

MUSIC IN THE FICTION OF WILLA CATHER

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MUSIC IN THE FICTION OF WILLA CATHER

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PREFACE

Some two or three years ago, during a course in American literature, I was again exposed to the works of Willa Cather after not having read them for several years. After I had started reading all the novels in chronological order, I was amazed to note the definite use of music made by Cather in these works. As I completed the novels, I decided that there must be something more to this use than mere chance; hence I began the study with a more definite purpose in mind than the mere reading of the various stories as such.

The short stories I found to be a veritable treasure house of musical references and allusions. After I finished reading them, I decided that I should like to pursue the subject even further. This study is a result of that interest. While I have not quoted every musical reference or allusion in the many works of Cather, I believe I have used enough of them to show Willa Cather's true insight into the use of music.

I have been able to read all the novels, and most all of the short stories. Those I have not been able to obtain are three of the stories included in the first collection compiled by Cather, The Troll Garden,

and "Jack-a-boy," published in the March 30, 1901, issue of The Saturday Evening Post.

In the recently published Willa Cather Living, this statement may be found:

Music, for Willa Cather, . . . was an emotional experience that had a potent influence on her own imaginative processes—quickenning the flow of her ideas, suggesting new forms and associations, translating itself into parallel movements of thought and feeling. I think no critic has sufficiently emphasized, how much musical forms influenced her composition, and how her style, her beauty of cadence and rhythm, were the result of a sort of transposed musical feeling and were arrived at almost unconsciously instead of being a conscious effort to produce definite effects with words.¹

I have in no way made a specific attempt to show musical influence upon Cather's style of writing, though many of the quoted excerpts will show such. I have merely used those definite and positive references to music, either by implication or actual mention of a song or of a musical selection. In other words, I am merely using the obvious, trying to show how Cather used that so effectively.

— W. W. J.

¹Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living, pp. 47-48.

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CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Introduction: The Artist

At an interview in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1921, Willa Cather remarked: "A book is made with one's own flesh and blood of years. . . . It is cremated youth. It is all yours—no one else gave it to you."¹ And in 1925, when writing a preface for the Mayflower edition of Sarah Orne Jewett's stories, she said:

The artist spends a lifetime in pursuing the things that haunt him, in having his mind "teased" by them, in trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that, as a painter tries different lightings and different attitudes with his subjects to catch the one that presents it more suggestively than any other. And at the end of a lifetime he emerges with much that is happy experimenting, and comparatively little that is the very flower of himself and his genius.²

Willa Cather's works are "made of her own flesh and blood of years," and for that reason a fairly complete biographical background is needed in order that this study of her use of music may be made more meaningful. For "a great memory and a great devotion were the things she lived upon."³

¹Mildred Bennett, The World of Willa Cather, p. xi.

²Willa Cather, "Miss Jewett," Not Under Forty, p. 80.

³Willa Cather, "A Chance Meeting," Not Under Forty, p. 34.

From Virginia to Nebraska

✓ The tombstone of Willa Cather in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, shows a birth date of December 7, 1876.⁴ A 1934 letter from Cather's secretary verifies this information.⁵

That this date is incorrect is indicated by several circumstances. Who's Who in America did not change its 1875 date, first used in the 1910-1911 edition, until the 1920-1921 issue. Since then it has used the 1876 date. Three different entries on file in the office of the registrar at the University of Nebraska show an 1874 date.⁶

Information secured from W. W. Glass, Archivist at Winchester, Virginia, shows that the birth date of December 7, 1876, is an obvious impossibility. While the Register of Births of Frederick County, Virginia, does not show Willa Cather's birth, it does show that Roscoe Boak Cather, younger brother of Willa, was born on June 24, 1877, thus making the December, 1876, birthdate of Willa Cather an impossibility.⁷ Charles Cather, father of Willa, wrote to his brother George in Nebraska that Willa was born in 1873.⁸

⁴Bennett, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵Madge Davis, "The Evolution of Willa Cather's Art," Unpublished M. A. Thesis, University of Texas, 1934, p. 3.

⁶James R. Shively, Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years, p. 14.

⁷Ibid., pp. 115-119.

⁸Bennett, op. cit., p. 9.

(Willa Cather, the daughter of Charles Fectigue Cather and Virginia Sibert Boak, was born near Winchester, Frederick County, Virginia. ⁹) Originally christened Willa Love Cather, she changed the middle name to Sibert in honor of an uncle who had died in the Civil War. ¹⁰

The Cathers had been interested in moving West almost as early as the birth of their daughter Willa. The stories told about the new country by relatives who had already gone to Nebraska did much to persuade them to leave Virginia. The damp climate of their section of Virginia and tuberculosis in the family were major reasons for their leaving; the burning of the four-storied Cather sheep barn, however, was the final reason. Packing their belongings in Confederate money, the Cathers took a train to Nebraska, arriving there in 1882.

After living in the community of Catherton about a year, Charles Cather moved his family to the growing railroad town of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Here young Willa spent a short time in the public schools, though she was educated largely by her mother and her grandmothers, whose schooling of her in the Bible and classical literature was to be found reflected in the purity of Cather's written style. She also studied Greek and French from two townsmen. ¹¹ She studied Latin

⁹Grant Overton, The Women Who Make Our Novels, p. 256.

¹⁰Bennett, op. cit., p. 9.

¹¹Shively, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

with an old English gentleman whose scholarly enthusiasm and interest did much to inspire her, and whose company and advice she was accustomed to seek even after she had begun her work at the university.¹²

(During these formative years in Red Cloud she saw and heard much that was to be incorporated into her writing many years later.) The foreigners were a constant source of delight to her. From the women she learned much of their backgrounds in the Old World. She was delighted by their secrets of the culinary arts. (Years later she was to be acclaimed as one of the world's best cooks!)¹³ (From some of the older men she learned of the culture of Europe, especially music, and discovered that they often missed the cultural centers of their homelands, and that many of them would not or could not adjust themselves to the rigorous life required of settlers on the Nebraska prairies. Some of these pioneer immigrants had played in the orchestras of the great music halls of Europe or had studied music there.) It was not surprising, then, that a number of them committed suicide rather than face the dreary life in the New World.¹⁴

Another person who afforded Willa Cather training in cultural pursuits was her aunt, Mrs. George Cather, a Bostonian and a graduate

¹²Knopf Pamphlet, p. 2.

¹³New York Times, March 19, 1933, p. 15.

¹⁴Bennett, op. cit., p. 139.

of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Aunt Frank, as she was called by Willa, organized and took active part in Sunday school activities at Catherton and also in the literary clubs which met in the various homes. She led the singing and taught a class of young people, most of whom later attended the state university, or who became noted in various fields of endeavor. She is the prototype of Aunt Georgiana of "A Wagner Matinee."¹⁵

Of this early period in Willa Cather's life, the person who probably did more than anyone else to instill a love of good music into young Willa was Julia Erikson Miner, wife of a Red Cloud merchant. Of her Cather once wrote:

I have never drawn but one portrait of an actual person. That was the mother of the neighbor family in My Antonia. She was the mother of my childhood chums in Red Cloud.¹⁶

Julia Miner, born in what was then Christiania, now Oslo, Norway, had literally grown up with music. Her father had been an oboist in Ole Bull's Royal Norwegian Orchestra, and young Julia had attended and enjoyed rehearsals and concerts, usually sitting in the orchestra pit with her father.

Willa Cather loved to listen to Mrs. Miner play operatic selections on the new Chickering piano and "tell how Ole Bull used to

¹⁵Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 59, quoting Cather in the Eleanor Hinman interview for the Lincoln Star.

rap his baton smartly over the knuckles of a musician who played a sour note. "17

It was from listening to Ole Bull that Julia Miner's father, James Erickson, came to America. Ole Bull himself brought a colony of Norwegians to Pennsylvania, but it failed and he returned to Norway to recoup his fortunes. Erickson moved his family to Iowa, where he often played the violin at the country dances. It was at such a dance that Julia had met James Miner. The Miners appear as the Harling family in My Antonia.¹⁸

From her association with the Miners came Willa Cather's opportunity to take music lessons from a Professor Shindelmeisser, who appeared in Red Cloud apparently from nowhere. He visited the Miners, playing on their new piano and talking about the old country. Since he was a heavy drinker, most of the parents refused to let him teach their children. Julia Miner, recognizing him for the musician he was, immediately hired him to teach her children. To discredit the tales that he went about giving lessons while he was drunk, she always sat through the lessons. Soon afterwards other parents permitted him to teach their children.¹⁹

¹⁷Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 153.

Mildred Bennett relates the story of Shindelmeisser's trying to teach young Willa Cather:

On the day for music lessons, the professor stopped first at the Cather's. Although "Willie" hungered to hear music and stories about it, she did not want to play and she would interrupt her lessons constantly with questions about the cities, the customs, the languages of the old country. By the time her hour was finished, the poor old man would be exhausted and exasperated.

He would go over to the Miners where Mary and her mother waited. Bursting in and sinking into a chair, he would exclaim, "Vat will I do mit dat Villie Cader? Her folks wants her to have some music, but all she wants to do is sit on mine lap and ask questions!" He would shake his head and wring his hands. "Mein Gott! Dat Villie Cader vill drife me crazy yet! Questions! Questions! Always questions! I don't know vat I do mit dat child." He would cast his troubled glance on Mary and say, "Ach, Mary, come here yet and sit on my lap vunce." Her quietness would calm him and after awhile he would be able to hear her lesson.

Finally Professor Shindelmeisser decided to talk with Willa's mother and tell her that the girl wasn't learning anything about playing the piano. Mrs. Cather listened to his story and then told him to come twice as often because whereas Willa wasn't learning like the other children, she was listening to him play and getting a great deal from his discussions.²⁰

The Mary Miner mentioned above was "Julia," the musical one of the Harlings in My Antonia. Often when Mary practiced, Willa would slip into the house and listen to her. When Mary had played until she became tired and Willa was still there, she would start a little ditty called "Pompinette." Willa hated it, and taking the hint, would leave.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 153-154.

²¹ Ibid., p. 45.

Wandering Italian minstrels from the mining areas of Colorado often appeared, carrying harp and violin, and sometimes having a trained bear. These minstrels always played opera on their highly polished instruments, singing a weird melody only when they wanted the bear to dance. They often stayed over for the Fourth of July if they came during early summer, playing for the bower dances. The dance pavilion of the Vannis in My Ántonia was probably a remembrance of these events.²²

The visit of Blind Boone was another musical event in the lives of the Red Clouders. Boone, a huge Negro, was an unusually talented pianist. He gave special concerts at Holland House for the owner and her guests. He was portrayed as the "Blind D'Arnault" of My Ántonia.²³

We learn many of Willa Cather's likes and dislikes of the 1888 period from a printed form which the young lady had completed. Willa, at that early date, wanted to be an M. D.; her favorite composer was Beethoven, and she liked "Sheakspear, Tennyson, and Emmerson." The spelling is her own.²⁴

One One special Fourth of July treat was the visit of Findley Hypes, an employee of Marshall Field, who had at one time planned a career

²²Ibid., p. 155.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 112-113.

in opera instead of "drumming." The favorite accompanist of Hypes was Sadie Becker, a very talented young lady who had moved to Red Cloud only a short time before. Sadie fell in love with a Red Cloud boy whom her father forbade her to see again. The unhappy boy married someone else and spent his life making money. Sadie left Red Cloud in order that she might continue her study of music. She never returned. The old-timers who remember "Sadie's pert manner, fleet walk and charming smile" feel that maybe Willa was thinking of her when she wrote Lucy Gayheart.²⁵

*Becker
Sadie* Another person from whom Willa Cather received some of her first ideas of the world of art and music was Peorianna Bogardus Sill. After marrying her guardian, Calvin Sill, who was much older than she, Peorianna had studied in Europe for fifteen years, becoming so adept at painting that she could make copies of old masters that could hardly be told from the originals. She also showed great musical talent and was accepted as a student by Anton Rubinstein. After coming to Red Cloud, she could often be seen, dressed in a velvet gown and resplendent with her diamonds, conducting cantatas or supervising her students in a musical "soirée" at the Miners' home, or at the home of some other wealthy family.²⁶

²⁵Ibid., p. 42.

²⁶Ibid., p. 160.

Willa often participated in the local talent plays or concerts of Red Cloud. She was learning that music, acting, and writing could go hand-in-hand, something she was to put into practice in later years.

The public school education of Willa Cather was rather scanty, but for only one reason: there were no schools during her first years in Nebraska. As one of the three students who graduated from Red Cloud High School in 1890, she delivered an oration on "Superstition vs. Investigation" for her part of the program.²⁷

The University Years

The next five years Willa Cather spent in Lincoln, Nebraska. In the fall of 1890 she entered the Latin School of the University of Nebraska in order to complete her preparatory work prior to entering the university proper, which she entered the next year.²⁸

A typical four-year program in the Academic College—the one Willa Cather took—included eight full-year courses in English literature; three years of Greek; two years each of Latin and French; a year each of rhetoric, mathematics, and German; and one semester each of physical training, preparatory sciences, chemistry, American history, European history, philosophy, and journalism.

²⁷Ibid., p. 177.

²⁸Shively, op. cit., p. 15.

For extracurricular activity a student of those days must have had high scholastic standing. Baseball, football, some intramural sports, and tennis were the sports to be found. Oratorical contests, however, were much more popular than the sports events. For out-of-town oratorical contests over two hundred of the school's four hundred and fifty students often made the trips to hear their fellow classmates.²⁹

The literary societies, centers of campus social life, held frequent but regular meetings in club rooms provided by the school; and programs consisting of debates, dramatizations, orations, and music were given.³⁰

At this time the Greek letter societies had just come to the campus, but Willa Cather never joined one. In addition to her work with the Union Literary Society, of which she was a member, she wrote for and edited the Hesperian, the campus publication which represented the anti-Greek group. In this magazine Cather's first fiction and poetry were published.

In 1894, Willa Cather edited the senior yearbook. James Shively says of this annual:

The 1894 volume, dedicated to the class of 1895, has become a memorable one indeed, notable for several

²⁹Ibid., p. 16.

³⁰Ibid., p. 17.

photographs of the cadet commandant, Lieutenant John J. Pershing, and of Miss Cather; an article by Louise Pound, and a story written jointly by Dorothy Canfield and Willa Cather, possibly the most youthful collaboration by two famous literary figures ever published.³¹

Cather, always interested in the various student activities, worked on several literary publications, participated in dramatic productions, and was a member of a club formed for the study of the works of Lewis Carroll. She traveled occasionally to Omaha and Chicago to see plays and operas, and during her senior year served as dramatic critic and columnist for a Lincoln daily newspaper.³²

She passed all her work in good standing, except a course in mathematics; she also delayed completing her French courses until near the end of her college career.

During these years the attitude of the Eastern scholars toward the students of the Western universities was that of condescension. Herbert Bates, a professor at the University of Nebraska, who had been educated in an Eastern university, says of the student of the University of Nebraska:

The Western student is not idle. He has two incentives—his poverty and the ridicule the East casts upon him. He cannot, like the graduate of Yale or Harvard, idle along under the prestige of a diploma. At every step he must prove he is not a barbarian. The attitude of the West to the East is the attitude of America to England—apologetically

³¹Ibid., p. 18.

³²Ibid.

defiant. And too often the position of the East to the West has been that of England to America—overbearing, prejudiced, contemptuous. Yet our very injustice has been their salvation.

They have pursued culture desperately, in self-defense, determined to surpass us, for to be admitted equal, they must surpass.³³

James Shively gives further information which shows that Willa Cather had the advantages of an Eastern university and more:

Even more than studies and activities, the phase of university life most likely to have influenced the young writer was the intense intellectual competition and stimulation of the people in the university and its circle. The school's chancellor was a distinguished and forceful educator, James H. Canfield, whose daughter, Dorothea, later famous as Dorothy Canfield Fisher, was herself a student in the Latin School during part of the time when Willa Cather attended the university. On the faculty was Lieutenant John J. Pershing, professor of military science and tactics and Commandant of Cadets. Coming to the university from his first command with a detachment of Sioux Indian Scouts, this remarkable man not only conducted the Military Department, taught its courses, and served as an instructor in mathematics for two years, but also enrolled as a student and graduated from the College of Law in 1893. Other notable faculty members of that period were Charles E. Bessey, botanist, author, editor of scientific publications, and later president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; and Lucius A. Sherman, noted as a critic, Shakespearean editor and originator of a once-famous analytical method of literary criticism.

The comparatively small group of students included many who were later to achieve distinction—four as state governors, one as a United States Senator, two as members of Congress, and two as chancellors of state universities. Classmates of Miss Cather who would later distinguish themselves in scholarship included William L. Westermann, an authority on Greek and Egyptian history;

³³Herbert Bates, "The Spirit of the Western University," Outlook, LV (February 27, 1897), 606.

Hartley B. Alexander, poet, philosopher, and literary scholar; and Louise Pound, famous for research in folklore, balladry, linguistics, and literary history.

Also in Lincoln at the same time as Willa Cather were two men, both lawyers, who though not directly connected with the university were associated with a group of its faculty and students. Willa Cather knew them both. One was Roscoe Pound, distinguished in the diverse fields of botany and law, who later served as professor of law at Nebraska, Northwestern, Chicago, and Harvard, and from 1916 to 1936 became the Harvard Law School's most memorable dean. The other young lawyer was William Jennings Bryan, who, in 1896, was to deliver the famous "Cross of Gold" oration at the Democratic national convention in Chicago, launching himself into national fame and three presidential nominations.³⁴

Cather was also briefly associated with Stephen Crane. She tells of her first meeting with him:

This was the first man of letters I had ever met in the flesh, and when the young man announced who he was, I dropped into a chair behind the editor's desk where I could stare at him without being too much in evidence.³⁵

After much difficulty, she finally got Crane's ideas about writing:

At length he sighed wearily and shook his drooping shoulders, remarking: "Where did you get all that rot? Yarns aren't done by mathematics. You can't do it by rule any more than you can dance by a rule. You have to have the itch of the thing in your fingers, and if you haven't—well, you're damned lucky, and you'll live long and prosper, that's all."³⁶

³⁴Shively, op. cit., p. 20.

³⁵Ibid., p. 22.

³⁶Ibid., p. 24.

During her last two years in college Willa Cather worked occasionally for the Lincoln Journal, attracting favorable attention with her writing. And shortly after her graduation from the university in 1895, the Courier obtained Willa Cather's services, ^{as an associated editor.} stating in an article:

Miss Willa Cather . . . will become a member of the Courier staff. Miss Cather's reputation extends beyond Nebraska. She is thoroughly original and always entertaining. Her writing has a piquant literary flavor, and her services are a valuable acquisition to any paper.³⁷

The work with the Courier, as an associate editor, lasted until sometime in November, 1895, when she returned to her home in Red Cloud. (Some six months later she left for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Cather's Nebraska years had come to an end.)³⁸

The Pittsburgh Years

The Red Cloud Chief of June 26, 1896, records rather perfunctorily, "Miss Willa Cather left this week for Pittsburgh, Pa." The departure of this young woman, just a year out of college, was hardly an event of importance, but comings and goings of the local citizens seldom passed unnoticed.³⁹ In Pittsburgh, the Home Monthly, a literary magazine, had been established to offer competition to Curtis

³⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ John P. Hinz, "Willa Cather in Pittsburgh," The New Colophon, III (1950), 198.

and Bok's Ladies' Home Journal, and Willa Cather was to be the new editor.⁴⁰

George Seibel, a one-time associate of Willa Cather, says of the Home Monthly venture by Axtell, Orr and Company, "It would not have caused a ripple in the sea of printer's ink but for one thing. They imported an editor from Nebraska, and her name was Willa Cather."⁴¹

Willa Cather soon put to use her knowledge of publishing learned during her college days. Only a few days after she had started to work, Mr. Axtell went on a trip out West, and young Willa Cather was left to run the whole show. She had to get out most of the first issue herself. And as the printer was not familiar with this type of magazine work, Willa had to oversee all the work in the composition room.⁴²

As editor, Willa Cather was entrusted with the various jobs of manuscript reading, purchasing for following numbers, and corresponding with authors. The work was difficult, and she often had to spend many hours at the plant. However, the general "trashiness" of some of the manuscripts submitted to her and the type of writing she had to do for the publication were the things most unpleasant to her. She did her best, however, to write the "home and fireside

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 198-199.

⁴¹George Seibel, "Miss Willa Cather from Nebraska," The New Colophon, II, Part 7 (September, 1949), 193.

⁴²Bennett, op. cit., pp. 190-191.

stuff" demanded by her readers, although her style of writing was too heavy for the magazine. ⁴³

There were compensations for the work, for she was able to meet many interesting, well-known personages of the day. One of these was Rudyard Kipling. Too, she could occasionally write those things she wanted to do, but she realized that there was little literary value to the Home Monthly, that it was just a way to make a living and a poor one at that. ⁴⁴

Seibel
George Seibel, now a director of the Carnegie Free Library of Allegheny of Pittsburgh, was one of Cather's closest friends during those days. She often visited the Seibel home to study French. Seibel states in a recent letter:

The first article I wrote for Willa Cather, when she was editor of "Home Monthly," was on "The Wild Pranks of Richard Wagner." She first brought Richard Strauss to my attention. She loved music, attended operas and concerts, but played no instrument so far as I know. She was a friend of Ethelbert Nevin's family; wrote an article about him for the "Ladies' Home Journal." She was fond of Schumann-Heink, the singer. We did not often talk about music, but mostly about French. ⁴⁵

That Seibel was not too much impressed by Strauss is evidenced by his quoting Moszkowski's epigram: "If Richard, give me Wagner;

⁴³Ibid., p. 191.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 192.

⁴⁵Letter from George Seibel, in the possession of the present writer, dated October 16, 1952.

if Strauss, I prefer Johann." Some two years later Cather wrote an article on Strauss for the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times of which Seibel was then Sunday editor.⁴⁶

Begin again
The Home Monthly printed some of Cather's earliest writings—poems, short stories, criticisms and reviews—and through her connections with it, she was able to get a position on the Pittsburgh Daily Leader, which thrived on sensation.⁴⁷ When she saw that the Home Monthly would not last, she went to interview W. A. Magee, a wealthy man reputed to "own Pittsburgh," to ask about writing for his two newspapers. He agreed to let her do some feature articles. By 1898, she was rewriting Spanish-American War dispatches for the Leader.⁴⁸

Still later she became one of the several reviewers under dramatic critic Hezekiah N. Duff. Her duty was to see and criticize the theater and opera and to be in charge of the book review department of the paper. In the meantime she also contributed to the Lincoln (Nebraska) Courier a column called "The Passing Show," which, according to the editor, Sarah B. Harris, was to consist of "interviews with distinguished men and women who visit Pittsburgh and

⁴⁶George Seibel, "Miss Willa Cather from Nebraska," The New Colophon, III, Part 7 (September, 1949), 202.

⁴⁷Hinz, op. cit., p. 199.

⁴⁸Bennett, op. cit., p. 192.

criticisms—appreciative of the arts, manners, morals and Women's Clubs of Pittsburgh."49

While interviewing famous people for her paper, Cather occasionally ran into difficulties. One day she frantically called her friend, George Seibel, asking him to talk five minutes in a slow and distinct manner about Nietzsche. He complied, wondering, however, why she wanted the information. He later related what had actually happened:

Willa had gone to interview the pianist Harold Bauer for the Leader. He talked mainly about Nietzsche, so volubly and volcanically that she might as well have been listening to a thunderstorm on the Brocken.

I do not remember seeing the printed interview, but I am sure Bauer's views on Nietzsche were reported in a way that met his full approval. 50

In the winter of 1899, a young man known as "Chick," his real name being Charles Clark, inherited a \$20,000 legacy from an uncle or a grandmother. He decided that Pittsburgh required a literary magazine similar to the Spectator—it clearly needed nothing less. He imported one Ewan Macpherson from New York, who discovered Willa Cather and George Seibel of the moribund Home Monthly. 51

Cather, somewhat later, took a turn at the editorship as she and Seibel "began to produce masterpieces in exchange for chunks of Chick's uncle's or grandma's coin."52

49Hinz, op. cit., p. 199.

50Seibel, op. cit., pp. 201-202.

51Hinz, op. cit., p. 199.

52Seibel, op. cit., p. 205.

The existence of The Library, as this magazine was called, was shorter than that of the Home Monthly. It lasted barely six months.⁵³

The winter of 1900-1901 Willa Cather spent in Washington, D. C., where she took every advantage of her opportunities to attend stage and operatic performances. At the same time she submitted weekly articles to The Index of Pittsburgh Life, the articles appearing as "Winter Sketches in the Capital."⁵⁴

During these first years Cather lived at the home of Marie Eyth, 6012 Harvard Street, East Liberty. Here with a screen to divide bed from workshop, Willa Cather wrote her first important works. She often brought home some pieces of music for Mrs. Eyth to play, new compositions by a friend named Ethelbert Nevin.⁵⁵ Also during these years she was able to visit art galleries, see exhibitions, and hear the concerts in the city. Actually, one of the reasons for her coming to Pittsburgh was to take advantage of cultural opportunities which had been lacking in Nebraska.⁵⁶

In 1901, after her return from Washington, she moved to the home of the well-to-do, socially prominent Pittsburgh judge, S. A.

⁵³Hinz, op. cit., p. 199.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Seibel, op. cit., p. 200.

⁵⁶Elizabeth Moorhead, These Too Were Here, p. 48.

McClung, at the invitation of the judge and his daughter Isabelle. Cather's newspapers writing had attracted Isabelle, who later met Willa in the dressing room of an actress whom they both admired. At this time Cather was having an interview for an article to be printed in one of the newspapers. Through this meeting their friendship grew, and with the friendship came the invitation to live at the judge's home.⁵⁷ Some contemporaries have related that Isabelle threatened to leave home if her father did not issue the invitation.⁵⁸

Also in 1901, Willa Cather began to teach English at Allegheny High School (according to some writers, Central High School). John P. Hinz states that her annual salary was \$650, and her position simply "teacher of English," not Head of the English Department, as is often reported.⁵⁹ As a teacher of Latin and English, she was well liked by her students for her inspiring, breezy Western ways.⁶⁰

For the next few years she worked long hours, leaving the McClung home quite early, going first to the newspaper office, then to her teaching duties, and finally returning home at five or six in the afternoon. The week-ends were all she could claim as her own, and

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Hinz, op. cit., p. 199.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Bennett, op. cit., p. 218.

then only if she did not have English themes to grade. She and Isabelle read the novels of the great writers, spoke French, and became closely associated with the world of art and letters.⁶¹ The Sunday afternoons were devoted to teas for neighbors and special friends of Isabelle's. At these the faculty of the departments of drama and music at Carnegie Tech and Italians from the Dante Alighieri Society supplied the cosmopolitan element which was to broaden the social order of Pittsburgh—and of Willa Cather—even though she often failed to show up at the meetings where she was to have been the chief attraction. For during these months she was working on a collection of short stories, The Troll Garden, which was published in 1905 by McClure, Phillips and Company.⁶²

During the summer months she always visited her family in Nebraska and made long sojourns into the American Southwest of New Mexico and Arizona. In 1902 she and Isabelle McClung visited Europe, where Cather got a first-hand view of the Old World.⁶³

After nearly ten years in Pittsburgh, Willa Cather resigned her job with the Allegheny High School and severed her connections with the newspapers to which she yet contributed articles. She had been

⁶¹ Moorhead, op. cit., p. 49.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 50-51.

⁶³ New York Times, April 25, 1947, p. 21.

offered a position on the staff of McClure's Magazine by none other than S. S. McClure himself, who had made a special trip to Pittsburgh to visit her.) Elizabeth Moorhead, a friend of Cather's during those days, gives the following account of McClure's visit to the McClung home:

It was an exciting event indeed when S. S. McClure, who had been a mere name, a sort of far-off benignant deity, descended in the flesh upon Pittsburgh. He was invited to dine at the Judge's house. Slim, sandy-haired, with very bright eyes, he was evidently of a sanguine mercurial temperament. He easily dominated the conversation at table, telling amusing anecdotes of his many hasty trips to Europe on the trail of one author or another. Once, landing in New York, he had gone straight from the boat to his office, he found a bundle of manuscript on his desk tied up to be returned, had opened and read—and here he was in Pittsburgh to see the author in person.⁶⁴

These ten years in Pittsburgh were formative ones for Willa Cather. Concerts, operas, art exhibits—all were plentiful. Renowned musicians lived nearby; other cultural centers were not far distant. In spite of these, she could not give herself fully to her writing until several years later when she became financially independent.)

Cather had, in 1903, published her volume of verse, April Twilights, and in 1905, the already-mentioned collection of short stories, The Troll Garden. However, she had written other articles for publication besides these. Included among them were short

⁶⁴Moorhead, op. cit., p. 52.

stories, reviews, poems, criticisms, and biographical sketches. Strangely enough, not until the past few years have many of these works been identified as hers; for, in her desperation to make a success of the magazine ventures of the Home Monthly and The Library, she resorted to the use of pseudonyms so that the magazines would have a seemingly large list of contributors. At least sixteen names were used: Willa Cather, Willa Sibert Cather, W. S. C., John Charles Asten, Mary Temple Bayard, C. W. S., Helen Delay, John Esten, W. Bert Foster, Mary K. Hawley, Mary Temple Jamison, Henry Nicklemann, George Overing, Clara Wood Shipman, Sibert, and Gilberta S. Whittle. And it is more than likely true that much of the unsigned material in these publications was also hers.⁶⁵ Most of these selections are now collector's items, almost unavailable to the general public.

John P. Hinz, who has made a rather careful study of this early Catheriana, says of these writings:

If Willa's Cather's contributions to Pittsburgh newspapers and articles often have little intrinsic literary merit, they are interesting none the less. They cast some light upon an interval of her life about which, until recently, little was known. . . . They reveal an already quite acute critical sensibility and occasionally permit a glimpse of the developing artist. It was for her a time for experimenting, of learning—the necessary, if not very exciting preparation of setting out.⁶⁶

⁶⁵Hinz, op. cit., pp. 204-207.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 204.

The McClure Interlude

For the next six years Willa Cather traveled gradually but steadily upward in her profession. At times she had to do certain types of work which were unpleasant to her, but she always did her best even with them. She did stipulate, however, that such articles should never mention her as the author.⁶⁷ Cather was never completely in agreement with many of the "muckraking" policies of the McClure concern; yet while there she met many writers who were later to make their mark, and S. S. McClure was one of her dearest friends the rest of her life. A perusal of McClure's Magazine shows such names as those of Stockton, Kipling, Barrie, Howells, Meredith, and others. Also, while on one of her assignments in Boston, she met Sarah Orne Jewett, who influenced her writing more than any other person.

Cather also ghosted an autobiography of S. S. McClure and completed the research and writing of a serialized and highly controversial "Life of Mary Baker Eddy."⁶⁸ Of this work Elizabeth Moorhead relates,

Every morning she would start off early, travel to some little New England village where the famous woman had lived, talk to people who had known her, and come back to her desk, tired out, with a variety of confused impressions and a mass of notes to be sorted and arranged.

⁶⁷Moorhead, op. cit., p. 52.

⁶⁸Bennett, op. cit., p. 194.

A wearisome job for one whose chief interest was the art of fiction.⁶⁹

(From 1908 to 1912, she held down the managing editorship of McClure's Magazine, no mean accomplishment in itself. During the summers of this period she was traveling in Europe and in the American Southwest. Her contributions for publication during these years were limited—only twenty in all, of which fourteen were short poems.)⁷⁰

In 1912, Willa Cather resigned her position with the magazine.

Of the six years spent with the McClure company she says:

I took a salaried position because I didn't want to write directly to sell. I didn't want to compromise. Not that magazine demands are wrong. But they are definite.⁷¹

The six years I spent on "McClure's Magazine" in an editorial capacity, I call work.⁷²

I had a delightful sense of freedom when I had saved enough money to take a house in Cherry Valley, New York, and could begin work on my first novel, "Alexander's Bridge."⁷³

As to her writing for the magazine, she said, "I had been trying to sing a song that did not lie in my voice."⁷⁴

⁶⁹Moorhead, op. cit., p. 53.

⁷⁰Rene Rapin, Willa Cather, p. 69.

⁷¹Carroll, op. cit., p. 214, quoting Willa Cather.

⁷²Bennett, op. cit., p. 194, quoting Willa Cather.

⁷³Carroll, op. cit., p. 214, quoting Willa Cather.

⁷⁴Bennett, op. cit., p. 199, quoting Willa Cather.

"Write it as it is . . ." ⁷⁵

In the February, March, and April issues of the 1912 McClure's Magazine, Cather published her first novel, Alexander's Masquerade. During the same year it was brought out by Houghton Mifflin under the title Alexander's Bridge. In this work Cather showed the influence of Henry James, who had stirred her youthful enthusiasm more than any other writer. ⁷⁶ But her friend, Sarah Orne Jewett, after reading the book, told her, "Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world so well before he can know the parish." ⁷⁷

From that time onward, Cather never again copied the style of another. When discussing the writing of her next novel, O Pioneers!, she remarked, "From the first chapter, I decided not to 'write' at all — simply to give myself up to the pleasure of recapturing in memory people and places I had believed forgotten." ⁷⁸ And with few exceptions, this was her credo the rest of her life.

With the publication of Alexander's Bridge, she had served her apprenticeship; with the publication in 1913 of O Pioneers! she had come into her own. The Song of the Lark, Cather's longest work, appeared in 1915. In My Antonia, published in 1918, Cather returned to

⁷⁵Overton, op. cit., p. 259, quoting Willa Cather.

⁷⁶Moorhead, op. cit., p. 54.

⁷⁷Willa Cather, quoting Sarah Orne Jewett. Preface to the 1922 edition of Alexander's Bridge.

⁷⁸Carroll, op. cit., p. 214, quoting Willa Cather.

the Nebraska scene. Many critics rate this as her best work. Cather herself stated in 1938 on the twentieth anniversary of its publication, "The best thing I've done is My Ántonia. I feel I've made a contribution to American letters with that book."⁷⁹ *inspiration of writing material*

For the next decade Cather's books appeared at fairly regular intervals, after which began a gradual slowing down of her writing processes.)

In 1920, four stories from the long-out-of-print The Troll Garden, plus four new ones, were published under the title Youth and the Bright Medusa; in 1922 came One of Ours; in 1923, The Lost Lady, and a fuller edition of April Twilights and Other Poems. And a book a year came during the next three years: in 1925, The Professor's House; in 1926, My Mortal Enemy; and in 1927, Death Comes for the Archbishop.

Not until 1931 did she issue her next book, Shadows on the Rock, a historical novel of old Quebec. In 1932 was published Obscure Destinies, a volume containing three short stories: "Neighbour Rosicky," "Old Mrs. Harris," and "Two Friends." "Old Mrs. Harris" had been published earlier in that same year in the September, October, and November issues of the Ladies' Home Journal, and at that time had been designated as a novel.

⁷⁹Bennett, op. cit., p. 203, quoting Willa Cather.

In 1935, came the tragic Lucy Gayheart, followed in 1936 by her first published collection of essays, Not Under Forty, and in 1940 by her last novel, the controversial Sapphira and the Slave Girl.

Most of these works have been translated into the Czech, French, German, and Scandinavian languages.⁸⁰

16 From 1940 until her death in 1947, Cather wrote little, published less. She always contended that she had only a certain number of stories to write, a certain amount of "cremated youth," and that when she had done these she would be written out.⁸¹ Truly, her motto could have been, "When I have sung my songs, I'll sing again no more."

In 1948, Alfred A. Knopf, who had been Cather's publisher since 1920, brought out three posthumous short stories in a collection entitled The Old Beauty and Others. The advertising on the book jacket reads, "The last three stories of a writer who has given us some of the greatest literary creations of our times." The stories, "The Old Beauty," "The Best Years," and "Before Breakfast," add little to their author's fame. Of the three, "The Best Years" runs more nearly in the true Cather vein. "The Old Beauty" is too filled with nostalgia, while "Before Breakfast" should have been left unpublished.

⁸⁰Who Was Who, II, 107.

⁸¹Bennett, op. cit., p. 225.

In 1949, Knopf brought together most of the various letters, articles, and prefaces by Cather not previously collected in book form, in a volume called Willa Cather on Writing.

In 1950, James R. Shively collected much of the college writing of Willa Cather in a small volume entitled Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years, published by the University of Nebraska Press.

Honors

With literary fame came numerous honors from colleges and universities. The University of Nebraska led the way in 1917, by awarding her a Doctor of Literature degree. When the award was proposed, one of Cather's former professors objected strenuously, crying, "Over my dead body!"⁸²

Many other institutions followed suit: the University of Michigan in 1924,⁸³ Columbia in 1928,⁸⁴ the College of Mount Saint Joseph⁸⁵ and Yale University in 1929,⁸⁶ California⁸⁷ and Princeton⁸⁸ in 1931, and Smith in 1933.⁸⁹

⁸²Ibid., p. 215.

⁸³Who Was Who, op. cit.

⁸⁴New York Times, June 6, 1928, p. 16.

⁸⁵Ibid., June 6, 1929, p. 17.

⁸⁶Ibid., June 20, 1929, p. 16.

⁸⁷Who Was Who, II, 107.

⁸⁸New York Times, June 17, 1931, p. 29.

⁸⁹Ibid., June 20, 1933, p. 12.

The degree from Princeton was the first from that school awarded a woman.⁹⁰

Academic honors were not the only ones bestowed upon Willa Cather. She was awarded the 1922 Pulitzer Prize for the best novel of the year.⁹¹ In 1930, she received the William Dean Howells award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for her Death Comes for the Archbishop, judged one of the best books of the preceding five years.⁹² For her Shadows on the Rock she received in 1933 the Prix Femina Americain.⁹³

In 1934, she was the only American writer to have four books on the White House shelves.⁹⁴ She was elected to membership to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1938;⁹⁵ in 1944, she received a gold medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters.⁹⁶

Writing and Music As Art

(1) In one of her university essays, the one on Carlyle, Cather writes:

⁹⁰Ibid., June 17, 1931, p. 29.

⁹¹Ibid., May 14, 1923, p. 14.

⁹²Ibid., November 15, 1930, p. 16.

⁹³Ibid., February 3, 1933, p. 15.

⁹⁴Bennett, op. cit., p. 202.

⁹⁵New York Times, November 11, 1938, p. 26.

⁹⁶Ibid., January 28, 1944, p. 13.

Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so even than Jehovah—He says only "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Art, Science, and Letters cry, "Thou shalt have no other gods at all." They demand human sacrifices.⁹⁷

When asked of her likes and dislikes, she related to Latrobe

Carroll:

I like reading, going to operas and concerts, travel in the West; but on the whole writing interests me more than anything else.

.

I get more entertainment from it than any I could buy except the privilege of hearing a few great musicians and singers. To listen to them interests me as much as a good morning's work.⁹⁸

However contradictory the statements may seem, there is other evidence that Cather made writing her primary god. Elizabeth Moorhead relates the results of a telephone call to Cather:

"Louise Homer has just sent me two tickets for the opera tonight," I said; "It's Tristan. Will you go?"

Back came the reply, succinct, final.

"If you had two tickets for heaven I wouldn't go!"

I laughed and rang off. . . . I understood. She was hard at work on a book and couldn't spare an atom of time and energy for anything else, not even for the music she so much loved.⁹⁹

Cather's complete absorption in her work was the beginning of a withdrawal which later was to make her a recluse.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷Bennett, op. cit., p. 219, quoting Willa Cather.

⁹⁸Carroll, op. cit., p. 214, quoting Willa Cather.

⁹⁹Moorhead, op. cit., pp. 54-55.

¹⁰⁰Bennett, op. cit., p. 219.

The Last Years

During her last years, Willa Cather lived in virtual seclusion in her New York apartment, surrounded by mementos of a full life—books, paintings, fine laces, autographed pictures of famous musicians. Few of her friends knew that she was ill; she hated change, and she did not want to bother anyone.

After she left Pittsburgh, in 1906, Cather seldom returned there, for most of her friends had left. Years later she remarked to Elizabeth Moorhead as they reminisced about their Pittsburgh days:

"What a happy group of friends used to meet there in those days! And how few of them are left. And how little of the world they loved is left. If only we had been born in the year eighteen fifty, we would have had all the best things of four civilizations, and none of the horrors. Would never have known of, or dreamed of the horrors."¹⁰¹

After leaving Webster County, Nebraska, in 1896, she never returned permanently; and after the death of her mother in 1931, she did not go back at all. It is not surprising, because she said:

The rage for newness and conventionality is one of the things I deplore in present-day Nebraska.

The second is the prevalence of superficial culture. The women who run about from one culture club to another studying Italian art out of a textbook and an encyclopedia and believing that they are learning something about it by memorizing a string of facts are fatal to the spirit of art. The Negro boy who plays by ear on his fiddle, airs from "Traviata" without knowing what he is playing, or why he likes it, has more real understanding

¹⁰¹Moorhead, op. cit., p. 63, quoting Willa Cather.

of Italian art than these esthetic creatures with a head and a larynx, and no organs that they get any use of except to reel you off the life of Leonardo da Vinci.¹⁰²

Willa Cather never married, though she had several admirers at the University of Nebraska; and a young doctor wanted to marry her while she was in Pittsburgh. It has been suggested that she loved her freedom too much to give it up.¹⁰³

In her last years she came to hate any sort of photography, almost hating the reporters themselves. As some writers have stated, she seemed to forget that she had once been a reporter, dependent on a certain amount of interference into personal privacy for news, and that there had been times when she herself had wanted and needed publicity.¹⁰⁴

Cather had expressed her ideas of death in her Death Comes for the Archbishop:

Father Vaillant nodded. "Whenever God wills. I am ready." He rose and began to pace the floor, addressing his friend without looking at him. "But it has not been so bad, Jean? We have done the things we used to plan to do, long ago, when we were Seminaricians, —at least some of them. To fulfil the dreams of one's youth; that is the best that can happen to a man. No worldly success can take the place of that."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²Willia Cather interviewed by Eleanor Hinman of the Lincoln Star, quoted by Bennett, op. cit., pp. 148-149.

¹⁰³Bennett, op. cit., p. 219.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁰⁵Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 261. The italics are mine.

The New York Times of April 25, 1947, carried on one of its inner pages:

WILLA CATHER DIES, NOTED NOVELIST 70

Willa Sibert Cather, noted American novelist, died at 4:30 P. M. yesterday in her home at 570 Park Avenue. After Miss Cather's death a secretary, who was with her at the time, was too upset to talk about it. It was reported that death was due to a cerebral hemorrhage. . . . 106

To complete the picture, the same paper of April 30 carried the following:

Jaffrey, N. H., April 29. — Willa Cather . . . was buried today in the old Jaffrey burying grounds amid the New Hampshire woodlands where she spent her vacations and wrote many books.

The novelist's body was brought hereby train and automobile from New York where she died on Thursday at the age of 70. Two brothers, James and John Cather, and several other relatives accompanied the body.

The services were conducted by the Rev. A. G. Lund, Jr., rector of the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Wareham, Mass. 107

Contrary to many rumors, Willa Cather was not a member of the Roman Catholic Church, although she treated it very sympathetically in her works. Likewise the conducting of the burial services by an Episcopalian minister would rule out such a possibility. ^{with} In June, 1934, Willa Cather's secretary, in a letter to Madge Davis of

¹⁰⁶ New York Times, April 25, 1947, p. 21.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., April 30, 1947, p. 25.

Wichita Falls, stated: "She is a communicant of the Anglican Church, and is not a Roman Catholic."¹⁰⁸

Begin
Cather's choosing Jaffrey, New Hampshire, as a final resting place is rather singular. The fact that she had spent many quiet and pleasant hours near there, or that she had been moved by the quiet and beauty of the old, fern-covered burial place may have influenced her. Too, it is possible that when she thought of being buried in Red Cloud, she remembered the reception of the dead hero in "The Sculptor's Funeral."¹⁰⁹ The parallel in this case is a very close one.

Reticent to the end about her private affairs, Cather stipulated in her will that none of her letters were to be published or quoted; that all unfinished manuscripts were to be destroyed; and that none of her works were to be made into movies, televised, or performed in any other medium.¹¹⁰ At the time of her death, Cather had amassed a fortune of almost a half-million dollars.¹¹¹

An Evaluation

Katherine Anne Porter has perhaps more nearly evaluated her life and influence than any other present-day writer:

¹⁰⁸ Madge Davis, op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁰⁹ Bennett, op. cit., p. 226.

¹¹⁰ Moorhead, op. cit., p. 58.

¹¹¹ New York Times, September 22, 1949, p. 33.

Freud had happened: but Miss Cather continued to cite the old Hebrew prophets, the Greek dramatists, Goethe, Shakespeare, Dante, Tolstoy, Flaubert and such for the deeper truths of human nature, both good and evil. She loved Shelley, Wordsworth, Walter Pater, without any reference to their public standing at the time.

Stravinsky happened: but she went on being dead in love with Wagner, Beethoven, Schubert, Gluck, especially Orpheus and almost any opera. She was music-mad, and Ravel's La Valse enchanted her, and perhaps even certain later music, but she has not mentioned it.

.....

If you look at her lifetime, you see an army of writers moving in the background and in the middle distance, each one of them having, for one reason or another, influence, power, fame, credit; or sometimes just notoriety, the newspaper sort of fame so loud and sometimes misleading while it lasts. But Willa Cather stood, and stands, in the foreground. For she is a curiously immovable shape, monumental, virtue itself in her art and a symbol of virtue—like certain churches, in fact, or exemplary women, revered and neglected. Yet like these again, she has her faithful friends, and true believers, even, so to speak, her lovers, and they last a lifetime and after: the only kind of bond she would grant or require or respect.¹¹²

¹¹²Katherine Anne Porter, "Reflections on Willa Cather," Mademoiselle, XXXV (July, 1952), 104.

CHAPTER II

THE SHORT STORIES

First Publications

Lying hidden in the files of early-day literary publications of the University of Nebraska may be found some of the earliest examples of Willa Cather's art of fiction. While many of these are definitely juvenile, others give an occasional glimpse or trace of the artistry that was to become the trademark, so to speak, of Catherian fiction. A number of these juvenile efforts have been resurrected, the best collection probably being Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years, edited in 1950 by James R. Shively.

Recent research, however, shows that Cather had one short story, "Peter," published in an Eastern magazine, The Mahogany Tree, on May 21, 1892.

Joe W. Kraus, in an article in American Literature, gives information about this magazine:

The Mahogany Tree, one of the precursors of the little magazines, was an earnest, if self-conscious attempt to establish a paper devoted solely to the interests of the fine arts, "free from advertisements," and "opposed to the prevailing tendency to exaggerate the commonplace and to belittle the deeper passions and the importance of dramatic form."

Fathered by a group of Harvard contemporaries of Herbert Bates, the magazine included contributions from Louise Imogene Guiney, Edith Giles, Algernon Tassin, Ralph Adams Cram, Joseph Trumbull Stickney, and Jesse Lynch Williams, in addition to the poems, essays, and stories submitted anonymously by the original group during the twenty-six numbers of the magazine's existence.¹

Cather's only contribution to this magazine appeared as the leading story of the May 21 issue. When the story was published in the Hesperian a few months later, there were sixteen changes, four of which were probably printer's changes, the others being Cather's.

The story was later published in The Library, on July 21, 1900, under the title of "Peter Sadelack, Father of Antone," with the locale changed from Nebraska to Oklahoma.²

In this story, Cather shows very early her love of music, and also uses a musical instrument as the main object around which the story evolves.

Peter Sadelack has been a rather poor manager of his financial affairs, always full of the joie de vivre, and not too highly respected by the neighbors. Antone, his son, on the other hand, because he works hard and has a clean field, is admired by his neighbors in spite of his underhanded methods of dealing with people. The Sadelacks had lived in Southwestern Nebraska for five years, and only eight years before,

¹ Joe W. Kraus, "Willa Cather's First Published Story," American Literature, XXIII (January, 1952), 493-494.

² Willa Cather, "Peter Sadelack, Father of Antone," The Library, I (July 21, 1900), 5.

Peter Sadelack had been a second violinist in a theater in Prague until he had "a stroke of paralysis, which made his arms so weak that his bowing was uncertain."³

He could play in those days, ay, that he could! He could never read the notes well, so he did not play first; but his touch, he had a touch indeed, so Herr Mikilsdoff, who led the orchestra had said. . . . He had seen all the lovely women in the world there, all the great singers and the great players. He was in the orchestra when Rachel played, and he heard Liszt play when the Countess d'Agoult sat in a stage box and threw the master white lilies. . . . Once, a French woman came and played for weeks, he did not remember her name now. He did not remember her face very well. . . . Most of all he remembered her voice. He did not know French, and could not understand a word she said, but it seemed to him that she must be talking the music of Chopin. . . . Even in those days he was a foolish fellow who cared for nothing but music and pretty faces.⁴

But the day came when Antone demanded that old Peter sell his beloved violin. Peter refused, for above all else, "he loved his violin and the holy Mary, and above all else he feared the Evil one and his son Antone."⁵ Then comes the stark, horrifying tragedy:

The fire was low, and it grew cold. Still Peter sat by the fire remembering. . . . He held his violin under his wrinkled chin, his white hair fell over it, and he began to play "Ave Maria." His hand shook more than ever before, and at last refused to work the bow at all. He sat stupefied for awhile, then rose, and taking his violin with him, stole

³James R. Shively, editor, Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years, pp. 42-43.

⁴Ibid., p. 43.

⁵Ibid., p. 44.

out into the old stable. He took Antone's shot-gun down from its peg, and loaded it by the moonlight which streamed in through the door. He sat down on the dirt floor, and leaned back against the dirt wall. He heard the wolves howling in the distance, and the night wind screaming as it swept over the snow. Near him he heard the regular breathing of the horses in the dark. He put his crucifix above his heart, and folding his hands said brokenly all the Latin he had ever known, "Pater noster, qui in coelum est." Then he raised his head and sighed, "Not one kreutzer will Antone pay them to pray for my soul, not one kreutzer, he is so careful of his money, is Antone; he does not waste it in drink; he is a better man than I, but hard sometimes; he works the girls too hard; women were not made to work so; but he shall not sell thee, my fiddle, I can play thee no more, but they shall not part us; we have seen it all together, and we will forget it together, the French woman and all." He held his fiddle under his chin a moment, where it had lain so often, then put it across his knee and broke it through the middle. He pulled off his old boot, held the gun between his knees with the muzzle against his forehead, and pressed the trigger with his toe.

In the morning Antone found him stiff, frozen fast in a pool of blood. They could not straighten him out enough to fit a coffin, so they buried him in a pine box. Before the funeral Antone carried to town the fiddlebow which Peter had forgotten to break. Antone was very thrifty, and a better man than his father had been.⁶

This scene of suicide Cather was to use somewhat later for the death of Mr. Shimerda, in My Antonia.

In this story, in which she stresses both music and a nostalgic attitude for the past, Cather brought forth the first of her many works of fiction in which she used some sort of musical reference or background.

⁶Ibid., pp. 44-45.

There were other stories written during Cather's college days, though, insofar as music is concerned, many of them do not concern us here. Among them are "Lou, the Prophet," "A Tale of the White Pyramid," "A Son of the Celestial," "The Clemency of the Court," and "A Night at Greenway Court," the latter being published several years later in The Library.⁷ Little, if any, reference to music is made in these stories. In "A Tale of the White Pyramid," there are two slight references to singing:

. . . The youths clothed in white, and the priests and those who bore the body began to ascend the pyramid, singing as they went:

"Enter into thy rest, oh Pharaoh!
Enter into thy kingdom.
For the crown of the two lands was heavy,
And thy head was old,
And thou hast laid it aside forever.
Thy two arms were weak,
And the scepter was a great weight,
And thou hast put it from thee.
Enter thou into thy new reign,
Longer than the eternities.
Darkness shall be thy realm, O king,
And sleep thy minion.
The chariots of Ethiopia shall surround thee no more,
Nor the multitudes of the mighty encompass thee in battle,
For thou, being dead, art become as a god;
Good thou knowest, oh king;
And evil has been nigh unto thee,
Yet neither approach thee now,
For thou art dead, and like unto the gods."⁸

⁷Willia Cather, "A Night at Greenway Court," The Library, I (April 21, 1900), 5-7.

⁸Shively, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

And,

The musicians played and the people shouted, for never before in all Egypt had so great a stone been raised. But suddenly the shouting ceased, and the music was hushed, and a stillness . . . fell over the plain. . . .⁹

Music is used in this story merely as a method of transition—of passing from one scene to the next. Generally speaking, Cather made little use of music in this early period of her fiction writing.

Cather's next story to be given public attention was "On the Divide," published in the January, 1896, issue of The Overland Monthly, the magazine which had carried many of Bret Harte's early publications. The story, one with a background of pioneer Nebraska, has no mention of music.¹⁰

The Home Monthly and The Library

Cather's next groups of short stories appeared over a period of about five years in the Pittsburgh magazines, The Home Monthly and The Library.

Of the eight stories appearing in The Home Monthly, some of them under pseudonyms, three, "Tommy the Unsentimental," "The Way of the World," and "The Strategy of the Were-Wolf Dog," have no mention of music. The other five, "A Chronicle of Crow Court,"

⁹ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁰ Willa Cather, "On the Divide," Overland Monthly, XXVII (January, 1896), 65-75.

"The Count of Crow's Nest," "A Resurrection," "Nanette: An Aside," and "The Prodigies," all show a definite musical mood, with most of them having some phase of the singer's life as the main plot or theme of the works.

"A Chronicle of Crow Court," written under the pseudonym of W. Bert Foster, tells of the sacrifice made by a young man in one of the poor districts of the city, so that a talented young girl, Marguerite LaSalle, could become a singer. We first hear of Marguerite:

The child inherited a talent for song. Her voice was as sweet and clear as a wild bird's, and when she sang the whole court turned out to listen. ¹¹

Meg goes away to a church school to study. Later, when young Mickey goes to inquire of her from the Sister in charge,

. . . she told him how great had been Marguerite's improvement . . . especially in music. Her voice had been pronounced by experts to be remarkable. Several very good friends had been raised up for her and an opportunity had been offered her to go to Germany and continue her musical education. ¹²

Mickey's sensations on hearing her for the first time are described in detail:

The orchestra played something ravishingly beautiful—something which stole away his senses and made him forget the place and the people. . . . ¹³

¹¹W. Bert Foster (Willa Cather), "A Chronicle of Crow Court," Home Monthly Magazine, VII (May, 1897), 5.

¹²Ibid., p. 6.

¹³Ibid.

His vision blurred. His ears were dull of hearing and the tones of her voice reached his brain through a vast difference. He did not know what she sang or when she ceased. The wild applause of the audience made no impression on him.¹⁴

The final scene is reminiscent of one in The Song of the Lark, the one in which Spanish Johnny takes off his hat to Thea Kronberg as she leaves the opera house. The scene is tense with emotion. Meg comes to the place where Mickey is working, but does not know him. After being introduced again, she shakes hands with Mickey. After she had left, Mickey "stood silently, his eyes fixed on the doorway through which she had disappeared. Then he looked at the great coarse hand in which hers had rested and sighed."¹⁵

Another story with a similar name, "The Count of Crow's Nest," also has a background in which there is music. While the story shows the James influence, it also shows Cather's interest in the life of the young artist, particularly the musician.

"Crow's Nest" is the name given to an inexpensive, but reputable lodging house. The inhabitants are of many types. Harold Buchanan, who relates the story, "wrote comic operas that were never produced";¹⁶ while "the prima donna sneered at the chilly style of the

¹⁴Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵Willa Cather, "The Count of Crow's Nest," Home Monthly Magazine, VI (September, 1896), 9.

¹⁶Ibid.

great Australian soprano who was singing for a thousand dollars a night in the Auditorium. "¹⁷

(Here Cather is writing about Nellie Melba, who did receive \$1000 a night for singing—a sum rather high in those days.)

The one interesting person at "Crow's Nest" is Count Koch, who has a box of letters and papers pertaining to the nobility of Europe, papers which if they were published would create a great deal of scandal, or, as Harold Buchanan describes them:

If these notes could speak the import of their contents what a roar of guttural basses, soaring sopranos, and impassioned contraltos and tenors there would be. And would the dominant note of the chorus be of Ares or Eros, he wondered. ¹⁸

The Count has a daughter, a very crude person who is a singer, and who would sell the letters to some publishing house for publication. She sings in oratorio and concert, because she says "cher papa will not hear of the opera. Oratorio seems to be the special retreat of decayed gentility. "¹⁹

She continues,

"By the way, cher papa, you are coming tomorrow night to hear me sing that waltz song by Arditti?"

"Certainly, if you wish, but I am not fond of that style of music."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

"O certainly not, that's not to be expected or hoped for, nothing but mossbacks. But seriously, one cannot sing Mendelssohn or Haydn forever, and all the modern classics are so abominably difficult."²⁰

Then the friend of the Count's daughter appears on the scene:

He was a little tenor whom Buchanan remembered having seen before and whose mild dark eyes and swarthy skin had given him a pretext to adopt an Italian stage name.²¹

"I think Mademoiselle has another rehearsal. You know what it means to presume to keep pace with an art, eternal vigilance. There is no rest for the weary in our profession—not at least in this world." This was said with such a weighty sincerity that it almost provoked a smile from Buchanan. There are two words which no Chicago singer can talk ten minutes without using: "art" and "Chicago," and this gentleman had already indulged in both.²²

"O yes, we must be gone to practice the despised Arditti. . . ." She took possession of the tenor and departed.²³

Cather describes the concert, again being the music critic as she had been on the Lincoln, Nebraska, newspaper:

She sang floridly and with that peculiar confidence which always seems to attend uncertain execution. She had a peculiar trick of just seeming to catch a note by the skirts and then falling back from it, just touching it, as it were, but totally unable to sustain it. More than that, her very unconsciousness of this showed that she had absolutely no musical sense. . . . To sing badly and not to have perception enough to know it was such a bad index of one's mental and aesthetic constitution.²⁴

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., p. 12.

After the concert, Buchanan has dinner with the singer and her tenor. "She discussed current music and light opera in quite an amiable and disinterested manner,"²⁵ and the tenor said, "I would rather sing to Chicago audiences than any other, and I think I've been before the best ones in this country."²⁶

The story, published in two issues of The Home Monthly Magazine, ends in a dramatic vein. The singer has stolen the Count's letters, but they are recovered. The story ends with this speech which may be applicable to any type of dramatic form:

Our little comedy is over, it is time the lights were out; the fifth act has dragged out too long. I am in haste to give back to the earth this blood I carry and free the world from it. It is inherent failure, germinal weakness, madness and chaos. When all sense of honor dies utterly out of an old stock there is nothing left but annihilation. It should be buried deep, deep as they bury plague, blotted out like the forgotten dynasties of history.²⁷

Cather's next story, "A Resurrection," is primarily a story of the West and contains few references to music. Martin Dempster tells Margie Pierson, "I'm counting on you taking some singing lessons when we get down to St. Louis."²⁸

And there is also a bit of philosophy about the vicissitudes of life:

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., October, 1897, p. 23.

²⁸Willa Cather, "A Resurrection," Home Monthly Magazine, VII (April, 1897), 8.

. . . There are plenty of such woman who were made to ride in carriages and wear jewels and grace first nights at the opera, who through some blunder of stage management in this little comédie humaine, have wrong parts assigned them. . . .²⁹

In "The Prodigies," Cather for the first time really delves into the true feeling and meaning of various songs. She continues to show the heartbreak, despair, and hard work that must go into the making of a successful artistic career.

"The Prodigies" is the story of two sets of parents, both ambitious for their children to be musicians, and of the ultimate heartbreak caused by the ambitions of one parent. Harriet Norton had studied at the New England Conservatory and had won numerous honors. She had studied music abroad, where "it had been rumored that Leschetizky was about to launch her on a concert tour as a piano virtuoso . . . ," but she had married a Scotchman named Nelson Mackenzie "with a propensity for playing the cornet."³¹ He had "even played 'Promise Me.'³² Their two children are described:

. . . Although he had heard music from the time he could hear at all, the child displayed neither interest nor aptitude for it. In vain his papa tooted familiar airs to him on the cornet, sometimes he recognized them and sometimes he

²⁹Ibid., p. 4.

³⁰Willia Cather, "The Prodigies," Home Monthly Magazine, VII (July, 1897), 9.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

did not. It was just the same with the little girl. The poor child could never sing the simplest nursery air correctly.³³

On the other hand, the children of Kate Massey are very talented.

The Mackenzies go to the Massey home to hear the prodigies. On their arrival at the Massey home, they are told:

"We are just about to begin and I didn't want you to miss Adrienne's first number. It is the waltz song from Romeo and Juliet; she had special drill from Madame Marchesi, you know, and in London they consider it one of her best."³⁴

The concert is given; first Adrienne and then her brother perform:

As to the merit or even the "wonder" of her singing, there was no doubt. Even the unmusical Mackenzie, who could not have described her voice in technical language knew this voice was marvelous from the throat of a child. The volume of a mature singer was of course not there, but her tones were pure and limpid and wonderfully correct. The thing that most surprised him was . . . the "method" of the child's singing. Gounod's waltz aria is not an easy one and the child must have been perfectly taught.³⁵

"Herman will sing the 'Serenade.' He selected that because it saves his voice. The duet they will sing after dinner is very trying, it's the parting scene from Juliette, the one they will sing in concert next week."³⁶

The boy was the elder of the two; not so thin as his sister perhaps, but still pitifully fragile, with an unusually large head, all forehead, and those same dark tired eyes. He sang the German words of the matchless serenade of Schubert's so familiar yet so perennially new and strange;

³³Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., p. 10.

so old yet so immortally young. It was a voice like those one sometimes hears in the boy choirs of the great cathedrals of the Old World, a voice that untrained would have been alto rather than tenor, clear, sweet, and vibrant, with an undefinable echo of melancholy. He was less limited by his physique than his sister, and it seemed impossible that such strong, sustained tones could come from that fragile body. Although he sang so feelingly, there was no fervor, rather a yearning, joyless and hopeless. It was a serenade to which no lattice would open, which expected no answer. It was as though this boy of fifteen were tired of the very name of love, and sang of a lost dream, inexpressably sweet. . . . When the last vibrant note had died away the boy bowed, and coughing slightly, crossed the room and stood beside his father.³⁷

After the boy has sung his song, Kate Massey relates several things that pertain to her precocious children:

"When I would sing them to sleep, when they were little things just learning to talk, Herman would take up the contralto with me and little Adrienne would form the soprano for herself."³⁸

"We took them to Dr. Harrison's church one day and the soloist sang an aria from the Messiah. After that I had no rest; all day long it was 'Mamma, sing Man a'sorrows,' —It was before they could talk plainly. They would do anything for me if I would only sing 'In Questa Tomba' for them."³⁹

(Here Cather adds to the mood of the sombre and macabre when she tells of this song, whose opening lines translated from the Italian mean, "Within the forgotten tomb, let me rest. . . ." Rather morbid singing for children, one might think!)

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

. . . And she continues: "Madame Marchesi used to say 'a little Patti and Campinini.'"40

". . . And here . . . is Jean de Reszke's photograph that he gave Adrienne with the inscription, 'To the Juliette of the future from an old Romeo.' . . . And here is the jeweled miniature of Malibran that the Duke of Orleans gave her, and the opera glasses from Madame Marchesi. And there is the picture of her husband that Frau Cosima Wagner gave Hermann. Of course he doesn't sing Wagnerian music yet but ça ira, ça ira as Madame used to say."41

Mackenzie talks to the children before they sing the fateful duet.

He finds their life rather limited, other than their musical activities.

"We have read the legends of the Holy Grail, and the Frau Cosima Wagner gave us a book of the legends of the Nibelung Trilogy. We liked that. It was full of fights and things. I suppose I will have to sing all the music some day; there is a great deal of it you know," the boy said apprehensively. 42

"I fence half an hour every morning. I will need to know how some day, when I sing Faust and parts like that."43

"You go to the opera often, don't you?"

"Yes," replied the little girl, "we are going to see 'Damnation of Faust' tomorrow night. . . ."44

". . . It's the only time they will sing Berlioz's 'Damnation of Faust' here this season, and we ought to hear it."45

After dinner the guests assemble to hear the duet from Romeo and Juliet.

40 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 11.

44 Ibid.

41 Ibid., p. 10.

43 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

They quietly took their places . . . and began that frenzied song of pain and parting: Tu die partir ohime! Poor little children! What could they know of the immeasurable anguish of that farewell—or of the immeasurable joy which alone can make such sorrow possible? What could they know of the fearful potency of the words they uttered, —words that have governed nations and wrecked empires!

They sang bravely enough, but the effect was that of trying to force the tones of a 'cello from a violin.

Suddenly a quick paleness came over the face of the little Juliet. Still struggling with the score, she threw out her hand and caught her Romeo's shoulder, swaying like a flower before the breath of a hurricane. ⁴⁶

The tragedy is that the child Adrienne will never again be able to sing. When reproached by Mackenzie, Kate Massey says:

"I know the child was properly taught. This has broken my heart but it has not convinced me I am in error. I have said I could make any sacrifice for their art, but God knows I never thought it would be this."⁴⁷

Turning to her young son, she says:

"Ah, my boy, you must travel your way alone now. I suppose the day must have come when one of you must have suffered for the other. Two of the same blood can never achieve equally. Perhaps it is best that it should come now: But remember, my son, you carry not one destiny in your throat but two. You must be great enough for both!"

The boy kissed her and said gently, "Don't cry, Mother. I will try."

His mother hid her face on his shoulder and he turned to the Doctor, who was drawing on his gloves, and shrugging his frail shoulders, smiled. It was a smile which might have touched the face of some Roman youth on the bloody sand when the reversed thumb of the Empress pointed deathward. ⁴⁸

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

All in all, this is one of Cather's most tragic and most bitter short stories. From beginning to end, she uses music as a device for predicting coming events. She analyzes the various musical selections, tells how they appeal to the listeners, and for the first time relies wholly on classical music to heighten the interest and emotions involved in the story.

"Nanette: An Aside," which appeared in August, 1897, is the story of a famous opera singer, Tradutorri, based possibly on the life of Emma Calvé. (This is mere conjecture on the part of the present writer, though certain things coincide with Cather's treatment of Calvé in an article published somewhat later.) Here Cather gives much of the behind-the-scene events in the life of a singer. Nanette is Madame Tradutorri's personal maid, who wishes to marry, and does. Tradutorri tells Nanette something of her life's story:

"Your mother and I were friends once when we both sang in the chorus in a miserable little theatre in Naples. She sang quite as well as I then, and she was a handsome girl and her future looked brighter than mine. But somehow in the strange lottery of art I rose and she went down under the wheel. She had youth, beauty, vigor, but was one of the countless thousands who fall. When I found her years afterwards, dying in a charity hospital in Paris, I took you from her. You were scarcely two years old then. If you had sung I should have given you the best instruction; as it was, I was only able to save you from that most horrible of fates, the chorus."⁴⁹

⁴⁹Willa Cather, "Nanette: An Aside," Home Monthly Magazine, VII (August, 1897), 6.

Tradutorri pulled up from her dressing case the score of the last great opera written in Europe which had been sent her to originate the title role.

"You see this, Nanette? When I began life, between me and this lay everything dear in life—every love, every human hope. I have had to bury what lay between. It is the same thing florists do when they cut away all the buds that one flower may blossom with the strength of all. God is a very merciless artist, and when he works out his purposes in the flesh his chisel does not falter."⁵⁰

"Why, Nanette, you are crying! One would think you had sung 'Voi lo sapete' yourself last night."⁵¹

The following material is of the music critic style that Cather had often used when reporting:

. . . Tradutorri always slept late after a performance. Last night it was Cavalleria Rusticana, and Santuzza is a trying role when it is enacted not merely with the emotions but with the soul, and it is this peculiar soul-note that has made Tradutorri great and unique among the artists of her generation.⁵²

Tradutorri had just returned from her last performance in New York. It had been one of those eventful nights when the audience catches fire and drives a singer to her best, drives her beyond herself until she is greater than she knows or means to be. Now that it was over she was utterly exhausted and the life force in her was low.⁵³

I have said that she is the only woman of our generation who sings with the soul rather than the senses, the only one indeed since Malibran, who died of that prodical expense of spirit. Other singers there are who feel and vent their suffering. Their methods are simple and transparent; they pour their self-inflicted anguish and when it is over they are merely tired as children are after excitement. But Tradutorri holds back her suffering within herself; she suffers as

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 6.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵³ Ibid.

the flesh and blood women of her century suffer. She is intense without being emotional. She takes this great anguish of hers and lays it in a tomb and rolls a stone before the door and walls it up. You wonder that one woman's heart can hold a grief so great. It is this stifled pain that wrings your heart when you hear her, that gives you the impression of horrible reality. It is this too, of which she is dying.

See, in all great impersonations there are two stages. One in which object is the generation of emotional power; to produce from one's own brain a whirlwind that will sweep the commonplaces of the world away from the naked souls of men and women and leave them defenceless and strange to each other. The other is the conservation of this emotional energy; to bind the whirlwind down within one's straining heart, to feel the tears of many burning in one's eyes and yet not to weep, to all those chaotic faces still and silent within one's self until out of this tempest of pain and passion there speaks the still, small voice unto the soul of man. . . . This is the theory of "repression." This is classical art, art exalted, art deified. And of all the mighty arts of her time Tradutorri is the only woman who has given us art like this.⁵⁴

Cather in these short stories of The Home Monthly period of her writing shows her great interest in the opera, and in opera singers. A perusal of the list of the great singers of those days will show such famous names as the de Reszkes, Marcella Sembrich, Pol Plançon, Emma Calvé, Nellie Melba, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Lillian Nordica, Emma Eames, and so many others.⁵⁵

At the same time Cather uses the music which she had heard and is familiar with. She also uses actual people as characters in her

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Mary E. Peltz, Behind the Gold Curtain, pp. 25-38.

stories, such as Jean de Reszke, Adelina Patti, Italo Campinini, Blanche Marchusi, and others. She was at the same time learning to give emotional impact to her work by using carefully chosen songs or arias.

During 1900 several of Cather's short stories were published in The Library, a short-lived publication. Of seven stories known to be Cather's or else attributed to her, four contain references to music, the remaining three, "The Sentimentality of William Tavener," "Conversion of Sum Loo," and "The Night at Greenway Court," lacking any musical content, while "Peter Sadelack, Father of Anton," though containing musical material, was merely a revised version of her story "Peter," published at least twice before.⁵⁶

In "The Affair at Grover's Station," there are two interesting statements, both descriptive in nature:

The telegraph poles scored the sky like a musical staff as they flashed by and the stars, seen between the wires, looked like the notes of some erratic symphony.⁵⁷

The orchestra was playing a waltz, drawing the strains out long and sweet like the notes of a flute.⁵⁸

The story is actually a rather eerie and gruesome murder story, reminiscent somewhat of Henry James' The Turn of the Screw.

⁵⁶Complete bibliographical data for these may be found in the full bibliography, listed at the end of the thesis.

⁵⁷Willa Cather, "The Affair at Grover's Corner," The Library, I (June 16, 1900), 3.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 4.

"The Dance at Chevalliers," written by Cather under the pseudonym of Henry Nicklemann, has all the elements of the typical Catherian story: music, the West, and foreigners. In addition, we meet an old friend, Peter Sadelack. The dance is described:

At nine o'clock the dance began, the dance that was to have lasted all night. Harry Burns played on an old bass viol, and Alplosen de Mar played the organ, but the chief musician was the old Bohemian, Peter Sadelack, who played the violin. Peter had seen better days, and had played in a theatre in Prague until he had paralysis and was discharged because his bowing was uncertain.⁵⁹

The statement is made, too, that "all those Frenchmen could play a fiddle from the time they were old enough to hold one."⁶⁰

"A Singer's Romance," published a short time later, is basically little more than a re-hash of Cather's earlier story, "Nanette." In this case the major character is Frau Selma Schumann, and the maid is Toinette.

A comparison of the endings of the two stories is rather interesting. The earlier version, "Nanette," showed a slightly different prima donna in Madame Tradutorri:

After Nanette was gone, Madame put her head down on her dressing case and wept, those lonely tears of utter wretchedness that a homesick girl sheds at school. And yet upon her brow shone the coronet that the nations had given her when they called her queen.⁶¹

⁵⁹Henry Nicklemann (Willa Cather), "The Dance at Chevalliers," The Library, I (April 28, 1900), 12.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Willa Cather, "Nanette: An Aside," The Home Monthly Magazine, VII (August, 1897), 6.

Frau Selma Schumann, in "A Singer's Romance," shows her Teutonic character: "Then she dried her eyes and railed at Fortune in deep German polysyllables and gesturing like an enraged Valkyr."⁶²

During this period Cather was experimenting with material that was not yet completely her own, but which eventually would be, when she was to write such works as The Song of the Lark and Lucy Gayheart.

"Eric Hermansson's Soul"

The Cosmopolitan Magazine of April, 1900, carried Cather's longest and most ambitious story to that date. It was "Eric Hermansson's Soul," a psychological story, generally speaking, yet one in which music plays a strong part, especially in the creation of a mood or in the expression of emotions.

The first part of the story relates the events at a camp meeting of the Free Gospellers, a religious sect:

Tonight Eric Hermansson, the wildest lad on all the Divide, sat in his audience with a fiddle on his knee, just as he had dropped in on his way to play for some dance. The violin is an object of particular abhorrence to the free Gospellers. Their antagonism to the church organ is bitter enough, but the fiddle they regard as a very incarnation of evil desires, singing forever of worldly pleasures and inseparably associated with all forbidden things.⁶³

⁶²Willa Cather, "A Singer's Romance," The Library, I (July 28, 1900), 16.

⁶³Willa Cather, "Eric Hermansson's Soul," Cosmopolitan Magazine, XXVIII (April, 1900), 633.

The whole congregation groaned under the pressure of spiritual panic. Shouts and hallelujahs went up from every lip. Another figure fell prostrate to the floor. From the mourners bench rose a chant of rapture and terror:

"Eating honey and drinking wine,
Glory to the bleeding lamb!
 I'm the Lord's and he is mine,
Glory to the bleeding lamb!"

The hymn was sung in a dozen dialects and voiced all the vague yearning of these hungry lives of these people who had starved all the passions so long only to fall victims to the basest of them all, fear.⁶⁴

The final barrier between Eric and his mother's faith was his violin, and to that he clung as a man sometimes will cling to his dearest sin.⁶⁵

Eric Hermansson rose to his feet; his lips were set and the lightning was in his eyes. He took his violin by the neck and crushed it to splinters across his knee, and to Asa Skinner, the sound was like the shackles of sin broken asunder.⁶⁶

The emotional impact of the church song and of the smashing of the violin could hardly be described more realistically. Like Peter Sadelack in Cather's first published story, Eric smashes his beloved violin in an emotional crisis. In both stories the central character is a lover of music who is deprived of music, and this conflict is central in both stories. It is a conflict which Cather repeated in later writings.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 634.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 635.

There are possible occasional references to Wagnerian opera characters, such as "Siegfried? Come, that's rather good, Wyllis. He looks like a dragon slayer,"⁶⁷ and, "You'd better be nice indeed for if there are many such valkyrs as Eric's sister among them. . . ."⁶⁸

Wyllis and Margaret Elliot appear on the scene and other musical events take place.

They had slept in sod houses on the Platte River, made the acquaintance of the personnel of a third-rate opera company on the train to Deadwood. . . . and . . . had watched a dance at Cripple Creek, where the lost souls who hide in the hills gathered for their besotted revelry.⁶⁹

Later Margaret meets Eric. She relates to her brother one of the incidents:

" . . . Eric stumbled in, and in some inarticulate manner made me understand that he wanted me to sing for him. . . . I sang just the old familiar things of course. . . . And of course I played the intermezzo from Cavalleria Rusticana for him; it goes better on the organ than most things do.

"He . . . just sort of rose up and told his own woe to answer Mascagni's. It overcame me."

"Poor devil," said Wyllis, looking at her with mysterious eyes, "and so you've given him a new woe. Now he'll go on wanting Grieg and Schubert all the rest of his life and never getting them."⁷⁰

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 636.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 638.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 635.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 636-637.

Eric visits Margaret again:

"I want to ask you if I go to New York to work, if I maybe hear music like you sang last night?"

.....

"You are the only beautiful thing that has ever come close to me. You came like an angel out of the sky. You are like the music you sing. . . . "71

The dance at which Eric falls from grace, so to speak, is described in such a way that one both hears and sees it:

About midnight the dance at Lockharts was at its height. Even the old men who had come to "look on" caught the spirit of revelry and stamped the floor with the vigor of old Silenus. Eric took the violin from the Frenchman and Minna Olson sat at the organ and the music grew more and more characteristic—rude, half-mournful music, made up of the folk songs of the Northland, that the villagers sang through the long night in hamlets by the sea when they are thinking of the sun, and the Spring, and the fisherman so long away. To Margaret it sounded like Grieg's Peer Gynt music.⁷²

As in other of Cather's works, the musical background here is of such a type that will depict highly emotional scenes. If one is familiar with the various Grieg musical selections, the mood created by Cather in this scene is even more powerful and meaningful.

Miscellaneous Uncollected Works

From late 1900, when The Library suspended publication, until the publication of her first novel in 1912, Cather wrote or submitted

⁷¹Ibid., p. 640.

⁷²Ibid., p. 642.

for publication at least twelve stories. Five of these have little or no reference to music. "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional" makes mention of a trip to Washington to hear Patti sing.⁷³

"The Professor's Commencement," "The Enchanted Bluff," "The Willing Muse," "The Profile," and "Eleanor's House," published in various magazines, show only minor, if any reference, to music.⁷⁴

In "The Namesake" one may find mention of a bugle and also some lines from "The Star-Spangled Banner":

"The bugle whenever I have heard it since has always seemed to me the very golden throat of that boyhood which spent itself so gaily, so innocently."⁷⁵

"My uncle, I gathered, was none too apt in his Latin, for the pages were dog eared and rubbed and interlined, the margins mottled with pencil sketches—bugles, stacked bayonets, and artillery carriages. In the act of putting the book down, I happened to run over the pages to the end, and on the fly-leaf at the back I saw his name again and a drawing—with his initials and a date—of the Federal flag; above it, written in a kind of arch and in the same unformed hand:

'Oh, say, can you see by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's
last gleaming?'

"The experience of that night coming so overwhelmingly to a man so dead, almost rent me in pieces. It was

⁷³Willia Cather, "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional," New England Magazine, XXIV (June, 1901), 359.

⁷⁴Complete bibliographical listings of these works may be found in the bibliography at the end of the thesis.

⁷⁵Willia Cather, "The Namesake," McClure's Magazine, XXVIII (March, 1907), 494.

the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force of purpose and security, of being glad we have lived."⁷⁶

"The Treasure of Far Island" has one major reference to music, that one being in the form of a reminiscence:

"Do you remember how, at the Sunday School concerts on Children's Day you and Pagie and Shortie and Temp used to stand in a row behind the flower wreathed pulpit rail, all in your new round-about suits with large silk bows tied under your collars, your hands behind you, and assure us with sonorous voices that you would come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves?"⁷⁷

"The Gull's Road" likewise has little material of a musical nature, the only references being purely descriptive:

There is something in each of us that does not belong to the family or to society, not even to ourselves. Sometimes it is given in marriage, and sometimes it is given in love, but oftener it is never given at all. We have nothing to do with giving or withholding it. It is a wild thing that sings in us once and flies away and never comes back, and mine has flown to you. When one loves like that it is enough somehow."⁷⁸

It was one of those strange, low musical exclamations which meant everything and nothing. . . .⁷⁹

One of Cather's last stories to be published before the appearance of Alexander's Bridge was "The Joy of Nelly Deane." The

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Willa Cather, "The Treasure of Far Island," New England Magazine, XXVII (October, 1902), 243.

⁷⁸Willa Cather, "On the Gull's Road," McClure's Magazine, XXXII (December, 1908), 151.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 152.

heroine of this story is somewhat vaguely reminiscent of Lucy Gayheart. She is a singer, though, while Lucy is a pianist. Yet the same wistful quality of the girls is present in both stories.

This story is primarily one of reminiscence. The young Nelly is described as "when she was not singing, she was laughing."⁸⁰

The musical life of Nelly in her younger days is given in detail, some of which is quoted:

When she rose and stood behind the organ and sang "There Is a Green Hill," one could see Mrs. Dow and Mrs. Freeze settle back in their accustomed seats and look upon her as if she had just come from that hill and had brought them glad tidings.⁸¹

It was because I sang contralto, or as we said, alto, in the Baptist choir that Nell and I became friends. . . . I think even then I must have loved to see her bloom and glow, and I loved to hear her sing, in "The Ninety and Nine,"

But one was out on the hills away
in her sweet, strong voice. Nell had never had a singing lesson, but she had sung from the time she could talk, and Mrs. Dow used fondly to say that it was her singing so much that made her figure so pretty.⁸²

The "Queen Esther" performance had cost us three months of hard practice. . . . Some of the boys we knew were in the chorus of Assyrian youths, but the solo cast was made up of older people and Nell found them very poky. . . .

⁸⁰Willia Cather, "The Joy of Nelly Deane," Century Magazine, LXXXII (October, 1911), 859.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 860.

⁸²Ibid.

It was certainly Nelly's night, for however much the tenor—he was her schoolmaster and thought poorly of her—might try to eclipse her in his dolorous solos about the rivers of Babylon; there could be no doubt as to whom the people had come to hear and see.⁸³

Like Ántonia in My Ántonia, Nelly had hopes of marrying a certain young man and of "going to live in Chicago and take singing lessons, and go to operas and do all those nice things . . ." ⁸⁴ Unfortunately, the young man marries someone else. Nelly eventually marries the hard-hearted, grasping son of one of her old friends. She is later baptized into the Baptist Church of which her husband was a member:

She went down until the water was well above her waist and stood white and small, with her hands crossed on her breasts, while the minister said the words about being buried with Christ in baptism. . . . The choir began to sing "Washed in the Blood of the Lamb" as they rose again.⁸⁵

Nelly dies in childbirth, because of a lack of proper medical care. This story, like the first part of "Eric Hermansson's Soul," derives much of its emotional appeal from the use of church music. In both stories, Cather was probably recalling scenes she had seen during her childhood.

"The Bohemian Girl" is another of those stories having the qualities of My Ántonia and O Pioneers! In fact, it could easily have been

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 862.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 863.

a chapter discarded from either of those books, so nearly is it in their same vein.

At the very beginning we learn that someone in the Norwegian family is musical:

He craned his neck and looked at Nils' flute-case with eager curiosity.

"The old woman ain't got any pianny that I knows on. Olaf, he has a grand. His wife's musical, took lessons in Chicago."⁸⁶

Other musical events are recalled:

Vavrika was always jolly. He played the violin, and I used to take my flute and Clara played the piano, and Johanna used to sing Bohemian songs.⁸⁷

Nils lifted his flute and began "When Other Lips and Other Hearts," and Joe hummed the air in a husky baritone, waving his carpet slipper. "Oh-h-h das-a fine music," he cried, clapping his hands as Nils finished. "Now 'Marble Halls, Marble Halls,' Clara, you sing him."

Clara smiled and leaned back in her chair, beginning softly:

"I dream't that I dwelt in ma-a-arble halls,
With vassals and serfs at my knee,"
and Joe hummed like a big bumble bee.

"There's one more you always played," Clara said quietly, "I remember that best." She locked her hands over her knee and began "The Heart Bowed Down," and sang it through without groping for words. She was singing with a great deal of warmth when she came to the end of the old song,

"For memory is the only friend
That grief can call its own."⁸⁸

⁸⁶Willia Cather, "The Bohemian Girl," McClure's Magazine, XXXIX (August, 1912), 422.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 433.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 436.

Nils put his lips to the instrument and Joe lay back in his chair, laughing and singing. "Oh, Evelina. Sweet Evelina!" Clara laughed too. . . . Evelina Oleson . . . had a long swinging walk which somehow suggested the measure of that song, and they used mercilessly to sing it at her.⁸⁹

Among other descriptions is that of a dance:

The musicians grinned, looked at each other, and began a new air; and Nils sang with them, as the couples fell from a quick waltz to a long slow glide:

"When other lips and other hearts
Their tale of love shall tell,
In language whose excess imparts
The power they feel so well,
.

Of days that have as ha-a-p-py been
And you'll remember me."⁹⁰

Here, as one may see, Cather uses music that is familiar to the people, music that is part of their life.

"Behind the Singer Tower," published in 1912, contains only one reference to music and that a rather grim one.

I found . . . a man's hand snapped off at the wrists as cleanly as if it had been taken off by a cutlass. . . .

It had belonged to Graziana, the tenor. . . . Yes, it was the same hand, I had seen it often enough when he placed it so confidently over his chest as he began his "Celeste Aida. . . ." ⁹¹

Cather's next three stories, "Consequences," "The Bookkeeper's Wife," and "Ardessa," have no mention of music.⁹²

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 440.

⁹¹Willia Cather, "Behind the Singer Tower," Collier's, LXIX (May 18, 1912), 41.

⁹²Complete bibliographical listings of these works may be found in the bibliography at the end of this thesis.

"Uncle Valentine," serialized in the February and March, 1925, issues of Woman's Home Companion Magazine, has several references to music, besides being based on the life of a composer. The story has a brief introduction; then the major portion of the story is told by a flashback method. Valentine Ramsey has left his wife and run off with another woman, a singer. His wife, a woman of wealth, is not interested in his music, or in any of the other things he likes. He had studied "in Paris under Saint-Saens,"⁹³ before marrying. One time he slipped away from his wife:

I got off to Bayreuth one time. Thought I'd covered my tracks well. She arrived in the middle of the Ring. My God, the agony of having to sit through music with that woman.⁹⁴

Roland Ramsey, brother of Valentine, had also studied music in Germany, but "under Liszt and D'Albert."⁹⁵

The young girl who relates the story tells that Valentine "made an arrangement for voices of the minuet in the third movement of Brahms' second symphony, and wrote words to it."⁹⁶ She also relates another incident:

While we were at dessert, Uncle Valentine went into the music-room and began to play the Rhine music. He

⁹³Willia Cather, "Uncle Valentine," Woman's Home Companion, LII (February, 1925), 8.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 86.

⁹⁵Ibid., March, 1925, p. 15.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 16.

played on as if he would never stop; Siegmund's love song and the Valhalla music and back to the Rhine journey and the Rhine maidens.⁹⁷

And Roland remarks as Valentine plays the Wagner selections:

"It's not a good thing to play Wagner at night. . . . It brings on sleeplessness."⁹⁸

Valentine Ramsey leaves for Paris, where he is killed shortly afterwards, but "when he went away he left between the leaves of one of my aunt's music books the manuscript of the most beautiful and heart breaking of all the songs, 'I know a wall where the red roses grow. . . .'"⁹⁹

In the final spirit of reminiscence, the narrator tells of all that passed after Valentine's death, and summarizes with this statement:

Fox Hill is gone, and our wall is gone, I know a wall where red roses grow; youngsters sing it still.
The roses of song and the roses of memory, they are the only ones that last.¹⁰⁰

Cather returned to her love of classical music and famous singers in her 1929 short story, "Double Birthday." The story compares the lives of people in two families, one wealthy, the other poor. The poorer group has at one time been rich, but has squandered its money in the sheer joy of living. There are numerous flashbacks which give some poignant scenes in the life of old Doctor Engelhardt.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Three Catherian characteristics are noticed in the story: the protest against change, the passing of the old, and musical and literary backgrounds.

Most of the musical backgrounds are found in the reminiscences of the old doctor, or in references to his family:

While Judge Hammersley was settling down to his book, Albert Engelhardt was sitting at home in a garnet velvet smoking jacket, at an upright piano, playing Schumann's Kreisleriana for his uncle. . . . After playing Schumann for some time, Albert without stopping went into Stravinsky.

Dr. Engelhardt by the gas fire stirred uneasily, turned his important head toward his nephew, and snapped his teeth. "Br-r-r, that stuff. Poverty of imagination, poverty of musical invention: fin-de-siècle!"

Albert laughed. "I thought you were asleep. Why will you use that phrase? It shows your vintage. Like this any better?" He began the second act of Pelleas et Melisande.

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, that is better, though I'm not fooled by it."¹⁰¹

Dr. Engelhardt . . . had been a medical student in New York while Patti was still singing; his biography fell into chapters of great voices as a turfman's falls into chapters of fast horses.¹⁰²

One morning . . . he stopped in front of the Allegheny High School Building because he heard singing—a chorus of young voices. . . . Among the voices he heard one Voice. . . . Just then the piano began again, and in a moment, he heard the same voice alone:

¹⁰¹ Willa Cather, "Double Birthday," Forum, LXXXI (February, 1929), 81-82.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 82.

"Still wie die Nacht, tief wie das Meer."

No, he was not mistaken; a full, rich soprano voice, so easy, so sure; a golden warmth, even in the high notes. Before the second verse was over he went softly into the building, and for the first time laid eyes on Marguerite Thiesinger. ¹⁰³

Within a week he had got his protégée to a very fine artist, just then returning from the opera, a woman who had been a pupil of Pauline Garcia Viardot. ¹⁰⁴

To his nephews he used to match her possibilities with the singers of that period. Emma Eames he called die Puritan, Geraldine Farrar la voix blanche, another was trop raffinée. ¹⁰⁵

The sad part of the story is that the young singer dies without fulfilling the ambitions of the doctor.

In this story Cather uses music that was then popular as well as mentions the names of numerous singers of the day. Those she mentions were some of the best of all times—truly members of the Golden Age of singing!

The Collected Works

In 1905 Cather collected seven of her short stories into book form and submitted them to the McClure-Phillips Company of New York for publication. Four of the stories had previously been published in periodicals. They were "A Death in the Desert," in Scribner's

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

Magazine in January, 1903; "A Wagner Matinee," in Everybody's Magazine in March, 1904; "The Sculptor's Funeral," in McClure's Magazine in January, 1905; and "Paul's Case," in McClure's Magazine for May, 1905. The remaining three stories were "Flavia and Her Artists," "The Garden Lodge," and "The Marriage of Phaedra." Only the four which had been published in periodicals prior to the issue of The Troll Garden, as the publication was called, were included in Cather's 1920 compilation entitled Youth and the Bright Medusa.

Since The Troll Garden has been long out of print, and the present writer has been unable to obtain it, he will discuss only those stories which were retained in the later collection, although there was in all probability a use of music in those three. Cather herself did not particularly care for the three stories, but nevertheless kept them copyrighted in order to prevent their re-publication.

Youth and the Bright Medusa

All of the stories in this collection are stories of artists—painters, sculptors, and musicians. In addition to the four stories originally published in The Troll Garden, four others have been included: "Coming, Aphrodite!," "The Diamond Mine," "A Gold Slipper," and "Scandal," with three of these being previously published in periodicals: "The Diamond Mine," in McClure's Magazine, October, 1916; "The Gold Slipper," in Harper's Magazine, January, 1917; and

"Scandal," in the Century Magazine, August, 1919. Of the eight, only "The Sculptor's Funeral" has no mention of music.

"Coming, Aphrodite!," the first story in the collection, relates the trials of a young man and a young woman. The young man was one of the early Modernists in the field of art, and refused to conform to the then traditional forms of art. The young lady was studying to become a singer.

There are numerous minor references to music, some of which are not too important, such as "a piano was arriving";¹⁰⁶ "one of them sat down at the piano and they all began to sing";¹⁰⁷ "a band of six pieces commenced playing furiously";¹⁰⁸ "the band struck up 'Blue Bell' by way of welcome";¹⁰⁹ or, "the moment he put his arms about her they began to talk, both at once, as people do in an opera,"¹¹⁰ and others of similar vein.

Probably the best description of musical activity is given in this paragraph:

They were quite lost in watching the glittering game, when they were suddenly diverted by a sound, —not from the stars, though it was music. It was not the Prologue

¹⁰⁶Willia Cather, "Coming, Aphrodite!," Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 36.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 48.

to Pagliacci, which rose ever and anon on hot evenings from an Italian tenement on Thompson Street, with the gasps of the corpulent baritone who got behind it; nor was it the hurdy-gurdy man, who often played at the corner in the balmy twilight. No, this was a woman's voice, singing the tempestuous overlapping phrases of Signor Puccini, then comparatively new in the world, but already so popular that even Hedger recognized his unmistakable gusts of breath. . . . Oh yes! It came up through the hole like a strong draught, a big, beautiful voice, and it sounded rather like a professional's. A piano had arrived in the morning, Hedger remembered. ¹¹¹

Years later, Eden Bower, the singer, returned to New York:

COMING, APHRODITE! This legend, in electric lights over the Lexington Opera House, had long announced the return of Eden Bower to New York after years of spectacular success. She came at last, under the management of an American Opera Company, but bringing her own chef d'orchestre. ¹¹²

There are other references to music, but generally, they are of the same type already quoted.

"The Diamond Mine" is the story of a famous opera singer, Cressida Garnett, who at the beginning of the story is mentioned as "a prima donna who would never be any younger and who had just announced her intention of marrying a fourth time." ¹¹³

Cressida has supported all her relatives in a financial way, they never realizing the amount of work she must do to be a famous singer. The whole lot of Garnetts, Cressida's son, and her fourth

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 59-60.

¹¹³ Willa Cather, "The Diamond Mine," Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 67.

husband are nothing more than vultures—while Cressida is truly a "diamond mine" for them.

We meet Cressida aboard a ship, on her way to Europe:

"I asked him if Cressida had engagements in London."

"Quite so; the Manchester Festival, some concerts at Queen's Hall, and the opera at Covent Garden; a rather special production of the operas of Mozart. That she can do quite well."¹¹⁴

There are numerous flashbacks as Cressida's life story is revealed:

It was no wonder Cressy ran away with Charley Wilton. . . . He was her first music teacher, the choir master of the church in which she sang. Charley was very handsome; the "romantic" son of an old impoverished family . . . he had gone abroad to study music when that was an extravagant and picturesque thing for an Ohio boy to do. . . .

Nobody was properly married in our part of Columbus unless Charley Wilton, and no other, played the wedding march. The old ladies of the First Church used to say that he "hovered over the keys like a spirit." At nineteen Cressida was beautiful enough to turn a much harder head than the pale ethereal one Charley Wilton bent above the organ.¹¹⁵

. . . There had been, professionally, two Cressida Garnetts: the big handsome girl, already a "popular favourite" of the concert stage, who took with her to Germany the raw material of a great voice;—and the accomplished artist who came back. The singer that returned was largely the work of Miletus Poppas. Cressida had at least known what she needed, hunted for it, found it, and held fast to it. . . . Cressida was not musically intelligent; she never became so. Who does not remember the countless rehearsals that were necessary before she sang *Isolde* in Berlin, the disgust of the conductor, the sullenness of the tenor, the rages of the blonde

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 70.

¹¹⁵Ibid., pp. 84-85.

teufelin, boiling with the impatience of youth and genius, who sang her Brangaena? Everything but her drawing power she had to get from the outside. ¹¹⁶

She was singing twice a week, sometimes oftener, at the Metropolitan that season, quite at the floodtide of her powers, and so enmeshed in operatic routine that to be walking in the park at an unaccustomed hour, attended by one of the men of her entourage, seemed adventurous. ¹¹⁷

Cressida Garnett's third husband, Blasius Bouchalka, was also a musician. Gather relates in detail many of the musical activities that brought them together.

The orchestra was playing as we entered and selected our table. It was not a bad orchestra, and we were no sooner seated than the first violin began to speak, to assert itself, as if it were suddenly done with mediocrity. . . . The violinist was standing directing his men with his head and with the beak of the violin. He was a tall gaunt young man, big-boned and rugged, in skin-tight clothes. His high forehead had a kind of luminous pallor, and his hair was jet black and somewhat stringy. His manner was excited and dramatic. . . .

. . . The violinist rummaged among some music piled on a chair, turning over the sheets with flurried rapidity as if he were searching for a lost article of which he was in desperate need. Presently he placed some sheets upon the piano and began vehemently to explain something to the pianist. The pianist stared at the music doubtfully. . . . The violinist bent over him, suggesting rhythms with his shoulders and running his bony finger up and down the pages. When he stepped back to his place, I noticed the other players sat at ease, without raising their instruments.

"He is going to try something unusual," I commented. "It looks as if it might be manuscript."

It was something, at all events, that neither of us had heard before, though it was very much in the manner of the later Russian composers who were just beginning to be heard

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 86.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 90.

in New York. The young man made a brilliant dash of it, despite a lagging scrambling accompaniment by the conservative pianist. . . .

The usual repertory of restaurant music followed, varied by a charming bit from Massenet's "Manon," then little known in this country. ¹¹⁸

Blasius sends Madame Garnett some of his songs a few days

later:

I sat down at the piano and busied myself with the manuscript. . . .

"Yes, that legend, Sarka, is the most interesting. Run it through a few times and I'll try it over for you."

There was another, "Dans les ombres des forêts tristes," which I thought quite as beautiful. They were fine songs, very individual, and each had that spontaneity which makes a song seem inevitable and once for all, "done." ¹¹⁹

She sang his "Sarka" with the Metropolitan Opera orchestra at a Sunday night concert, she got him a position with the Symphony Orchestra, and persuaded the conservative Hempfstangle Quartette to play one of his chamber compositions from manuscript. ¹²⁰

Cressida married Blasius, and all went well, though Blasius did not compose as much as formerly. The narrator muses somewhat about this:

Those first beautiful compositions, full of the folk music of his own country, had been wrung out of him by home-sickness and heart-ache. I wondered whether he could compose only under the spur of hunger and loneliness. ¹²¹

¹¹⁸Ibid., pp. 91-92.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 94.

¹²⁰Ibid., p. 102.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 110.

Then Madame came home one day and found Blasius with the maid. The maid was sent away, and shortly afterwards Blasius and Cressida were divorced. Blasius

. . . went back to his own village in Bohemia. He wrote her that the old monk, his teacher, was still alive, and that from the windows of his room in the town he could see the pigeons flying forth from and back to the monastery bell-tower all day long. He sent her a song with his own words, about those pigeons, —quite a lovely thing. He was the bell-tower, and les colombes were his memories of her.¹²²

After marrying for the fourth time, to a man who was worse than any of her other husbands, Cressida was lost on the Titanic. After her death, the greed and jealousies of her relatives are brought into the open, showing that they were interested only in how much money she could give them.

There are numerous other references to music, such as: "On the floor below somebody was struggling with Schubert's Marche Militaire on a coarse-toned upright piano";¹²³ ". . . the new Spanish soprano, Mme. Bartolas . . .";¹²⁴ or, ". . . the aged and ossified 'cellist of the Hempfstangle Quartette"¹²⁵—but those quoted are representative of those Cather used throughout the story.

¹²²Ibid., pp. 115-116.

¹²³Ibid., p. 105.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 98.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 96.

"A Gold Slipper" and "Scandal" are incidents from the life of Kitty Ayrshire, the former being one that is told directly, while the latter is told primarily in the form of reminiscences.

"A Gold Slipper" is the story of Marshall McKann's attendance at one of Kitty Ayrshire's concerts and his later meeting her on the train. To embarrass him, Kitty leaves one of her gold slippers in his Pullman car.

McKann did not want to attend the concert, as is evidenced in these paragraphs:

Marshall McKann followed his wife and her friend Mrs. Post down the aisle and up the steps to the stage of the Carnegie Music Hall with an ill-concealed feeling of grievance. . . . A man went to concerts when he was courting while he was a junior partner. When he became a person of substance he stopped that sort of nonsense. ¹²⁶

His wife's friend, Mrs. Post, "was an aggressive lady, with weighty opinions, and a deep voice like a jovial bassoon." ¹²⁷

McKann has his own ideas of what type of costumes a singer should wear, and Kitty's was not "a costume in which to sing Mozart and Handel and Beethoven." ¹²⁸

The concert is fully described:

. . . She nodded gaily to the young man at the piano, fell into an attitude of seriousness, and began a group of Beethoven and Mozart songs.

¹²⁶Willia Cather, "A Gold Slipper," Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 123.

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 124.

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 127.

Though McKann would not have admitted it, there were really a great many people in the concert-hall who knew what the prodigal daughter of their country was singing, and how well she was doing it. They thawed gradually under the beauty of her voice and the subtlety of her interpretation. She had sung seldom in concert then, and they had supposed her dependent upon the accessories of the opera. Clean singing, finished artistry, were not what they expected of her. They began to feel, even, the wayward charm of her personality.

McKann, who stared coldly up at the balconies during her first song, during the second glanced cautiously at the green apparition before him. He was vexed with her for having retained a debutante figure. He comfortably classed all singers—especially opera singers—as "fat Dutchwomen" or, "Shifty Sadies," and Kitty would not fit into his clever generalization. She displayed, under his nose, the only kind of figure he considered worth looking at—that of a very young girl, supple and sinuous and quick-silverish, thin, eager shoulders, polished white arms that were nowhere too fat and nowhere too thin. McKann found it agreeable to look at Kitty. . . .

When Miss Ayrshire finished her first group of songs her audience expressed its approval positively, but guardedly. . . .

. . . Kitty began her second number, a group of romantic German songs which were altogether more her affair than her first number. . . .

The final number was made up of modern French songs which Kitty sang enchantingly, and at last her frigid public was thoroughly aroused. . . .

At last Miss Ayrshire returned, escorted by her accompanist, and gave the people what she of course knew they wanted: the most popular aria from the French opera of which the title role had become synonymous with her name—an opera written for her and to her and round about her, by the veteran French composer who adored her, — the last and not the palest flash of his creative fire. This brought her audience all the way. They clamoured for more of it, but she was not to be coerced. She had been unyielding through storms to which this was a summer breeze. . . . 129

As previously stated, this is merely one of the events in the life of an opera singer. Accordingly, the type of music used is that which best displays Madame Ayrshire's voice.

"Scandal" is told primarily as a reminiscence, giving further background or biographical material about Madame Kitty Ayrshire. We learn of certain behind-the-scene intrigues common to most opera houses:

Kitty was tormented by a suspicion that he [the Director] was secretly backing the little Spanish woman who had sung many of her best parts since she was ill. He furthered the girl's interest because his wife had a very special consideration because— But that was too long and too dreary a story to follow out in one's mind. Kitty felt a tonsilitis disgust for opera house politics, which, when she was in health she rather enjoyed, being no mean strategist herself. . . . 130

Kitty is involved in an intrigue planned by a wealthy Jew, who is trying to get ahead socially. Siegmund Stein, the Jew, "took singing lessons, though he had a voice like a crow's." 131

He had hired a double to impersonate Kitty, and had appeared at the opera and other places where the right people could see him. He also had invited Kitty and her friend or protégée, Peppo, to sing at one of his parties.

¹³⁰ Willa Cather, "Scandal," Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 153.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 167.

The first winter Peppo had no chance at the Opera. There was an iron ring about him, and my interest in him only made it all the more difficult. We've become a nest of intrigues down there; worse than the Scala. . . . One evening he came to me and said he could get an engagement to sing for the grand rich Steins, but the condition was that I should sing with him. . . . As you know, I never sing private engagements, but to help the boy along, I consented.¹³²

. . . In the music-room Stein insisted upon arranging things for me. . . . One has under such circumstances to be either gracious or pouty. Either you have to stand and sulk, like an old-fashioned German singer who wants the piano moved about for her like a teawagon . . . or you have to be a trifle forced, like a debutante trying to make good.¹³³

Actually, there is not much in the story that could be told without the musical background. It is merely another story of an artist in his natural habitat.

"Paul's Case" is a psychological story; and while few references are made to music, those made are generally important. Some of the rather obvious uses may be considered rather trivial: "As for Paul, he ran down the hill, whistling the Soldiers' Chorus from Faust";¹³⁴ or, ". . . the undulating repetitions of the Blue Danube."¹³⁵

Some of the music has an actual psychological effect on Paul: "When the Symphony began, Paul sank into one of the rear seats with

¹³²Ibid., p. 173.

¹³³Ibid., p. 174.

¹³⁴Willia Cather, "Paul's Case," Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 185.

¹³⁵Ibid., p. 205.

a sigh of relief";¹³⁶ and, "The moment the cracked orchestra beat out the overture from Martha, or jerked at the serenade from Rigoletto, all stupid and ugly things slipped from him."¹³⁷

"A Death in the Desert" vividly recounts the death of a once well-known singer on a ranch near Cheyenne. Everett Hilgarde, who is always mistaken for his more famous brother Adriance Hilgarde, the composer, meets again Katherine Gaylord, the singer, who is dying of tuberculosis. Much of the story is that of reminiscing, but of such a type that requires many musical references and allusions.

Everett is mistaken for his brother at the very beginning of the story, and such mistaken identity is shown by use of music.

The stranger . . . began softly to whistle the Spring Song from Proserpine, the cantata that a dozen years before had made its young composer famous in a night. Everett had heard that air on guitars in Old Mexico, on mandolins at college glees, on cottage organs in New England hamlets, and only two weeks ago he had heard it played on sleighbells at a variety theater in Denver. There was literally no way of escaping his brother's precocity.¹³⁸

Again at the end of the story, the same case of mistaken identity occurs:

The people of a German opera company . . . pushed by them in frantic haste. . . . Everett heard an exclamation

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 187.

¹³⁷Ibid., p. 196.

¹³⁸Willa Cather, "A Death in the Desert," Youth and the Bright Medusa, pp. 254-255.

and a stout woman rushed up to him, glowing with a joyful surprise. . . .

"Herr Gott, Adriance, lieber Freund," she cried. ¹³⁹

The days spent with Katharine Gaylord are not happy ones for Everett, as he must watch her die. He and Katharine discuss his brother's various musical works, Katharine wanting to know who has his "brother's old studio now, and what misguided aspirants practise their scales in the rookeries about Carnegie Hall,"¹⁴⁰ and Everett, "diagramming with his pencil some new mechanical device to be used at the Metropolitan in the production of the Rheingold."¹⁴¹

Everett cables Adriance of Katharine's condition. Adriance writes a long letter, and with it sends a copy of his last Sonata, which Everett plays for Katharine:

He sat down at the piano and began playing the first movement, which was indeed the voice of Adriance, his proper speech. The sonata was the most ambitious work he had done up to that time, and marked the transition from his early lyric vein to a deeper and nobler style. . . . When he had finished he turned to Katharine.

"How he has grown," she cried. "What the last three years have done for him! He used to write only the tragedies of passion; but this is the tragedy of effort and failure, the thing Keats called hell. This is my tragedy, as I lie here, listening to the feet of the runners as they pass me—ah, God! the swift feet of the runners!"¹⁴²

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 279.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 263.

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 264.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 273.

The night of Katharine's death is beautifully described:

On the night of Adriance's opening concert in Paris, Everett sat by the bed in the ranch-house in Wyoming, watching over the last battle that we have with the flesh before we are done with it and free of it forever. At times it seemed that the serene soul of her must have left already and found some refuge from the storm, and only the tenacious animal life were left to do battle with death. She laboured under a delusion at once pitiful and merciful, thinking that she was in the Pullman on her way to New York, going back to her life and her work. . . . At midnight Everett and the nurse were alone with her. . . . Everett . . . was dreaming of Adriance's concert in Paris, and of Adriance, the troubadour. He heard the applause and he saw the flowers going up over the footlights until they were stacked half as high as the piano, and the petals fell and scattered, making crimson splotches on the floor. Down this crimson pathway came Adriance with his youthful step, leading his singer by the hand, a dark woman this time, with Spanish eyes.

[Earlier this same scene had been described with Katharine Gaylord as the singer at one of Adriance's concerts.]

The nurse touched him on the shoulder, he started and awoke Everett saw that Katharine was awake and conscious, and struggling a little. He lifted her gently on his arm and began to fan her. She looked into his face with eyes that seemed never to have wept or doubted. "Ah, dear Adriance, dear, dear!" she whispered.

Everett went to call her brother, but when they came back the madness of art was over for Katharine. ¹⁴³

There are many elements of this story that could easily fit into The Song of the Lark. In fact, the whole story, with a bit of editing, and with some changes of names, could become an ending for The Song of the Lark, a morbid one, to be sure, yet one probably much more true to life than the ending of the book as it was written.

¹⁴³Ibid., pp. 278-279.

In any study of Cather's use of music, "A Wagner Matinee" immediately comes to mind. To really do the story justice, one would almost have to quote the entire story, for it is truly a "Wagner matinee."

Using her own aunt as the prototype for Aunt Georgiana of the story, Cather tells the story of the aunt's first visit to Boston in thirty years. The aunt had been a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory and had married Howard Carpenter and had moved to Nebraska, where for thirty years she had not been more than fifty miles from the homestead.¹⁴⁴ Now after all the years she was coming to Boston to settle an estate. Her nephew plans to take her to the Symphony Orchestra program of Wagner music. He finds out that she has never heard any Wagnerian operas, but that she knows the plots and had at one time possessed the piano score of The Flying Dutchman.¹⁴⁵

The concert is most vividly described:

. . . From the time we entered the concert hall, however, she was a trifle less passive inert, and for the first time seemed to perceive her surroundings.

When the musicians came out and took their places she gave a little stir of anticipation, and looked with quickening interest down over the rail at that invariable grouping. . . . I could feel how all these details sank into her soul. . . . The clean profiles of the musicians, the gloss of their

¹⁴⁴Willa Cather, "A Wagner Matinee," Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 217.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., p. 219.

linen, the dull black of their coats, the beloved shapes of the instruments, the patches of yellow light on the smooth, varnished bellies of the 'cellos and the bass viols in the rear, the restless, wind-tossed forest of fiddle necks and bows. . . . I recalled how, in the first orchestra I ever heard, those long bow-strokes seemed to draw the heart out of me, as a conjurer's stick reels out yards of paper ribbon from a hat.

The first number was the Tannhauser overture. When the horns drew out the first strain of the Pilgrim's chorus, Aunt Georgiana clutched my sleeve. Then it was I first realized that for her this broke a silence of thirty years. With the battle between the two motives, with the frenzy of the Venusberg theme and its ripping of strings there came to me an overwhelming sense of the waste and wear we are so powerless to combat; and I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress. . . . The world there was the flat world of the ancients; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset. . . .

The overture closed, my aunt released my coat sleeve, but said nothing. . . . She had been a good pianist in her day, I knew, and her musical education had been broader than that of most music teachers of a quarter of a century ago. She had told me of Mozart's operas and Meyerbeer's, and I could remember hearing her sing, years ago, certain melodies of Verdi . . . "Home to our mountains, O, let us return!" in a way fit to break the heart of a Vermont boy near dead of homesickness already. I watched her closely through the prelude to Tristan and Isolde, trying vainly to conjecture what that seething turmoil of strings and winds might mean to her. . . . but Aunt Georgiana sat silent upon her peak in Darien. She preserved this utter immobility throughout the number from The Flying Dutchman, though her fingers worked mechanically upon her black dress, as if, of themselves, they were recalling the piano score they had once played. . . .

Soon after the tenor began the "Prize Song," I heard a quick drawn breath and turned to my aunt. Her eyes were closed, but the tears were glistening on her cheeks, and I think, in a moment more, they were in my eyes as well. It never really died, then—the soul which can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably; it withers to the outward

eye only; like the strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again. She wept so throughout the development and elaboration of the melody. ¹⁴⁶

So far, Cather has built up the program to an emotional climax, each selection being more moving than the previous one until the climax is reached in the last part of the program.

The second half of the program consisted of four numbers from the Ring, and closed with Siegfried's funeral march. . . .

The deluge of sound poured on and on; I never knew what she found in the shining current of it; I never knew how far it bore her, or past what happy islands. From the trembling of her face I could well believe that before the last number she had been carried out where the myriad graves are, into the grey, nameless burying grounds of the sea; or into some world of death vaster yet, where, from the beginning of the world, hope has lain down with hope and dream with dream and, renouncing, slept.

The concert was over; the people filed out of the hall . . . but my kinswoman made no effort to rise. The harpist slipped the green felt over his instrument; the flute-players shook the water from their mouthpieces; the men of the orchestra went out one by one, leaving the stage to the chairs and music stands, empty as a winter corn-field. ¹⁴⁷

The ending is abrupt, and moving—similar to the ones used in others of her works. The music has truly awakened Aunt Georgiana from the sleep of thirty years. Yes, "for her just outside the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house . . . the crook-backed ash seedlings. . . ." ¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 221-224.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., p. 226.

Cather shows here as well as in other works the effect of music on people. A study of the music involved in the story will only add to the meaning and will show just how much Cather knew the influence of music.

Obscure Destinies

Cather did not collect any other short stories until 1932, when Alfred A. Knopf published her three stories, "Neighbour Rosicky," "Old Mrs. Harris," and "Two Friends," in a volume called Obscure Destinies.

"Neighbour Rosicky" had appeared earlier in the April and May, 1930, issues of Woman's Home Companion, while "Old Mrs. Harris" had appeared in the September and October, 1932, issues of Ladies' Home Journal under the title, Three Women, and was designated as a novel.

"Neighbour Rosicky," the story of Anton Rosicky, a Bohemian immigrant, is written in much the same style as My Ántonia. It, too, has its moments of nostalgia. Anton had enjoyed music in the old days:

He often stood through an opera on Saturday nights; he could get standing room for a dollar. Those were the great days of opera in New York. . . . Rosicky had a quick ear, and a childlike love of all the stage splendour; the scenery, the costumes, the ballet. ¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹Willia Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," Obscure Destinies, pp. 27-28.

Zechec often practised on his flute in the evening. They were both fond of music and went to the opera together. ¹⁵⁰

Then Anton thinks of his son Rudolph's wife's sisters: "All four of them were musical and sang in the Methodist choir which the eldest sister directed." ¹⁵¹

Cather makes the statement that "it was as if Rosicky had a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for color." ¹⁵²

Dr. Ed's meditation at the end of the story epitomizes the freedom of the open spaces—the freedom that Cather herself had once enjoyed—

Nothing could be more undearthlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got it at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful. ¹⁵³

Actually, then, what Cather had said of My Ántonia—that it was a thing Grieg could have written—could be said of "Neighbour Rosicky."

"Old Mrs. Harris," another long short story, has few references to music, and those used are rather incidental, such as the

¹⁵⁰Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 71.

reference to the Dies Irae hymn which Vicki translates from the Latin for Mrs. Rosen;¹⁵⁴ and Mr. Rosen's asking if Mrs. Rosen had got a cloak out of Rigoletto.¹⁵⁵ There is a mention of a performance of "The Chimes of Normandy" at the Opera House,¹⁵⁶ in addition to others.

These references do little more than add somewhat to the mood of the story, or else serve as mere statements of fact.

The same may be said of the one statement found in "Two Friends," the last of the three stories: "Dillon had a musical, vibrating voice, and the changeable grey eye that is peculiarly Irish."¹⁵⁷

The Old Beauty and Others

This posthumous publication of Cather's appeared in 1948, and contained only three stories not previously released for publication.

The first story, "The Old Beauty," has two references to music or music personalities, the first referring to a dance:

The conductor smiled and bowed, then spoke to his men who smiled in return. The saxophone put down his instrument and grinned. The strings sat up in their chairs,

¹⁵⁴Willia Cather, "Old Mrs. Harris," Obscure Destinies, pp. 106-107.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., p. 171.

¹⁵⁷Willia Cather, "Two Friends," Obscure Destinies, p. 195.

pulled themselves up, as it were, tuned for a moment, and sat at attention. At the lift of the leader's hand they began the "Blue Danube";¹⁵⁸

and the other to a burial place:

After illness two years ago Gabrielle de Coucy had bought a lot a perpetuité in Père-Lachaise. That was rather a fashion then: Adelina Patti, Sarah Bernhardt, and other ladies who once held a place in the world made the same choice.¹⁵⁹

"The Best Years," and probably the best story of the three, contains no important musical references.¹⁶⁰

The rather brief "Before Breakfast" has this scene between husband and wife:

Soon after the soup was served, Harrison wondered whether Koussevitzky would take the slow movement in the Brahms Second as he did last winter. His mother said she still remembered Muck's reading and preferred it.

The theoretical head of the house spoke up. "I take it that this is Symphony night, and that my family are going. You have ordered the car? Well, I am going to hear John McCormack sing Kathleen Mavourneen.

His wife rescued him as she often did (in an innocent well-bred way) by refusing to recognize his rudeness. "Dear me! I haven't heard McCormack sing since he first came out in Italy years and years ago. His success was sensational. He was singing Mozart then."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸Willia Cather, "The Old Beauty," The Old Beauty and Others, p. 59.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁶⁰Willia Cather, "The Best Years," The Old Beauty and Others, pp. 75-138.

¹⁶¹Willia Cather, "Before Breakfast," The Old Beauty and Others, pp. 155-156.

There is not a great deal of music to be had; the situation did not call for it, and accordingly Cather did not use it.

Between Cather's short stories and her novels lie a great number of differences. Yet when one reads the early short stories, and then follows this reading with a close reading of the novels, he will discern the same general pattern, the same general plan for use of musical materials. In fact, in many cases he will find the short story deeply embedded in some of the novels. All in all, the plan of usage was the same. The novels, however, will in most cases show a more mature, more properly balanced type of work. In them music is more completely integrated with plot and character. In both stories and novels, however, Cather used music to express the longings and desires of her characters; and in both, emotional climaxes and experiences are expressed through the use of music.

CHAPTER III

THE NOVELS

From the date of publication of Alexander's Bridge in 1912, until the publication of her last novel in 1941, Willa Cather used some type of musical activity or reference in her novels. From a slight use of it, such as may be found in the first novel, Alexander's Bridge, and in her last one, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, to such works as The Song of the Lark and Lucy Gayheart, in which the entire work is based on music, or on the life of a musician, Cather continually used music in some form in all her works.

Cather many times in interviews compared her works to certain musical forms, although she did not always fully explain how she accomplished this.

As may be seen in the biographical discussion in Chapter I, Cather became more and more interested in classical music, although she was not a musician herself. Much of this devout interest has only recently been revealed, especially in Edward K. Brown's Willa Cather, published in March, 1953, and designated by Cather's literary executrix as the official biography of Willa Cather; and in Edith Lewis'

Willa Cather Living, published on the same date as the Brown biography.

With these facts in mind, the writer will attempt to show in chronological order the various uses of music in the Cather novels, excluding, however, The Song of the Lark and Lucy Gayheart, which are to be discussed in a separate chapter, because of their special subject matter as related to music.

Alexander's Bridge

After resigning from the staff of McClure's Magazine in 1912, Cather began writing in earnest and not many months later her first novel, Alexander's Bridge, was published.

This work, which shows the influence of Henry James, was never one of Cather's favorites. As she said, her writing at that time was "like singing a song which did not fit her voice."¹

There is little musical activity mentioned in the novel, although Bartley Alexander's wife is an accomplished musician, a pianist.

At the meeting of Bartley and Professor Wilson, described at the beginning of the novel, there is a scene in which Bartley's wife, who earlier had been "detained at a concert,"² practices on the piano:

¹Mildred R. Bennett, World of Willa Cather, p. 199.

²Willa Cather, Alexander's Bridge, p. 5.

"Why, certainly, if you won't find me too noisy. I am working on the Schumann 'Carnival,' and, though I don't practise a great many hours, I am very methodical," Mrs. Alexander explained, as she crossed to an upright piano that stood at the back of the room, near the windows.

Wilson followed, and having seen her seated, dropped into a chair behind her. She played brilliantly and with great musical feeling. Wilson was surprised at the cleanness of her execution. He wondered how a woman with so many duties had managed to keep herself up to a standard really professional. It must take a great deal of time.³

Hilda Burgoyne, Alexander's sweetheart of earlier days (and later his mistress), was also a musician, but of a different type, a light opera or a musical comedy singer. Alexander sees Hilda for the first time after many years' absence at a musical comedy:

After her dances she withdrew from the dialogue and retreated to the ditch wall back of Phillip's burro, where she sat, singing "The Rising of the Moon" and making a wreath of primroses for her donkey.⁴

When they reached their box, the house was darkened and the orchestra was playing "The Cloak of Gaul."⁵

After Alexander is reunited with Hilda, the following scene takes place:

"But he's given me some good Irish songs. Listen." She sat down at the piano and sang. When she finished, Alexander shook himself out of a reverie.

"Sing 'The Harp that Once,' Hilda. You used to sing it well."

"Nonsense. Of course I can't really sing, except the way my mother and grandmother did before me."⁶

³Ibid., p. 18.

⁴Ibid., p. 32.

⁵Ibid., p. 35.

⁶Ibid., p. 74.

Two other rather interesting descriptions, which fit more or less into a musical category, occur early in the work:

A harp-shaped elm stood stripped against the pale coloured evening sky, with ragged last year's birds' nests in its forks, and through the bare branches the evening star quivered in the misty air;⁷

and,

. . . Bartley caught the wind early, and it has sung in his sails ever since.⁸

Cather was much too engrossed in following the style of Henry James to give free rein to her use of music, though she was later to do this more noticeably and more positively.

O Pioneers!

George L. White in his 1936 University of Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation, "Scandinavian Themes in American Literature," says, "The finest portrait of a Scandinavian, written by an American novelist without any Scandinavian blood in her is Willa Cather's picture of Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers, 1913."⁹

John Bergson, father of Alexandra, had been a musician in the old country, and it is not surprising that music recurs frequently in

O Pioneers!

⁷Ibid., p. 5.

⁸Ibid., p. 9.

⁹George L. White, "Scandinavian Themes in American Literature," Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1937, p. 199.

Emil, Alexandra's youngest brother, attended the State University, where he was active musically. Shortly after his return home this scene occurred:

One morning a young man stood at the gate of the Norwegian graveyard, sharpening his scythe in strokes unconsciously timed to the tune he was whistling. . . .

When he was satisfied with the edge of his blade, he slipped the whetstone into his hip pocket and began to swing his scythe, still whistling, but softly, out of respect to the quiet folk about him. . . . The space between his two front teeth, which were unusually far apart, gave him the proficiency for which he was distinguished at college. (He also played the cornet in the university band.)

When the grass required his close attention, or when he had to stoop to cut about a headstone, he paused in his lively air—the "Jewel Song"—taking it up where he had left it when his scythe swung free again.¹⁰

Through the years the two older brothers had become quite jealous of whatever Alexandra should do for the children of the other. When Alexandra mentioned that she intended to buy Milly, her niece, a piano, there was almost an explosion from the other brother. Alexandra remained calm through it all:

"Yes," said Alexandra firmly, "I think Milly deserves a piano. All the girls around here have been taking lessons for years, but Milly is the only one of them who can ever play anything when you ask her. I'll tell you when I first thought I'd like to give you a piano, Milly, and that was when you learned that book of old Swedish songs that your grandfather used to sing. He had a sweet tenor voice, and when he was a young man he loved to sing. I can remember hearing him singing with the sailors down in the shipyard. . . ."¹¹

¹⁰ Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, pp. 77-78.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 103.

When Carl Lindstrum returns after an absence of many years, he reminisces,

"Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, 'Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?' Do you ever feel like that, I wonder?"

"There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country that have been singing the same five notes for thousands of years."¹³

"We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look about us at the hundreds of our own kind and shudder."¹⁴

Cather captures the proper holiday atmosphere when she describes the carnival over in Sainte Agnes, the French settlement:

The French boys . . . were always delighted to hear about anything new: new clothes, new games, new songs, new dances.¹⁵

Marie could hear him talking and strumming his guitar while Marcel sang falsetto.¹⁶

The young people drifted to the other end of the hall where the guitar was sounding. In a moment she heard Emil and Raoul singing

"Across the Rio Grande-e
There lies a sunny land-e
My bright-eyed Mexico!"¹⁷

¹²Ibid., p. 118.

¹³Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 215.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 216.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 226.

Somewhat later, but shortly before the great church scene,

Alexandra and Emil are talking:

Alexandra took up her sewing again. "I can remember father when he was quite a young man. He belonged to some kind of musical society, a male chorus, in Stockholm. I can remember going with mother to hear them sing. There must have been a hundred of them and they wore long black coats and white neckties. . . . Do you remember that Swedish song he taught you about the ship boy?"

"Yes, I used to sing it to the Mexicans. They liked anything different." Emil paused.¹⁸

Cather is truly at home in describing the great confirmation scene at the Sainte Agnes Roman Catholic Church. One can almost hear as well as see the scene as he reads the descriptions:

He [Emil] went first to see Raoul Marcel, and found him innocently practising the "Gloria" for the big confirmation service, while he polished the mirrors of his father's saloon.¹⁹

All day Saturday the church was the scene of bustling activity, a little hushed by the thought of Amedee. The choir was busy rehearsing a Mass of Rossini, which they had studied and practised for the occasion.²⁰

The actual service is most vividly described:

Even before the Mass began, the air was charged with feeling. The choir had never sung so well, and Raoul Marcel in the "Gloria" drew even the bishop's eye to the organ loft. For the offertory he sang Gounod's "Ave Maria"—always spoken of in Sainte Agnes as "the Ave Maria."²¹

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 237-238.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 245.

²⁰Ibid., p. 251.

²¹Ibid., p. 254.

As he listened to Raoul, he seemed to emerge from the conflicting emotions that had been whirling about and sucking him under. He felt as if a clear light broke upon his mind, and with it a conviction that good was, after all, stronger than evil, and that good was possible to men. He seemed to discover that there was a kind of rapture in which he could love forever, without faltering and without sin. He looked across the heads of the people at Frank Shabata with calmness. The rapture was for those who could feel it; for people who could not, it was non-existent. He coveted nothing that was Frank Shabata's. The spirit he had met in music was his own. Frank Shabata had never found it; would never find it if he lived beside it a thousand years; would have destroyed it had he found it, as Herod slew the innocents, as Rome slew the martyrs.

San—cta Mari-i-i-a,
wailed Raoul from the organ loft,
O-ra pro no-o-bis!

And it did not occur to Emil that anyone had ever reasoned thus before, that music had ever before given a man this equivocal revelation. ²²

Emil accompanies Raoul to the home of the banker that same afternoon, where Raoul was to sing for the Bishop.

At three o'clock Emil felt that he could stand it no longer. He slipped out under the cover of "The Holy City." . . .

He was at that height of excitement from which everything is foreshortened, from which life seems short and simple, death very near, and the soul seems to soar like an eagle. ²³

Death was near, for as Emil rode toward home, Fate intervened, and both Emil, with "the deep young baritone voice,"²⁴ and Marie, with the "merry contralto voice,"²⁵ were the victims.

²²Ibid., pp. 255-256.

²³Ibid., p. 257.

²⁴Ibid., p. 175.

²⁵Ibid., p. 79.

Cather has used music to create a background and to heighten the emotional scenes, using the ritual of the church to accomplish some of this.

My Antonia

"I expressed a mood, the core of which was like a folksong, a thing Greig could have written," Willa Cather remarked, when asked about My Antonia, at an interview in 1924.²⁶

In My Antonia Cather relates many of her earliest recollections of music, as well as makes mention of various musical instruments, church songs, folk songs, operatic music, dancing, and musicians.

Here again Cather shows the immigrant's love of music, especially that of Mr. Shimerda, father of Antonia.

It is a well-known fact that Cather was devoutly interested in the music of Richard Wagner, having had Thea Kronberg, a successful Wagnerian singer, as the heroine of her preceding novel, The Song of the Lark. Too, one of her earliest and best short stories, "A Wagner Matinee," is, as its title would imply, "all" Wagner. In My Antonia one can discern certain well-defined themes--Antonia, Jim, the frontier, the silhouetted plow, and many others.

One which is almost unnoticed on first reading is the theme of Mr. Shimerda. Whether we would have him be a major theme or not,

²⁶New York Times, December 21, 1924, III, 11; Rose Feld quoting Willa Cather.

and despite the fact that he commits suicide early in the novel, he nevertheless remains a dominating force in the work. This use of the theme motif was developed to the highest by Richard Wagner, and to a lesser degree by other composers. It is then possibly not amiss to state that Cather used this Wagnerian method to develop and to hold together, as it were, much of the action of the novel. There are several references to Mr. Shimerda's musical activities as well as to his other activities:

He had brought his fiddle with him, which wouldn't be of much use here, though he used to pick up money by it at home. ²⁷

"My papa play for his wedding and he gave my papa a fine gun. . . . ²⁸

"My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for wedding and for dance. Here never. When I beg him to play, he shake his head no. Some days he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but never he make the music. He don't like this kawn-tree."

"People who don't like this country ought to stay at home," I said severely. "We don't make them come here."

"He not want to come, nev-er!" she burst out. "My mamenka make him come. All the time she say: 'America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls.' My papa, he cry for leave his old friends what make music with him. He love very much the man what play the long horn like this"—she indicated a slide

²⁷ Willa Cather, My Ántonia, p. 20. In order to follow conventional punctuation rules, I have used double quotation marks for direct quotations, single for indirect. Quotation marks were used in a reverse manner in this book, as well as in The Song of the Lark.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

trombone. "They go to school together and are friends from boys. But my mama, she want Ambrosh for to be rich, with many cattle."²⁹

Mr. Shimerda did not long endure the hardships of the frontier, for he killed himself one cold winter's night. As Otto described it: "He pulled the trigger with his big toe. He layed over on his side and put the end of the barrel in his mouth, then he drew up one foot and felt for the trigger. He found it all right."³⁰

Later Jim Burden reflects on Mr. Shimerda's death:

I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country. . . . No, he would not at once set out upon that long journey. Surely, his exhausted spirit, so tired of cold and crowding and the struggle with the everfalling snow, was resting now in this quiet house. . . . I went softly down to the kitchen. . . . There, on the bench behind the stove I thought and thought about Mr. Shimerda. Outside I could hear the wind singing over hundreds of miles of snow. It was as if I had let the old man in out of the tormenting weather, and were sitting there with him. I went over all that Antonia had ever told me about his life before he came to this country; how he used to play the fiddle at weddings and dances. I thought about the friends he had mourned to leave, the trombone-player, the great forest full of game—belonging as Antonia said, to the "nobles"—from which she and her mother used to steal wood on moonlight nights. There was a white hart that lived in the forest and if anyone killed it, he would be hanged, she said. Such vivid pictures came to me that they might have been Mr. Shimerda's memories, not yet faded out from the air in which they had haunted him.³¹

²⁹Ibid., p. 88.

³⁰Ibid., p. 97.

³¹Ibid., pp. 101-102.

"Mr. Shimerda lay dead in the barn four days, and on the fifth they buried him," relates Jim Burden.³² The strange burial service is described:

Grandmother turned to Otto and whispered, "Can't you start a hymn, Fuchs? It would seem less heathenish."

Fuchs glanced about to see if there was general approval of her suggestion, then began "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," and all the men and women took it up after him. Whenever I have heard the hymn since, it has made me remember that white waste and the little group of people; and the bluish air, full of fine, eddying snow, like long veils flying:

"While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high."

.

Years afterward, when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines, Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, and an unpainted wooden cross. As grandfather had predicted, Mrs. Shimerda never saw the roads going over his head. The road from the north curved a little to the east just there; and the road from the west swung out a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. I loved the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence—the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the homecoming wagons rattled after sunset. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper.³³

³²Ibid., p. 114.

³³Ibid., pp. 118-119.

Then again the pervading spirit of Mr. Shimerda appears.

This time, it is the scene of Jim's graduation from high school.

Antonia says:

"Oh, I just sat there and wished my papa could hear you! Jim"—Antonia took hold of my coat lapels—"there was something in your speech that made me think so about my papa!"

"I thought about your papa when I wrote my speech, Tony," I said. "I dedicated it to him."³⁴

Again, at Jim's picnic with the hired girls, he and Antonia talk of Mr. Shimerda:

"In summer . . . he used to sit there with his friend that played the trombone. When I was little I used to go down there to hear them talk—beautiful talk like I never hear in this country. . . . About music, and the woods, and about God, and when they were young."³⁵

Antonia tells the rather tragic story of why her father had to marry her mother, a woman of much lower social standing:

"They said he could have paid my mother money, and not married her. But he was . . . too kind to treat her like that. . . . After my father married her, my grandmother never let my mother come in her house again. When I went to my grandmother's funeral was the only time I was ever in my grandmother's house."³⁶

The Shimerda theme returns, just as Jim Burden returns to see Antonia and her baby:

We met like people in the old song, in silence, in
not in tears. Her warm hand clasped mine.
.....

³⁴Ibid., pp. 230-231.

³⁵Ibid., p. 236.

³⁶Ibid., p. 237.

Antonia stuck her fork in the ground and instinctively we walked toward that unplowed patch at the crossing of the roads as the fittest place to talk to each other. We sat down outside the sagging wire fence that shut Mr. Shimerda's plot off from the rest of the world. The tall red grass had never been cut there. It had died down in the winter and come up again in the spring until it was as thick and shrubby as some tropical garden.³⁷

Jim's farewell to Antonia at that time merely adds to the same theme:

"I'll come back," I said earnestly, through the soft intrusive darkness.

"Perhaps you will,"—I felt rather than saw her smile. "But even if you don't, you're here, like my father. So I won't be lonesome."

As I went back alone over that familiar road, I could almost believe that a boy and girl ran along beside me, as our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass.³⁸

With such descriptions as these, one can almost say that Cather was writing her own symphony—one with words rather than with actual musical notes, though one can certainly get a musical effect when reading them! It is truly something that Greig might have written; or it could have been just as beautifully written by Richard Wagner in his leit-motif method of composition.

Musical activity itself was not lacking those days in pioneer Nebraska:

Every Saturday night we popped corn or made taffy, and Otto Fuchs used to sing, "For I Am a Cowboy and Know

³⁷Ibid., pp. 319-320.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 322-323.

"I've Done Wrong," or "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie." He had a good baritone voice and always led the singing when we went to church services in the old sod school-house.³⁹

The Shimerdas were not the only foreigners to be interested in music. Cather relates the story of Pavel and Peter, when Jim and his grandfather go to visit them:

Peter . . . ran into the storeroom and brought out a gaudily painted harmonica, sat down on a bench, and spreading his fat legs apart began to play like a whole band. The tunes were either very lively or very doleful, and he sang words to some of them.⁴⁰

Somewhat later Cather tells the story of Peter and Pavel's early life in Russia in the story-within-a-story, in which the bride and groom are thrown to the wolves in order to lighten the load of the sledge. The beginning and end of this story have certain musical references.

The party set out with singing and the jingle of sleigh-bells, the groom's sledge going first.⁴¹

In the struggle, the groom rose. Pavel knocked him over the side of the sledge and threw the girl after him. He said he never remembered exactly how he did it, or what happened afterward. . . . The first thing either of them noticed was a new sound that broke into the clear air, louder than they had ever heard it before—the bell of the monastery of their own village, ringing for early prayers.⁴²

Ántonia and Jim find a cricket, and Ántonia tells Jim of memories the cricket's song brings:

³⁹Ibid., p. 67.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 37.

⁴²Ibid., p. 59.

She told me that in her village at home there was an old beggar-woman who went about selling herbs and roots she had dug up in the forest. If you took her in and gave her a warm place by the fire, she sang old songs to the children in a cracked voice like this. Old Hata, she was called, and the children loved to see her coming and saved their cakes and sweets for her.⁴³

After the Burdens moved to Black Hawk, where he wanted Antonia to see their "red plush furniture, and the trumpet-blowing cherubs the German paperhanger had put on their parlour ceiling,"⁴⁴ there was much more musical activity for Jim. The Harlings, their neighbors, were all musical.

Except when the father was at home, the Harling house was never quiet . . . and there was usually someone at the piano. Julia was the only one who was held down to regular hours of practising, but they all played. When Frances came home at noon, she played until dinner was ready. When Sally got back from school, she sat down in her hat and coat and drummed the plantation melodies that Negro minstrel troupes brought to town. Even Nina played the Swedish Wedding March.

Mrs. Harling had studied the piano under a good teacher and somehow she managed to practise every day. I soon learned that if I were sent over on an errand and found Mrs. Harling at the piano, I must sit down and wait quietly until she turned to me. I can see her at this moment: her short square person planted firmly on the stool, her little fat hands moving quickly and neatly over the keys, her eyes fixed on the music with intelligent concentration.⁴⁵

Frances taught us to dance that winter and she said, from the first lesson, that Antonia would make the best dancer among us. On Saturday nights, Mrs. Harling used to play the old operas for us—"Martha," "Norma," "Rigoletto"—telling us the story while she played.⁴⁶

⁴³Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 146.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 157-158.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 175.

Cather also describes the musical activities of the minor characters in the novel. She tells about the traveling salesmen:

They used to assemble in the parlour after supper on Saturday nights. Marshall Fields' man, Anson Kirkpatrick, played the piano and sang all the latest sentimental songs.⁴⁷

Blind d'Arnault, the Negro pianist, came to town. He gave a concert at the Opera house on Monday night . . .⁴⁸

The men gathered round him, as he began to play "My Old Kentucky Home." They sang one Negro melody after another. . . .⁴⁹

Cather describes in detail d'Arnault's early life and his musical training; however, only a few sentences will be given here to show her mastery of such description:

He was always a Negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully. As piano playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses—that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly. To hear him, to watch him was to see a Negro enjoying himself as only a Negro can. It was as if all the agreeable sensations possible to creatures of flesh and blood were heaped up on those black and white keys, and he were gloating over them and trickling them through his yellow fingers.⁵⁰

The other musical activity described so fully is the dancing tent of the Vannis:

The silence seemed to ooze out of the ground, to hang under the foliage of the black maple trees with the bats and shadows. Now it was broken by the lighthearted

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 170.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 181.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 184.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 189.

sounds. First, the deep purring of Mr. Vanni's harp came in silver ripples through the blackness of the dusty-smelling night, then the violins fell in—one of them was almost like a flute. They called so archly, so seductively that our feet hurried toward the tent of themselves. ⁵¹

The Vannis kept exemplary order, and closed every evening at the hour suggested by the city council. When Mrs. Vanni gave the signal, and the harp struck up "Home, Sweet Home," all Black Hawk knew it was ten o'clock. You could set your watch by that tune as confidently as by the roundhouse whistle. ⁵²

Antonia talked and thought of nothing but the tent. She hummed the dance tunes all day. . . . At the first call of the music she became irresponsible. ⁵³

There were other dances after the Vannis had gone. One of these is most vividly described:

To dance "Home, Sweet Home" with Lena was like coming in with the tide. She danced every dance like a waltz, and it was always the same waltz—the waltz of coming home to something, of inevitable, fated return. ⁵⁴

After Jim Burden goes to the State University at Lincoln, he and Lena Lingard attend several plays and operettas: "She sat entranced through 'Robin Hood,' and hung upon the lips of the contralto who sang, 'Oh, Promise Me!'" ⁵⁵

Later they attend a performance of Dumas' tragedy, Camille:

⁵¹Ibid., p. 196.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 195-196.

⁵³Ibid., p. 205.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 222-223.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 271.

We arrived early, because Lena liked to watch the people come in. There was a note on the programme, saying that the "incidental music" would be from the opera "Traviata," which was made from the same story as the play. ⁵⁶

. . . Accompanied by the orchestra in the old "Traviata" duet, "misterioso, misterios'altero!" she maintained her bitter skepticism, and the curtain fell on her dancing recklessly with the others, after Armand had been sent away with her flower.

Between the acts we had no time to forget. The orchestra kept sawing away at the "Traviata" music, so joyous and sad, so thin and faraway, so clap-trap and yet so heart-breaking. ⁵⁷

There is little other musical activity in the novel. There was a Mr. Ordinsky who "wrote a furious article attacking the musical taste of the town," ⁵⁸ not unlike some of Cather's own youthful actions.

Antonia's children show musical talent, too:

After supper we went into the parlour so that Yulka and Leo could play for me. . . . Leo, with a good deal of fussing, got out his violin. It was old Mr. Shimerda's instrument, which Antonia had always kept, and it was too big for him. But he played well for a self-taught boy. Poor Yulka's efforts were not so successful. . . .

Antonia spoke to Leo in Bohemian. . . . After twisting and screwing the keys, he played some Bohemian airs without the organ to hold him back, and that went better. ⁵⁹

Antonia's husband is also very much interested when he learns that Jim has heard the famous Bohemian singer, Maria Vasak, or Vasakova. ⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 272.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 287.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 359.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 275.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 347-348.

In this work Cather has shown the immigrant's love of music and his sense of frustration when he is denied it. She has also shown that fiction, as well as music, may be developed by a theme motif.

One of Ours

Alexander Porterfield in writing for The London Mercury, March, 1926, makes this mention:

One of Ours received the Pulitzer Prize for the best novel of 1922 and had a succes d'estime as well-deserved as its popularity, which in the United States, at any rate, was very large. It is the story of a sensitive, shy boy brought up on a Nebraska homestead who marries the wrong girl and is killed in the war before disillusionment has set in, and it immediately placed its author in the forefront of American novelists.⁶¹

Musical activity in One of Ours may possibly be placed in three categories: the everyday, casual mention of songs and musical instruments; Claude's contact with music at the Erlich home; and the music related to his service in the Great War.

There are several references to the phonograph:

He bought . . . another music machine. . . . His mother, who did not like phonograph music, and detested phonograph monologues, begged him to take the machine at home, but he assured her that she would be dull without it on winter evenings. He wanted one of the latest makes put out under the name of a great American inventor.⁶²

⁶¹Knopf Pamphlet, p. 7.

⁶²Willa Cather, One of Ours, p. 70.

Lights were shining from the upstairs rooms on the hill, and through the open windows sounded the singing snarl of a phonograph.⁶³

The Yoeder boys had a music box long before the days of the Victrola.⁶⁴

Claude reminisces frequently, as do most other Catherian characters:

Claude could remember warm spring days when the plum bushes were all in blossom and Mahalley used to lie down under them and sing to herself, as if the honey-heavy sweetness made her drowsy; songs without words for the most part, though he recalled one mountain dirge which said over and over,

"And they laid Jessie James in his grave."⁶⁵

His body felt light in the scented wind, and he listened drowsily to the larks singing on dried weeds and sunflower stalks. At this season their song is almost painful to hear.⁶⁶

The provincialism or narrow-mindedness of the small country town is partially revealed by these passages:

Bayless . . . didn't know one tune from another. . . . Gladys Farmer was the best musician in Frankfort, and she probably would like to hear it. [Here Claude plans to go to a musical in a nearby town.]⁶⁷

Gladys had not dared, for instance, to go to Omaha that spring for the three performances of the Chicago Opera Company. Such an extravagance would have aroused a corrective spirit in all her friends.⁶⁸

⁶³Ibid., p. 75.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 255.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 63.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 91.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 155.

Cather's interest in German music is shown by the numerous references to it. The Erlichs were an interesting lot, and Claude Wheeler always made a point of visiting them every chance he had. Of Mrs. Erlich he was especially fond.

When she talked to him she taught him so much about life. He loved to hear her sing sentimental German songs as she worked;

"Spinn, spinn, du Tochter mein . . ."

He had been to see Mrs. Erlich just before starting home for the holidays and found her making German Christmas cakes. . . . She told off on her fingers the many ingredients, but he believed there were things she did not name: the fragrance of old friendships, the glow of early memories, belief in wonder-working rhymes and songs.⁶⁹

. . . Mrs. Erlich was at the piano, playing one of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words."⁷⁰

The visit of the opera singer to Lincoln was an event of importance to the Erlichs—and to Claude.

That spring Mrs. Erlich's first cousin Wilhelmina Schroeder-Schatz, who sang with the Chicago Opera Company, came to Lincoln as soloist for the May festival. . . . Her relatives began planning to entertain her. . . .

The dinner party came off next evening. The guest of honour . . . was short, stalwart, with an enormous chest, a fine head, and a commanding appearance. Her great contralto voice, which she had used without much discretion was a really superb organ and gave people a pleasure as substantial as food and drink.

Later in the evening Madame Schroeder-Schatz graciously consented to sing for her cousins. When she sat

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 45.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 87.

down to the piano, she beckoned Claude and asked him to turn for her. He shook his head, smiling ruefully.

"I'm sorry I'm so stupid, but I don't know one note from another."

She tapped his sleeve. "Well, never mind. I may want the piano moved yet; you could do that for me, eh?"⁷¹

Likewise the German friends of Claude pause to reflect; music means different things to different people:

Ernest Havel was cultivating his bright glistening young cornfield one summer morning whistling to himself an old German song, which was somehow connected with a picture that rose in his memory. It was a picture of the earliest plowing he could remember.⁷²

The fear that anything German was subversive in itself is adequately portrayed in the trial of Mr. Oberlies:

. . . A third complained that on Sunday afternoon the old man sat on his front porch and played Die Wacht am Rhein on a slide-trombone, to the great annoyance of his neighbours.⁷³

The activities aboard the Anchises are vividly portrayed. There is musical activity from the first day of the voyage to the last.

Before Claude had got over his first thrill, the Kansas band in the bow began playing "Over There." Two thousand voices took it up, booming out over the water, the gay indomitable resolution of that jaunty air.⁷⁴

That howling swarm of brown arms and hats and faced looked like nothing but a crowd of American boys going to a football game somewhere. But the scene was ageless; youths were sailing away to die for an idea, a sentiment, for the mere sound of a phrase. . . . And on

⁷¹Ibid., pp. 57-60.

⁷²Ibid., p. 137.

⁷³Ibid., p. 240.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 273.

their departure they were making vows to a bronze image in the sea.⁷⁵

That evening Claude was on deck, almost alone; there was a concert down in the card room. To the west heavy clouds had come up, moving so low that they flapped over the water like a black washing hanging on the line.

The music sounded well from below. Four Swedish boys from the Scandinavian settlement of Lindsborg, Kansas, were singing "Long, Long Ago." . . . Downstairs the men began singing "Annie Laurie."⁷⁶

The influenza epidemic aboard the Anchises is described in such a way that one does not soon forget it. The funeral at sea of Lieutenant Bird is portrayed in all its stark reality:

Lieutenant Bird died late in the afternoon and was buried at sunrise the next day, sewed up in a tarpaulin, with an eighteen pound shell at his feet. The morning broke brilliantly clear and bitter cold. The sea was rolling blue walls of water, and the boat was raked by a wind as sharp as ice. Excepting those who were sick, the boys turned out to a man. It was the first burial at sea they had ever witnessed, and they couldn't help finding it interesting. The Chaplain read the burial service while they stood with uncovered heads. The Kansas band played a solemn march, the Swedish quartette sang a hymn. Many a man turned his face away when the brown sack was lowered into the cold, leaping indigo ridges that seemed so destitute of anything friendly to human kind. In a moment it was done, and they steamed on without him.⁷⁷

Claude talks a half-frightened soldier out of supposed illness, by remarking,

". . . I suppose they got the band out and made a fuss over you when you went away, and thought they were sending off a fine soldier."⁷⁸

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 274.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 283-284.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 292.

⁷⁸ibid., p. 295.

And,

. . . as there were no nurses on board, the Kansas band had taken over the hospital. They had been trained for stretcher and first aid work, and when they realized what was happening on the Anchises, the bandmaster came to the Doctor and offered the services of his men.⁷⁹

Claude wonders, after many weary days and nights of waiting on the sick,

. . . what had become of those first days of golden weather, leisure and good comradeship? The band concerts, the Lindsborg Quartette, the first excitement and the novelty of the sea: all that had gone by like a dream.⁸⁰

Victor Morse and Claude discuss Victor's girl friend in England.

Victor says that "she's a linguist and a musician and all that."⁸¹ And he later hums "Roses of Picardy" for Claude, telling him that his Maisie often plays it.⁸²

Later, after Claude hears of Victor's death, he wonders whether "the heavy-eyed beauty had been very sorry, or whether she was playing 'Roses of Picardy' for other young officers?"⁸³

Cather gives adequate evidence that the A. E. F. was a singing army:

The Americans went through every village in march step, colours flying, and band playing, "to show that morale was high," as the officers said.⁸⁴

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 297.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 298.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 308.

⁸²Ibid., p. 332.

⁸³Ibid., p. 375.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 358.

A new flag, le drapeau étoilé, floated along with the tricolour in the square. At sunset the soldiers stood in formation behind it and sang "The Star Spangled Banner" with uncovered heads. The old people watched them from the doorways. The Americans were the first to bring "Madelon" to Beaufort. The fact that the village had never heard this song, that the children stood round begging for it, "Chantez-vous la Madelon!" made the soldiers realize how far and how long out of the world these villagers had been. The German occupation was like a deafness which nothing pierced but their own arrogant martial airs.⁸⁵

Claude is very much impressed and interested in Louis, the young Frenchman who had lost an arm:

Down in the garden Louis was singing. Again he wished he knew the words of Louis' song. The airs were rather melancholy, but they were sung very cheerfully. There was something open and warm about the boy's voice, as there was about his face, something blond, too. It was distinctly a blond voice, like summer wheatfields, ripe and waving.⁸⁶

Probably one of the most beautiful friendships in One of Ours is that of Claude Wheeler and David Gerhardt, the violinist.

Gerhardt had studied the violin in Paris for several years prior to World War I, and he could have escaped combat service by going in as an interpreter or as an organizer of camp entertainments. At first the men look on him with suspicion, but when they discover that he "could have wriggled out and didn't," they respect him.⁸⁷

Gerhardt maintains a certain reserve, even with Claude. He does eventually relate the story of how his violin, a Stradivarius, was

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 434.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 391.

⁸⁷Ibid., pp. 354-357.

smashed, and how much its loss affected him.⁸⁸ Claude also learns that Gerhardt had made some phonograph records before he came overseas:

The men kept the phonograph going: as soon as one record buzzed out, somebody put on another. Once, when a new tune began, Claude saw David look up from his paper with a curious expression. He listened for a moment with a half-contemptuous smile, then frowned and began sketching in his map again. Something about his momentary glance of recognition made Claude wonder whether he had particular associations with the air, —melancholy, but beautiful, Claude thought. He got up and went over to change the record himself this time. He took out the disk, and holding it up to the light, read the inscription: "Meditation from Thais—Violin solo—David Gerhardt."⁸⁹

On their way back to their camp, Gerhardt, after being questioned by Claude, tells him that he has made a number of records and that Claude's mother, who Claude says is interested in good music, may "find them in the catalog with my picture in uniform alongside."⁹⁰

The scene at the Fleury home is poignantly described. Rene, the Fleurys' son, had been a classmate of David's, but had been killed sometime earlier. One can almost feel the tenseness of the situation—the pathos, as it were, of it:

After dinner, when they went into the salon, Madame Fleury asked David whether he would like to see Rene's violin again, and nodded to the little boy. He slipped away and returned carrying the case which he placed on the table. He opened it carefully and took off the velvet cloth,

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 408-409.

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 370-371.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 371.

as if this was his peculiar office, then handed the instrument to Gerhardt.

David turned it over under the candles, telling Madame Fleury that he would have known it anywhere. Rene's wonderful Amati, almost too exquisite in tone for the concert hall, like a woman who is too beautiful for the stage. The family stood round and listened to his praise with evident satisfaction. Madame Fleury told him that Lucien was tres serieux with his music, that his master was well pleased with him, and when his hand was a little larger he would be allowed to play upon Rene's violin. Claude watched the little boy as he stood looking at the instrument in David's hands; in each of his big black eyes a candle flame was reflected, as if some steady fire were actually burning there.

"What is it, Lucien?" his mother asked.

"If Monsieur David would be so good as to play before I must go to bed—" he murmured entreatingly.

"But, Lucien, I am a soldier now. I have not worked at all for two years. The Amati would think it had fallen into the hands of a Boche."

Lucien smiled. "Oh, no! It is too intelligent for that. A little, please," and he sat down on a footstool before the sofa in confident anticipation.

Mlle. Clair went to the piano. David frowned and began to tune the violin. Madame Fleury called the old servant and told him to light the sticks that lay in the fireplace. She took the arm-chair at the right of the hearth and motioned Claude to a seat on the left. The little boy kept his stool at the other end of the room. Mlle. Clair began the orchestral introduction to the Saint-Saëns concerto.

"Oh, not that!" David lifted his chin and looked at her in perplexity.

She made no reply, but played on, her shoulders bent forward. Lucien drew his knees up under his chin and shivered. When the time came, the violin made its entrance. David had put it back under his chin mechanically, and the instrument broke into that suppressed, bitter melody.

They played for a long while. At last David stopped and wiped his forehead. "I'm afraid I can't do anything with the third movement, really."

"Nor can I. But that was the last thing Rene played on it, the night before he went away, after his last leave." She began again, and David followed. Madame Fleury sat with half-closed eyes, looking into the fire. Claude, his lips

compressed, his hands on his knees, was watching his friend's back. The music was a part of his own confused emotions. He was torn between generous admiration, and bitter, bitter envy. What would it mean to be able to do anything as well as that, to have a hand capable of delicacy and precision and power? If he had been taught to do anything at all, he would not be sitting here tonight a wooden thing amongst living people. He felt that a man might have been made of him, but nobody had taken the trouble to do it; tongue-tied, foot-tied, hand-tied. If one were born into this world like a bear cub or a bull calf, one would only play and upset things, break and destroy, all one's life.

Gerhardt wrapped the violin up in its cloth. The little boy thanked him and carried it away.⁹¹

Both David and Claude are killed, though neither knew of the other's death, Claude dying, "believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. And those were beautiful beliefs to die with. Perhaps it was as well to see that vision, and then see no more."⁹²

The end of the book is a musical apotheosis in itself:

Mahailey, when they are alone, sometimes addresses Mrs. Wheeler as "Mudder"; "Now, Mudder, you go upstairs an' lay down an' rest yourself." Mrs. Wheeler knows that then she is thinking of Claude, is speaking for Claude. As they are working at the table or banding over the oven, something reminds them of him, and they think of him together, like one person: Mahailey will pat her back and say, "Never you mind, Mudder; you'll see your boy up yonder." Mrs. Wheeler always feels that God is near—but Mahailey is not troubled by any knowledge of interstellar spaces, and for her He is nearer still, —directly overhead, not so very far above the kitchen stove.⁹³

⁹¹Ibid., pp. 416-417.

⁹²Ibid., p. 458.

⁹³Ibid., p. 459.

All in all, only with music could Cather have gained the many effects noted in this work.

The Lost Lady

Because of Cather's strictly-focused point of view in The Lost Lady, there is little use made of music or musical allusion. A use of musical comparison is noted in some of the various descriptions, such as the description of Marian Forrester's laugh:

The door of the front office opened, he heard his uncle rise quickly to his feet, and, at the same moment, heard a woman's laugh, —a soft, musical laugh which rose and descended like a suave scale.⁹⁴

And never elsewhere had he heard anything like her inviting laugh—like the distant measures of dance music, heard through the opening and shutting of doors.⁹⁵

When the Forresters are visited by Cyrus Dalzell, president of the railroad company, and Marian is told of his plan for them to visit the Dalzell home, the same type of comparison is used:

Tears flashed into her eyes. "That's very dear of you. It's sweet to be remembered when one is away." In her voice there was the heartbreaking sweetness one sometimes hears in lovely gentle old songs.⁹⁶

There is at least one scene in which specific musical activity is mentioned:

"Uncle can start a song if you coax him, sir."
Judge Pommeroy, after smoothing his silver whiskers and coughing, began "Auld Lang Syne."⁹⁷

⁹⁴Willa Cather, The Lost Lady, p. 34.

⁹⁵Ibid., pp. 41-42.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 97.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 57.

And finally, Cather uses a possible allusion to Wagnerian opera, the immolation of Brunnhilde,⁹⁸ though she does not mention it as such. In the scene, Niel is reminiscing about Marian Forrester:

It was what he held against Mrs. Forrester; that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms.⁹⁹

Here Cather is able to make use of two of her favorite themes, those of musical reference and a nostalgic attitude toward the past.

All in all; there is little need for music in this work, for as Henry Seidel Canby said of it, "Here she has been concerned with a woman's personality and it is enough."¹⁰⁰

The Professor's House

Cather, in a letter written to a friend on December 12, 1938, states:

When I wrote the Professor's House, I wished to try two experiments in form. The first is the device often used by the early French and Spanish novelists, that of inserting the Nouvelle into the Roman. . . . But the experiment which interested me was something a little more vague and was very much akin to the arrangement followed in sonatas in which the academic sonata form was handled somewhat freely. Just before I began the book I had seen in Paris an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings.

⁹⁸Richard Wagner, Götterdämmerung, Act III, Scene 3.

⁹⁹Willa Cather, The Lost Lady, p. 169.

¹⁰⁰Quoted from book jacket; source not indicated.

In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea. The feeling of the sea that one got through those square windows was remarkable, and gave me a sense of the fleets of Dutch ships that ply quietly on all the waters of the globe. . . .

In my book I tried to make Professor St. Peter's house rather overcrowded and stuffy . . . until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa.¹⁰¹

Strangely enough, Cather used this same method when she mentions music in this novel. The visit of St. Peter and his wife to the opera is truly the scene beyond the square window of their strained existence. The professor and his wife attend the opera as guests of their son-in-law. Louie tells them that the opera is Mignon, one which will remind them of their student days in Paris. The opera was one of St. Peter's favorites.

At eight o'clock he and his wife were in their places in the Auditorium. The overture brought a smile to his lips and a gracious mood to his heart. The music seemed extraordinarily fresh and genuine still. It might grow old-fashioned, he told himself, but never old, surely, while there was any youth left in men. It was an expression of youth, —that, and no more: with the sweetness and foolishness, the lingering accent, the heavy stresses—the delicacy, too—belonging to that time. After the entrance of the hero, Lillian leaned toward him and whispered: "Am I over-credulous? He looks to me exactly like the pictures of Goethe in his youth."

"So he does to me. He is certainly as tall as Goethe. I didn't know tenors were ever so tall. The Mignon seems young, too."

¹⁰¹ Willa Cather, On Writing, pp. 31-32.

She was slender, at any rate, and very fragile beside the courtly Wilhelm. When she began her immortal song, one felt that she was right for the part, the pure lyric soprano that suits it best, and in her voice there was something fresh and delicate, like deep wood flowers. "Connais-tu—le pays"—it stirred one like the odours of early spring, recalled the time of sweet, impersonal emotions.

When the curtain fell on the first act, St. Peter turned to his wife. "A fine cast, don't you think? And the harps are very good. Except for the wood-winds, I should say it was as good as any performance I ever heard at the Comique."

"How it does make one think of Paris, and of so many half-forgotten things!" his wife murmured. It had been long since he had seen her face so relaxed and reflective and undetermined.

Through the next act he often glanced at her. Curious, how a young mood could return and soften a face. More than once he saw a starry moisture shine in her eyes. If she only knew how much more lovely she was when she wasn't doing her duty!

Presently the melting music of the tenor's last aria brought their eyes together in a smile not altogether sad. ¹⁰²

In addition to its being a bright spot in the rather drab existence of St. Peter's life, it is autobiographical in that it truly shows Cather's nostalgic attitude toward the past—an attitude which is expressed through music.

One other brief mention of operatic music is made when St. Peter's wife "heard him humming his favorite air from Matrimonio Segreto."¹⁰³

¹⁰²Willia Cather, The Professor's House, pp. 93-95.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 106.

In thinking about Tom Outland, Professor St. Peter makes certain musical references:

Fantastic too that this tramp boy should amass a fortune for someone whose name he had never heard, for "an extravagant and wheeling stranger." The Professor often thought of that curiously bitter burst from the baritone in Brahms' Requiem, attending the word, "He heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall scatter them!" The vehemence of this passage had seemed to him uncalled for until he read it by the light of the history of his own family.¹⁰⁴

Actually there is little use of music in this novel; however, that used is well-chosen and adds to the emotional impact needed in the work.

My Mortal Enemy

Compared with Cather's other novels, My Mortal Enemy, published in 1926, seems almost minute, both as to size and content. But what a plethora of riches one finds on reading it! Basically, it is the story of Myra Henshawe, as seen through the eyes of her clear-sighted young friend, Nellie Birdseye. The story takes Myra from the time she was the pampered niece of a Midwestern millionaire to her last, almost-poverty-stricken days in a West Coast town, where she dies, as she says, "alone with her mortal enemy."¹⁰⁵

The story, divided into three major settings, Parthia, Illinois, New York City, and the West Coast town, abounds in musical activities

¹⁰⁴Ibid., pp. 257-258.

¹⁰⁵Willa Cather, My Mortal Enemy, p. 113.

and allusions, for, according to Nellie, "her friends, I found, were . . . artistic people—actors, musicians, literary men—with whom she was always at her best because she admired them."¹⁰⁶

Nellie describes her first meeting with Myra: "I could see at the far end of the parlour, a short, plump woman in a black velvet dress, seated upon a sofa and softly playing on Cousin Bert's guitar."¹⁰⁷

John Driscoll, the rich uncle of Myra, though dead many years before the novel opens, is quite an important character. In fact, we can almost visualize him in the background, pointing his finger at Myra, and saying, "I told you so!" Myra had everything during those early years, even "a Steinway piano."¹⁰⁸ As for John Driscoll,

. . . he bought silver instruments for the town band, and paid the salary of the bandmaster. When the band went up to serenade him on his birthday and on holidays, he called the boys in and treated them to his best whisky. If Myra gave a ball or a garden-party, the band furnished the music. It was indeed John Driscoll's band.¹⁰⁹

The old Driscoll place in Parthia is still heard as well as seen:

I used to walk around the Driscoll place alone very often . . . and watch the nuns pacing so mildly and measuredly among the blossoming trees where Myra used to give garden-parties and have the band play for

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

her. . . . Since then, chanting and devotions and discipline, and the tinkle of little bells . . . seemed forever calling the Sisters to prayers. ¹¹⁰

(Driscoll had left the place to the Catholic Church after his niece had eloped with Oswald Henshawe.)

In describing John Driscoll's funeral service, Cather is at her height: one hears the music, sees the service, and smells the flowers and incense.

I myself could remember his funeral—remember it very vividly—though I was not more than six years old when it happened. I sat with my parents in front of the gallery, at the back of the church that the old man had enlarged and enriched during the latter days of his life. The high altar blazed with hundreds of candles, the choir was entirely filled by the masses of flowers. The bishop was there, and a flock of priests in gorgeous vestments. When the pall-bearers arrived, Driscoll did not come to the church; the church went to him. The bishop and clergy went down the nave and met that great black coffin at the door, preceded by the cross and boys swinging cloudy censers, followed by the choir chanting to the organ. They surrounded, they received, they seemed to assimilate into the body of the church, the body of old John Driscoll. They bore it up to the high altar on a river of colour and incense and organ tone; they claimed it and enclosed it.

In after years, when I went to other funerals, stark and grim enough, I thought of John Driscoll as having escaped the end of all flesh; it was as if he had been translated with no dark conclusion to the pageant, no "night of the grave" about which our Protestant preachers talked. From the freshness of roses and lilies, from the glory of the high altar, he had gone straight to the greater glory through smoking censers and candles and stars. ¹¹¹

Nellie's experiences in New York contain many musical references, from the mere mention of the musical sound of a fountain—

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹¹Ibid., pp. 25-27.

I lingered long by the intermittent fountain. Its rhythmical splash was like the voice of the place. It rose and fell like something taking deep, happy breaths; and the sound was musical, seemed to come from the throat of spring. . . . Here, I felt winter brought no desolation; it was tamed, like a polar bear led on a leash by a beautiful lady;¹¹²

the mention of an opera performance—

Afterwards, at the opera when the lights were down, I noticed he was not listening to the music, but was looking listlessly off into the gloom of the house, with something almost sorrowful in his strange, half-moon eyes;¹¹³

or the mention of a street musician—

"Oh hear the penny whistle! They always find me out." She stopped a thin lad with a cap and yarn comforter but no overcoat, who was playing The Irish Washerwoman on a little pipe, and rummaged in her bag for a coin;¹¹⁴

to the vivid, and unforgettable, description of Myra's New Year's Eve party:

The Henshawes always gave a party on New Year's eve. That year most of the guests were stage people. . . . Most of them are dead now, but it was a fine group that stood about the table to drink the new year in. By far the handsomest and most distinguished . . . was a woman no longer young, but beautiful in age . . . she had come early . . . bringing with her a young Polish woman who was singing at the Opera that winter. I had an opportunity to watch Modjeska . . . she sat by the fire in a high-backed chair, her head resting lightly on her hand, her beautiful face half in shadow. How well I remember those long, beautifully modelled hands, with so much humanity in them. They were worldly, indeed, but fashioned for a nobler worldliness than

¹¹²Ibid., pp. 34-35.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 47.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 36.

ours; hands to hold a sceptre, or a chalice—or by courtesy, a sword.

The party did not last long, but it was a whirl of high spirits. . . . There was a great deal of talk about Sarah Bernhardt's Hamlet . . . and about Jean de Reske's return to the Metropolitan that night after a long illness in London.

By two o'clock everyone had gone but the two Polish ladies. Modjeska, after she had put on her long cloak . . . turned to her friend, "Emelia, I think you must sing something. Something old . . . yes, from Norma." She hummed a familiar air under her breath, and looked about for a chair. Oswald brought one. "Thank you. And we might have less light, might we not?" He turned off the lights.

She sat by the window, half draped in her cloak, the moonlight falling across her knees. Her friend went to the piano and commenced the Casta Diva aria, which begins so like the quivering of moonbeams on the water. It was the first air on our old music-box at home, but I had never heard it sung—and I have never heard it sung so beautifully since. I remember Oswald standing like a statue behind Madame Modjeska's chair, and Myra, crouching low beside the singer, her head in both hands, while the song grew and blossomed like a great emotion.

When it stopped, nobody said anything beyond a low good-bye. . . . For many years I associated Mrs. Henshawe with that music, thought of that aria as being mysteriously related to something in her nature that one rarely saw, but nearly always felt; a compelling, passionate, overmastering something for which I had no name, but which was audible, visible in the air that night, as she sat crouching in the shadow. When I wanted powerfully to recall that hidden richness in her, I had only to close my eyes and sing to myself:

"Casta diva, casta diva!"¹¹⁵

These three types of musical description are much more interesting when one learns the true import of the "Casta Diva" aria in the opera. The opera Norma, the story of the Druids and their Roman

¹¹⁵Ibid., pp. 57-61.

conquerors, is laid in ancient Gaul. The Druids look forward to the day of their freedom from the Romans and would revolt, but Norma, their high priestess, is able to prevent their uprising—though she has personal reasons for so doing. The "Casta Diva" aria is a prayer for peace, sung by Norma, with the other priests and priestesses joining in to make a most impressive musical number.

Casta Diva, Casta Diva che inargenti
 Queste sacre, queste sacre, queste sacre antiche painte,
 A noi volgi il bel sembiante, A noi volgi,
 A noi volgi il bel sembiante, il bel sembiante.
 Senza nube, e senza vel, Si senza vel.
 Tempra, o Diva, tempra tu de'cor ardenti,
 Tempra ancora, tempra ancora, tempra ancor lo zelo audace,
 Spargi in terra, ah, quella pace,
 Spargi in terra, spargi in terra quella pace,
 Che regnar, regnar tu fai, tu fai nel ciel, tu fai nel ciel. ¹¹⁶

The aria is one of the most difficult to sing in all opera. In fact, the opera itself requires much of the performer and demands such superior singers that it is seldom performed today. It was a favorite, however, during Cather's early days in Pittsburgh and New York. One may notice that when any operatic selection is discussed at any length by Cather, it will invariably be one of the most difficult numbers in opera.

It is not too difficult to compare Myra Henshawe with the Norma of the opera. Each went her own way, doing as she chose to do—

¹¹⁶Vincenzo Bellini, Norma (Libretto), pp. 38-42.

Myra giving up her uncle's millions to marry a poor working man, and Norma violating her priestess vows of chastity by being clandestinely married to Pollione, the Roman proconsul, and bearing two children by him, paying for her own headstrong passions and emotions by the supreme sacrifice—death! Myra paid for her rash act by living a lifetime of regret, and by coming to hate her husband as her "mortal enemy."

After the Henshawes became poor and moved to the West Coast town, there was little music in their lives—they could not afford it. Only once or twice is there any reference to it after the New York episode. Nellie Birdseye mentions one other song:

Presently I . . . heard . . . a voice humming very low an old German air—yes, Schubert's Frühlingsglaube; ta ta te-ta / ta-ta ta-ta ta-ta / ta. ¹¹⁷

The short work is so constructed that it could easily be made into a play, and from a play it could be transformed into an opera—with arias, and leading motifs. For the opera, Cather could have dispensed with the last chapter and ended the work with quiet, peaceful music, such as the mood of Chapter VI would suggest:

. . . We found her wrapped in her blankets, leaning against the cedar tree, facing the sea. Her head had fallen forward; the ebony crucifix was in her hands. She must have died peacefully and painlessly. There was every reason to believe she had lived to see the dawn. While we watched beside her, waiting for the

¹¹⁷ Willa Cather, My Mortal Enemy, p. 72.

undertaker and Father Fay to come, I told Oswald what she had said to me about longing to behold the morning break over the sea, and it comforted him, ¹¹⁸

Death Comes for the Archbishop

In the January, 1927, issue of Forum Magazine, the first installment of Willa Cather's great novel of the Southwest, Death Comes for the Archbishop, appeared; the work was published in book form in the summer of the same year.

On November 23, 1927, Willa Cather wrote the editor of The Commonweal Magazine, giving information as to the writing of Death Comes for the Archbishop. She says in part:

My book was a conjunction of the general and the particular, like most works of the imagination. I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Geneviève in my student days, I had wished that I could try something a little like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition. In the Golden Legend the martyrdoms of the saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives; it is as though all human experiences, measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were of about the same importance. The essence of such writing is not to hold the note, not to use an incident for all there is in it—but to touch and pass on. . . . In this kind of writing the mood is the thing. . . . To attempt to convey this hardihood of spirit one must use language a little stiff, a little formal, one must not be afraid of the old trite phraseology of the frontier. Some of those time-worn phrases I used as the note from the piano by which

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 118.

the violinist tunes his instrument. Not that there was much difficulty in keeping the pitch. I did not sit down to write the book until the feeling of it had so teased me that I could not get on with other things. The writing of it took only a few months, because the book had all been lived many times before it was written, and the happy mood in which I began it never paled. It was like going back and playing the early composers after a surfeit of modern music.¹¹⁹

While one is almost overwhelmed with the vividness of Cather's colorful description, he can discover a very definite use of music which adds to the mood of the book. Cather still remembered the songs and music she had heard during the many trips she had made into the Southwest, but at the same time she had not lost her interest in classical music.

At the very beginning of the novel, with the setting in Rome, the then comparatively young priests "talked . . . of a new opera by young Verdi which was being sung in Venice. . . ."120

Not too much later, though the setting is now New Mexico, the new diocese of Fathers Latour and Vaillant, there is mention of a liturgical selection:

The evening star hung above the amber afterglow, so soft, so brilliant, that she seemed to bathe in her own silver light. Ave Maris Stella, the song which one of his friends at the Seminary used to intone so beautifully; humming it softly, he returned to his desk.¹²¹

¹¹⁹Willia Cather, On Writing, pp. 9-10.

¹²⁰Willia Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 14.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 37.

In one of Cather's stories-within-a-story, the one about the wicked Padre Balthazar, one can almost hear an Indian chant:

As the sun sank lower and lower there began a deep singing murmur of male voices from the pueblo below him, not a chant, but the rhythmical intonation of Indian oratory when a serious matter is under discussion. ¹²²

The gathering at the Olivares home affords Cather a chance to describe the musical talents of the various members of that household, as well as to mention some of the songs then popular:

Doña . . . Isabella . . . spoke French well, Spanish lamely, played the harp, and sang agreeably. ¹²³

It was refreshing to . . . listen to good music. Father Joseph that man of inconsistencies, had a pleasing tenor voice, true though not strong. Madame Olivares liked to sing old French songs with him. She was a trifle vain, it must be owned, and when she sang at all, insisted in singing in three languages, never forgetting her husband's favorites, "La Paloma" and "La Golondrina," and "My Nellie Was a Lady." The Negro melodies of Stephen Foster had already travelled to the frontier, going along the river highways, not in print, but passed on from one humble singer to another. ¹²⁴

Along with the musical interests, certain family jealousies are revealed, especially of and about Doña Isabella and her daughter Inez:

Her nephews-in-law went so far as to declare that she was enamoured of the Mexican boy the Olivares had brought up from San Antonio to play the banjo for them— they both loved music, and this boy Pablo was a magician with his instrument. ¹²⁵

¹²²Ibid., p. 112.

¹²³Ibid., p. 176.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 177.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 178.

After supper was over and the toasts had been drunk, the boy Pablo was called in to play for the company while the gentlemen smoked. The banjo always remained a foreign instrument for Father Latour; he found it more than a little savage. When this strange yellow boy played it, there was softness and languor in the wire strings—but there was also a kind of madness; the recklessness, the call of the wild countries which all these men had felt and followed in one way or another. Through clouds of cigar smoke, the scout and the soldier, the Mexican rancheros and the priests sat silently watching the bent head and crouching shoulders of the banjo player, and his seesawing yellow-hand, which sometimes lost all form and became a mere whirl of matter in motion, like a patch of sandstorm. ¹²⁶

When the banjo player was exhausted, Father Joseph said that as for him, he would like a little drawing room music and he led Madame Olivares to her harp. She was very charming at her instrument. . . . This was the last time the Bishop heard her sing "La Paloma" for her admiring husband, whose eyes smiled at her even when his heavy face seemed asleep. ¹²⁷

But that night the future troubled nobody; the house was full of light and music, the air warm with that simple hospitality of the frontier, where people dwell in exile, far from their kindred, where they lead rough lives and seldom meet together for pleasure. ¹²⁸

And of the Olivares' daughter Inez, "born long ago and still unmarried," ¹²⁹

. . . though she had not taken the veil, her life was that of a nun. She was very plain and had none of her mother's social graces, but she had a beautiful contralto voice. She sang in the Cathedral choir, and taught singing in a convent there. ¹³⁰

¹²⁶Ibid., pp. 182-183.

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 186.

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 180.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 179.

¹³⁰Ibid.

In the rather hilarious scene after Doña Isabella's winning of her court suit against Olivares' nephews, Cather tells of musical activity in the house so long silent after the death of Olivares:

From the other end of the room sounded the high tinkle of the harp, and Doña Isabella's voice:

"Listen to the mocking bird,
Listen to the mocking bird." ¹³¹

Father Latour describes certain musical activities of the Indians:

As he was returning, still a mile or more up the river, he heard the deep sound of a cottonwood drum, beaten softly. . . . Father Latour found Eusabio seated beside his doorway, singing in the Navajo language and beating softly on the one end of a long drum. Before him two very little Indian boys, about four or five years old, were dancing to the music on the hard beaten ground. . . .

The Bishop stood watching the flowing supple movements of their arms and shoulders, the sure rhythm of their tiny moccasined feet, no larger than the cottonwood leaves, as without a word of instruction they followed the irregular and strangely accented music. ¹³²

And the Bishop later reflects on the image of the Virgin Mary:

These poor Mexicans . . . were not the first to pour out their love in this simple fashion. Raphael and Titian had made costumes for Her in their time, and the great masters had made music for Her, and the great architects had built cathedrals for Her. ¹³³

The great Cathedral, long Father Latour's dream, had been built according to his specifications by the young architect who "used

¹³¹Ibid., p. 195.

¹³²Ibid., p. 230.

¹³³Ibid., p. 257.

to tell the Bishop that only in Italy or in the opera did churches leap out of the mountains and black pines like that."¹³⁴

The ending of the novel is simple, moving—and abrupt:

When the Cathedral bell tolled just after dark, the Mexican population fell upon their knees, and all American Catholics as well. Many others who did not kneel prayed in their hearts. Eusabio and the Tesuque boys went quietly away to tell their people; and the next morning the old Archbishop lay before the high altar in the church he had built.¹³⁵

Actually, Willa Cather may have had something else in mind when she wrote this ending; for the "Scene d'Apotheose" in Gounod's opera Faust has the same abrupt ending. The celestial and triumphant music of this operatic scene would be especially appropriate for the ending of this novel.

Shadows on the Rock

Shortly after her Shadows on the Rock appeared in 1931, Cather wrote to Wilbur Cross, then governor of Connecticut, thanking him for an appreciative review of the book. The letter, which was later printed in The Saturday Review of Literature, contained the basic germ or idea of what Cather had tried to do in Shadows on the Rock. Among other things, she said:

I tried, as you say, to state the mood and the viewpoint in the title. To me the rock of Quebec is not only a stronghold on which many strange figures have for a little

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 272.

¹³⁵Ibid., p. 299.

time cast a shadow in the sun; it is the curious endurance of a kind of culture, narrow but definite. There another age persists. There, among the country people and the nuns, I caught something new to me, a kind of feeling about life and human fate that I could not accept, wholly, but which I could not but admire. It is hard to state that feeling in language; it is more like an old song, incomplete but uncorrupted, than like a legend. The text was mainly anacoluthon so to speak, but the meaning was clear. I took the incomplete air and tried to give it what would correspond to a sympathetic musical setting; tried to develop it into a prose composition not too conclusive, not too definite; a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced; a kind of thinking, a mental complexion inherited, left over from the past, lacking in robustness, and full of pious resignation.¹³⁶

Though Cather rather explicitly explained in musical terms her intentions for this work, there are few direct references to music, and these are rather trivial:

From the stone kitchen at the back two pleasant emanations greeted the chemist: the rich odour of roasting fowl, and a child's voice singing.¹³⁷

Here we have two examples of Cather's description which appeal to the senses—those of hearing and smelling.

The musical interests of the older members of some of the families are mentioned:

But the old grandfather who was of course the head of the house, had come from Haute-Savoie as a drummer in the Cazignan-Salières regiment. He played the Alpine horn as well, and still performed on the flute at country weddings. This grandson, Georges, took after him, —

¹³⁶Willia Cather, On Writing, p. 15.

¹³⁷Willia Cather, Shadows on the Rock, p. 9.

was musical and wanted nothing in the world but a soldier's life. 138

After mass his family would make réveillon, —music and dancing. . . .

"And before daybreak, mademoiselle, my grandfather will play the Alpine horn. He always does that on Christmas morning. If you were awake, you would hear it even over here. Such a beautiful sound it has, and the old man plays so true!" 139

Cather's interest in the ritual of the church is again shown in one of the many discussions of it:

The three families agreed that it would be well to start for the church very early and get good places. The Cathedral would be full to the doors tonight. Monsiigneur de Saint-Vallier was to say the mass and the old Bishop would be present, with a great number of clergy, and the Seminarians were to sing the music. 140

The arrival of the ships from France also brings in additional musical interest:

"Should you like to hear him whistle a tune, mademoiselle? He can if he will. We will try to have a concert. . . ." Then the captain began to whistle a song of his own country.

"A Saint-Malo, beau port de mer,
Trois gros navires sont arrivés . . ."

After a few moments the bird repeated the air perfectly—his whistle was very musical, sounded something like a flute. . . . 141

Some sailors down in the place were singing, and when they finished, their mates on board answered them with another song. 142

138 Ibid., p. 55.

139 Ibid., pp. 109-110.

140 Ibid., pp. 112-113.

141 Ibid., pp. 222-223.

142 Ibid., p. 225.

As she [Cecile] knitted and watched the shop, she kept singing over Captain Poindaven's old song about the ships that came

A saint-Malo, beau port de mer,
Chargés d'avoine, charges de bled. 143

Too, there is an occasional mention of the French royal court:

"Yes, the King is old. He still comes down to supper to the music of twenty-four violins, still works indefatigably with his ministers; there is dancing and play and conversation in the Salle d'Apollon every evening. His court remains the most brilliant in Europe but his heart is not in it." 144

One might almost say that musical references in this work are almost nothing more than "shadows on the rock."

Sapphira and the Slave Girl

Cather returned to the scenes of her earliest childhood for the setting of her last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl. She recalled many of the incidents heard from relatives, as well as remembered many songs she had heard during those early years. While she shows the Negro's love of music, especially hymns, it is more than probable that Cather was poking fun at some of the denominational churches in showing the Negro's activity at church:

After the prayer he gave out the hymn, read it aloud slowly and distinctly, since many of his congregation could not read. When he closed his hymnbook, the congregation rose. Old Andrew Shand, a Scotchman with

¹⁴³Ibid., p. 251.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 276.

wiry red hair and chin whiskers, officially led the singing. He struck his tuning fork on the back of a bench and began: "There is a Land of Pure Delight," at a weary, drawling pace. But the Colbert negroes and the miller himself, immediately broke away from Shand and carried the tune along. Mr. Fairhead joined in, looking up at the gallery. For him the singing was the living worship of the Sunday services; the negroes in the loft sang those bright promises and dark warnings with such fervent conviction. Fat Lizzie and her daughter, Bluebell, could be heard above them all. Bluebell had a pretty soprano voice, but Lizzie sang high and low with equal ease. The congregation downstairs knew what a "limb" she was, but no one, except Andy Shand, ever complained because she took a high hand with the hymns. The old people who couldn't read could "hear the words" when Lizzie sang. Neither could Lizzie read, but she knew the hymns by heart. Mr. Fairhead often wondered how it was that she sounded the letter "r" clearly when she sang, though she didn't when she talked.

Could we but stand where Moses stood
 And view the landscape o'er
 Not Jordan's stream nor death's cold flood
 Would fright us from that shore.

When Lizzie rolled out the last verse and sat down, the young preacher looked up at the gallery, not with a smile, exactly, but with appreciation. He often felt like thanking her. ¹⁴⁵

Lizzie and Bluebell sang "In the Sweet By and By" at old Jezebel's funeral, too. ¹⁴⁶

The miller shows his deep insight and religious feeling many times, such as on the night after Jezebel's funeral.

As he stood there, he repeated to himself some verses of a favourite hymn.

¹⁴⁵Willia Cather, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, pp. 78-79.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., p. 102.

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;

.....
Deep in the unfathomable mines
of never failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will."¹⁴⁷

Martin Colbert, the miller's scapegrace nephew, also showed an interest in music as he talked to Nancy and Bluebell, on different occasions.

"Good morning, Nancy," he called up to her as she stood at the foot of the tree. "Cherries are ripe, eh? Do you know that song? Can you sing like Bluebell?"

"No, sir. I can't sing. I got no singing voice."

"Neither have I, but I sing anyhow. Can't help it on a morning like this."¹⁴⁸

Colbert's encounter with Bluebell is more humorous:

"You find time to sing though. Aunt Sapphy's going to have you and Lizzie come into the parlour and sing for me some night. I like to hear you. Maybe I could teach you some new songs. I'm not just crazy about these hymn tunes."

Bluebell grinned. "Oh, we sings 'Home, Sweet Home' an' 'The Gypsy's Warming.'"

Martin chuckled. "It's 'warning,' not 'warming,' my girl."

"Yes, sir. Seems just alike when you sings it."¹⁴⁹

There is little other mention of music in the novel, although we are told that "Colbert and Sapphira sometimes went out to watch her

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 183.

[young Negro] slave dance, while Dave played his mouth organ, and the other darkies 'patted' with their hands. "150

There is little need for music in this novel, as the situations are not those generally associated with music. Cather does, however, use folk music and church music very effectively.

Unfinished Works

After the publication of Sapphira and the Slave Girl, Cather gave little to the world of literature. Her interest in music, though, was as keen as ever. Physical handicaps, however, prevented her finishing her last planned work. Her literary executrix and friend of many years' standing, Edith Lewis, says of Cather's proposed, but unfinished work:

She had wanted for years to write an Avignon story. On her many journeys to the south of France, it was Avignon that left the deepest impression on her. The Papal Palace at Avignon—seen first when she was a girl—stirred her as no building in the world had ever done. In 1935 we were there together. One day, as we wandered through the great chambers of white, almost translucent stone, alone except for a guide, this young fellow suddenly stopped still in one of the rooms and began to sing with a beautiful voice. It echoed down the corridors and under the arched ceilings like a great bell sounding—but sounding from some remote past; its vibrations seemed laden, weighted down with the passions of another age—cruelties, splendours, lost and unimaginable to us in our time.

I have sometimes thought Willa Cather wished to make her story like this song. 151

¹⁵⁰Ibid., p. 181.

¹⁵¹Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living, p. 190.

She worked fitfully at the Avignon story the next two years; but her right hand was so troublesome, became instantly so painful when she tried to write, that she was unable to make much headway. It was a story of large design, and needed concentrated vigour and power. Her knowledge of this often led her to put it aside entirely and try to forget about it until better times should come.¹⁵²

Thus, we learn that a physical handicap prevented our getting another novel from the hand of one of America's truly great novelists, and that even to the last, Cather had a musical theme in mind for her next novel.

Cather has used music of the every-day, common variety, such as cowboy songs and other similar types to show the musical interests of the person who would normally perform that type of music; she has used the various hymns in scenes of Protestant church services. She has most vividly recounted the rich musical background for the ritual and pageantry of the Roman Catholic Church.

But, above all, she has expressed her strongest emotional scenes by the use of music. She does the same in describing her nostalgic attitude for the past: that yearning is expressed in music. By combining her love of music with her nostalgic attitude toward the past, Cather has been able to unite her two favorite literary devices.

¹⁵²Ibid., pp. 195-196.

CHAPTER IV

ARTIST'S AWAKENING: THE SONG OF THE LARK

In 1932, when writing a preface for a new edition of The Song of the Lark, Cather said, among other things:

The Song of the Lark was written during the years 1914 and 1915. The title of the book is unfortunate; many readers take it for granted that the lark song refers to the vocal accomplishments of the heroine, which is altogether a mistake. Her song is not of the skylark order. The book was named for a rather second-rate French painting in the Chicago Art Institute; a picture in which a little peasant girl, on her way to work in the fields at early morning, stops and looks up to listen to a lark. The title was meant to suggest a young girl's awakening to something beautiful.¹

The book is divided into six parts, each of which has at least one major scene referring to music. There are many smaller scenes, to be sure, but most of these are references and allusions similar to those already discussed in the chapters on the novels and short stories. Accordingly, the minor references will not be discussed in this chapter.

The story is that of Thea Kronborg, daughter of a Methodist minister of Scandinavian descent, from her early years in a small

¹ Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark, Preface, p. v.

Colorado town to her eventual success as a Wagnerian singer at the Metropolitan Opera Company.

It is generally believed that Cather had in mind Olive Fremstad, the Swedish singer, when she wrote this novel. In December, 1913, Cather had written an article for McClure's Magazine, entitled "Three American Singers," in which she discussed Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar, and Olive Fremstad.² The story of Fremstad parallels that of Thea Kronborg in many respects, especially in that both were daughters of ministers and both had to struggle against certain accepted standards which neither believed that the true artist should adhere to.

Moonstone, Colorado, did not encourage Thea greatly; in fact, it discouraged her. Only a few of the citizens really understood her ambitions: Thea's mother, Dr. Archie, Spanish Johnny, the Kohlers, and Professor Wunsch.

Thea takes music lessons from Wunsch and also learns German from him. He had been a famous musician in Europe, another of those who could not or would not adjust to the ways of the world in which he found himself. To offset that frustration, he, as did many others of the time, became a drunkard. Mrs. Kronborg realizes his weaknesses; yet, more than others, she realizes his inherent worth

²Willa Cather, "Three American Singers," McClure's Magazine, XLII (December, 1913), 33-48.

as a teacher: "it's good for us he does drink. He'd never be in a little place like this if he didn't have some weakness."³

Thea has been taking piano lessons from Wunsch, but one day he discovers that she has a voice:

When the lesson was over, he did not seem inclined to talk. Thea, loitering on the stool, reached for a tattered book she had taken off the music-rest when she sat down. It was a very old Leipsic edition of the piano score of Glück's "Orpheus." She turned over the pages curiously.

.....
 . . . "You like to try? See." He drew her from the stool and sat down at the piano. Turning over the leaves to the third act, he handed the score to Thea. "Listen, I play it through and you get the rhythmus. . . ." He played through Orpheus' lament, then pushed back his cuffs with awakening interest and nodded at Thea. "Now, vom blatt, mit mir."

"Ach, ich habe sie verloren,
All' mein Glück is nun dahin."

Wunsch sang the aria with much feeling. It was evidently one that was very dear to him.

"Noch einmal, alone yourself." He played the introductory measures, then nodded at her vehemently, and she began:

"Ach, ich habe sie verloren."

When she finished, Wunsch nodded again. "Schon," he muttered as he finished the accompaniment softly. He dropped his hands on his knees and looked up at Thea. "That is very fine, eh? There is no such beautiful melody in the world. You can take the book for one week and learn something, to pass the time. It is good to know—always. Euridice, Eu-ri-di-ce, weh dass ich auf Erden bin!" he sang softly, playing the melody with his right hand.⁴

³Willia Cather, The Song of the Lark, p. 20.

⁴Ibid., p. 90.

Later, after Thea has memorized one of the German Lieder,

"Im Leuchtenden Sommermorgen," Wunsch wonders about her voice:

Wunsch had noticed before that when his pupil read anything in verse the character of her voice changed altogether; it was no longer the voice which spoke the speech of Moonstone. It was a soft, rich contralto, and she read quietly; the feeling was in the voice itself, not indicated by emphasis or change of pitch. She repeated the little verses musically, like a song, and the entreaty of the flowers was even softer than the rest, as the shy speech of flowers might be, and she ended with the voice suspended, almost with a rising inflection. It was a nature-voice, Wunsch told himself, breathed from the creature and apart from the language, like the sound of the wind in the trees, or the murmur of water.⁵

Thea realizes that she is getting more from Wunsch than a mere music lesson.

Wunsch goes on a drunken binge, practically demolishes part of the Kohler home, and then in sorrow leaves Moonstone. Before he leaves, however, he repairs the Glück score, inscribes on the title page:

Einst, O Wunder!—
A. Wunsch

Moonstone, Colo.
September 30, 18—

and presents it to Thea, telling her "that in ten years she would either know what the inscription meant, or she would not have the least idea, in which case it would not matter."⁶

⁵Ibid., p. 97.

⁶Ibid., p. 120.

As he is leaving Moonstone on the early morning train, he sees Thea, who has run all the way to the railway station:

He thrust his head out at the car window and called back, "Leben sie wohl, leben sie wohl, mein Kind!" He watched her until the train swept around the curve beyond the roundhouse and then sank back into his seat, muttering, "She had been running. Ah, she will run a long way; they cannot stop her!"⁷

Thea occasionally helps her father with his church work. She leads songs at prayer meetings, plays the piano, and performs other necessary duties. One such prayer meeting is vividly described:

One bitter cold night in December the prayer meeting seemed to Thea longer than usual. The prayers and the talks went on and on. It was as if the old people were afraid to go out into the cold, or were stupefied by the hot air of the room. She had left a book at home that she was impatient to get back to. At last the Doxology was sung, but the old people lingered about the stove to greet each other, and Thea took her mother's arm and hurried out to the frozen sidewalk, before her father could get away. The wind was whistling up the street and whipping the naked cottonwood trees against the telegraph poles and the sides of the houses. Thin snow clouds were flying overhead, so that the sky looked grey, with a dull phosphorescence. . . . There was not a cat or a dog in Moonstone that night that was not given a warm shelter. . . . Thea . . . took from her table a thick paper-backed volume . . . a poor translation of "Anna Karenina." Thea opened it at a mark, and fixed her eyes intently upon the small print. The hymns, the sick girl, the resigned black figures were forgotten. It was the night of the ball in Moscow.

Thea would have been astonished if she could have known how, years afterward, when she had need of them, those old faces were to come back to her, long after they were hidden away under the earth; that they would seem to

⁷Ibid., p. 121.

her then as full of meaning, as mysteriously marked by Destiny, as the people who danced the mazurka under the elegant Korsunsky.⁸

Ray Kennedy, a young railroad man who loves Thea, is killed. He leaves a six hundred dollar insurance policy made out to Thea, with the stipulation that she go to Chicago to study. He, too, knows that Thea is destined for great things.

In Chicago, Thea has rooms at the home of two German women, Mrs. Lorch and her daughter, Mrs. Anderson. Both admire Thea because she is a musician. Thea impresses the Reverend Lars Larsen with her singing ability and gets a job as a soloist in his church, where she is paid eight dollars for church singing and ten dollars for funerals.⁹

She studies piano with Andor Harsanyi, a rising young concert pianist. She knows little of the literature of the piano, having been exposed only to a few copies of music owned by Wunsch. Harsanyi realizes "he had never had [a pupil] more intelligent, and he had never had one so ignorant."¹⁰ Harsanyi tells Thea:

Every artist makes himself born. It is very much harder than the other time, and longer. Your mother did not bring anything into the world to play piano. That you must bring into the world yourself.¹¹

⁸Ibid., pp. 163-165.

⁹Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 219.

¹¹Ibid., p. 221.

Thea works diligently, takes little time off for entertainment; she even turns down a chance to hear Emma Juch, the famous opera and oratorio singer.¹² Juch, incidentally, was an actual singer of those days. This use of real people is another of Cather's favorite devices.

Then Harsanyi, too, learns that Thea can sing. As she is having dinner with Harsanyi one night, she mentions that she sings for the church. Harsanyi is very much surprised and insists on Thea's singing for him:

Thea looked at the keyboard uneasily for a moment, then she began "Come, ye Disconsolate," the hymn Wunsch had always liked to hear her sing. . . . Thea finished the hymn, she did not turn around, but immediately began "The Ninety and Nine."

. . . Thea turned on the chair and grinned. "That's about enough, isn't it? That song got me my job. . . ."

Harsanyi drew himself up in his chair, resting his elbows on the low arms. "Yes? That is better suited to your voice. Your upper tones are good, above G. I must teach you some songs. Don't you know anything—pleasant?"

Thea shook her head ruefully. "I'm afraid I don't. Let me see—Perhaps"—she turned to the piano and put her hands on the keys. "I used to sing this for Mr. Wunsch a long while ago. It's for contralto, but I'll try it." She frowned at the keyboard a moment, played the few introductory measures, and began

"Ach, ich habe sie verloren."

She had not sung it for a long time, and it came back like an old friendship.¹³

Thea and Harsanyi practice some scales, while testing her voice. Harsanyi is impressed:

¹²Ibid., p. 225.

¹³Ibid., pp. 235-236.

He put his hand back to her throat and sat with his head bent, his one eye closed. He loved to hear a big voice throb in a relaxed, natural throat, and he was thinking that no one had ever felt this voice vibrate before. It was like a wild bird that had flown into his studio on Middleton Street from goodness knew how far! No one knew that it had come, or even that it existed; least of all the strange, crude girl in whose throat it beat its passionate wings.¹⁴

After that session Harsanyi helps Thea with her singing after her piano lessons are finished. One afternoon's practice stands out:

One afternoon Harsanyi, after the lesson, was standing by the window putting some collodion on a cracked finger, and Thea was at the piano trying over "Die Lorelei" which he had given her last week to practise. It was scarcely a song which a singing master would have given her, but he had his own reasons. How she sang it mattered only to him and to her. He was playing his own game now, without interference; he suspected that he could not do so always.

When she finished the song, she looked back over her shoulder at him and spoke thoughtfully. "That wasn't right, at the end, was it?"

"No, that should be an open, flowing tone, something like this"—he waved his fingers rapidly in the air. "You get the idea?"

"No, I don't. Seems a queer ending, after the rest."

Harsanyi corked his little bottle and dropped it into the pocket of his velvet coat. "Why so? Shipwrecks come and go, Marchen come and go, but the river keeps right on. There you have your open, flowing tone."

Thea looked intently at the music. "I see," she said dully. "Oh, I see!" she repeated quickly and turned to him a glowing countenance. "It is the river.—Oh, yes, I get it now!" She looked at him but long enough to catch his glance, then turned to the piano again. Harsanyi was never quite sure where the light came from when her face suddenly flashed out at him in that way. Her eyes were too

¹⁴Ibid., p. 237.

small to account for it, though they glittered like green ice in the sun. At such moments her hair was yellower, her skin whiter, her cheeks pinker, as if a lamp had suddenly been turned up inside of her. She went at the song again:

"Ich weiss nicht, was soll es bedeuten,
Das ich so traurig bin."

A kind of happiness vibrated in her voice. Harsanyi noticed how much and how unhesitatingly she changed her delivery of the whole song, the first part as well as the last. He had often noticed that she could not think a thing out in passages. Until she saw it as a whole, she wandered like a blind man surrounded by torments. After she once had her "revelation," after she got the idea that to her—not always to him—explained everything, then she went forward rapidly. But she was not always easy to help. She was sometimes impervious to suggestion; she would stare at him as if she were deaf and ignore everything he told her to do. Then, all at once, something would happen in her brain and she would begin to do all that he had been for weeks telling her to do, without realizing that he had ever told her.

To-night Thea forgot Harsanyi and his finger. She finished the song only to begin it with fresh enthusiasm.

"Und das hat mit ihren singen
Die Lorelei gethan."

She sat there singing it until the darkening room was so flooded with it that Harsanyi threw open a window.

"You really must stop it, Miss Kronborg. I shan't be able to get it out of my head to-night."

Thea laughed tolerantly as she began to gather up her music. "Why, I thought you had gone, Mr. Harsanyi. I like that song."¹⁵

Harsanyi secures a ticket for a symphony concert and gives it to Thea, who had attended only a very few concerts.

The concert began at two-thirty, and Thea was in her seat in the Auditorium at ten minutes after two. . . .

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 240-242.

During the first number Thea was so much interested in the orchestra itself, in the men, the instruments, the volume of sound, that she paid little attention to what they were playing. Her excitement impaired her power of listening. She kept saying to herself, "Now I must stop this foolishness and listen; I may never hear this again"; but her mind was like a glass that is hard to focus. She was not ready to listen until the second number, Dvorak's Symphony in E minor, called on the programme, "From the New World." The first theme had scarcely been given out when her mind became clear; instant composure fell upon her, and with it came the power to concentrate. This was music she could understand, music from the New World indeed! Strange how, as the first movement went on, it brought back to her that high tableland above Laramie; the grass-grown wagon-trails, the far-away peaks of the snowy range, the wind and the eagles, that old man and the first telegraph message.

When the first movement ended, Thea's hands and feet were cold as ice. She was too much excited to know anything except that she wanted something desperately, and when the English horns gave out the theme of the Largo, she knew that what she wanted was exactly that. Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. There was home in it, too; first memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet old, that had dreamed something despairing, something glorious, in the dark before it was born; a soul obsessed by what it did not know, under the cloud of a past it could not recall.

If Thea had had much experience in concert-going, and had known her own capacity, she would have left the hall when the symphony was over. But she sat still, scarcely knowing where she was, because her mind had been far away and had not yet come back to her. She was startled when the orchestra began to play again—the entry of the gods into Walhalla. She heard it as people hear things in their sleep. She knew scarcely anything about the Wagner operas. She had a vague idea that the "Rhinégold" was about the strife between gods and men; she had read something about it in Mr. Haweis's book long ago. Too tired to follow the orchestra with much understanding, she crouched down in her seat and closed her eyes. The cold,

stately measures of the Walhalla music rang out, far away; the rainbow bridge throbbed out into the air, under it the wailing of the Rhine daughters and the singing of the Rhine. But Thea was sunk in twilight; it was all going on in another world. So it happened that with a dull, almost listless ear she heard for the first time that troubled music, ever-darkening, ever-brightening, which was to flow through so many years of her life.¹⁶

Cather is here repeating a scene she used so effectively in "A Wagner Matinee." And in the last sentence, she gives an important clue to Thea's future.

After the concert, Thea suddenly awakens; she is a little girl no longer:

All these things and people . . . were lined up against her, they were there to take something from her. Very well; they should never have it. They might trample her to death, but they should never have it. As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height. She could hear the crash of the orchestra again, and she rose on the brasses. She would have it, what the trumpets were singing! She would have it, have it—it! Under the old cape she pressed her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl's no longer.¹⁷

Harsanyi goes to Theodore Thomas, then a power in the musical world, and asks for his advice about singers. Thomas tells Harsanyi of his early struggles and how the two famous singers, Jenny Lind and Henrietta Sontag, influenced him more than anyone else. He ends

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 250-252.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 254-255.

up by saying, "The great thing I got from Lind and Sontag was the indefinite, not the definite."¹⁸

Harsanyi sends Thea, much against her will, to Madison Bowers, a well-known though not well-liked voice teacher. He misses Thea, but he tells his wife:

"I believe in her. She will do nothing common. She is uncommon, in a common, common world. . . . All this drudgery will kill me if once in a while I cannot hope something, for somebody! If I cannot sometimes see a bird fly and wave my hand to it."¹⁹

Thea studies with Bowers for a while before going home. She realizes she has learned a lot, but she also has her own thoughts as she is on the train going home. She reflects, "It was to music more than to anything else that these hidden things in people responded."²⁰

As Thea sees the land near her home, she still is thinking:

Wire fences might mark the end of a man's pasture, but they could not shut in his thoughts as mountains and forests can. It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang—and one's heart sang there, too. Thea was glad that this was her country, even if one did not learn to speak elegantly there. It was, somehow, an honest country, and there was a new song in that blue air which had never been sung in the world before.²¹

When Thea arrives home, she finds that she is supposed to sing at Maggie Evans' funeral the next day. At first she refuses, but her

¹⁸Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 268.

²⁰Ibid., p. 273.

²¹Ibid., pp. 276-277.

mother tells her that Maggie had wished her to do it and had remained one of Thea's loyal friends in Moonstone. Thea sings at the funeral. In the original version of the story, there is one sentence at the end of the book which reads something like this: "Dreary Maggie Evans, dead nearly twenty years, is still remembered because Thea sang at her funeral after she 'studied in Chicago.'"²²

The Mexican dance which Thea attends in Moonstone is described so vividly that one can almost see it:

Thea walked slowly. . . . She could hear the scraping of the violins being tuned, the tinkle of mandolins, and the growl of a double bass. Where had they got a double bass? . . . The Mexicans never wait until it is dark to begin to dance, and Thea had no difficulty in finding the new hall, because every other house in the town was deserted. Even the babies had gone to the ball; a neighbor was always willing to hold the baby while the mother danced.

. . . The musicians did not long remain at their post. When one of them felt like dancing, he called some other boy to take his instrument, put on his coat and went down on the floor. Johnny, who wore a blousy white silk shirt, did not even put on his coat.

The dances the railroad men gave in Fireman's Hall were the only dances Thea had ever been allowed to go to, and they were very different from this. The boys played rough jokes and thought it smart to be clumsy and to run into each other on the floor. . . .

This Mexican dance was soft and quiet. There was no calling, the conversation was very low, the rhythm of the music was smooth and engaging, the men were graceful and courteous. . . . Sometimes, when the music happened to be a popular Mexican waltz song, the dancers sang it softly as they moved. . . . There was an atmosphere of ease and friendly pleasure in the low, dimly lit room. . . .²³

²²David Daiches, Willa Cather, p. 42.

²³Ibid., pp. 287-289.

After the dance, most of the dancers go to Spanish Johnny's for ice cream and music. There Thea sings for them.

She had sung for churches and funerals and teachers, but she had never before sung for a really musical people, and this was the first time she had ever felt the response that such a people can give. They turned themselves and all they had over to her. For the moment they cared about nothing else in the world but what she was doing.²⁴

Johnny and Thea sing a duet, and then the real musical treat of the evening takes place:

When they had finished, Famos, the baritone, murmured something to Johnny; who replied, "Sure, we can sing 'Trovatore.' We have no alto, but all the girls can sing alto and make some noise."

The women laughed. Mexican women of the poorer class do not sing like the men. Perhaps they are too indolent. In the evening, when the men are singing their throats dry on the doorstep, or around the camp-fire beside the work-train, the women usually sit and comb their hair.²⁵

Across the gulch the little house of the Kohlers slept among its trees, a dark spot on the white face of the desert. The windows of their upstairs bedroom were open, and Paulina had listened to the dance-music for a long while before she drowsed off. She was a light sleeper, and when she woke again, after midnight, Johnny's concert was at its height. She lay still until she could bear it no longer. Then she wakened Fritz and they went over to the window and leaned out. They could hear clearly there.

"Die Thea," whispered Mrs. Kohler; "it must be. Ach, wunderschön!"

Fritz was not so wide awake as his wife. He grunted and scratched on the floor with his bare foot. They were listening to a Mexican part-song; the tenor, then the

²⁴Ibid., p. 292.

²⁵Ibid., p. 294.

soprano, then both together; the baritone joins them, rages, is extinguished; the tenor expires in sobs, and the soprano finishes alone. When the soprano's last note died away, Fritz nodded to his wife. "Ja," he said; "schön."

There was silence for a few moments. Then the guitar sounded fiercely, and several male voices began the sextette from "Lucia." Johnny's reedy tenor they knew well, and the bricklayer's big, opaque baritone; the others might be anybody over there—just Mexican voices. Then at the appointed, at the acute, moment, the soprano voice, like a fountain jet, shot up into the light. "Horch! Horch!" whispered the old people, both at once. How it leaped from among those dusky male voices! How it played in and about and around and over them, like a goldfish darting among creek minnows, like a yellow butterfly soaring above a swarm of dark ones. "Ah," said Mrs. Kohler softly, "the dear man; if he could hear her now!"²⁶

After a near battle with her family the next day, Thea realizes that she is no longer a part of the family, that they are no longer particularly interested in her and her ambitions. Her mother alone understands how she feels.

Cather, in the scenes of the Mexican dance and musical at Johnny's house, shows the Latin's love for music. These scenes she had witnessed, probably many times on her journeys into the Southwest. The scene of the family battle, so to speak, of the Kronborgs with Thea is also another theme used by Cather—the dislike of the Mexicans by the "whites."

Thea goes back to Chicago, where she continues her lessons with Bowers. She despises many of the singers who come to him—

²⁶Ibid., pp. 295-296.

singers who she thinks are very bad. Nor can she understand why the public is so fond of some of them. A Mrs. Priest is one of Thea's pet peeves. She tells Mrs. Harsanyi, "The people I have to play accompaniments for are discouraging. The professionals like Katharine Priest and Miles Murdstone, are worst of all. If I have to play 'The Messiah' much longer for Mrs. Priest, I'll go out of my mind."²⁷

Another singer whom she tells Mrs. Harsanyi about is Jessie Darcey: "She's singing some Schumann songs Mr. Harsanyi used to go over with me. Well, I don't know what he would do if he heard her."²⁸ And there are others:

"I must go now. I had to give my lesson hour this morning to a Duluth woman to coach, and I must go and play 'On Mighty Pens' for her. Please tell Mr. Harsanyi that I think oratorio is a great chance for bluffers."²⁹

There are other equally amusing remarks about the singers. Some of the lesson scenes are pointedly described, too. It is quite possible that Cather may have been giving her ideas about writers, under the disguise of discussing singers. On another occasion,

. . . Bowers . . . threw some sheets of music on the piano. "Better look that over, accompaniment's a little tricky. It's for that new woman from Detroit. And Mrs. Priest will be in this afternoon."

Thea sighed.

"'I Know That My Redeemer Liveth'?"

²⁷Ibid., p. 323.

²⁸Ibid., p. 324.

²⁹Ibid., p. 325.

"The same. She starts on her concert tour next week, and we'll have a rest. Until then, I suppose we'll have to be going over her programme."³⁰

Thea meets Fred Ottenburg, the youngest son of a wealthy German beer-making family. Fred is a good musician and is interested in music. He asks Thea to translate a Norwegian song, Tak for dit Råd, for him. Thea translates literally:

"Thanks for your advice! But I prefer to steer my boat into the din of the roaring breakers. Even if the journey is my last. I may find what I have never found before. Onward must I go, for I yearn for the wild sea. I long to fight my way through the angry waves, and to see how far, and how long I can make them carry me."³¹

Here we have Cather selecting a song which further states Thea's driving ambition—her future!

Fred's playing is excellent, and he in turn encourages Thea, realizing what a fine voice she has. Thus the last of the major characters who foresee Thea's future is introduced.

Thea is invited to sing at the home of Henry Nathanmeyer, a wealthy and highly cultured Jewish family.

At a practice, or try-out, session for them, she sings "an aria from 'Gioconda,' some songs by Schumann, and the Tak for dit Råd."³² The Nathanmeyers are very much impressed, Mrs. Nathanmeyer remarking: "That's the first real voice I have heard in Chicago."³³

³⁰Ibid., pp. 334-335.

³¹Ibid., p. 338.

³²Ibid., p. 349.

³³Ibid., p. 351.

Thea has a very trying summer and is in a run-down condition. She learns that Fred's father owns a whole canyon full of cliff dwellings somewhere in Arizona. She goes there for a summer of rest and recuperation, and while there gets one of her greatest incentives to go on with her singing. Music is not too often mentioned, yet Thea has not forgotten it:

Here she could lie for half a day undistracted, holding pleasant and incomplete conceptions in her mind—almost in her hands. They were scarcely clear enough to be called ideas. They had something to do with fragrance and colour and sound, but almost nothing to do with words. She was singing very little now, but a song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up, and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged. It was much more like a sensation than like an idea, or an act of remembering.

Music had never before come to her in that sensuous form. It had always been a thing to be struggled with, had always brought anxiety and exaltation and chagrin—never content and indolence.³⁴

She had not been singing much, but she knew that her voice was more interesting than it had ever been before. She had begun to understand that—with her, at least—voice was, first of all, vitality; a lightness in the body and a driving power in the blood. If she had that, she could sing. When she felt so keenly alive, lying on that insensible shelf of stone, when her body bounded like a rubber ball away from its hardness, then she could sing.³⁵

Musical phrases drove each other rapidly through her mind, and the song of the cicada was now too long and too sharp. Everything seemed suddenly to take the form of a desire for action.

It was while she was in this abstracted state, waiting for the clock to strike, that Thea at last made up her mind

³⁴Ibid., p. 373.

³⁵Ibid., p. 381.

what she was going to try to do in the world, and that she was going to Germany to study without further loss of time. Only by the merest chance had she ever got to Panther Canon. There was certainly no kindly Providence that directed one's life; and one's parents did not in the least care what became of one, so long as one did not misbehave and endanger their comfort. One's life was at the mercy of blind chance.³⁶

After an unfortunate affair, in which Thea learns that Ottenburg has a wife, she goes to New York and wires Dr. Archie for money to go to Europe for study.

Before Thea sails, however, Fred visits her, and they discuss the future:

"Did you sing for Harsanyi?"

"Yes. He thinks I've improved. He said nice things to me. Oh, he was very nice! He agrees with you about my going to Lehmann, if she'll take me."³⁷

Fred bent over her trunk and picked up something which proved to be a score, clumsily bound. "What's this? Did you ever try to sing this?" He opened it and on the engraved title-page read Wunsch's inscription, "Einst, O Wunder!" He looked up sharply at Thea.

"Wunsch gave me that when he went away. I've told you about him, my old teacher in Moonstone. He loved that opera."

Fred went toward the fireplace, the book under his arm, singing softly:

"Einst, O Wunder, entbluht auf meinen Grabe,
Eine Blume der Asche meines Herzens."

"You have no idea at all where he is, Thea?" he asked, leaning against the mantel and looking down at her.

"No, I wish I had. He may be dead by this time. That was five years ago, and he used himself hard. Mrs. Kohler was always afraid he would die off alone somewhere

³⁶Ibid., p. 382.

³⁷Ibid., p. 462.

and be stuck under the prairie. When we last heard of him, he was in Kansas."

"If he were to be found, I'd like to do something for him. I seem to get a good deal of him from this." He opened the book again, where he kept the place with his finger, and scrutinized the purple ink. "How like a German! Had he ever sung the song for you?"

"No. I didn't know where the words were from until once, when Harsanyi sang it for me, I recognized them."

Fred smiled whimsically and dropped the score into the trunk. "You are taking it with you?"

"Surely I am. I haven't so many keepsakes that I can afford to leave that. . . ."38

The final section of the story is called "Kronborg—Ten Years Later." Ottenburg and Dr. Archie are discussing Thea, who is now singing at the Metropolitan.

Dr. Archie clasped his large hands under his chin. "Oh, I'm counting on that. I don't suppose her voice will sound natural to me. Probably I wouldn't know it."

Ottenburg smiles. "You'll know it, if you ever knew it. It's the same voice, only more so. You'll know it."

"Did you, in Germany, that time, when you wrote me? Seven years ago, now. That must have been at the very beginning."

"Yes, somewhere near the beginning. She sang one of the Rhine daughters." Fred paused for a moment.

"Sure, I knew it from the first note. I'd heard a good many young voices come up out of the Rhine; but I hadn't heard one like that! Mahler was conducting that night. I met him as he was leaving the house and had a word with him. 'Interesting voice you tried out this evening,' I said. He stopped and smiled. 'Miss Kronborg, you mean? Yes, very. She seems to sing for the idea. Unusual in a young singer.' I'd never heard him admit before that a singer could have an idea."39

³⁸Ibid., pp. 462-463.

³⁹Ibid., p. 483.

There is a discussion of Thea's not coming home during the last illness of her mother. Thea was just getting a chance to sing at Dresden. Should she have left, her chances for success would have been delayed for years. Mrs. Kronborg realizes that Thea would have come home if she could have, recalling that she had been unable to attend her own father's funeral. She tells Dr. Archie as he comes to visit her:

. . . "I'd counted on hearing her sing again. But I always took my pleasures as they came. I always enjoyed her singing when she was here about the house. While she was practising, I often used to leave my work and sit down in a rocker and give myself up to it, the same as if I'd been at an entertainment. First and last"—she glanced judiciously at the photograph—"I guess I got about as much out of Thea's voice as anybody will ever get."⁴⁰

"It's been quite a satisfaction to you and me, doctor, having her voice turn out so fine. The things you hope for don't always turn out like that, by a long sight. As long as old Mrs. Kohler lived, she used to translate what it said about Thea in the German papers she sent. I could make some of it out myself—it's not very different from Swedish—but it pleased the old lady. She left Thea her piece picture of the burning of Moscow. I've got it put away in moth-balls for her, along with the oboe her grandfather brought from Sweden. I want her to take father's oboe back there some day." Mrs. Kronborg paused a moment and compressed her lips. "But I guess she'll take a finer instrument than that with her, back to Sweden!" she added.

Her tone fairly startled the doctor, it was so vibrating with a fierce, defiant kind of pride he had heard often in Thea's voice. He looked down wonderingly at his old friend and patient. After all, one never knew people to the core.⁴¹

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 493.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 494.

The next time Doctor Archie came to Moonstone, he came to be a pallbearer at Mrs. Kronborg's funeral. When he last looked at her, she was so serene and queenly that he went back to Denver feeling almost as if he had helped to bury Thea Kronborg herself. The handsome head in the coffin seemed to him much more really Thea than did the radiant young woman in the picture, looking about at the Gothic vaultings and greeting the Hall of Song.⁴²

Dr. Archie goes to New York and learns that the very first night he is to be there Thea is to sing Elsa in Lohengrin. The performance of Lohengrin has much the same effect on Dr. Archie as did the symphony on Thea somewhat earlier.

The opera was announced for seven-forty-five, but at half-past seven Archie took his seat in the right front of the orchestra circle. He had never been inside the Metropolitan Opera House before, and the height of the audience room, the rich colour, and the sweep of the balconies were not without their effect upon him. He watched the house fill with a growing feeling of expectation. When the steel curtain rose and the men of the orchestra took their places, he felt distinctly nervous. The burst of applause which greeted the conductor keyed him still higher. He found that he had taken off his gloves the twisted them to a string. When the lights went down and the violins began the prelude, the place looked larger than ever; a great pit, shadowy and solemn. The whole atmosphere, he reflected, was somehow more serious than he had anticipated.

After the curtains were drawn back upon the scene beside the Scheldt, he got readily into the swing of the story. He was so much interested in the bass who sang King Henry that he had almost forgotten for what he was waiting so nervously, when the Herald began in stentorian tones to summon Elsa von Brabant. Then he began to realize that he was rather frightened. There was a flutter of white at the back of the stage, and women began to come in: two, four, six, eight, but not the right one. . . .

All at once, she was there. Yes, unquestionably it was she. Her eyes were downcast, but the head, the cheeks,

⁴²Ibid., p. 495.

the chin—there could be no mistake; she advanced slowly, as if she were walking in her sleep. Someone spoke to her; she only inclined her head. He spoke again, and she bowed her head still lower. Archie had forgotten his libretto, and he had not counted upon these long pauses. He had expected her to appear and sing and reassure him. They seemed to be waiting for her. Did she ever forget? Why in the thunder didn't she— She made a sound, a faint one. The people on the stage whispered together and seemed confounded. His nervousness was absurd. She must have done this often before; she knew her bearings. She made another sound, but he could make nothing of it. Then the King sang to her, and Archie began to remember where they were in the story. She came to the front of the stage, lifted her eyes for the first time, clasped her hands and began, "Einsam in trüben Tagen."

.....

The King interrupted her. She began again, "In lichter Waffen Scheine." Archie . . . presently . . . found that he was sitting quietly in a darkened house, not listening to, but dreaming upon, a river of silver sound. He felt apart from the others, drifting alone on the melody, as if he had been alone with it for a long while and had known it all before. His power of attention was not great just then, but in so far as it went he seemed to be looking through an exalted calmness at a beautiful woman from far away, from another sort of life and feeling and understanding than his own, who had in her face something he had known long ago, much brightened and beautified. As a lad he used to believe that the faces of people who died were like that in the next world; the same faces, but shining with the light of a new understanding.

What he felt was admiration and estrangement. The homely reunion, that he had somehow expected, now seemed foolish. Instead of feeling proud that he knew her better than all these people about him, he felt chagrined at his own ingenuousness. For he did not know her better. This woman he had never known; she had somehow devoured his little friend, as the wolf ate up Red Ridinghood. Beautiful, radiant, tender as she was, she chilled his old affection; that sort of feeling was no longer appropriate. She seemed much, much farther away from him than she had seemed all those years when she was in Germany. The ocean he could cross, but there was something here he could not cross.

There was a moment, when she turned to the King and smiled that rare, sunrise smile of her childhood, when he thought she was coming back to him. After the Herald's second call for her champion, when she knelt in her impassioned prayer, there was again something familiar, a kind of wild wonder that she had had the power to call up long ago.

After the tenor came on, the doctor ceased trying to make the woman before him fit into any of his cherished recollections. He took her, in so far as he could, for what she was then and there. When the knight raised the kneeling girl and put his mailed hand on her hair, when she lifted to him a face full of worship and passionate humility, Archie gave up his last reservation. He knew no more about her than did the hundreds around him, who sat in the shadow and looked on, as he looked, some with more understanding, some with less. He knew as much about Ortrud or Lohengrin as he knew about Elsa—more, because she went farther than they, she sustained the legendary beauty of her conception more consistently. Even he could see that. Attitudes, movements, her face, her white arms and fingers, everything was suffused with a rosy tenderness, a warm humility, a gracious and yet—to him—wholly estranging beauty.

During the balcony singing in the second act the doctor's thoughts were as far away from Moonstone as the singer's doubtless were. He had begun, indeed, to feel the exhilaration of getting free of personalities, of being released from his own past as well as from Thea Kronborg's. During the duet with Ortrud, and the splendours of the wedding processional, this new feeling grew and grew. At the end of the act there were many curtain calls and Elsa acknowledged them, brilliant, gracious, spirited, and with her far-breaking smile; but on the whole she was harder and more self-contained before the curtain than she was in the scene behind it. Archie did his part in the applause that greeted her, but it was the new and wonderful he applauded, not the old and dear. His personal, proprietary pride in her was frozen out.⁴³

As Fred and Dr. Archie discuss the performance the next morning, Fred explains Thea's interpretation of her various characterizations:

⁴³Ibid., pp. 498-502.

"You see, Archie, it's all very simple, a natural development. It's exactly what Mahler said back there in the beginning, when she sang Woglinde. It's the idea, the basic idea, pulsing behind every bar she sings. She simplifies a character down to the musical idea it's built on, and makes everything conform to that. The people who chatter about her being a great actress don't seem to get the notion of where she gets the notion. It all goes back to her original endowment, her tremendous musical talent. Instead of inventing a lot of business and expedients to suggest character, she knows the thing at the root, and lets the musical pattern take care of her. The score pours her into all those lovely postures, makes the light and shadow go over her face, lifts her and drops her. She lies on it, the way she used to lie on the Rhine music."⁴⁴

In the description of the opera Lohengrin, just presented, and the description of certain scenes from Die Walküre, in which Thea sings, but which will not be quoted here, Cather makes use of Gertrude Hall's The Wagnerian Romances. Cather said in a preface to a new edition of the work, published in 1925: "If you wish to know how difficult it is to transfer the feeling of an operatic scene upon a page of narrative, try it! I had to attempt it once, in the course of a novel, and I paid Miss Hall the highest compliment one writer can pay another: I stole from her."⁴⁵

Thea, like Fremstad, goes on to become world-famous, adding more operas to her repertoire. Even at the New York period, the one which is described in the last chapter, she sings in performances

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 511.

⁴⁵Willa Cather, On Writing, pp. 64-65.

of Tannhauser, Trovatore, and the various operas included in The Ring.

There are discussions of Thea's impersonations, how she differs from the traditional ideas of so many of the singers, one of which is especially interesting:

"Her conceptions are coloured in so many different ways. You've heard her Elizabeth? Wonderful, isn't it? She was working on that part years ago when her mother was ill. I could see her anxiety and grief getting more and more into the part. The last act is heart-breaking. It's as homely as a country prayer-meeting: might be any lonely woman getting ready to die. It's full of the thing every plain creature finds out for himself, but that never gets written down."⁴⁶

The final opera described in The Song of the Lark is Die Walküre. Present at it are the people who have known Thea all the years, people who have been most interested in her: Dr. Archie, Fred Ottenburg, Landry, the Harsanyis, and Spanish Johnny.

Spanish Johnny, Thea's Mexican friend of Moonstone days, was then in New York, playing in a band which was to be a feature of Barnum and Bailey's Circus. Of all the people at the opera, it is doubtful if any got more pleasure from it than he. As Thea left the opera house after the performance, Johnny was the only man in the crowd to take his hat off. She did not see him, but smiled at the crowd. Johnny

. . . walked down Broadway with his hands in his overcoat pockets, wearing a smile which embraced all the stream

⁴⁶Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark, pp. 539-540.

of life that passed him and the lighted towers that rose into the limpid blue of the evening sky. If the singer, going home exhausted in her car, was wondering what was the good of it all, that smile, could she have seen it, would have answered her. It is the only commensurate answer.⁴⁷

In summarizing the book, one might say that Cather used all the methods which she had formerly used. She used various songs to create various moods. She gives, as she did in some of her early short stories, some of the background of behind-the-scene activities at the opera houses. She still uses the names of many songs that were well-known or that were at least appropriate to the situation. Some of the songs mentioned are "La Golondrina," "Invitation to the Dance," "Beloved It Is Night," "When Shepherds Watched," "The Prize Song," "O Promise Me," "Ah, Fuyez Douce Image," and many others. There are a mere sampling of those used.

The delineation of the operatic character is another device used to make the story more effective; for, after all, it is the story of a famous opera singer.

Of the famous singers written about by Cather in the 1913 article, Geraldine Farrar is the only one yet living. Louise Homer died some two weeks after Willa Cather, while Olive Fremstad died on April 21, 1951, in New York.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 573.

⁴⁸New York Times, April 23, 1951, p. 25.

Cather never again attempted to write a novel like The Song of the Lark with its page after page of detailed activities. Afterwards she left many of the events to be described by mere suggestion. All in all, the musical activities in this book are those most vividly described,—those which are needed to make the book full and rich and complete.

CHAPTER V

REFLECTIONS IN THE TWILIGHT:

LUCY GAYHEART

Lucy Gayheart may truly be called Willa Cather's Götterdämmerung in her stories of artists and their struggles, for this was to be the last of such stories. She was to write one more novel and a short story or two, but the major writing days of Willa Cather were just about over. It was during the writing of this book that her wrist became infected, and for long periods at a time she could not write.

Lucy Gayheart, which Cather had once intended to call Blue Eyes on the Platte, received mixed types of recognition on its publication. It has been ranked as one of her best books by some, by others as one of her worst. Regardless, there is much more to the book than that which meets the eye on first reading.

It is the story of a struggling young musician, yet not in the same sense as struggle besets many of Cather's artists.

The book opens in a reminiscent, almost sentimental mood:

In Haverford on the Platte the towns-people still talk of Lucy Gayheart . . . do not talk of her a great deal . . . but when they do mention her name, it is with a gentle glow in the face or in the voice. . . . ¹

¹Willa Cather, Lucy Gayheart, p. 3.

When there is a heavy snowfall, the older people look out of their windows and remember how Lucy used to come darting through just such storms, her muff against her cheek, not shrinking, but giving her body to the wind as if she were catching step with it.²

We missed Lucy in Haverford when she went away to Chicago to study music. She was eighteen years old then; talented, but too careless and light-hearted to take herself very seriously. She never dreamed of a "career." She thought of music as a natural form of pleasure, and as a means of earning money to help her father when she came home. Her father, Jacob Gayheart, led the town band and gave lessons on the clarinet, flute, and violin, at the back of his watch-repairing shop. Lucy had given piano lessons to beginners ever since she was in the tenth grade. Children liked her, because she treated them like children; they tried to please her, especially the boys.³

The story opens during the Christmas season of 1901, just after Lucy returns home for the holidays. The usual skating and other activities take place, but Lucy is anxious to get back to Chicago to try out as accompanist for a famous singer then living in Chicago, Clément Sebastian.

On the way back to Chicago, Lucy recalls the first concert of Sebastian's she had heard some time before:

Sebastian's personality had aroused her, even before he began to sing. . . . He was not young, was middle-aged. . . .

The first number was a Schubert song, she had never heard or ever seen. His diction was one of the remarkable things about Sebastian's singing, and she did not miss a word of the German. A Greek sailor, returned from a voyage, stands in the temple of Castor and Pollux, the

²Ibid., p. 3.

³Ibid., p. 5.

mariners' stars, and acknowledges their protection. He has steered his little boat by their mild, protecting light, eure Milde, eure Wachen. In recognition of their aid he hangs his oar as a votive offering in the porch of their temple.

The song was sung as a religious observance in the classical spirit, a rite more than a prayer; a noble salutation to beings so exalted that in the mariner's invocation there was no humbleness and no entreaty: In your light I stand without fear, O august stars! I salute your eternity. That was the feeling. Lucy had never heard anything with such elevation of style. In its calmness and serenity there was a kind of large enlightenment, like daybreak.

After this invocation came five more Schubert songs, all melancholy. . . . When he began Der Doppelgänger, the last song of the group (Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen), it was like moonlight pouring down on the narrow street of an old German town. With every phrase that picture deepened. . . .

Through the rest of the recital her attention was intermittent. Sometimes she listened intently and the next moment her mind was far away. She was struggling with something she had never felt before. A new conception of art? It came closer than that. A new kind of personality? But it was much more. It was a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water. As she sat listening to this man the outside world seemed to her dark and terrifying, full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now.⁴

This same mood was expressed by Emil in O Pioneers!, and it was implied either directly or indirectly in many of Cather's short stories.

An encore is finally given at the program, and Clément sings a setting of Byron's When We Two Parted, which gave Lucy a sense of

⁴Ibid., pp. 29-31.

foreboding, which actually became the introduction to the Fate motif in the story.

Later Lucy went to Sebastian's studio to try out as one of his accompanists.

As she approached the door, she heard Sebastian singing the "Largo al Factotum" from the Barber of Seville. She slipped in quietly. . . . When the aria was over, Auerback introduced her. . . .

"Have you ever played the piano accompaniment?" Sebastian asked as she sat down.

"I haven't happened to. But I've heard the opera."

When they finished he began turning over the music. "Now suppose we take something quite different." He put an aria from Massenet's Herodiade, "Vision fugitive," on the rack before her.⁵

Of the students trying for the place, Lucy is selected and is given a score of Elijah to look over.

After the Christmas holidays, Lucy returns, and hears an all-Schubert program, the complete Die Winterreise.⁶

When Lucy appears for work the next day, they immediately start work on the Elijah.

When she sat down at the piano, he put the music on the rack, turning over the pages. "Before we begin with my part, we might run through the tenor's aria, here. It's much too high for me, of course, but I like to sing it." He pointed to the page and began: "If with all your heart you truly seek Him."⁷

(Cather's use of "Him" indicates a not infallible, if nearly always correct memory. The pronoun should be "Me.")

⁵Ibid., pp. 34-35.

⁶Ibid., p. 38.

⁷Ibid., p. 41.

After the practice session, Clément asks Lucy if she has heard the Elijah, and on hearing that she hasn't, remarks that "Mendelssohn is out of fashion just now."⁸ On hearing that Lucy's father is a watchmaker who plays the flute, he says, "A German watchmaker who plays the flute seems to me a comfortable sort of father to have."⁹

Not long after this, a friend of Sebastian's, a French singer, Madame Renée de Vignon, dies rather suddenly and funeral services are to be held at a small church which Sebastian usually attends. Here again we have almost the same description of a church service that is given in My Mortal Enemy and in O Pioneers!:

The next morning, a little before the hour announced, Lucy stole into the church. There were not a great many people there, and in the dusky light she easily found Sebastian. He was kneeling with his hand over his face. When the organ began to play softly, the doors were opened and held back to admit the pallbearers, he lifted his head and turned in his seat to face the coffin, carried into the church on the shoulders of six men. A company of priests and censer-bearers went with it up the aisle toward the altar. As it moved forward, Sebastian's eyes never left it; turning his head slowly, he followed it with a look that struck a chill to Lucy's heart. It was a terrible look; anguish and despair, and something like entreaty. All faces were turned reverently toward the procession, but his stood out from the rest with a feeling personal and passionate. . . . Had this woman been a very dear friend? Or was it death itself that seemed horrible to him—death in a foreign land, in a hotel, far from everything he loved?¹⁰

⁸Ibid., p. 42.

⁹Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 53-54.

Lucy learns that Sebastian and his wife are not on particularly friendly terms, and that she is the daughter of a famous conductor.

One day after a practice session of Die Schöne Müllerin Sebastian tells of his enjoyment of certain types of music:

She thought she had never heard him sing so beautifully, but she was much too timid to say so. He went through the cycle before he stopped. Then he brought out his bottle of port and they sat down before the fire. He began to tell her about his concerts in the North, and said he liked engagements with singing societies.

"Many singers, don't you know? But I always feel such a friendliness in the people of the chorus, and I like them, especially when they sing well. In Minneapolis the sopranos are very good. The basses, too; most of them Germans and Swedes. The people in choral societies really get something out of music, something to help them through their lives, not something to talk about. Plumbers and brewers and bank clerks and dressmakers, they wouldn't be there unless it meant something; it cuts one night out of their week all winter."¹¹

For the first time in her life, Lucy is really and truly happy.

Working with Sebastian and hearing the music she loves puts her in a mood that is best expressed by some of the songs she sings:

As soon as she reached the studio, that excitement and sense of struggle vanished; her mind was like a pair of dancing balances brought to rest. Something quieted her like a great natural force. Things took on their right relation, the trivial and disturbing shut out. Life was resolved into something simple and noble—and joyous; a joyousness which seemed safe from time or change, like that in Schubert's Die Forelle, which Sebastian often sang.

Lucy stopped looking at the streaks of rain against the grey wall, went to her shabby piano and played that song again.

¹¹Ibid., p. 68.

There were other songs which she associated more closely with Sebastian himself, but this one was like the studio, like the hours they spent there together. No matter where in the world she should ever hear it, it would always drop her down again into that room with the piano between the two big windows, the coal fire glowing behind her, the Lake reaching out before her and the man walking carelessly up and down as he sang. ¹²

Other songs are played, and other emotions discussed by Lucy and Sebastian:

One morning Sebastian brought out an old English song, She Never Told Her Love. He sang it over several times, walking up and down smiling to himself: But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud, feed on her damask cheek. . . .

Until she began to play for Sebastian she had never known that words had any value aside from their direct meaning. ¹³

When the Chicago opera season opens, Harry Gordan, Lucy's boy friend from Haverford, appears and takes Lucy to the opera. They see Aida, Otello, Traviata, and Lohengrin. As for the performance of Aida, Harry

. . . enjoyed the music, and the audience, and being with Lucy. His enthusiasm for the tenor was sincere; the duet in the third act was, he whispered, his idea of music. He beat time softly to the triumphal march, and didn't mind that the trumpets played off pitch. ¹⁴

The music of Lohengrin widens the gap between Lucy and Harry:

It chanced that Lucy had never heard even the prelude to Lohengrin played by an orchestra; the first measures

¹²Ibid., pp. 75-76.

¹³Ibid., pp. 94-95.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 100.

caught her unaware. Before the first act was over she was longing to be alone; this wasn't the kind of opera to be hearing with Harry. ¹⁵

Shortly afterwards, Lucy tells Harry of her attachment to Sebastian, letting him think that she is Sebastian's mistress. Harry leaves her abruptly in a dining room.

The so-called Fate motif is renewed by the mention of a song that Sebastian had sung when Lucy first heard him. It is "When We Two Parted." Sebastian is to go to Europe. Again Cather uses a certain song to express a highly emotional scene, as Lucy and Sebastian are taking their farewell drive:

As they passed a lamp-post she looked up, and in the flash of light she saw his face. Oh, then it came back to her! The night he sang When We Two Parted and she knew he had done something to her life. Presentiments like that one were not meaningless; they came out of the future. Surely that hour foretold sorrow to this. They were going to lose something. They were both clinging to it and to each other, but they must lose it. ¹⁶

The sorrow had been foretold, for only a few months after the scene, Sebastian and his accompanist are drowned in an Italian lake.

Lucy goes back to Haverford, a sad, disheartened girl, still remembering Sebastian. Again we have one of Cather's favorite devices, the expression of reminiscence by use of music:

Out here in the orchard she could even talk to herself; it was a great comfort. She loved to repeat lines

¹⁵Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 126-127.

from some of Sebastian's songs, trying to get exactly his way of saying the words, his accent, his phrasing. She tried to sing them a little. It made her cry, but it melted the cold about her heart and brought him back to her more than anything else did. Even that first air she ever played for him, "Oh that I knew . . . where I might find him . . ." she used to sing it over and over, softly, passionately, until she choked with tears. But it helped her to say those things aloud to her heart, as if something of him were still living in this world. In her sleep she sometimes heard him sing again, and both he and she were caught up into an unearthly beauty and joy. "So shall their righteousness shine forth as the sun in their heavenly Father's realm." It was like that, when she heard him in her sleep.¹⁷

Lucy occasionally visited her friend Mrs. Ramsey, a person who probably understood her feelings more than any one else, and played her piano. Mrs. Ramsey tells Lucy that "nothing really matters but living."¹⁸

At the same time, Cather inserts some of her philosophy—philosophy that has the element of Fate in it:

In little towns, lives roll along so close to one another; loves and hates beat about, their wings almost touching. On the sidewalks along which everybody comes and goes, you must, if you walk abroad at all, at some time pass within a few inches of the man who cheated and betrayed you, or the woman you desire more than anything else in the world. Her skirt brushes against you. Out in the world the escapes are not so narrow.¹⁹

Mr. Gayheart brings tickets one night for a performance of The Bohemian Girl. He expresses his opinion of light operas:

¹⁷Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 167.

"That Gilbert and Sullivan stuff, I can't see much in it," said Mr. Gayheart. "If you want something light and amusing, now, there is Die Fledermaus. Or La Belle Hélène. You never heard it, Lucy? I was crazy about that opera when I was a boy. The Bohemian Girl is a little old-fashioned, maybe, but it's very nice."²⁰

When the conductor, who was also the pianist, appeared, Mr. Gayheart settled back with satisfaction, and the curtain rose on the hunting scene. The chorus was fair, the tenor had his good points; but before the first act was over, the three Gayhearts were greatly interested in the soprano. She was a fair-skinned woman, slender and graceful, but far from young. She sang so well that Lucy wondered how she had ever drifted into a little road company like this one. Her voice was worn, to be sure, like her face, and there was not much physical sweetness left in it. But there was another kind of sweetness; a sympathy, a tolerant understanding. She gave the old songs, even the most hackneyed, their full value. When she sang: "I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls," she glided delicately over the too regular stresses, and subtly varied the rhythm. She gave freshness to the foolish old words because she phrased intelligently; she was tender with their sentimentality, as if they were pressed flowers which might fall apart if roughly handled.

Why was it worth her while, Lucy wondered. Singing this humdrum music to humdrum people, why was it worth while? This poor little singer had lost everything: youth, good looks, position, the high notes of her voice. And yet she sang so well! Lucy wanted to be up there on the stage with her, helping her do it. A wild kind of excitement flared up in her. She felt she must run away tonight, by any train, back to a world that strove after excellence—the world out of which this woman must have fallen.

It was long before Lucy got to sleep that night. The wandering singer had struck something in her that went on vibrating; something that was like a purpose forming, and she could not stop it.²¹

²⁰Ibid., p. 180.

²¹Ibid., pp. 181-182.

Lucy makes up her mind that she must go back to Chicago, that she must live the life she has loved:

Suddenly something flashed into her mind, so clear that it must have come from without, from the breathless quiet. What if—what if Life itself were the sweetheart? It was like a lover waiting for her in distant cities—across the sea; drawing her, enticing her, weaving a spell over her. She opened the window softly and knelt down beside it to breathe the cold air. . . . Oh, now she knew! She must have it, she couldn't run away from it. She must go back into the world and get all she could of everything that had made him what he was. These splendours were still on earth, to be sought after and fought for. In them she would find him. If with all your heart you truly seek Him, you shall ever surely find Him. He had sung that for her in the beginning, when she first went to him. Now she knew what it meant.²²

Lucy decides to go skating; and not knowing that the old skating area has been ruined by the changing of the river bed, she breaks through the ice and is drowned.

The epilogue of the novel takes place twenty-five years later. It is the funeral of Mr. Gayheart. The description of the funeral is a complete resumé of the life of the Gayhearts, the life of the people of Haverford:

He had lived a long and useful life, people were thinking as they walked, or drove slowly in their cars out to the cemetery. Almost every timepiece in Haverford was indebted to him for some attention. He was slow, to be sure, but to the end he was a good workman. Last night, when they wound their watches, many a one of his old customers paused and wondered; tick, tick, the little thing in his hand was measuring time as

²²ibid., pp. 184-185.

smartly as before, and old Mr. Gayheart was out of the measurement altogether.

By four o'clock the graveyard was black with automobiles and people. The cars formed a half-circle at some distance away, and their occupants, except the old and feeble, got out and stood around the open grave. The grey-haired business men had once been "band boys." The young men had taken lessons from Mr. Gayheart even after he stopped leading the town band. His older pupils looked serious and dejected; how many happy memories of their youth went back to the music-teacher who had lived so long, and lived happily, in spite of misfortunes!

It was sad, too, to see the last member of a family go out; to see a chapter closed, and a once familiar name on the way to be forgotten. There they were, the Gayhearts, in that little square of ground, the new grave standing open. Mr. Gayheart would lie between his long-dead wife and his daughter Lucy; the young people could not remember her at all. Pauline they remembered; she lay on Lucy's left. There were too little mounds in the lot; sons who died in childhood, it was said. And now the story was finished; no grandchildren, complete oblivion.

While the prayers were being read, someone whispered that it was almost as if Lucy's grave had been opened; the service brought back vividly that winter day long ago when she had been laid to rest here, so young, so lovely, and everyone vaguely knew, so unhappy. It was like a bird being shot down when it rises in the ecstasy of its morning flight toward the sun. The townspeople remembered that as the saddest funeral that had ever drawn old and young together in this cemetery.

By the time the grave was filled in and the flowers were heaped over it, the sun had set, and a low streak of red fire burned along the edge of the prairie. The automobiles began slowly to back out, and the people who had come on foot turned their steps homeward.²³

Lucy is not one of those positive artists found in so many of Cather's works; she is seemingly passive, yet maybe not so much so

²³Ibid., pp. 206-208.

as one might think. For her, music was a part of life, part of the sheer joy of living.

Cather uses many references to oratorio in this work, something she had not previously done. Seemingly, she used the oratorio music because it was simple, reverent, almost passive, not the robustness of the Italian or German opera aria. The whole story is rather like the footprints in the cement—"three footprints, running away."²⁴ It is something beautifully intangible. We still see Lucy "as a slight figure always in motion; dancing or skating, or walking swiftly with intense direction, like a bird flying home."²⁵

²⁴Ibid., p. 231.

²⁵Ibid., p. 3.

CHAPTER VI

"RESTLESSNESS SUCH AS OURS . . ."

"Restlessness such as ours, success such as ours, striving such as ours, do not make for beauty." So said Willa Cather to Rose Feld in a 1924 interview.¹

One may wonder just how this statement concerns Willa Cather's use of music, but it is the belief of the present writer that it does. In all Cather's uses of music, we find the most impressive types of music used in some way which is related to the immigrant and his adjustment to the New World. Apparently she thought that we were too busy to become as interested in music as we should have been.

From the biographical sketch we see that Cather was not a performing musician. She never had the inclination or the patience to be one. She did take music lessons, but primarily what she got was a solid background of music history and music appreciation.

Numerous people who were to influence her in later life were or had been performing musicians. The influence of the Miner family in Red Cloud was unquestionably very great. Likewise, the influence

¹New York Times, December 21, 1924, III, 11.

of her aunt, Mrs. George Cather, was felt by Willa the rest of her life. The Pittsburgh and New York groups included many well-known musicians. Among her friends were Jan Hambourg, Yehudi Menuhin, Ethelbert Nevin, Olive Fremstad, Louise Homer, Ethel Litchfield, Josef Lhevinne, Myra Hess, and others. From these people she received much that was to find its way into her stories. Above all, though, Cather's ambition to get into the centers of culture after she left Nebraska was a driving, dominating force, one that was to last the rest of her life.

Cather was very much interested in the lives of great singers, and one will find many references to actual musicians in her fiction: Patti, Eames, Farrar, Juch, Marchesi, Viardot, the de Reszkes, Malibran, and many others. Also, others gave the inspiration for many of Cather's characters; for instance, Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark was inspired by Olive Fremstad.

Along with the famous singers, Cather also used the device of referring to certain operatic arias—arias which usually are among the most difficult in the operatic repertoire. Yet each of these arias seems to be perfectly appropriate to its place and function in her fiction.

Not only does she use famous singers and well-known arias, but she also uses the great composers. Many of her characters have

studied under famous composers, some of whom were then comparatively obscure. A list of these composers would include Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, Grieg, Wagner, Verdi, Mascagni, Gounod, Debussy, and others. Cather knew her composers as well as she knew her singers.

(Popular songs of the day and folk music were used interchangeably when the occasion demanded, yet at all times it was in good taste and appropriate to the situation.) At no time did the present writer find an anachronistic, erroneous, or inappropriate use of music.

The great scenes of the Roman Catholic ritual are described in such a manner that one both hears and sees the services. The great church scenes in O Pioneers! and in My Mortal Enemy are unsurpassed. In them one can almost hear the organ and the choir!

The scenes of the Protestant revival services are likewise well done. Many of the hymns are especially well-chosen. One can almost conclude that the hymn "The Ninety and Nine" was one of Cather's favorite hymns because it was used at least three times in her works.

But above all else Cather used music to create a mood, and to depict the emotions. Cather's nostalgic attitude for the past, not only a device used in her works, but also something Cather herself deeply felt, is expressed most forcefully and unforgettably by music.)

The highly emotional scenes are intensified by a musical background, a sudden burst of song, or the memory of some beloved melody.

From her first work to her last, Cather used music in some way. While the novels show a better integrated use—from the few references in Alexander's Bridge or Sapphira and the Slave Girl to the extensive use in The Song of the Lark and Lucy Gayheart—her short stories are still beautifully done, with music being used in the same general manner. In both, she knew whereof she spoke.

One scholar has written: "Nobody who was not passionately interested in music and very familiar with the temper of the great interpreters could have written The Song of the Lark."² One could include many of her other works with this one.

Cather's works have been divided into many classifications. The best one, so far as the present writer is concerned, is as follows:

Experiment	<u>Alexander's Bridge</u>
Affirmation of Life	<u>O Pioneers!</u> <u>The Song of the Lark</u> <u>My Antonia</u>
Unrest, Maladjustment, and Frustration	<u>One of Ours</u> <u>The Lost Lady</u> <u>The Professor's House</u> <u>My Mortal Enemy</u>

²Edward Wagenknecht, "Willa Cather," Sewanee Review, XXXVII (April-June, 1929), 237.

Tranquillity

Death Comes for the
Archbishop
Shadows on the Rock

Reminiscence

Lucy Gayheart
Sapphira and the Slave Girl

Throughout her career, Cather expressed each of these: experiment, affirmation of life, unrest, maladjustment, frustration, tranquillity, and reminiscence—in all, the complete range of her artistic talent—through the use of music.

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