11.

Archer's loyalties lie, and so they begin their ruthless plan to eradicate Ellen from their midst.

To allow for a clear unfolding of the plot and the consequences of Archer's actions, it was imperative that Archer's relation to both May and Ellen be established as early as possible in the opera. While Archer's interactions with the two women in the first two scenes of act 1 provide some information in this regard, I found it necessary to employ a plot device on which to base this evolving love triangle. This was one of my most significant departures from Wharton, though its provenance can be found in the novel: in chapter 15, Archer is in the middle of unpacking a shipment of books from London, when

[s]uddenly, among them, he lit on a small volume of verse which he had ordered because the name had attracted him: *The House of Life*. He took it up, and found himself plunged in an atmosphere unlike any he had ever breathed in books; so warm, so rich, and yet so ineffably tender, that it gave a new and haunting beauty to the most elementary of human passions. All through the night he pursued through those enchanted pages the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska.<sup>29</sup>

Taking Wharton's cue, in act 1, scene 5, I have Archer discover this book in Ellen's house as he waits for her arrival. Ellen then tells Archer that in her "old life" (in Europe), "I read his [i.e., Rossetti's] words/To free my prisoned spirit/From a life of illusions:/Where all the soirées,/ Jewels,/Music/Could not make me forget/The betrayals, falsehoods—/Temptations./There was no life for me." She ends up giving the book to Archer at the end of the scene, partly in gratitude for the sympathy he showed for her when she confessed to her feelings of loneliness living in New York. It is thus by way of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 87. This book of poems was by the English writer Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882).

this small token that Ellen first hints at her feelings for Archer, intuiting his sensitivity to the written word and realms of feeling that he does not encounter among his family and friends. While I certainly have added something of my own here to Wharton's story, I believe it is completely within the compass of Archer's character, and indeed is in harmony with the (unrealistic) aspirations he has for his marriage to May: " 'We'll read *Faust* together ... by the Italian lakes ... ' he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honeymoon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride."<sup>30</sup> Later on, Wharton describes how Archer "delighted in [May's] shy interest in books and ideas that she was beginning to develop under his guidance. (She had advanced far enough to join him in ridiculing the 'Idyls of the King,' but not to feel the beauty of 'Ulysses' and the 'Lotus Eaters.')<sup>31</sup> In act 1, scene 7, as Archer and May stroll through Central Park, she notices *The House of Life*, which he carries with him. When she asks him where he got it, he begins to say, "Madame Olenska," but then tells her "It came with my monthly shipment of books from London" (one of the many lies he tells May in the course of the opera). She then asks him to read one of the poems to her—he selects "The Bridal Birth," which I set as a duet for the two of them. May's interpretation of the poem reveals her inability to understand any literary subject without Archer's guidance, as she says (quoting the poem), " 'When her soul knew at length the Love it nursed.' Isn't that the love we feel for each other?" and then uses it as an argument against Archer's idea of advancing their wedding date: "We needn't to rush to confirm [our love] with nuptial vows. That will all come in good time.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 29.

For we have each other till that day arrives, don't we, Newland?" She then asks Archer to read another poem, and he selects "Love's Testament," set as a solo aria for him. Seeing his withdrawn reaction to the poem, she asks, "Newland, what is it?" He replies, "Nothing, dearest. Only the words remind me ... of how much I love you." Just as Wharton describes Archer's experience of *The House of Life* as a pursuit of "the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska," so too in the opera he comes to associate "Love's Testament" with Ellen. (I will discuss the musical setting of both poems and references to them throughout the opera in the next chapter.) The extent to which Archer has retreated into his world of illusions is made evident in act 2, scene 3: while he sings "Love's Testament," he does not hear May pleading, "The family, Newland./Remember the family./Wouldn't she be happier/Far away, away from us?/So tell me, Newland, that you still.../That I still mean..." Here I have used the poem to express in operatic terms both Archer's complete ignorance of the threatening forces surrounding him, as well as his unrealistic belief that he, as a married man, and Ellen, as a married woman, might somehow have a life together. This too is inspired by Wharton's narration:

[H]e had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which [Ellen] throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgments and his visions. Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent—that was what he was: so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was there.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 159.

“The Bridal Birth,” meanwhile, is heard again in act 2, scene 6 when May recalls how Archer once read poetry to her, and then goes on to quote “The Bridal Birth.” Archer does not take up the cue, however, and after contemplating the idea that May might die and thus set him free, he leaves her alone in the drawing room of their house. May attempts to finish the poem on her own, and then breaks down in tears. May’s words about the poem in this scene are entirely my own invention, but like all references to *The House of Life*, it helps to define Archer’s relationship to both May and Ellen in a way that is, I believe, faithful to the intentions of the novel.

Scene structure and placement of arias also help to more fully define the love triangle. The scenes involving Archer and May, and Archer and Ellen, for example, complement each other by their similar positioning in each act: act 1, scene 5, when Archer first visits Ellen’s house and begins to be drawn towards her, correlates to act 2 scene 6, when he contemplates how many years he will have to endure in his marriage to May. Act 1, scenes 8 and 9 (both taking place at Mrs. Mingott’s house), when Archer hears of Ellen’s divorce case which he subsequently convinces her to drop, correlate to act 2, scenes 8 and 9 (again in one location, at Archer and May’s house), when May tells him that Ellen is going back to Europe, followed by the farewell dinner for Ellen (these events forming the ultimate consequence of Archer’s success in persuading Ellen to not seek a divorce). But perhaps the most striking similarity between two scenes (alluded to in the discussion of the plot, above), can be found in act 1, scene 11 and act 2, scene 8. Both involve a written form of communication, one from May to Ellen, and the other from Ellen to May. In the former case, just after Archer and Ellen confess their love for

each other, May's telegram arrives announcing that both her mother and Archer's have agreed to a wedding date in only a month. In the latter, Ellen tells May in a note she is returning to Europe and that it would be "utterly useless" for any of her friends to persuade her to stay in New York. In both instances, however, the message is essentially the same: Archer can be with only one woman, May, and Ellen understands this fact in both scenes. There is one more structural element in the libretto that serves to define the love triangle: both May and Ellen have an aria in act 2, each of which sums up her relationship with Archer at that point in the story. Ellen's takes place at the end of scene 2, when she realizes that May and her world are really all Archer knows, and May will never surrender the bond she has with her husband. For Archer to break the trust of this bond would be, in Ellen's eyes, equivalent to betrayals she experienced in her life in Europe, as she says, "Newland, if you care for me/Then love me as she loves you/Or you'll make me go back/To all the temptations you know of,/The lies you half-guess." Ellen's aria is answered, so to speak, by May's at the end of scene 4, just as Archer is on his way to pick up Ellen at the train station. Here, the idea of telling lies and all its ramifications, hinted at in Ellen's aria, is more fully realized: May comprehends that Archer is living "A lie by day/A lie by night;" like Ellen she is aware of the other woman, and begs Archer to "surrender/All that you've longed for,/All that you've hoped for,/The vision of all that you've missed." The trio of arias, and thus the love triangle, is made complete with Archer's aria at the end of scene 7, when he anticipates the consummation of his and Ellen's love, echoing May's aria with the words, "all that I've longed for, all that I've hoped for,/The vision of all that I've missed,/Will soon be as close/As her

breath, her touch.” As noted above, after this point the consequent of the act begins, effectively dissolving the triangle, and returning May’s husband to her.

Beyond the entwined situations of Archer, May and Ellen, there is the greater society of New York, represented most prominently by Mrs. Catherine (Manson) Mingott, grandmother to May and Ellen, and matriarch of the Mingott/Welland clan. Her role in the opera has been greatly expanded from the novel in several respects. For one, the opera ball of act 1, scene 2, originally at Julius Beaufort’s house, takes place at her own, where she announces to all of New York Archer and May’s engagement, making them promise to uphold honor and duty to the family. This moment is the de facto wedding for May and Archer, and Mrs. Mingott’s presiding over it solidifies her role as the primary defender of family and tradition. I have set up this moment to anticipate and prepare act 1, scene 8, when Mrs. Mingott confronts Archer about Ellen’s divorce case. In the novel, this moment takes place between Archer and Mr. Letterblair, Archer’s boss at his law firm (this role has been subsumed by Jackson in the opera). Putting Mrs. Mingott in Letterblair’s place, and having her speak his words, reinforces what was made clear in scene 2: that she speaks on behalf of the entire family as well as New York society. She also takes this opportunity to remind Archer of his promise (also from scene 2) to never shirk his duty to the family. Conveniently enough, the old lady has Ellen show up at that very moment so Archer can speak with her—this entire scene is my own invention, allowing for further definition of Mrs. Mingott’s character, and providing the singer who portrays her a true supporting role. Another instance of Mrs. Mingott’s power over Archer can be seen in act 2, scene 1, when she sends him off to Boston with the

suggestion (not an explicit order this time) that he persuade Ellen to accept the Count's offer of money to return to him; this with the warning that Ellen's money is tied up with Julius Beaufort's investments in railroad bonds, which are rumored to be losing value. This foreshadows the events of scene 3, when the financial panic takes hold of New York's investors who in turn blame Beaufort's railroad speculations for their losses. The full ramifications of even suggesting that the family name be associated with such financial impropriety are evident here: when Beaufort begs Mrs. Mingott for monetary assistance and not to "desert me, or the family now," she thunders back at him, "The family! You dare to ask the family to follow you into dishonor! And ask me to persuade them to do so! No! Not a penny for your wild schemes, Beaufort!" Just as she banishes him from her presence, the stress proves too much for her, and she has a stroke. The moment of her collapse is not narrated in the novel, but I have depicted it in my opera to make for a moment of extreme dramatic tension, reminding the audience of Mrs. Mingott's place in this society, and the consequences of betraying its values—consequences that come to bear on both Ellen and Archer when they dare to challenge New York's belief system.

One level down from Mrs. Mingott are the characters of Mrs. Welland (May's mother, and daughter to Mrs. Mingott), Mrs. Archer (Archer's mother), Sillerton Jackson and Lawrence Lefferts. (The Mr. Welland of the novel has been eliminated and Mr. Archer (Newland's father) is deceased.) The pairs of women and men and their voice parts provide a certain symmetry to the cast: a soprano (Mrs. Welland) and a mezzo-soprano (Mrs. Archer) are set against a tenor (Lefferts) and a bass-baritone (Jackson).

The women's roles have been somewhat reduced from their counterparts' in the novel: they reinforce Mrs. Mingott's convictions about family and duty by expressing approval of May and Archer's engagement, distress over Ellen's proposed divorce (Mrs. Archer is the only one to speak on this, though her sentiments reflect Mrs. Welland's), congratulating Archer on his new bride, and giving Ellen an affectionate (if hypocritical) send-off at her farewell dinner party. They are in a sense the most one-dimensional characters in the opera, though I hope this very one-dimensionality makes clear their position in the family's hierarchy, standing as they do in Mrs. Mingott's shadow. Jackson and Lefferts, on the other hand, as they are not a part of the Mingott/Archer clan, have slightly more definition to their characters, and provide a masculine counterbalance to the female characters, with all the attendant freedoms and privileges to which their sex entitles them in this society. As in the novel, they gossip about Ellen's shadowy past in Europe and Beaufort's philandering, and effectively undermine Archer's attempts to defend Ellen's reputation. In so doing, not only do they reveal their tremendous capacity for cynicism and male chauvinism, but they also set traps for Archer into which he falls, revealing more about his feelings for Ellen than he would like. In act 1, scene 10, for example, at the gentlemen's club, Jackson plays upon Archer's jealousy towards Beaufort, insinuating that the latter is out to seduce Ellen. Archer expresses indignation at such a suggestion, and then proceeds to turn down Beaufort's offer to buy into his railroad bond scheme. In the same scene Lefferts suggests that Archer, like his other male friends, will be a less than faithful husband to May: when Archer says he has to be sure May has her lilies-of-the-valley in the morning, Lefferts tells him, "Better make it a

standing order, Archer. She'll never know the difference, and appearances, as I've learned, are all that matter in marriage. I think in time you'll agree with me." Archer can only reply, "Yes, I fear so."

The final circle beyond Mrs. Mingott, her pawns Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Welland, and Lefferts and Jackson are the ladies and gentlemen of New York society, represented by the chorus. I found it necessary to include a chorus to make it clear (as Britten does in *Peter Grimes*) that there is a larger society looming over Archer and Ellen all the time; a presence of which Archer becomes fully aware at Ellen's farewell dinner party, when he realizes that their "silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears"<sup>33</sup> have been following him and Ellen for months. My use of the chorus is perhaps the most significant departure from Wharton in the opera: while in the novel New York society is largely a silent entity, whose thoughts and judgments are conveyed through Wharton's narration, in my opera I have given them an active voice, most importantly in their approval of May and Archer's engagement in act 1 scene 2; their refusal of the invitation to the dinner party to meet Ellen in act 1 scene 3; and their outrage over the Ellen's refusal to leave New York and Archer's complicity in her plan of action in act 2, scene 7. In the last instance especially, I have tried to make clear the magnitude of the threat that Ellen and Archer's incipient relationship poses to their world, as they sing, "We'll tolerate no more/The one who's defied us all/With the one who should have known/Where his duty lies." The chorus, along with Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Archer, Jackson and Lefferts, thus

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 200–201.

make salient what in the novel May silently communicates to Archer when he announces that he is going to Washington “on business”:

“The change will do you good,” she said simply, when he had finished; “and you must be sure to go and see Ellen,” she added, looking him straight in the eyes with her cloudless smile, and speaking in the tone she might have employed in urging him not to neglect some irksome family duty.

It was the only word that passed between them on the subject; but in the code in which they had both been trained it meant: “Of course you understand that I know all that people have been saying about Ellen, and heartily sympathize with my family in their effort to get her to return to her husband. I also know that, for some reason you have not chosen to tell me, you have advised her against this course, which all the older men of the family, as well as our grandmother, agree in approving; and that it is owing to your encouragement that Ellen defies us all, and exposes herself to the kind of criticism of which Mr. Sillerton Jackson probably gave you, this evening, the hint that has made you so irritable.... Hints have indeed not been wanting; but since you appear unwilling to take them from others, I offer you this one myself, in the only form in which well-bred people of our kind can communicate unpleasant things to each other: by letting you understand that I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington, and are perhaps going there expressly for that purpose; and that, since you are sure to see her, I wish you to do so with my full and explicit approval—and to take the opportunity of letting her know what the course of conduct you have encouraged her in is likely to lead to.”<sup>34</sup>

Individual members of the chorus also serve important roles in fostering this air of suspicion and surveillance: in act 1, scene 2, at Mrs. Mingott’s opera ball, they gossip about Ellen being escorted home by Beaufort; in act 1, scene 6, two men confer about Archer’s visit to Ellen’s house; and at the beginning of act 2, scene 3, individual members again emerge, like a Greek chorus, to comment on Ellen and Archer’s actions. Finally, just as Archer and Ellen agree to their one night of passion in act 2, scene 7, solo voices in the chorus are heard saying to Archer, “Newland...do not betray...the family.”

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 161–162.

By way of all these operative devices, the role of New York society is writ large, keeping, I think, very much in the spirit of Wharton's creation.

Julius Beaufort is the wildcard of all the characters in both the novel and the opera; as Wharton writes, he "passes" for an Englishman, but remains something of a mystery to all New York: "The question was: who *was* Beaufort? ... He had come to America ... and had speedily made himself an important position in the world of affairs; but his habits were dissipated, his tongue was bitter, his antecedents were mysterious."<sup>35</sup> One of his "dissipated habits" is his adulterous affairs—New York is quite aware of his philandering, but cannot help but be impressed by his business acumen as a banker and his extravagant house containing a ballroom, which is "felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past."<sup>36</sup> In the opera, I use Beaufort as an object lesson about what happens to someone who dares bring dishonor on his family, as well as a figure representative of all the men's chauvinism as they condone (on one level or another) Beaufort's amorous exploits. In act 1, scene 10, after the men express their admiration for Beaufort's romantic skills, he offers to invest their money in railroad bonds, just as he has done for Ellen, an invitation several of the men take up. This sets up the situation of act 2, scene 3, when Beaufort's investments take a turn for the worse, causing all of New York to blame him for the ensuing financial panic.<sup>37</sup> Concerning Beaufort's financial demise, Wharton writes:

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>37</sup> Wharton based this financial panic on an actual one that happened in 1873, when the firm of Jay Cooke & Co., one of the most trusted financial houses in the United States, attempted to sell \$30 million worth of bonds for the Northern Pacific Railroad. The

No one really liked Beaufort, and it was not wholly unpleasant to think the worst of his private life; but the idea of his having brought financial dishonor on his wife's family was too shocking to be enjoyed even by his enemies. Archer's New York tolerated hypocrisy in private relations; but in business matters it exacted a limpid and impeccable honesty. It was a long time since any well-known banker had failed discredibly; but everyone remembered the social extinction visited on the heads of the firm when the last event of the kind had happened. It would be the same with the Beauforts, in spite of his power and her popularity; not all the leagued strength of the Dallas connection [i.e., Regina Beaufort's relation to Mrs. Mingott as her niece] would save poor Regina if there were any truth in the reports of her husband's unlawful speculations.<sup>38</sup>

This, in effect, becomes a warning for Archer not to bring dishonor on his family by way of an adulterous affair. New York's particular distaste for Ellen is made clear by the fact that she is the one exception to the rule of New York's tolerance of hypocrisy in private relations: she becomes for them a symbol of all corrupting foreign influence, threatening a marriage that has joined together two of New York's most respected families. In this way, Archer's potential betrayal of his family is an even greater trespass on society's strictures than Beaufort's.

The two other minor roles in the opera, Ellen's maid, Nastasia, and Archer's son, Charles, require little comment, other than to mention that Charles represents the new generation of New York, which has more or less rejected the reservedness and discretion of his father's time. As he avers in the final scene of act 2, no one remembers

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market being flooded with so many railroad bonds, however, Cooke was forced to use his own money to back up Northern Pacific; eventually this caused him to suspend payments to his investors. Soon thereafter, the firms of Kenyon & Cox and Fiske & Hatch suspended payment, leading to widespread financial panic (for a full discussion of the panic, see Jerry W. Markham, *A Financial History of the United States*, vol. 1, *From Christopher Columbus to the Robber Barons (1492–1900)* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 279–296).

<sup>38</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 157.

anything anymore about the Beaufort financial scandal, and indeed has any objection to his marrying Annie, the product of Julius Beaufort's second marriage. Wharton imbues the end of her novel with a sense of renewal and continuance as the newer generation takes over where the old one left off—something I have tried to reflect in this scene, as Charles gently teases his father about the value his generation placed on discretion: “[W]hat’s the good of keeping secrets?” Charles asks, and, speaking more truth than he is aware of, “It only makes others want to find them out.” As the fifty-seven-year-old Archer looks back on his life, and observes the new, more tolerant attitudes of his children, even he can admit, “[t]here was good in the new order, too.”<sup>39</sup>

#### The Language of the Libretto

One of the potential pitfalls in adapting a work like *The Age of Innocence* is that since the novel is so much a reflection of its own time (late nineteenth-century America, in this case), employing its language in an opera libretto can give it an air of a “period piece”—something I certainly wished to avoid in my opera. I believed from the time I began work on the libretto that the characters’ emotional situations and feelings are timeless, and speak as much to the audience of the early twenty-first century as they did to the audience of the early twentieth. At the same time, I realized it was essential to let the audience know this was a society that operated by the rules of its own era. As Wharton puts it:

In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs; as when Mrs. Welland, who knew exactly why Archer had pressed her to announce her daughter’s engagement at the Beaufort

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 209.

ball (and had indeed expected him to do no less), yet felt obliged to simulate reluctance, and the air of having had her hand forced ...<sup>40</sup>

This suggested that the libretto operate on two levels: the things actually said, the public side of New York society, and the things unsaid, the private side, where real motives and feelings are revealed. For the former category, it was quite frequently possible to lift entire sections of dialogue from the novel and transfer them directly to the libretto. Examples of this working method are too numerous to list them all here, but I will cite a few of the more interesting ones. Jackson and Lefferts's gossip in act 1, scene 1 is reproduced almost exactly from the chapter 2 of the book (p. 11), as is Archer's conversation with May and Ellen in the Wellands' box soon thereafter (p 12).<sup>41</sup> Even Ellen's reference to "knickerbockers and pantelettes" has been preserved, suggesting as they do a dress code of a different time. Sometimes changes to the novel's dialogue were a matter of some modest subtraction in order to get to the point of a conversation, and allow room for the music (which tends to stretch out time). In act 1, scene 9, for example, when Archer tells Ellen of the scandal she will bring on herself and her family should she pursue the divorce case, I have retained what I felt were the most powerful lines of dialogue, including Archer's admission that all he has just told her is "stupid and narrow and unjust" but still insists that "one can't make over society." (The entire section of dialogue can be found in chapter 12, pp. 69–72). Similarly, the tension-filled exchange between Archer and May at the end of act 2, scene 9, when she tells him she is pregnant, has also been lifted almost without alteration from chapter 33 (pp. 204–206).

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>41</sup> All page numbers refer to the Norton Critical Edition of the *Age of Innocence*.

There are also instances where narration from the novel becomes the basis for public expression. The text for Mrs. Minogott's arioso in act 1, scene 8 ("These Mingotts and Archers"), for instance, was drawn from Wharton's description of the great lady's mansion:

Her visitors were startled and fascinated by the foreignness of this arrangement [of her house], which recalled scenes in French fiction, and architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of. That was how women with lovers lived in the wicked old societies, in apartments with all the rooms on one floor, and all the indecent propinquities that their novels described. It amused Newland Archer . . . to picture her blameless life led in the stage-setting of adultery; but he said to himself, with considerable admiration, that if a lover had been what she wanted, the intrepid woman would have had him too.<sup>42</sup>

Interestingly enough, Mrs. Mingott shares with Archer (and with us) some details of her private life in this public utterance, but she does it with an underlying, and unsaid motive: to put Archer at his ease before coming in for the kill, when she will remind him of his duty to the family to convince Ellen to drop her divorce case.

Instances of the unsaid words of this society can be found in select parts for the chorus and the supporting characters, such as act 1, scene 3, when New York society reacts to Mrs. Mingott's dinner invitation with the exclamations, "That woman! We'll not meet her!" "Unscrupulous Europeans!" "Should stand by her husband!" and the like.

These words are not found in the novel, though they certainly demonstrate New York's intent to "make cruelly clear their determination not to meet the Countess Olenska."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 31. In keeping with the idea of evoking a particular era, the formula for the invitation to Mrs. Mingott's dinner has been taken from a contemporary source. See M. E. W. Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1884), 58.

Similarly, in act 2, scene 7, Mrs. Archer, Mrs. Welland, Jackson and Lefferts express their deepest misgivings about Archer's lack of loyalty to the family and Ellen's stubborn refusal to return to her husband. The words here are in part drawn from the novel, beginning with this exchange between Mrs. Archer and Mrs. van der Luyden (a character eliminated in the opera) in chapter 32:

“Imprudent people are often kind,” said Mrs. Archer, as if the fact were scarcely an extenuation; and Mrs. van der Luyden murmured: “If only she had consulted someone—”

“Ah, that she never did!” Mrs. Archer rejoined.<sup>44</sup>

Mrs. Archer's final words become a refrain for the soloists, and later for the soloists with the chorus, as they present, for the first time in the opera, a united front in their condemnation of Archer and Ellen—here, the calm surface of society, “where the real thing was never said or done or even thought” is all but ruptured. I believe it is the abstract quality of the scene, with no particular locale, that keeps these words in the realm of the unsaid—New York society certainly thinks these things, but they would never actually say them, even to each other. This, I believe is Wharton's real meaning when she says that “the real thing was never ... even thought.”

Soliloquies are another important element of the undercurrent of thought, though of course the character is saying these thoughts to out loud to him- or herself—it's a happy coincidence that in the theater, we are allowed to hear these thoughts. I draw on Wharton's narration for the text of the soliloquies, as already noted in Archer's aria “From childhood ever on” in act 1, scene 10. Not only does this half-soliloquy (the men at the club hear it, too) give us a look into Archer's mind, but it also describes

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 191.

the false innocence assumed by young women in this society. Similarly, the arias for Ellen, May and Archer in act 2 (noted above) are derived from Wharton's narration. The central message of Ellen's aria, "How can I love him," from scene 2, has its provenance in this passage from chapter 24, which reveals the circumstances that will force Ellen to go back to Europe:

What her answer [to Archer] really said was: "If you lift a finger you'll drive me back: back to all the abominations you know of, and all the temptations you half guess." He understood it as clearly as if she had uttered the words, and the thought kept him anchored to his side of the table in a kind of moved and sacred submission.<sup>45</sup>

In this case, I have Ellen sing her thoughts as an apostrophe to Archer:

Newland, if you care for me,  
Then love me as she loves you,  
Or you'll make me go back  
To all the temptations you know of,  
The lies you half-guess,  
Where innocence drowns  
In bitterest tears.

The words of May's aria from scene 4, "A lie by day," meanwhile, are derived from a different context, in which Archer recalls his youthful affair with a married woman, and the deceit she employed to keep her husband in the dark:

[H]e had watched Mrs. Thorley Rushworth play [this part] toward a fond and unperceiving husband: a smiling, bantering, humouring, watchful and incessant lie. A lie by day, a lie by night, a lie in every touch and every look; a lie in every caress and every quarrel; a lie in every word and in every silence.<sup>46</sup>

I transfer these thoughts to May's mind, just after she sends Archer on his way to pick up

Ellen at the train station:

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 183.

Newland ...  
I know it hurts you half as much to tell an untruth,  
Than to see me pretend I do not see it.  
What have I done  
That makes you want to part from me  
When you know that once  
I would have let you go free...?

A lie by day,  
A lie by night,  
A lie in every touch,  
In every look.  
A lie in every kiss,  
In every caress...  
A lie in every word  
Of every parting.

This of course makes obvious what is only implied in the novel: that May knows Archer is lying to him, the situation being especially bitter for her since she once offered him his freedom, which he unequivocally refused. But Wharton also makes clear that May sincerely loves Archer, and so we can only sympathize with her struggle to hold onto her husband. I therefore felt compelled to write this aria for May, so that the audience might fully understand her situation, and pity her. May stands in stark contrast to the person who in many ways is least deserving of our pity: Archer himself. Throughout the opera he refuses to grow up, and we see him as a mature man only in the last scene, when he discovers that May knew of his love for Ellen all along. Prior to this, at the end of act 2, scene 7, we witness his greatest flight of fancy in the aria, “Yes, she’ll come.” The words here are again derived from the novel’s narration, just after Ellen agrees to “come once” to him:

She had disengaged her wrist; but for a moment they continued to hold each other’s eyes, and he saw that her face, which had grown very pale,

was flooded with a deep inner radiance. His heart beat with awe: he felt that he had never before beheld love visible.<sup>47</sup>

In Archer's aria, this becomes:

Yes, she'll come.  
She'll try to fight her fate,  
As I tried to fight mine,  
And find that, after all,  
She must surrender all,  
And she'll not bear that we part again.  
All I've dreamed is just beyond tomorrow...  
Then will I hold love visible, as never before:  
A radiance that shines from those eyes into my own  
And reflected, blinds all, save love  
Only love, that no one now dare us deny.

Finally, a combination of both the said and unsaid occurs in act 2, scene 9, during the dinner party for Ellen. The farewell speeches given by Jackson, Mrs. Archer, Mrs.

Welland, Archer and Ellen are all my own invention—in the cases of the first three, they say exactly the opposite of what they actually feel, and in so doing reflect Wharton's description of the elaborate, silent conspiracy taking place that evening:

In the drawing-room, where [the men] presently joined the ladies, [Archer] met May's triumphant eyes, and read in them the conviction that everything had "gone off" beautifully. She rose from Madame Olenska's side, and immediately Mrs. van der Luyden beckoned the latter to a seat on the gilt sofa where she throned. Mrs. Selfridge Merry bore across the room to join them, and it became clear to Archer that here also a conspiracy of rehabilitation and obliteration was going on. The silent organization which held his little world together was determined to put itself on record as never for a moment having questioned the propriety of Madame Olenska's conduct, or the completeness of Archer's domestic felicity. All these amiable and inexorable persons were resolutely engaged in pretending to each other that they had never heard of, suspected, or even conceived possible, the least hint to the contrary; and from this tissue of elaborate mutual dissimulation Archer once more disengaged the fact that New York believed him to be Madame Olenska's lover. He caught the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 188.

glitter of victory in his wife's eyes, and for the first time understood that she shared the belief. The discovery roused a laughter of inner devils that reverberated through all his efforts to discuss the Martha Washington ball with Mrs. Reggie Chivers and little Mrs. Newland; and so the evening swept on, running and running like a senseless river that did not know how to stop.<sup>48</sup>

Caught in such a trap, Archer and Ellen, in their farewells, are forced to speak both publicly and privately at the same time: Ellen says farewell not only to all of New York, but also to Archer, while Archer not only says farewell on behalf of May and the family, while also revealing his deepest feelings for the Countess:

Before Countess Olenska came to our country,  
I never thought of a world beyond New York.  
All I desired, all that I hoped for,  
I thought could be found in our cloistered city.  
But it was Ellen who showed me, showed all of us,  
How small our vision really was:  
For one can be a stranger among friends;  
A foreigner in one's native land.  
And so we open our hearts to those  
Who wish for home, and love.  
Ellen, know that you will always have a home here,  
And more love than a heart can hold—  
Even to the end of our days,  
When this age will be no more,  
And memory of love, only love, will remain.

By this layering of meanings in the libretto, balancing the said with the unsaid, I hope to have achieved a certain dramatic tension, reinforcing the ever-intensifying silent conflict taking place amongst Archer, Ellen, and all of New York society. One of New York's greatest fears is that the unsaid will become said—that the “unpleasant” will actually have to be contemplated (I will speak more on the theme of the “unpleasant” in the discussion of the opera's music, below). Ellen becomes the ultimate unpleasantness in

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 203.

everyone's life (save Archer's) and rather than admit publicly to the fact, they make certain that their private wish—to make her leave New York once and for all—becomes a reality.

I would like to finish my discussion of the libretto's language by making some mention about the meter and cadence of the words themselves. The dialogue, as noted above, has in many instances been transferred with little alteration from the novel into the libretto. While I was happy to be able to use Wharton's actual words in the libretto, it was important, of course, to prevent dialogue between the characters from overtaking the opera, reducing the action to people singing at one another. I therefore took care to allow for moments of song (a number of which have already been cited) whose words, while not verse in a strict sense, certainly do have implications of stress and meter. The sense of meter was sometimes suggested by a fragment of Wharton's prose, as in May's aria, "A *lie* by day,/A *lie* by night" (act 2 scene 4, mm. mm. 69–71),<sup>49</sup> or in Mrs. Mingott's description of Ellen's eccentric upbringing: "Reading French *authors*,/Drawing from the *model*,/Playing the piano in *quintets*/With *professional musicians*!" (act 1, scene 8, mm. 60–62). Often, however, I found it necessary to elaborate Wharton's prose by adding my own words to these moments of song, giving the singer an opportunity to emote. In chapter 18 of the novel, for instance, after Ellen and Archer have confessed their love, Ellen tells him, "I shan't be lonely now. I *was* lonely; I *was* afraid. But the emptiness and

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<sup>49</sup> I provide the scene and measure numbers so that, in conjunction with the discussion of syllabic stresses in the setting of the text (below), they may be examined in their musical context.

the darkness are gone; when I turn back into myself now I'm like a child going at night into a room where there's always a light."<sup>50</sup> In act 1, scene 8, this has been expanded to:

I was lonely; I was afraid.  
But I shan't be now.  
To have found you, to love you,  
Brings morn to these eyes  
That had known only night.  
Only with you is the darkness gone,  
And when I turn back into myself,  
I'm like a child going into a room  
Where there's always light.  
(Act 1, scene 11, mm. 151–161)

The stresses on “morn,” “eyes,” “known” and “night,” are self-evident, as is the rhyme between “night” and “light.” The use of rhyme is deliberately limited throughout the libretto, thus drawing more attention to it when it does occur, as in Mrs. Mingott’s anthem in act 1, scene 2, which ends with the almost-perfect rhyme, “Never let me see the day/When duty will not be obeyed” (mm. 101–103)—a phrase that comes back with its strongest force when she uses it against Archer in scene 8. Just as this rhyme calls our attention to the ideas duty and family as a major theme of the opera, the refrain of Beaufort’s song in act 1, scene 10 points up the hypocrisy and chauvinism of the men of New York, as he sings, “A man’s fidelity’s only as good/As the lies he’s willing to tell/To hallow that innocence/That pure womanhood/That feminine virtue we all love so well” (mm. 22–27). The aria with the greatest number of rhymes occurs in the middle of this scene—Archer’s soliloquy “From childhood ever on.” The sprightliness of Beaufort’s song is here juxtaposed with Archer’s poetic introspection:

From childhood ever on, they’re kept as little girls:

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 107.

Never to question a mother's affection,  
A father's protection, a husband's fidelity—  
A factitious purity of female invention.  
We've been led to believe what we want is this:  
An image of unsullied snow.  
Till the day comes when we take our right  
In smashing the illusion,  
The innocence that crumbles  
When touched for a moment  
By the wing-tip of reality.  
I didn't suspect she'd know...  
(mm. 107–132)

Another reflection on the image of the innocent female is seen in Archer's soliloquy in act 2, scene 1. As he gazes upon his new wife, he reflects on the life he dreamed for the both of them, and the reality he eventually faced:

I saw no reason she should not be as free as I:  
A woman of the world,  
Bound to no convention,  
My equal in every way.  
But when we joined hands that morning,  
Within that vision of eternal youth,  
I gazed into the face of a stranger...  
I could then see  
There was no sense in freeing someone  
Who had not the dimmest notion  
She was not free.  
(mm. 82–94)

The rhyme of "see" and "free" underlines the significance of Archer's realization that May is indeed still the "simple girl of yesterday," and will never be anything more than that. While freely metered verse is most frequently found in arias for Archer, Ellen and May (often lyrical in style), it is also used in ensembles to build up dramatic and musical tension. In act 2, scene 7, for example, Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Welland have the rapid-fire exchange, "Hints have not been *wanting*..." / "Why does he keep *silent*?" / "Ellen still

defies us!” ending with the refrain, “Ah, that she always did!” (mm. 48–51). In act 1, scene 8, Mrs. Archer’s distress over Ellen’s actions is also expressed in shorter lines with pronounced stresses: “Oh, how regrettable, *unfortunate!*/She doesn’t *understand*/What she’s doing to *herself*,/To *Newland*, to *May*,/To the *family!*” (mm. 4–11). I have thus aimed in writing the libretto to craft a language with an inherent sense of rhythm, meter and sometimes rhyme; in other words, one suitable for musical treatment. As I’ve hoped to make clear, Wharton’s words contain much music in them, and in this way she provides both a story and language ripe for operatic treatment. It is at this point I would like to discuss the music of *The Age of Innocence*—the one element that gives opera its ultimate meaning and justification, and in the case of this particular opera, breathes life into the characters of Archer, Ellen and May, making possible our identification with their situations.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MUSIC

Britten has a cogent statement about his reasons for writing an opera—sentiments that reflect my love for the medium, as well as my approach to composing the music for *The Age of Innocence*:

How and why is an opera written? ... I think it is the combination of the human being, in his or her daily life, with music that can point up the events in people's lives, and their emotions, in a most marvelous way. I think also that when you go to the theater you don't want—at least I don't want—to see just a little touch of people's everyday lives. I want to see something heightened; I want to see something stylized. And that is why I believe the operatic form, like the poetic drama, is so much more illuminating than, for instance, just a straight drawing-room comedy. I like the idea of the stylistic vision of people's lives.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, it was only when I began to set my libretto to music that the characters' emotions and actions took on this heightened, stylized aspect: they came alive through the music, and their places in the narrative structure were thrown into greater relief. The role of music in any opera is, of course, a large subject to tackle, but as with my discussion of the libretto, I have divided this subject into three areas, each of which bears its own relation to Britten's ideas of heightened expression and stylization: the system of motives and musical processes that define the relationships between the characters and delineate the realms of the said and unsaid in New York society; the orchestra's role in the drama; and finally the process of setting words to music, providing definition to the text's sense of rhyme and meter. Trying to keep these areas separate is, of course, something of a futile effort, as their interdependence is essential to effective expression in opera; but

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<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Britten, "No Ivory Tower," *Opera News* 33, no. 23 (1969): 8.

seeing how each area works on its own will, I think, point up its special relation to the libretto and how it brings Wharton's story to life onstage.

#### Motives and Musical Processes

As alluded to above, one of the central issues I faced in adapting *The Age of Innocence* for the stage was how to make characters who are essentially reserved in their speech sing their thoughts and feelings—characters who, as Wharton puts it, live in a world “where the real thing was never said or done or even thought.”<sup>52</sup> Of course, in writing the libretto, I have had the characters speak their thoughts in the words they utter, thoughts that include New York society's abhorrence of Ellen; Ellen's realization that she and Archer must keep apart; May's sorrow over Archer's infidelity; and Archer's desire to run away with Ellen. I think, however, that these utterances, representing the characters' thoughts about the “real thing,” can be justified by (and only by) their context in the music. That is, by expressing themselves musically, the characters do not break their society's code of silence—the uneasy, tension-filled silence that gives the story much of its dramatic power. To achieve this effect, I have employed a system of musical codes that delineates the characters and underscores moments of intense emotion. Though the idea of codes is hardly original to this opera, I do feel that a compositional habit from my other works has also surfaced in *The Age of Innocence* that perhaps gives a touch of originality to my use of these codes: the idea of a certain harmony or sonority with a problematic quality, requiring a working-through process for its resolution. If any one character represents the “problem” of *The Age of Innocence*, it is Ellen, whose presence

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<sup>52</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 29.

engenders feelings of trepidation on the part of May and Archer’s families, and ardent desire on Archer’s part. The sonority that comes to represent Ellen (hereafter known as the “Ellen” chord) a combination of F minor and A minor chords, is first heard in the prelude to act 1 (the high B in the oboe, sustained from the previous measure, not technically part of the chord, is omitted here):

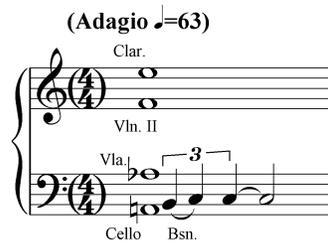


Figure 1. Ellen chord (act 1, Prelude, m. 3).

This chord appears in many contexts throughout the opera, referring not only to Ellen, but also to the unfulfilled desire she and Archer have for each other.<sup>53</sup> Embedded in the sonority above is a rising triplet figure, which represents New York society and its constant threat to Ellen and Archer’s love—its presence here in the chord makes the threat to them very real indeed. The motive is then heard in the horn, flute and bassoon, and for a moment overtakes the texture of the music:

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<sup>53</sup> An echo of the chord from *Tristan und Isolde* and the tragic quality of the two title characters’ love is also evident here.

(Adagio  $\text{♩} = 63$ )

(Strings sus.)

Flt. 3

Hn. 3

Bsn. 3

Figure 2. “Society” motive (act 1, Prelude, mm. 5–6).

The prelude thus presents the two opposing forces of the opera, leading into the first scene in which Jackson and Lefferts gossip about Ellen’s life in Europe. Many such exchanges of rumor about the Countess take place in the opera, even if such gossip is never admitted to by New York society, who insist on maintaining a front of social grace and politesse at all costs. The upholding of this façade is evident in the music of the waltz played at Mrs. Mingott’s opera ball in scene 2. The public face of New York is represented here, though darker undertones also lurk with the society motive embedded in the melody:

**Moderato ma con spirito**  $\text{♩} = 84$

Society motive

Clars., Vlns.

Hns., Vlas.

Cellos, Dbl. basses

Figure 3. Act 1, scene 2, Waltz, mm. 1–4.

An air of deception is also detectable in the meter: while it might be expected that the waltz is beaten in a fast three (or even one), with the downbeat on each accented note, in fact six beats of the “expected” meter fit into three beats of the actual meter—a hemiola effect that underscores the precariousness of this society’s façade, and how little is needed to unsettle this composed exterior. Indeed, the stability of E major in this scene is supplanted by the atonality of scene 3, revealing the violence of the New York’s private thoughts, and leading to no tonal resolution. This scene is reminiscent of Aschenbach’s monologue at the beginning of *Death in Venice* with its “image of a beating, throbbing mind leading nowhere, achieving nothing,” whose vocal line “compounds the tonal ambiguity of the instrumental texture.”<sup>54</sup> Just as the absence of resolution in Aschenbach’s music leaves his mind open to the idea of travelling to Venice, leading to his infatuation with the boy Tadzio; in my opera, the lack of tonal resolution sets the stage for New York’s plot to exile Ellen from New York—what they regard as a resolution of the “problem” of Ellen. Indeed, their affirmation at the end of this atonal passage, “We’ll not meet that woman!” (mm. 39–40) is echoed in act 2, scene 7, mm. 71–77: whole-tone harmonies obscure any sense of tonality, while the climatic exclamation, “That she (he) never did!” again leads to no tonal resolution, but does bring the story ever closer to Ellen’s banishment from New York. Here, I again owe a debt to Britten and his use of the chorus in act 3 of *Peter Grimes*, where the Borough’s denunciation of Peter builds up to the climactic cries of his name, a process I imitate in my opera with the

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<sup>54</sup> John Evans, “Twelve-Note Structures and Tonal Polarity” in *Benjamin Britten: Death In Venice*, comp. Donald Mitchell, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 100.

chorus's final exclamation. But I owe something else to Britten by including Mrs.

Welland, Mrs. Archer, Lefferts and Jackson in the chorus' condemnation of Archer and

Ellen. In his study of *Peter Grimes*, Eric Walter White notes that

[a]lthough the majority of the inhabitants of the Borough are prejudiced bigots, they nevertheless remain closely defined individuals who are absorbed into the general community only when their finer feelings are submerged by the herd instinct—as on the occasion of the man-hunt [in act 3]. The changes of focus whereby Balstrode, Boles, the Rector, Swallow, Keene, Hobson, Mrs. Sedley, Auntie and her two nieces sometimes appear as individuals ... and sometimes as members of the general chorus, are deliberately designed by [Montagu] Slater [the opera's librettist] and Britten as a means of obtaining a degree of characterization in depth.<sup>55</sup>

I too have allowed any sense of loyalty or decency in Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Archer,

Lefferts and Jackson to be subsumed by the herd instinct, even as their solo lines in mm.

66–76 reveal their individual motivations for denouncing Archer and Ellen. The united

front presented by New York society, just like the Borough's front, represents a force

with the power to destroy whomever it chooses; one which the individual has no hope of

overcoming. Ellen realizes this fact before Archer does, and so makes the decision to

return to Europe, rather than, as she puts it, “stay here and lie to those who have been

good to me.”<sup>56</sup> Ellen's nobility and generosity of spirit are impressive considering how

much she has come to be regarded as an outcast by her friends and family, who finally

wish nothing more than to be permanently rid of her.

One of the underlying reasons for New York's rejection of Ellen is its morbid

fear of the “unpleasant”—to our ears, a word connoting something mildly distasteful, but

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<sup>55</sup> Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 137.

<sup>56</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 187.

to this society a term representing something to be avoided at all costs. Wharton makes this idea quite clear at several points in the novel: when May tells Archer that Ellen decided not to come to the opera ball, thus saving all concerned a great deal of embarrassment, he reflects that “[n]othing about his betrothed pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the ‘unpleasant’ in which they had both been brought up.”<sup>57</sup> Later on, he remembers “Mrs. Welland’s request to be spared whatever was ‘unpleasant’ in [Ellen’s] history, and he winced at the thought that it was perhaps this attitude of mind which kept the New York air so pure.”<sup>58</sup> Finally, when Archer is prevailed upon to dissuade Ellen from divorcing her husband, he at first agrees with Mr. Letterblair (his boss at his law firm) on the matter, but hearing it “put into words by this selfish, well-fed and supremely indifferent old man it suddenly became the Pharisaic voice of a society wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant.”<sup>59</sup> I translate the idea of the “unpleasant” into another motive, whose notes (A-natural, A-flat, C and E) are derived from the Ellen chord (see Figure 1):



Figure 4. “Unpleasant” motive.

The motive is heard, of course, with the mention of the word “unpleasant,” as in act 1, scene 5, m. 123 in the piccolo, just before Ellen sings, “As long as they hear nothing unpleasant” (the A-flat here spelled as a G-sharp). The motive is heard again in act 1,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 60–61.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 62.

scene 8, mm. 188–189, in the harp, when Mrs. Mingott tells Archer that Ellen’s divorce case “might make for some unpleasant talk.” When Archer dutifully follows her orders in the next scene, the motive literally stops him in mid-sentence at m. 21, when he warns Ellen that “if your husband fights the case—he could say things that might be unpleasant.” The motive is then exchanged between the first and second violins in mm. 34 (third beat)–35 (first two beats, with the notes rearranged), accompanying Archer’s embarrassed explanation of how society’s opinion almost invariably goes against the woman in such cases. Perhaps the most striking use of the motive can be found in act 2, scene 8, when May reveals to Archer that Ellen is going back to Europe: it is heard three times in mm. 53–55, first in the oboe, then in the clarinet, and finally in the bassoon. The pitches here are slightly altered from the original form, but the contour and rhythm remain the same, all serving as a reminder that the unpleasantness of Ellen’s presence in New York is about to be exorcised forever.

Mrs. Mingott, whose influence on Archer I mentioned in the discussion of the libretto, also exerts a musical force on him by way of her refrain, “Never let me see the day/When duty will not be obeyed:

(♩=60)  
MRS. MINGOTT *f pesante*

*dim.* *p*

Nev-er let me see the day when du-ty will not be o-beyed.

Flt. Ob., Vln. II  
Clars. I Clars. I Vln. I  
*f pesante*

Hrn. Vlas.  
Bass tmbn. Winds + Strings  
*dim.*

Cellos, Dbl. basses

Figure 5. Act 1, scene 2, mm. 101–103.

Not only does this phrase return in scene 8, mm. 207–209, when she forces Archer’s hand in the matter of Ellen’s divorce, but the melody accompanies Archer’s words in the next scene, mm. 51–56, when he tells Ellen, “I know it’s all stupid, and narrow, and unjust. But one can’t make over society,” thus revealing his true reasons for saying what he does, and perhaps also his own disgust for his words. The melody indeed becomes a part of Archer’s consciousness as an “unsaid” element in the opera, foreshadowing May’s news in act 1, scene 11 that their wedding date has been advanced (mm. 169–171, in the English horn); accompanying Mrs. Mingott’s words in act 2, scene 1, “Marriage is marriage, and Ellen is still a wife” (mm. 162–163, again in the English horn); and, with perhaps the most bitter affect, serving as a prelude to Ellen’s news in act 2, scene 8 that she is returning to Europe (m. 64, in the oboe). The motive is also transformed into a melody that suggests time dragging on endlessly, as Archer contemplates his years of marriage to May:

(Molto lento  $\text{♩}=42$ )

Ob.  
*p espr.*  
Bsn.  
Hp.

Figure 6. Act 2, scene 6, mm. 17–19.

The prominence of D in the original motive is also apparent here, as is the descent of a sixth: from the B of “Never” to the D of “duty,” (cf. Figure 5) and D to F-sharp here, both of which are followed by an upward turn in the melody. This dirge-like music will come back to mock Archer in act 2, scene 9, mm. 176–177, when May reveals she is pregnant.

Though the musical realms of the said and unsaid are critical to defining the roles of Mrs. Mingott and New York society, their true significance is seen in their relation to the love triangle of Archer, Ellen and May. Here the music is devoted almost entirely to unsaid thoughts and feelings, as Archer attempts to take hold of the freedom May once offered him, and May tacitly acknowledges his desire to be with Ellen. A structure of tonal relationships governs the interactions of the three characters; specifically, the keys of F major, D minor and D major. F major is May’s realm, a key first encountered at m. 65 in act 1, scene 1. Here too we first hear the motive associated with May:

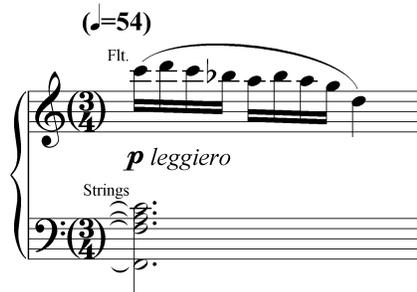


Figure 7. May's motive (act 1, scene 1, m. 65).

This leads into Archer and May's first mild disagreement over the subject of their upcoming wedding. Archer impetuously proposes that they announce their engagement that evening at Mrs. Mingott's ball—in so doing, he attempts to move out of the key of F major, ending on a tonally ambiguous chord on the last beat of m. 72—a combination of the notes A, E-flat and D-flat. May, however, gently draws him back into her key in mm. 74–77, thus establishing her quiet authority in their relationship, as well as her steadfast refusal to go beyond society's accepted norms concerning marriage. A similar incident occurs in act 1, scene 7, which begins and ends in May's key of F major. When Archer questions the reason for their long betrothal, May tells him that other young couples of their acquaintance have also had lengthy engagements, and that this is “only what Mamma and Granny expect.” Archer attempts to move the conversation from F into D-flat major at m. 44 with the question, “But why should we be all like the others?” only to be again frustrated by May's gentle remonstrance, “Oh Newland, let's not argue. Not now, a week after our engagement,” leading back to the realm of F major by m. 49. The two other important keys of the love triangle, D minor and D major, are introduced later in this scene, with the settings of the two Rossetti poems, “The Bridal Birth” and “Love's Testament.” “The Bridal Birth” is preceded by one of Archer's many lies to May: when

she asks where he found the book of Rossetti poems, he begins to say, “Madame Olenska,” only to catch himself and be interrupted by a simple triplet figure in the harp, the “lie” motive:

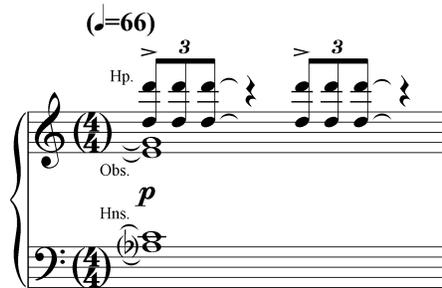


Figure 8. “Lie” motive (act 1, scene 7, m. 59).

He then quickly explains that the book “came with my monthly shipment of books from London.” The setting of “The Bridal Birth” that follows is cast as a duet for the two of them whose F major tonality is almost ruptured by the interference of the Ellen chord at m. 90. It is with this sonority ringing in his head, and his fear of the temptation it represents, that Archer again challenges the idea of a long engagement with the words, “Why should we dream away another year?”—but May only asks that he read another poem. The moment is a fateful one, for Archer only partially concedes to May’s wish, moving back not to F major, but rather to its relative minor, D, for the setting of “Love’s Testament.” As in “The Bridal Birth,” approximately halfway through the aria, at m. 144, the “Ellen” chord reappears:

(♩=ca. 60) rall. . . . .  
 ARCHER *p*  
 “I am thine, thou art one with me!”  
 Hp. *p*  
 Ob. *pp*  
 3  
 3  
 Strings sus. — Ellen chord —

Figure 9. Act 1, scene 7, mm. 143–144.

As in “The Bridal Birth,” at m. 90, a C-sharp sounds, here replacing the C-natural of the Ellen chord, coinciding with the words “one with me.” The G/C-sharp tritone to which these words are set comes to represent the unfulfilled aspect of Archer and Ellen’s love: invert a tritone, and, unlike any other interval, the two notes are still the same distance apart, reflecting the unbridgeable divide between the two characters. The contraction of this interval by a half step on both ends, however, results in a major third built on D: this is the tonality (D major) towards which Archer’s desire, and the entire opera, moves, though he is not to achieve this goal until the very end of act 2. Thus, in this setting of “Love’s Testament,” a resolution to D major is denied at the last minute in m. 158, leading only to another of Archer’s lies: May, bewildered by his withdrawn reaction to the poem, asks him, “Newland, what is it?” He replies, “Nothing, dearest ... only the words remind me ... of how much I love you”—here, the Ellen chord intervenes in the strings, after “me” (m. 162) followed by the lie motive in the harp (mm. 163–164).

The setting of the two Rossetti poems, the Ellen chord, May’s motive and the lie motive recur at crucial points in the opera, heightening the tensions of the love

triangle, and leading to its eventual rupture. In the final scene of act 1, May appears as an image in Archer's memory, as he recounts to Ellen the conversation he and May had in Florida. The Ellen chord first appears after May's question, "Is there somebody else—between you and me?" on the last beat of m. 38. May's motive (in the flute, then the harp) is then superimposed on the orchestra's rendition of "Love's Testament" in mm. 76–78, as she protests, "I can't have my happiness made out of a wrong to someone else." The Ellen chord then recurs at m. 86, against which May sings, "Newland, don't give her up because of me!" It is important here to note that this is Archer's recollection of May's words: she does not guess that the "someone else" is Ellen, for as Archer says moments later, "May guessed the truth. There is another woman. But not the one she thinks." The Ellen chord and the melody of "Love's Testament," noted above, are both products of Archer's emotions, musical ideas which filter through his present state of mind as he remembers his conversation with May. His and Ellen's confession of their love at long last brings these unsaid feelings into the realm of the said: their kiss is accompanied by a quote from "Love's Testament" in mm. 117–119, with the fateful G/C-sharp tritone in the oboe. As Ellen recounts all the "good things" that Archer has done for her, she moves towards the key of D major, finally reaching it at the words, "To have found you,/To love you,/Brings morn to these eyes that had known only night." Her chord, however, resurfaces at m. 164 when she sings, "Don't you see I can't love you unless I give you up?" This is inevitably followed by F major and May's motive in mm. 175–179, with her news that the wedding will take place in only a month. The last

attempt at a D-major resolution is frustrated in the final measures of the scene, as Ellen tells Archer that hers is still a life “as long as it’s part of yours.”

“Love’s Testament” makes its next appearance in act 2, scene 3, mm. 17–32, where we find Archer drifting further and further into his fantasy world with its visions of Ellen—May’s countermelody here, with its prominent leaps, does not have the force sufficient to jar him out of the stepwise motion of his melody, and even after the episode of the financial panic, he returns to his dreams, finally breaking off to tell May that he must go to Washington “on business.” As he unnecessarily elaborates his story, the orchestral texture becomes saturated with the lie motive in mm. 81–88, ending with May brightly telling him that while in Washington, “you must be sure to go see Ellen.” Unable to reach Archer through “Love’s Testament,” May attempts to revive memories of their courtship by mentioning “The Bridal Birth” in scene 6, mm. 26–30. Archer does not take up her cue, however, and instead leaves May to finish the song at the end of the scene—she tries and fails to do so, breaking down in tears. This scene presents Archer at possibly his very worst, as he begins to fantasize about May suddenly dying, thus setting him free. Wharton writes: “The sensation of standing there, in that warm familiar room, and looking at her, and wishing her dead, was so strange, so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity did not immediately strike him. He simply felt that chance had given him a new possibility to which his sick soul might cling.”<sup>60</sup> At this point in the scene (m. 38) a chord is sounded in the orchestra that reflects the Archer’s “sick soul”—the A-

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 178.

natural, A-flat, C and E here are borrowed from the Ellen chord, but they are subsumed in a greater sonority whose eeriness suggests a realm of moral corruption:

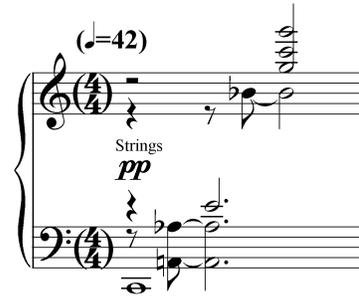


Figure 10. “Corruption” chord (act 2, scene 6, m. 38).

This is a realm of which Ellen warned him in the previous scene, when, in response to Archer’s disgusted comment that he is “beyond” caring about betraying his family in mm. 60–62, with the corruption chord in the strings, Ellen sings, “No, you’re not. You’ve never been beyond. I have—and I know what it looks like there.” Like Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, Archer is faced with a choice that will define the rest of his life—his obsession with Ellen has, for a moment at least, led him to entertain the idea of living in moral chaos, where not only the tenets of his society are upended, but also the very idea of decency in human relationships, in that he wishes his wife dead so he might gain the freedom she once offered him. The influence of Britten is again evident here: in act 2, scene 13 of *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach struggles with a life-defining choice in his dream, where,

[o]ut of the blurred string scales of Aschenbach’s E major the Voice of Dionysus emerges, poised on Tazio’s A major. The voice of Apollo also attempts this assertion of Tazio’s A, but is undermined by an F major/minor juxtaposition in bell and woodwind flourishes. Soon Apollo’s vocal line, too, asserts F in place of A. Meanwhile Dionysus has exploited

the major/minor ambivalence now present in Tadzio's A since the end of Act I.<sup>61</sup>

A parallel can be drawn between the use of the A-natural and A-flat of Ellen's chord in the corruption chord, and Dionysus's usurping of Tadzio's A (in effect corrupting it) in his urging Aschenbach to "receive the stranger god."<sup>62</sup>

Both men, despite their awareness of the moral corruption they face, become convinced they cannot live without their respective objects of desire. The moment of true moral choice for Archer occurs at the end of act 2, scene 7, when he accosts Ellen on the street, and all but insists that they give into their desire, ending with the plea, "Come away with me" (mm. 106–107). These words replace "Thou art one with me" in "Love's Testament," again set to the fateful G/C-sharp tritone, accompanied by the Ellen chord. Not only does this moment foretell the doom of their plan to consummate their love, but so does the ending of Archer's aria, "Yes, she'll come," whose resolution to D major on the words "age of innocence" (mm. 146–147) is denied in two ways: the absence of the tonic D (save for the passing D on the "no" of "innocence") and the sounding of the lie motive on the dissonant G-sharp. But even after Archer's hopes are dashed when he hears the news of Ellen's imminent departure for Europe, he still believes it possible for him and Ellen to be together: at the end of scene 8, when May asks him, "You'll stay with me here, won't you, Newland?" he responds, "Yes, dear. I'll stay" as the lie motive is heard

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<sup>61</sup> Evans, 107.

<sup>62</sup> There is another striking similarity here between Archer and Aschenbach: in his desperate desire to have Tadzio, Aschenbach laments in act 2, scene 12, "What if all were dead, and only we two left alive?" He says this after his failure to warn Tadzio's family about the plague in Venice—an act whose self-centeredness is comparable to Archer's wish for May's death.

in the oboe in m. 109. May's ultimate triumph over Ellen takes place in scene 9, when, to the accompaniment of "The Bridal Birth" in the key of F major (mm. 168–172), she tells Archer she is pregnant. The Ellen chord makes its final appearance in this scene at m. 190, when May says she was right when she told Ellen a week earlier that she was pregnant. The chord resolves to bleak open fourths and fifths on D and A—reminiscent of the opening of "Love's Testament"—before a modulation to G minor and then back to F major for the resumption of "The Bridal Birth" at m. 207. With the Ellen chord never to be heard again while May is alive, the ensuing orchestral interlude becomes a paean to May, finishing her rendition of "The Bridal Birth" in scene 6.

By the time the interlude ends, twenty-five years have gone by, and, as we learn from Archer's son Charles in scene 10, May has since died. With the newfound knowledge that May had guessed about her husband's love for Ellen, and pitied him for it, Archer is now able to bridge the worlds between May and Ellen: the F major tonality at m. 79 gives way to the latter part of "Love's Testament" at m. 81, moving into D minor by m. 96. By the time D major is gained at m. 100, Archer can bring himself to quote only two lines from the poem in mm. 101–103—"And weary water of the place of sighs/And there dost work deliverance," before he walks away from the chance of seeing Ellen once again. Commenting on the final scene of *Death in Venice*, Clifford Hindley writes, "What is affirmed [in this scene] is the self-justifying spectacle of beauty here and now, as, to an orchestral epilogue of quiet rapture, Aschenbach dies gazing upon it."<sup>63</sup> Archer also gazes upon a spectacle of beauty, though in his memory, not in the here and

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<sup>63</sup> Hindley, 162.

now—as he says to himself in the novel, “It’s more real to me here than if I went up.”<sup>64</sup>

Thus, having reconciled his love for both May and Ellen, as well as their love for him, the D major resolution (like Tadzio’s A major at the end of Britten’s opera) so long denied is achieved in the last bar, as Archer is granted the deliverance for which he waited his entire life.

### Text Setting

My usual method of text-setting tends naturally towards a syllabic treatment, with very few melismas—in the case of *The Age of Innocence*, this seemed a working method best suited to bring out the meter of the text. The examples provided in the discussion of the libretto’s language above, when examined in their musical context, demonstrate this preservation of meter and stress. There is one melisma in the text setting, however, that points up a subtle yet significant connection between Ellen and Archer: in act 1, scene 5, when Ellen tells him about her experience reading *The House of Life*, she quotes the words “prisoned spirit” from “Love’s Testament,” putting a melisma on “spirit” in m. 73. Archer takes up this idea when he reads “Love’s Testament” in scene 7, also placing a melisma on “spirit” in m. 156. Just as the notes’ rhythmic values enhance the expression of the text, the pitches themselves also contribute to this goal. In the setting of Ellen’s words in act 1, scene 11 mm. 153–156, for example—“To have found you, to love you/Brings morn to these eyes/That had known only night”—the rising notes G, B and G (an octave higher) highlight the words “found,” “love” and “morn.” On the other hand, for the setting of Beaufort’s motto in act 1, scene 10, mm.

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<sup>64</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 217.

22–27 (“A man’s fidelity’s only as good/As the lies he’s willing to tell/To hallow that innocence/That pure womanhood/That feminine virtue we all love so well”) the contour of the melodic line underlines not so much word stresses as the text’s actual meaning: the rising part of the melody on “a man’s fidelity” suggests something perhaps nobler, indeed higher (as the rising pitches imply) in these men’s characters, only to be brought back down to baser motives for keeping up the appearance of fidelity; i.e., the willingness to lie to one’s wife. The idea of “pure womanhood” is likewise reflected by pitch level, with Beaufort’s high D overlapping with the female singing register, exploited to a mocking effect in m. 167, where the same words are sung in falsetto.

The most challenging part of the text setting, however, was dealing with sections of what might be called “heightened recitative.” These are passages where the words are underpinned by much emotional and dramatic tension—moments especially prominent in the scenes with Archer and Ellen in act 2. Their conflict at this point in the story, especially in scene 5, is bound up with their different perspectives on their shared predicament: Archer remains much the little boy in this matter, with his escapist fantasies of a life for himself and Ellen. His lines here tend towards lyrical, arching phrases, as in mm. 29–30, with the words, “Quietly trusting that the vision of us will come true.” It is up to Ellen to bring him up short, and answer his fantasies with unflinching realism. The shortened phrases and pronounced leaps of her lines reflect this idea, as in mm. 32–35, when she tells him, “I only know that as long as we’re together, we’ll look at realities, Newland, not visions,” finishing with a prominent leap down a sixth with the final two words. Archer’s impassioned response to this again tends towards lyricism (the throbbing

trio accompaniment borrowed from the end of “Love’s Testament”), believing as he does that his very words, “But what reality is there other than this?” can alter their present situation. Ellen counters this with her most forceful outburst yet: “I can’t be your wife, Newland—is it your idea that I should live with you as your mistress?” Here all sense of lyricism is abandoned, the repeated notes and terminating tritone providing the necessary means to awaken Archer from his romantic reveries. Still he demurs, saying, “I want to find a world where words like that don’t exist./Where we’ll only be two people who love one another,/And nothing else on earth will matter.” The expression here is still lyrical, but more somber, and has an effect on Ellen’s music: she still tells him the truth about their predicament, that there is no such world, though her shortened phrases here are tempered by the arpeggios in the harp and oboe. As this example demonstrates, if there is one overarching style of text-setting for Archer’s words, it is the lyrical mode, first heard in “Love’s Testament.” Time and again he returns to this mode in the vain hope to make the realities of the surrounding world conform to his dreams. Both Ellen and May sing against his lyricism (recall May’s angular lines against Archer’s recitation of “Love’s Testament” in act 2, scene 3) in the attempt to draw him out of this unreality, but in the end it is only the news of May’s pregnancy that brings him back down to earth. His final rendition of “Love’s Testament” in act 2, scene 10 is perhaps the only point in the opera where his lyricism actually reflects reality, when he comes to a mature understanding of the love these two women have for him.

## The Orchestra

Following a great tradition in opera, the orchestra in *The Age of Innocence* plays an important role in the drama, underscoring the characters' thoughts and feelings, helping to delineate the realms of the said and unsaid. The motives and other musical processes noted above, many of which are heard in the orchestra, clearly demonstrate how the it fulfills this role. But I would here like to speak on two other functions of the orchestra: the evocation of a particular historical period, and the use of tone color as it brings into sharper focus the love triangle of Archer, Ellen and May.

Though I have not found it in general necessary to parody any musical style in my music, there was still a need to evoke, on some level, the atmosphere of New York in the 1870's. One method of doing this was quite obvious, as suggested by the novel itself: the story begins at the old Academy of Music, at a performance of Gounod's *Faust*—one of the most popular operas in late nineteenth-century America. For scene 1 in my opera, also at the Academy, I have chosen the "Spinning Song" from act 1, scene 4 of *Faust*, in which Margarita laments that Faust has still not returned to her.<sup>65</sup> The music here has been taken directly from Gounod's opera, making this an undisguised evocation of the nineteenth-century, though I meld it with my own musical style: the murmuring thirty-second notes of the violins are transferred to the woodwinds in mm. 19–20, while the E

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<sup>65</sup> Of the soprano's (here Christine Nilsson's) performance in this opera, Wharton writes, "She sang, of course, '*M'ama!*' and not 'he loves me,' since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences" (*The Age of Innocence*, 4). I managed to find an early-twentieth century vocal score of *Faust*, published by Schirmer, with an Italian singing translation, to use for Margarita's part in this scene.

minor tonality moves to an unsettled whole-tone harmony in mm. 19–20, underscoring Lefferts and Jackson’s gossip. The ostinato then shifts back to the violins and E minor, as Margarita continues her lament—in this way, the orchestra both evokes the time of Wharton’s novel, and sets the stage for the actual drama, with its atmosphere of intrigue and rumor. The waltz of scene 2 accomplishes much the same purpose, though here the music is my own, written in a style reminiscent of Johann Strauss II, whose “Blue Danube” waltz was a great favorite of New York society in the 1870’s. Like the music in scene 1, the waltz here evokes a era of another time, while also conjuring up the underlying threat that will come to bear on Archer and Ellen (as noted with the waltz’s inclusion of the society motive, above). With the return of the waltz at the beginning of act 2, scene 9, the orchestra re-establishes the sense of nineteenth-century social order even as New York society shows Ellen the way out the door. Beginning at m. 132, this sense of tribal order is juxtaposed with Archer’s tortured mental state: the flutes and clarinets play the waltz theme in E major with its tonic and dominant in trombone, timpani and double-basses while the rest of the orchestra thunders out a B-flat minor chord with an added sixth and seventh. But even this depiction of Archer’s anguish over Ellen’s departure is overcome by the waltz theme, piped out by the clarinets in mm. 139–140. The rules of 1870’s New York society are maintained to the very end, with Archer and May upholding their roles as the good host and hostess bidding their guests goodnight.

Though a complete analysis of the actual orchestration is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to mention three particular instruments whose timbres help to

define the relationships amongst Archer, Ellen and May. The oboe is probably the most prominent instrument throughout the opera, first heard in the prelude to act 1, mm. 7–9, its last three notes anticipating its line in act 1, scene 7, m. 144, with the setting of “Love’s Testament.” The oboe thus establishes its association with the Rossetti poem and Archer and Ellen’s love from the outset of the opera. It is this instrument, in fact, that first sounds the melody of “Love’s Testament” in act 1, scene 5 mm. 65–73, as Ellen relates her experience reading *The House of Life*, and takes up the melody again at m. 7 in act 2, scene 2, when Archer catches sight of Ellen on the Boston Common. The oboe quotes “Love’s Testament” a final time in act 2, scene 10 at m. 95, and subsequently completes Archer’s quotation from the poem at m. 103, as the triplets in the flute and piccolo lead into the final resolution in D major. The flute by this point has become a symbol for May, having been the instrument to announce her motive in act 1, scene 1, m. 65 (see Figure 7), and play the motive in almost all its occurrences thereafter. But perhaps nowhere else does the flute take on such significance as at the beginning of act 2, scene 9, when, reinforced by the piccolo an octave higher, it plays May’s motive over the melody of the waltz first heard in act 1, scene 2: social order has been restored, and May’s triumph is complete. The harp rounds out this trio of instruments, and serves to bridge the worlds of May and Archer, and Ellen and Archer: it accompanies the oboe in each of its renditions of “Love’s Testament,” noted above, and also accompanies the flute when it announces May’s motive in scene 1; the harp continues its association with May at the beginning of act 1, scene 7, supporting her vocal line in her key of F major. A more sinister role for the instrument is also in evidence, reflecting the darker side of Archer and May’s

relationship. For while it does not monopolize the lie motive (see Figure 8) it does announce it at key points in the opera, such as when Archer lies to May about where he obtained *The House of Life* (act 1, scene 7, m. 59); when May catches him in his lie about having to go to Washington on “business” (act 2, scene 4, m. 49); and finally, when May reveals her own lie (the most successful one in the entire story) of telling Ellen she was sure about her pregnancy when she was not (act 2, scene 9, m. 189). These devices in the orchestration, will, I hope, draw out the subtleties Wharton wove into her novel, and what they reveal about her characters’ inner lives—even if they are not fully aware of each others’ thoughts, the music gives us as listeners clues as to their motivations and deepest desires.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

At this point in the essay, I would like to step out of my role of quasi-musicologist-cum-English major, and return wholly to the role by which I best came to know Edith Wharton's extraordinary novel: that of a composer. One might think that "reader" might be the more appropriate word here, since it was, of course, by reading the novel that I first came to know it. But it was in the very process of adapting the work that I became most intimately acquainted with the book, and indeed stood more in awe of Wharton's achievement. I realized, however, that in order to make a successful adaptation, I would have to do away with many aspects of the novel I had come to love. Dramatization of any literary work must necessarily exclude much from the original source, and sometimes such cuts must be made quite ruthlessly. There was much in the novel that I was sorry to lose: the characters of Rivière (the Count's secretary), Archer's sister Janey, and Mr. and Mrs. van der Luyden; Archer and Ellen's intimate encounter at the old patroon house on the van der Luydens' estate, as well as the scene on the beach in Newport, when Archer waits in vain for Ellen to turn her gaze from the ocean to him, as he recalls an evening at the theater they had together:

The figure at the end of the pier had not moved. For a long moment the young man stood half way down the bank, gazing at the bay furrowed with the coming and going of sailboats, yacht-launches, fishing-craft and the trailing black coal-barges hauled by noisy tugs. The lady in the summer-house seemed to be held by the same sight. Beyond the grey bastions of Fort Adams a long-drawn sunset was splintering up into a thousand fires, and the radiance caught the sail of a catboat as it beat out through the channel between the Lime Rock and the shore. Archer, as he watched,

remembered the scene in *The Shaughraun*, and Montague lifting Ada Dyas's ribbon to his lips without her knowing that he was in the room.<sup>66</sup>

Such moments give the novel its great poignancy and sense of nostalgia, as they reverberate in Archer's mind (and ours) in the last chapter of the book, when he looks back upon his life and realizes that he has missed "the flower of life," personified by his one great love, the Countess Ellen Olenska. But even while conceding the necessity of such losses in the adaptation process, I rejected the notion that an opera based on *The Age of Innocence* must also sacrifice its emotional and moral complexity—a complexity that distinguishes this love triangle from any other in literature I know of. The moral choices that face Archer, Ellen and May face, and how those choices are influenced by the society in which they live and breathe, lie very much at the heart of the triangle—exclude too much of this in the opera, and you threaten the unique quality of this love story, thus striking at the very greatness of Wharton's creation. I therefore hope that all aspects of the novel retained in my opera are indispensable to the effectiveness of the drama. And this effectiveness, in the end, is measured by how well I've done my job as a composer—that is, I believe my only hope in realizing the emotional and psychological complexities of the novel was in the music itself. I therefore employed motives, sonorities, timbres and textures so that what Wharton took pains to convey about this unique love story might be preserved for the stage. In many ways, I believe this is the duty of the opera composer, as far as adapting a great literary work goes: what gives the original work its distinction, indeed its status as a "classic," something that has stood the test of time, should be present, and even amplified, in the operatic medium. Those who might think this is too

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<sup>66</sup> Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 132.

tall an order for opera I believe underestimate music's ability to achieve this end. Whether the opera *The Age of Innocence* has accomplished this task I don't think is for me to say. But having lived so long with Archer, Ellen, May, I can say that I have come to know them very well, and as is the case with all great literary works, I have seen aspects of myself in each of them. I hope that in my re-creation of the novel I have allowed them to inhabit a world not too different from Wharton's, where they might recognize one other and come to know the bond of love that works deliverance upon them all.

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