CARL SANDBURG’S TIMELESS PRAIRIE: PHILIP WHARTON’S

SONG CYCLE, THE PRAIRIE SINGS

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The connection of music and verse evident in the work of American poet, Carl Sandburg, is a topic that has received inadequate attention. Much preexisting research has focused on Sandburg’s work with *The American Songbag* anthology; however little has been written about music composers’ settings of his verse. The relevance of Sandburg’s work as a poet has faded in today’s society; the rural prairie subject matter and his poetic style are deemed archaic in an ever-evolving mechanistic society. Philip Wharton, a native of Sandburg’s Midwest prairie, composes to create an evocative and image-laden world for the hearers of his music. This is what creates a semblance between both artists’ works. This paper makes a connection between the work of the 20th century prairie poet and a current, 21st century American composer’s musical setting of Sandburg’s verse. Both artists are connected not only geographically, but also in their approach to an accessible art form for their audience.

Negating current compositional trends and using text from Sandburg’s poetry collections, *Chicago Poems* and *Cornhuskers*, Wharton melds the text into his evocative, imagistic musical language in his song cycle, *The Prairie Sings*. Using examples from the five movements of the cycle, I show the dependent relationship of verse and music. An in-depth analysis of the connection of poetry and music in each of the five movements of the cycle is contained in the paper. An additional connection in the dynamic interplay of the vocal line and piano accompaniment, the two “narrators” of the cycle, is also discussed. The resulting research points to an aspect of a creation of a regional American “sound,” reminiscent of trends of nationalism in the 19th and 20th century in art, literature and music.
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INTRODUCTION: THE AMERICAN “REALISM” OF SANDBURG AND WHARTON

I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover, the eyes of its women, gave me a song and a slogan.
The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night I rest easy in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart.
-Carl Sandburg, from the poem “Cornhuskers”

The melding of two artists, separated by a period of 100 years, is evident in the connection of the verses of 20th century prairie poet, Carl Sandburg, and in the compositions of a young 21st century American composer, Philip Wharton. An artist’s hope for posterity in his works is often created by a duality of connection to history’s past and looking forward with a new scope. Both of these men, and their respective art, exhibit such connection. When brought to a crossroads in his own development as a poet, Carl Sandburg created a new form of poetic verse whose subject matter was the archaic and disappearing American prairie. Wharton has averted composition of “modern” music, in the guise of serialism, atonality and electronic music, favoring instead a style of composition that feeds the audience’s senses in an evocative manner. His return to the ideals of composers, such as Barber, Copland and Thomson, who strove to create an authentic “American sound” is revolutionary in a way. Although heavily influenced by the past, not only in music, but also in the text he chooses to set, Wharton strives for posterity in a new syntax within the measures of his compositions. Wharton and Sandburg emulate a regional American sound focused on the voice of the microcosm of the Midwest prairie. Both men have a personal connection to the heartland of America, calling the prairie their home. The artists are connected not only geographically, but also at a basic level in their approach to an accessible art form for the masses. Though separated by an obvious span of time and history, the
poetry of Sandburg and the compositions of Wharton are connected by their focus on a regional realism and simplicity that is so inherently American.

Sandburg had a close relationship to music, served not only in the melodious lines of his poetry, but also as an arranger/compiler in his work on the folk song anthology, *The American Songbag*. Sandburg states the importance of music in his own writing,

> Dissonance, even cacophony, has its place; just as, in a poem of any length, there must be transitions between passages of greater and lesser intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole; and the passages of less intensity will be in relation to the level on which the total poem operates, prosaic-so that, in the sense implied by that context, it may be said that no poet can write a poem of amplitude unless he is a master of the prosaic.  

While there are sources on composer’s settings of Sandburg’s poetry, the majority of research seems to be weighted toward the poet’s work on *The American Songbag*. Focusing on the aforementioned artistic exchange between a current American composer and the verse of Sandburg has not been a topic that has received adequate research.

In asking composer Philip Wharton to define himself as a composer, he simply stated that he was an American. To him, this signifies a certain sound; a certain rhythm that he knows is very individualistic. Wharton states that one of his clear objectives, as a composer, is “to persuade people to slow down and listen.” Most likely, Sandburg would have described his work as a poet in the same manner. The importance of this topic is that it seeks to explore what makes the microcosm of the prairie, of America, so special. The importance of this paper is also to focus on two artist’s connection through time in creating an accessible art form. Forty years ago you could have mentioned the name of Carl Sandburg to a school child and received an immediate reaction; today that seems improbable. The poetry of Sandburg seems to not be

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2. Philip Wharton, interview by author, 17 January 2008, Decorah, electronic mail interview, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.
applicable to today’s society, but it is so important as a snapshot of what has gone before. In the same respect, an imagistic music, severed from the mechanization fostered in some current compositions, seems just as foreign as Sandburg’s antiquated language. The sounds of the past in Sandburg’s poetry set in Wharton’s current compositional hand are an important part of our history.
AN AMERICAN POET OF THE PRAIRIE: CARL SANDBURG

Free Verse Poet

Carl Sandburg (1878–1967) was born and raised in Galesburg, Illinois. Sandburg’s hometown was a railway center; many railroad lines from the stock market center of nearby Chicago crossed in Galesburg. The prairie town of 20,000 was made up of a significant number of immigrants who made their meager livelihood in railroad work. Sandburg’s early life as the son of a railroad worker opened his eyes to the plight and struggle of the working class; this would have a profound impact on his political leanings as well as the subject material for his free-verse poetry. With the industrial, agricultural and economic growth inherent in the late 19th century Midwest, there also came a desire for greater development of the arts and education. In the second half of the 19th century, Twain and Whitman followed the endeavors of Emerson in the creation of regional American culture in verse. The Art Institute of Chicago was established in 1879, providing a backdrop for American artists such as Grant Wood that would surface in the regionalism art movement of the Depression era. After moving to the expanding cultural center of Chicago in the early 20th century, Sandburg also allied himself with the scope of regionalist realism in the arts when he joined the Chicago literary renaissance movement. This movement, although regional in its scope, was inherently political. Sandburg’s fascination with socialism transcended to his work as a writer. He now strove to create literature that would descend from its elitist ivory tower into the homes of men who shaped America with their hands and minds.

Sandburg’s first success as a writer was in connection with the Chicago based-magazine, Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, founded in 1912 by Harriet Monroe. Monroe believed that

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American poetry should treat contemporary American life in new and freer rhythms. She hoped her magazine would foster a new breed of poet and create a sounding board for new writing forms showcased in the works of contemporary American poets. Carl Sandburg quickly associated himself with the periodical, first publishing his work within its pages in 1914. The free verse utilized by Sandburg and other poets was quickly heralded as revolutionary and catapulted their subject matter to a topic of discussion amongst readers.

Sandburg’s success with this new free verse form was immediate and his own unique treatment of seemingly ordinary and simple life in his verse echoed the realism apparent in other art forms. In editing The New Poetry, an anthology containing poems by new writers allied with the movement, Monroe stated the aim of this new breed of poet.

We wanted to get rid not only of rhetoric but of poetic diction. We tried to strip away everything that was artificial, to get a style like speech, as simple as the simplest phrase, like a cry of the heart.

Two years after his first success with the new medium of free verse poetry Sandburg would see his first collection of poems, Chicago Poems, published. This collection would remain one of his most significant contributions to the literary world, bringing both the poet and his work under national scrutiny.

**Chicago Poems and Cornhuskers Poetry Collection**

When men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life, and cannot write poetry on ordinary things, then exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation, in the way men cease to build beautiful churches when they have lost happiness in building shops.

- Carl Sandburg

The text of the song cycle, The Prairie Sings, is taken from two collections of Sandburg

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6 Ibid, 20.
poems. The first three poems of the cycle are taken from a collection of poems entitled, *Cornhuskers* (1918), while the last two are taken from *Chicago Poems* (1916). Both collections of poetry are significant contributions by Sandburg of a new style of poetry and also provided a focus for the regionalism movement in the field of literature.

His first literary success, *Chicago Poems*, allied Sandburg with this new poetic movement, opening him to attack by poetry’s traditionalists. Published in 1916, the collection contained 73 pages full of metaphors, imagistic language, and a simplicity of word selection, all collated in a free verse setting devoid of structure and rhyme scheme. *Chicago Poems* also created a stir in its discussion of the harsh side of Industrial Revolution life, its commentary on socio-economic groups and discussion of social issues such as child labor and poverty as well as accusations of industrial and political disorganization. The fame attained from the success of these poems catapulted Sandburg into the role of a dynamic, controversial painter of an America developing in material growth more rapidly than in spiritual growth.7 The *Chicago Poems* collection brought Sandburg into the public eye, laying the foundation for a life long career as poet, biographer and folk song arranger.

Two years later, in 1918, a second volume of *Chicago Poems* entitled *Cornhuskers* was published. The rural, wholesome and apolitical folk culture of the American prairie was celebrated in this collection.8 A more delicate poet seemed to arise from the refrains of these poems with their gentler, more lyric lines; although there are definite thematic connections between many of the *Cornhuskers* and *Chicago* poems. Sandburg’s lyrical lines exalting the love of the land and beauty of the Midwest became synonymous with his subject matter. He became a chronicler of the timeless land he loved, a “poet of the prairie.” In discussing the

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8 Niven, 1991, 40.
Cornhuskers poetry collection, Durnell states:

Here, though, it was not the meaning and value of the brawling, lusty workers’ city that concerned Sandburg but the meaning and value of the heartland, the other America, which he emptied of its contemporary and past radicalism. An attempt at capturing the spirit of the place. It was at times geological, with references to how the land was formed, at times anthropological, with references to history before white settlement. The prairie was said to be timeless, preexisting the cities and bound to exist long after the cities decayed. It was history’s ultimate witness, speaking of what it had seen across time.  

An Art for the Masses

While first known as a poet, music was an integral part of Sandburg’s life. He strove to help keep alive the aural folk song tradition of immigrants who inhabited the vastness of the United States by transcribing and arranging their songs in a collection entitled *The American Songbag*. His work in this endeavor was also responsible, in part, for the Folk Music Revival of the late 1940s. He states in the preface of *The American Songbag* that the collection “comes from the hearts and voices of thousands of men and women. They made new songs, they changed old songs, they carried songs from place to place, they resurrected and kept alive dying and forgotten songs.” His role in the preservation of folk music cannot be overestimated. A novice singer and guitarist, he would often end poetry lectures with the singing of American folk music. It seemed important to him to carry the aural tradition of the prairie culture from generation to generation; providing a visual sketch of the sounds and life of the prairie with the poetry of his pen.

It was inherently important to Sandburg that he focused his work as both a poet and a folk song arranger/compiler on the working class. The term “poet of the prairie” could also be

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9 Durnell, 1965, 35.
expanded to “poet of the people.” Poetry had remained a diversion of the upper class with its complicated words and ideas; the inaccessibility of poetry to throngs of middle and lower class Americans was something Sandburg could not condone. His free verse poetic style spoke to the masses at their level; using images from their lives united with words and ideas those same masses could understand. However, to confuse the term “accessible” with “simplistic” would be to do Sandburg’s poetry a great disservice. His direct manner of composition often masked a deeper meaning; providing social commentary on an ever evolving America.

Contemporary music in America seems to be struggling with the same issue of accessibility of works and the connection of current compositions to a mass audience. This was a point much bemoaned by composers like Aaron Copland who, during the 1930s, inspired by the strife of the Great Depression, felt that their duty was to speak to and for the American people through their compositions. Stating the importance of this mission, Copland paid homage to Sandburg’s literary idol, Walt Whitman.

[We] wanted to write on a level that left popular music far behind—music with a largeness of utterance wholly representative of the country Whitman has envisaged. Much like Sandburg, Wharton provides a commentary within his compositions on an art form that often seems disconnected from its audience. While atonality, serialism, and electronic music all have a role in creating and expanding the patchwork of a varied American music; the audience, at large, is often neglected. One hundred years after the inception of Sandburg’s radical free verse style, a return to an accessible music, laden with expressionism is seemingly just as revolutionary.

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THE MUSICAL VOICE OF SANDBURG’S PRAIRIE: PHILIP WHARTON

American Composer

Decorah, Iowa native, Philip Wharton was trained as a composer and violinist at Eastman, where his teachers were Warren Benson and Joseph Schwantner. He continued studies at The Julliard School where he studied composition with John Corigliano and David Del Tredici. Both Julliard composition teachers focused their attention on fostering an individual voice, one that would not compromise standards, in their pupil. Del Tredici had made a return from the auspices of serialism to expressive tonality in his own compositions, realizing that an expressive element was always innately needed in his compositions. He states,

Composers now are beginning to realize that if a piece excites an audience, that doesn’t mean it’s terrible. Why are we writing music except to move people and to be expressive? To have what has moved us move someone else? Everything is reversed today. If a piece appeals immediately, if an audience likes it; all those are “bad things.”

Both composers echoed an element of connection and expressivity that would transcend in the works of their pupil, although Wharton was unfamiliar with their music while he was beginning to form his own voice as a composer. Del Tredici insisted that Wharton write music that he wanted, not that which would please the modernist movement in composition and that which would win competitions.

Wharton was commissioned jointly by the Iowa Arts Council and Dorian Opera Theatre to write a children’s opera ...and out the other side. He also wrote two short comic operas, The Soap Opera and Two Saintes Caught in the Same Act, for an evening entitled Four Short Ordered Operas at Lincoln Center. In the summer of 2005, the Santa Fe Opera mounted Two Saintes in its entirety as part of their apprentice scenes program. Mr. Wharton is the composer-

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14 Wharton, 2008.
in-residence for the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Symphony. A native of Sandburg’s Midwestern
prairie, Wharton has often looked to the sounds and sights of his home to find inspiration for his
work. Critics speak of his music as follows,

- …the most complex, and in many ways, the most interesting.\(^\text{15}\)

- The novelty of the afternoon was Evening Serenade, a work composed by Philip
  Wharton especially for this concert. The idiom, while decidedly contemporary in
  harmony and musical persona, is both engaging and accessible in its “listener
  friendliness”.\(^\text{16}\)

- …is impressionistic and quietly emotional, reflecting the beauty of nature.

The Prairie Sings

While no stranger to the genre of song, The Prairie Sings exists as Wharton’s first song
cycle composition. The Prairies Sings was premiered at an art show gallery opening entitled
Seeing Iowa at Waldorf College on October 20, 2006. I performed the cycle in its debut
performance. The cycle was commissioned to celebrate the opening of artist and Waldorf
College Professor Kristi Carlson’s thesis exhibit and is dedicated to her. Mr. Wharton evidenced
the importance of the text-music relationship apparent in the creation of The Prairie Sings in a
statement from the program notes of the premiere performance.

In France in the early part of the twentieth century, it was not unusual to see a piano in an
artist’s studio. Artists, musicians, poets, fashion and costume designers were all
exploring new modes of expression; they delighted in artistic exchange and responded to
each other’s work in their own media. I wrote The Prairie Sings in response to Kristi
Carlson’s vision of the prairie. I was fortunate to find the wonderful poetry of Carl
Sandburg to give me further inspiration.\(^\text{17}\)

The Prairie Sings was orchestrated in 2007. In May 2007 the cycle received its

\(^{15}\text{Review of Praise, Laudate!, by Philip Wharton, Fort Worth Star Telegram,}\)
\(^{16}\text{Review of Evening Serenade, by Philip Wharton (Weill Recital Hall, New York), New York}
  Concert Review, 17 February 1996.}\)
\(^{17}\text{Wharton, Philip, program notes of The Prairie Sings, October 2006.}\)
international premiere when it was performed at the Stadttheater Idar-Oberstein Germany. Another international performance followed three months later when The Prairie Sings was included in a recital at the Pfalzakademie Lambrecht in August 2007. The event was a German government sponsored recital for young German officers whose duties posted them in the United States. The recital was entitled, “An American Journey;” the cycle performed amidst songs by fellow American composers Bolcom, Ives, Weill and Cage. The cycle was also most recently performed at the Bowling Green University New Music and Art Festival on October 20, 2007.

Setting Sandburg’s Verse

There is a real sense of music in Sandburg’s poetry and Wharton’s music captures the shifting balance in the text-music relationship in each of the five songs of the cycle. Perhaps that is what Sandburg wished when he envisioned his words set to music. The aforementioned artistic exchange between composer and poet is very strong as is evidenced in the dependent relationship of tone and word in The Prairie Sings. Wharton’s music is much like Sandburg’s poetry in its ability to capture so many of the senses. The sounds, movement, and sights of the prairie are all developed to provide the listener with a truly multi dimensional aesthetic experience. Within the cycle, the audience hears the sounds of the prairie and envisions a unique way of life and beauty. Wharton states, “Sandburg is to poetry what Copland is to music.”\(^{18}\)

The importance of this topic in its relationship to the individualistic voice of American culture, including the subculture of the prairie, cannot be overestimated. Nationalism in American music constitutes an inclusion of regional art in its various guises; the connection of Wharton’s music and Sandburg’s text creates a narrative on the decaying prairie life. The aural sounds of the

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\(^{18}\)Philip Wharton, interview by author, 5 July 2007, Decorah, tape recording. Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.
prairie, just like the dilapidated barns and crumbling silos on abandoned farms that dot the Midwest, will die if not celebrated.

Sandburg’s poetry has transcended through the decades of the 20th century into the 21st century. Many American composers, including both his contemporaries and non-contemporaries, as in the case of Wharton, have set his words. Sandburg’s verse was set in various ways throughout the 20th century; from the serialism of Ruth Crawford Seeger to the lyrical lines of Norman Dello Joio. Wharton’s cycle remains the most current representation of a musical setting of Sandburg’s text. He paints Sandburg’s text throughout the 5 songs of the cycle in the dynamic interplay between the accompaniment and voice. Much like Sandburg’s text, the true depth of the meaning behind the words and the music cannot be understood fully until further analyzed.

The inspiration for The Prairie Sings was the aforementioned art gallery opening. The choice of which Sandburg texts to set came when Wharton selected those poems that typified the sounds and persona of the Midwest. - Wharton chose the 5 poems of The Prairie Sings when, upon reading them, he immediately thought of something that sparked his ideas for the composition. The poetry, he states, is so “indicative of the Midwest”19 and each song shows a different aspect of the land, the people and the sounds of the prairie. Wharton believes that in his compositional style, the poetry determines the tune. He admits being attracted to simpler poetry with shorter stanzas, stating that the sometimes “flowery” stanzas of classic poets tend to inhibit the music and compositional process. Wharton states,

Some composers can set anything to music. I have to see room for me as a composer within the scope of the poem. Sandburg in particular used clear concise phrases with few modifiers. This allows me as a composer to put in additional modifiers (the music) without getting in the way of his poem. For me, a lot of truly great poems leave no room

for a composer…the poet has already filled in all the space for adjectives and adverbs, so any music obscures rather than illuminates.\textsuperscript{20}

The poetry of Sandburg was an obvious choice. Wharton states, “The poetry is, on the surface, easily understood by the audience and has an appeal to the masses. It is only when you keep going in examination of the poetry that a true inner depth emerges.”\textsuperscript{21} Whether it be the train in “…of passing night,” which symbolized the Industrial growth of the Midwest, the half answers of farmers on a hot summer day in “…of late summer” or evoking the rustling of the sea of autumnal prairie grass in “…of beauty;” Wharton wishes to create a visual snapshot for his audience in the sounds of his music. The choice of poems to set in the body of the cycle was a painstaking and deliberate decision for the composer. In selecting poems from Sandburg’s two most famous collections, \textit{Cornhuskers} and \textit{Chicago Poems}, Wharton provides the listener with a truly multi-dimensional and varied aesthetic view of the prairie.

The poems contained in the cycle are as follows:

\textit{The Prairie Sings}

1. “…of waters by night” (“Prairie Waters by Night” from \textit{Cornhuskers})
2. “…of laughing corn” (“Laughing Corn” from \textit{Cornhuskers})
3. “…of late summer” (“Village in Late Summer” from \textit{Cornhuskers})
4. “…of passing night” (“Window” from \textit{Chicago Poems})
5. “…of beauty” (“Monotone” from \textit{Chicago Poems})

Wharton chose to alter the titles of the five songs from Sandburg’s original poem titles. He did this to correlate to the title of the cycle, \textit{The Prairie Sings} in making each of the songs play an active role in the “singing” and sound of the prairie, changing the titles to the role of object of the preposition rather than subject. This evocative representation of an active prairie serves as a sketch and a commentary on a constant, but changing land.

\textsuperscript{20} Wharton, 2008.
\textsuperscript{21} Wharton, 2007.
Wharton is greatly influenced by text and is conscious of setting Sandburg’s words in a way that befits their ability to transcend the senses. However, to create this visceral relationship between text and music, Wharton goes further in his setting of Sandburg’s words by not only altering the titles of the songs, but also the lines of the poetry. He often repeats key words or phrases in a manner that echoes the emotion or mood belied by the words of the poem.

**An Individual American Voice**

Wharton tends to think of his compositions as evocative and often tries to paint different colors in his compositions through tonality. He tends to not lock his compositional style into a preconceived notion, stating that what he does as a composer has not been labeled yet. His teacher, David Del Tredici pointed out that his music “uses Copland’s sound but not syntax.” He often incorporates referential music ideas, but does not describe himself as a post modernist. Although influenced by composers such as Copland and Ravel, Wharton breaks from the neo-classicist’s focus on merely horizontal elements of melody and rhythm. The verticality of harmony, texture and instrumentation also figure prominently within the five songs of the cycle.

The connection between the two solo lines in the cycle, piano and voice respectively, is that of equality. The duet created between the connection of the two solo instruments of *The Prairie Sings* is almost impressionistic at times. This is apparent in the melding of voices; the soloist is often asked to merge into the tonal color scheme of the whole orchestra. There are moments of soloistic virtuosity, especially for the piano, throughout many measures of the cycle.

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22 Wharton 2007.
However the connection of the two instruments is dependent; the two parts rely and exist due to the inclusion of the other half. Jens Barnieck, pianist involved with the European premiere of *The Prairie Sings* along with soprano Julia Oesch, states that the cycle is that of chamber music with “a kind of two voice impression, sung by only one singer.”

The five songs of the cycle are not connected by key relationship, but rather by the continuance of moods and ideas. Naturalistic elements in poetic imagery exist through all five of the songs, evidenced in the use of an ostinato to mimic running water in “…of waters by night.” The implementation of ostinati in all but the third song of the cycle, “…of late summer,” makes it a connecting factor throughout the cycle. Wharton states that this recurring use of ostinati is meant to mimic the description of the prairie as an endless ocean of grass. The sound of water is again a theme, creating a circular connection, in the last song of the cycle, “…of beauty,” evidenced in the dropping triplets of the accompaniment. An “American sound,” reminiscent of Copland, is created harmonically in the use of open fifths throughout many measures of the cycle.

The American music idioms of jazz and blues are highlighted in the construction of the middle song of the cycle, “…of late summer.” Wharton states that he believes that the “American sound” is actually a rhythmic rather than a harmonic idiom. Rhythm also becomes an identifiable “American” element as is evidenced in the third and fourth songs of the cycle. “…of passing night” evokes all the different sounds of the train passing over tracks, the rhythm of the wheels and motion. Variance of rhythm is also apparent in “…of laughing corn,” echoed also in the shifting tonality centers of the song.

25 Barnieck, interview by author, 15 October 2007, Decorah, electronic mail interview, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.
27 Wharton, 2008.
All of these elements create a cycle that is the continuation of the lineage of composers of the 20th century such as Harris, Copland and Thomson; those who created an American music steeped in the nationalism movement of the 20th century. Much like his predecessors, Wharton strives through his compositions to create an individualistic sound that is inherently American.
The Prairie Sings “…of waters by night”

“Prairie Waters by Night”
(from Cornhuskers, 1918)

Chatter of birds two by two raises a night song joining a litany of running water-sheer waters showing the russet of old stones remembering many rains.

And the long willows drowse on the shoulders of the running water, and sleep from much music; joined songs of day-end, feathery throats and stony waters, in a choir chanting new psalms.

It is too much for the long willows when low laughter of a red moon comes down; and the willows drowse and sleep on the shoulders of the running water.28

-Carl Sandburg

“…of waters by night” begins the cycle, The Prairie Sings. Recurring images and themes quickly emerge as Wharton illustrates the elemental juxtaposition of earth, water and air. In measures 1-2, the first two chords of the right hand of the accompaniment are almost an octave apart, symbolizing the height of heavenly sounds of birds in comparison to the motive of earth and water. The shift is not only apparent in the tessitura of measures 1-2, but also in the open structure of the first chord and the closed structure of the triad immediately following. This material returns later in measures 36-39. In measure 3, the two elements become one harmonious sound and a large A major 9th chord sounds before the voice begins its recitative “chatter.” The conversational sounds of the birds are echoed in the altered repetition of Sandburg’s text and the decreasing rhythmic values in the inception of the vocal line (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Prairie Sings “…of waters by night” (measures 1-4)29

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28 Carl Sandburg, Poems of the Midwest (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 166
The strange syllabic stress on the word “of” in the vocal line of measure 7 again seems to highlight the duality of the air, apparent in the bird’s song of the vocal line, and earthy, running water coursing the land. This caesura in the vocal line creates a moment of repose before the image of water is illustrated in measure 8, both in the moving eighth-note ostinato and lower tessitura of the accompaniment (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *The Prairie Sings* “…of waters by night” (measures 7-8) \(^{30}\)

As the voice utters the word, “rains” in measure 14, there is a sharp jump of a 9\(^{th}\) in the right hand of the accompaniment to evoke the image of rain. This increases in pitch level in measures 17-18, only to quickly die in intensity and tessitura as the image of a drowsing willow pulls again to the water running on the earth (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *The Prairie Sings* “…of waters by night” (measures 14-20) \(^{31}\)

\(^{30}\) Ibid, 1.
\(^{31}\) Ibid, 1.
Beginning in measure 19, the voice begins its constant ascent in pitch level from F4 to B-flat4, while the accompaniment begins its contrary motion in the descent from E-flat5 to F4 in measure 27. The key of E remains the goal, but is not achieved until the initial chord of measure 31. The vocal line of measures 19-30, with its multiple ties over the bar line, creates a sense of rhythmic freedom and hemiola, again emphasizing the drowsing nature of the willows. While the accompaniment continues its descent to the earthy water, the voice again echoes the laziness of the sleeping willows in the inclusion of several semitone steps that weave throughout the ascent and decent of the vocal line, ending finally in the C4 of measure 30.

Although Wharton’s music is indicative of the blurred sections of impressionism, the piece is in a modified strophic form. The chorale-like accompaniment present at the inception of the song returns in measures 36-39, creating the beginning of the B section. The voice and piano share a common tone of F4 in measure 40, once again causing a caesura in the imminent movement of water in measure 42. In measure 45, the accompaniment creates a feeling of retrograde motion as the rain motive ends in a statement of the chorale-like accompaniment in measure 48 that was present at the inception of the song. This again denotes a new strophe beginning in measure 49. The brief unison tone of G4 in both the voice and piano line is quickly altered. Cluster chords increase in dissonance, from an F-G-A cluster to an E-flat-F-G-A cluster. In a repetition of the harmonic motive apparent in measures 13-15 of the vocal line, as it states, “remembering many rains,” the voice steps from the dissonant E flat to C#, now on the words, “of the running water.” The approach to a lower tessitura in both the vocal and piano line in the third strophe of the song creates a feeling of oneness between the two separate voices. The sounds of the singer’s final strains meld into the harmonic structure of the accompaniment,
creating a final statement on the now unified juxtaposition of natural elements evidenced in the beginning measures of the song (Figure 4).

Figure 4. *The Prairie Sings* “…of waters by night” (measures 50-54) 32

Again, the union of the two water elements is harmonically apparent in the setting of Sandburg’s text. The C#4 in the vocal line of measure 52 is firmly placed in a F# major/minor chord, the same tonality apparent in measure 8 at the first “water” statement. However, the inner voices of the accompaniment create a rocking dissonance in the effect of a tritone between A# and E on the on beats and D and G# on the off-beats of the final three measures of the song. While the listener hears the constancy and security of the water running on the land in the familiar ostinato pattern, the dissonance creates a feeling of unsettlement and incompleteness. The final fermata of the accompaniment’s D4 creates a feeling of movement. The dissonance created between this D4 of the right hand of the accompaniment and the C#4 of the vocal line effectively creates a moment of unrest within the aforementioned “security” of the water osinato. The unrest apparent in this dissonance aurally prepares the listener for the undulation and fast harmonic movement of the following song.

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32 Ibid, 3.
A sudden emotional change is evidenced in the sharp contrast between the unsettled dissonance in the waning measures of “…of prairie waters by night” and the two abrupt major chords that begin “…of laughing corn.” The sounds of the vital Midwest corn plant create a canvas in the second song of Wharton’s cycle. The tall majesty of the corn is brought to life by the decision to center the song’s beginning tonality in the key of D, long associated with nobility and grandeur. Barnieck goes further to state that the rhythmic development also seems Baroque-influenced, citing that the introduction of this song is much like a Handelian fanfare (Figure 5).34

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33 Sandburg, 1946, 167.
The constancy of this tonal center is short-lived, however, and the song rapidly moves to
different tonalities. Just as the sounds of the corn laughing in the wind, the tonal center’s brevity
creates a “fooling” of the ear. However, the tonality of D remains crucial to the piece as the
tonal centers suggested twist and turn around it, sometimes suggesting D-flat major and also the
raised “tonic”, D#, in measure 52 evocatively representing the teasing nature of the poem’s
stanzas.

The laughter of the hissing corn is apparent throughout the multi-faceted sections of this
song. The “fooling” of the sound of the corn is not only witnessed in the fast harmonic
movement, but also in the variance of rhythms utilized. This laughter is evoked with short dotted
notes, falling triplets and an ever-changing rhythmic meter between 2/4, 3/4 and 6/8 (Figure 6).

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**Figure 5. The Prairie Sings “…of laughing corn” (measures 1-3)**  
![Musical notation for measures 1-3]

**Figure 6. The Prairie Sings “…of laughing corn” (measures 12-13)**  
![Musical notation for measures 12-13]

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35 Wharton, 2006, 3.  
36 Wharton, 2006, 3.
This rhythmic interplay also creates a very “American sound;” American rhythms differ from European in that they tend to be less symmetrical. American composers tend to be attracted to a more spontaneous, asymmetrical sound evidenced in smaller rhythmic units.37

The asymmetrical feeling created by the shifting rhythmic meter of 2 against 3 throughout the piece creates an aural wave indicative of the wind rustling through the leaves of the corn (Figure 6). The busy accompaniment is evidenced in the running 16th note ostinato in the right hand, creating a hurried and impatient presence that colors the poetry. The chattering “conversation” between the two musical voices is evidenced in the periods of silence in the accompaniment, which quickly evolve into moments of frantic rhythmic virtuosity.

The exuberance and fertile life of the corn are also evidenced in the multi-faceted sections of this song. The song exists as a theme and variations with a coda; the sections are always slightly altered to create a feeling of unexpectedness and humor. An almost frantic nature occurs between the voice and the dynamic accompaniment. The voice, in stark contrast with “…of prairie waters by night,” sings throughout the far recesses of both head and chest voice, helping to create different levels of laughter; sometimes a high pitched giggle and other times a low guffaw. The accompaniment mirrors this laughter effect in the voice, especially in the dynamic interplay between the two hands. This is especially evidenced in the falling 16th note triplets of the right hand against the left hand’s staccato eighths throughout the middle section of the song. This material resurfaces and serves to help denote several bridge-like sections leading to a new idea or thought in the poetry (Figure 7).

Important words or phrases are often illustrated compositionally. The bursting forth of the juice of the corn is evidenced in the vocal line by the inclusion of a pentatonic whole tone

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37 Henry Cowell, American Composers on American Music (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1933), 150.
scale in measures 63-64 (Figure 8).

Figure 7. *The Prairie Sings* “…of laughing corn” (measures 28-31)\(^\text{38}\)

![Figure 8. The Prairie Sings “...of laughing corn” (measures 63-66)](image)

Again, the whole tone scale is utilized by the voice to evoke the momentum of the wind in measure 69-70 (Figure 9).

Figure 9. *The Prairie Sings* “...of laughing corn” (measures 69-70)\(^\text{39}\)

![Figure 9. The Prairie Sings “...of laughing corn” (measures 69-70)](image)

Often Wharton asks for the voice and piano to emulate naturalistic sounds. This is evidenced in the portamento used to relay the sound of the moving corn, displayed in measure 80 of the vocal line (Figure 10).

\(^{38}\) Ibid, 5.

\(^{39}\) Ibid, 6.
The piano also fashions itself in the guise of a red-winged blackbird in its accented “chitters” of measure 50 (Figure 11).

Wharton again alters Sandburg’s text, in this instance to highlight the conversational connection between the two solo voices, coloring the mood and intensity of this “chattering” song. The repetition of phrases such as “high fooling,” “majestic fooling,” “laughter,” and “come on;” again form an echo of the rustling sounds of the wind through the corn. In measures 85-91, the chattering sounds of the talk of the corn, sun, rain and wind are expressed in the repetition of text. The emphatic nature of the word “together” is not only heightened by repetition, but also with an increase in both the tessitura of the voice and piano and a change of dynamic intensity. The final three measures of this section slow the conversational nature of the piece, highlighting a union between the voice and piano line that up until this point has not been evident. In measure 89 the accompaniment states a Bb 7th chord which does not resolve to the

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40 Ibid, 6.
tonic Eb, but rather an E major/minor chord. The second statement in the following measure again shows a complete sounding of the V of Eb with a reinstatement of the Bb 7th chord, but again it is unresolved in its movement to another E major/minor chord. Only in the final statement of the text “together” is the Bb 7th chord finally resolved. However, the resolution cannot occur without the inclusion of the vocal line’s statement of the G, as the piano line’s chord is incomplete. Therefore, not only is the fooling nature of the text again evidenced in the prolongation of the unresolved tonic, but the dependence of the two solo voices on each other is again underlined (Figure 12).

Figure 12. *The Prairie Sings* “…of laughing corn” (measures 82-93) \(^{41}\)

\[\text{Figure 12. *The Prairie Sings* “…of laughing corn” (measures 82-93) \(^{41}\)}\]

Again, the bridge material of 8th note triplets is apparent in measures 92-93, leading to the coda, appropriate for the mood and scene change of the poetry. The union created between the two voices in measures 89-91 is still apparent. The tonality of D suggested at the beginning of the song has now shifted to E major. The connection is apparent in the raised “tonic” of D,

\[^{41}\text{Ibid, 6.}\]
revealed in the D# minor tonality that begins the coda in measure 94. A slower tempo and rocking 6/8 meter quiet the frantic nature of the piece and allow for a quieter setting in the description of the farmstead (Figure 13). As in “…of prairie waters by night,” the vocal line’s rhythm carries over the bar line in several instances, creating a hemiola effect that paints the drowsy, sleepy nature of the exhausted farmer and his wife.

Figure 13. *The Prairie Sings* “…of laughing corn” (measures 94-98)  

The lullaby-like accompaniment steadily descends in parallel motion between the two hands of the piano line in measures 94-101. The D# minor chord present at measure 94 dips down almost an octave in tessitura of the accompaniment line to the D major chord of measure 101, again used in a way to evocatively represent the drowsy nature of the overworked tillers of the land.

The repose in the relaxed tempo is short lived, however. The D major tonality used to begin the piece is again hinted in measure 101-102 as the voice sings, “..till the corn is husked.,” reminding the listener of the previous “majestic” sounds of the corn. This is further evidenced in the a tempo of measure 103 in the inclusion of the same rhythmic and tonal patterns of measure 19-25. There is again a segmented conversational relationship between the piano and vocal line. The musical material is the same, although now the “conversation” exists not between wind and corn, but the farmer and his wife (Figure 14). This reiteration of material by Wharton further indicates the innate relationship between man and land that was lauded in Sandburg’s verse.

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42 Ibid, 7.
The F major tonality suggested at this point quickly moves to suggest the key of Eb, only to move abruptly to a V-I cadence in the key of E echoing the aforementioned exchange between voices in measures 89-91. Again, the agreement and dependence of the two solo instruments creates a finality that brings the hurried movement to an abrupt close.

\[ \text{Figure 14. } \textit{The Prairie Sings} \ldots \text{of laughing corn} \text{ (measures 101-104)} ^{43} \]

\[ \text{a tempo } \underline{pp} \]

\[ \text{till the corn is husked.} \]

\[ \text{a tempo } \underline{The farmer} \]

\[ \text{...} \]
The Prairie Sings “…of late summer”

“Village in Late Summer”
(from Cornhuskers, 1918)

Lips half-willing in a doorway.
Lips half-singing at a window.
Eyes half-dreaming in the walls.
Feet half-dancing in a kitchen.
Even the clocks half-yawn the hours
And the farmers make half-answers.  

-Carl Sandburg

“…of late summer” forms the pivotal middle piece of the cycle. The absence of the ostinati apparent in all but this song of the cycle also echoes the individuality apparent in the measures of this song. The tempo marking of langorous creates an abrupt mood and scene change after the virtuosic, energized motion of the previous song, “…of laughing corn.” The tempo marking is also indicative of Wharton’s own personal statement on the American musical mediums of jazz and blues. The song evidences a freedom in both tonality and rhythm, again mirroring an influence of jazz structure.

The battle between dissonance and consonance is apparent in the sultry sounds of the piano’s prelude. This ever-shifting harmonic structure, without a sense of any definite center of tonality, echoes impressionism in its sounds. This is apparent in the “stress of the acoustical and sensuous sides of harmony, often neglecting the functionality of prescribed chords and their logical connection.”

Stravinsky believed that jazz was not essentially rhythmic but “a combination of hypnotic regularity in the beat and indulgent rubato in the melodies.” Wharton creates the “hypnotic” effect in the use of a rhythmic motive coursing through the song’s measures. Often the downbeat of the measure is obscured in a hemiola effect, helping to create the aforementioned

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44 Sandburg, 1946, 170.
45 Frank, 274.
46 Levy, 1983, 42.
me melodic rubato. The rhythmic freedom inherent in this song allows several different combinations of rhythms to coexist. The voice lazily echoes the phrase and melodic material of the accompaniment. The accompaniment and vocal line seem to form a quasi canon, or fugue, although rhythms or pitches are always slightly altered so the two are never exact duplicates. Beginning in measure 18, the dotted eighth-sixteenth-eighth-eighth pattern forms a crucial half motive throughout the middle section of the song. The accompaniment voices this rhythmic motive 8 times before the conclusion of the motive is voiced by the vocal line in measure 39 with the text “Kitchen, window, doorway, walls” (Figure 15). This again echoes the dependence of the two solo instruments seen thus far in the cycle.

Figure 15. *The Prairie Sings* “…of late summer” (measures 38-43)  

The alteration of Sandburg’s poetry seems most apparent in the setting of this poem. The compositional choice of repetition of key words and phrases allows the poem to take on a new life, forming a visual snapshot of the scene. The speaker’s physical and mental mindset is revealed in the incomplete phrase structures throughout the middle section of the song. While the listener’s visual senses are awakened, the sounds of the words describing a body, “eyes, lips, feet” create a sensual, onomatopoeic feeling that pairs well with the jazz-like music.

Within the same middle section of the song alternating A major and a minor tonalities create another aspect of jazz-like freedom. In measures 43-45, A major is suggested by the

\[ \text{Wharton, 2006, 8.} \]
inclusion of a clear rising statement of an A-C#-E motive in the vocal line while the piano clearly states an A major root position chord.

The P4 interval becomes a crucial compositional structure in the layout of this song. Often the beginning and ending notes of each of the vocal line’s phrases are a P4 apart. In measures 43-45, the voice begins on a B natural and reaches the pinnacle of the phrase on a P4 above, an E. At this moment in measure 45, the composer ironically begins his quotation of Westminster chimes in the step-wise descent of E-D-C-B in the right hand of the accompaniment, quoting the third passage of the four bar phrased chime melody. Beginning in measure 48, the composer quotes the beginning of the Westminster chimes melody. Again, the scope of the vocal line is contained within the interval of the P4 (Figure 16).

Figure 16. The Prairie Sings “…of late summer” (measures 45-50)  

![Figure 16](image)

The incompleteness of the half voiced chime melody again alludes to the segmented nature of the song and poetry. The inclusion of this melody firmly brings the tonal center of the piece back to the key of A, only this time in minor. This melody quickly evolves to the key of c minor in measure 51. The diminution of the chime melody in measure 53 creates the effect of the clock speeding up, but the augmentation of the same melody a measure later echoes the laziness of the farmer’s “half answers.”

The incomplete answers are echoed in the final chord of the piece, an A 9th chord created

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48 Ibid, 8.
in the voice and accompaniment without the inclusion of the 5th. The accompaniment’s bell-like C creates one final sounding of the P4 interval against the vocal line’s G, bringing the half-answers to a close (Figure 17).

Figure 17. *The Prairie Sings* “…of late summer” (measures 51-58) 49
"Window"
(from Chicago Poems, 1916)

Night from a railroad car window
is a great, dark, soft thing
Broken across with slashes of light.

-Carl Sandburg

The fourth song of the cycle is the sole representation of the encroaching industrialism on the prairie. “…of passing night” is unlike the pastoral and rural qualities of the four other songs contained in the cycle in its scope. The mechanical, constant momentum of an evoked train serves as a juxtaposition of the quiet prairie painted throughout The Prairie Sings. The Industrial age, bitingly satirized by Sandburg in Chicago Poems, is brought to life in the cycle through the sounds of railroad life. The sounds of growth, brought about by the ever pressing ostinato of engine’s wheels against metal track, were a constant in the poet’s formative years in his railway center hometown of Galesburg.

The shortest of Sandburg’s poetry set in The Prairie Sings, “…of passing night,” makes up for the brevity of its text material in its true virtuosity. The accompaniment plays a much more crucial role than the voice in the illustration of the varying sounds of the train over the tracks. The tempo marking of mechanical is to be adhered to strictly, as the piano must recreate the repetitious roll of the wheels portraying the many rhythms associated with an oncoming train.

The open fifths between the accompaniment’s right and left hand in the first three measures of the song form a type of prelude to the constant motion indicated in the left hand ostinato of measure 4. Wharton intended for these first few measures to provide an aural indication of disjointed motion of wheels against tracks as the train begins to move. This prelude begins with a B-flat chord. As the intensity and direction of the echoes, between the hands of the

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50 Sandburg, 1946,
accompaniment, increases in tempo, a shift between B-flat major and G minor occurs in measure 2 and 3 (Figure 18).

Figure 18. The Prairie Sings “…of passing night” (measures 1-3)  

![Musical notation](image)

The “American sound” created with the inclusion of smaller rhythmic valued notes is again apparent in measure 4 as the accompaniment begins its continuous 16\textsuperscript{th} note ostinato, ending only in the last 5 measures of the song. The left hand predominantly plays this ostinato, shifting to the right hand in measure 22 in anticipation of the entering vocal line. As the measures of the piano’s prelude increase, the metric values in the rhythms of the right hand of the accompaniment decrease. This creates an aural indication of the location of the train and its immediacy is sensed; the wheels of the train are now beginning to approach full and faster motion. The 16\textsuperscript{th} note ostinato is only doubled in both hands of the accompaniment once, again in a manner emphasizing the impending entrance of the voice in measure 28.

In marked contrast to the repetitious 16\textsuperscript{th} note ostinato, the other hand of the accompaniment creates a whistle-like motive that, while far less predictable than the 16\textsuperscript{th} note ostinato, creates semblance and structure with bouts of virtuosity. The motive exists in three sections, the only complete utterance contained in the right hand of the accompaniment in measures 5-8 (Figure 19). The remaining 5 repetitions of the motive exist in a fragmented manner. This disjointed motive may be a portrayal of the “slashes of light” that the voice echoes in the last utterance of the poetry. Within the darkness of night, a slash of light only reveals an incomplete picture of what is outside the railroad car’s window.

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The voice delays its entrance until measure 29; the beginning of the 4th repetition of the whistle motive, sharing the F of the right hand of the accompaniment. This sharing of motivic material creates a sense of expectancy for the next phrase of the vocal line. While the accompaniment continues its 16th note rhythmic march, the voice enters as a calm, monotonic narrator. The three short lines of the poetry become three short vocal lines, progressing with each entrance down by semitone. The first vocal phrase creates a sense of sleepiness and calm evidenced in the duplets of measure 31 (Figure 20). Wharton indicates that the inclusion of the duplets also evokes the ironic feeling of riding in a train, the passenger not sensing the true momentum and movement of the wheels in the stillness of the railcar.

Beginning in measure 33, the vocal line is a series of whole tones, indicating a rising
intensity in the adjectives of the phrase. This second line of poetry begins in C# minor, the altered A# in measure 37 creating a tritone with the phrase’s beginning E. The dissonance created within the vocal line’s second phrase is quickly calmed in the inclusion of the key of E-flat major in measure 39, the consonance reinforced by a P5 between the accompaniment’s A-flat and the vocal line’s beginning E-flat (Figure 21).

Figure 21. *The Prairie Sings* “…of passing night” (measures 37-40)  

The 3 against 2 feeling created between the voice and accompaniment in measure 42 creates stress on the words “slashes” and “light.” The eighth-note triplets in measure 30 serve as a hemiola, shifting the rhythmic structure of the accompaniment to the long dotted half notes in measure 34 of the vocal line.

The sixth occurrence of the whistle motive ends in measure 45 as the voice dies away in a decrescendo to *niente* on the word, “light.” The composer’s image of passing night comes to fruition in the remaining material of the accompaniment that serves as a coda. The motion of the sixteenth ostinato slows and begins to fragment itself, shifting beat stress and creating a drawn out rhythmic structure indicating a stopping train. The inclusion of the Picardy third in the final fermata of the piece gives an element of surprise while still gravitating towards a degree of constancy (Figure 22).

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54 Ibid, 10.
Figure 22. The Prairie Sings “…of passing night” (measures 45-51)\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 11.
The Prairie Sings “…of beauty”

“Monotone”
(from Chicago Poems, 1916)

The monotone of the rain is beautiful,
And the sudden rise and slow relapse
Of the long multitudinous rain.

The sun on the hills is beautiful,
Or a captured sunset sea-flung,
Bannered with fire and gold.

A face I know is beautiful—
With fire and gold of sky and sea,
And the peace of long warm rain.56
-Carl Sandburg

The last song of the cycle, “…of beauty” is in A B A prime form. The title of Sandburg’s poem caused Wharton grief, disagreeing with the poet in connotations evoked by the word “monotone.” However, the constancy of the seasons and the harvest are of comfort to the people of the prairie, forming a repetitious cycle. Again, the image of rain is treated in a similar fashion as the first song of the cycle. The image of descending water in the form of rain is presented in the high tessitura of the right hand of the accompaniment. The rain’s monotone is evidenced in the repetitious ostinato of the accompaniment which opens and closes the A section. (m 1-4, 10-13). However, as the voice utters the word “beautiful” at the end of the first vocal line, Wharton cleverly changes the monotonous motive of the rain, echoing his individual thoughts in relation to the title of the poem (Figure 23). The downward arpeggio ostinato becomes a motive that shifts rhythmically and dynamically, but also in direction as the upper right hand of the accompaniment ascends. The voice mimics the feeling of stagnancy in its drone like presence during the A section where the tessitura does not exceed the interval of a major 6th.

The tonal centers of G major and D major/D minor are important in the song, evidenced

56 Sandburg, 1946,
in the beginning osinato pattern of the accompaniment. A d minor triad sounds in a descending motion, while a G in the left hand of the piano creates tonal dissonance against an A of the piano’s right hand in the downbeat of the first measure. The variance of these tonal centers are altered in measure 3 as the vocal line is introduced on a G-flat and proceeds to the pinnacle of the phrase with a C#, an enharmonic D-flat. The voice also creates an important moment in the singing of the word, “rain” in measure 5 on an A# (enharmonic B-flat), a tonal area that will again return, concluding and settling the end of the song. The G/D relationship is further developed in the vocal line’s next phrase, begun on a G# and ending on a D# in measure 9. The vocal line’s second phrase continues into measure 12 as the voice settles on a G as the accompaniment continues its “monotone” ostinato in various turns around the tonal centers of G and D.

57 Wharton, 2006, 11.
There is an abrupt scene change in measure 16 as the tempo slows and the moving
ostinato of rain becomes majestic with the larger rhythmic values apparent in slowed,
impressionistic sounding chords (Figure 24).

Figure 24. *The Prairie Sings* “…of beauty” (measures 16-21) \(^{58}\)

The tonal center circles D, boldly heard in the open 5\(^{th}\) chords on the downbeats of measures 16, 19 and 21, respectively. The voice begins with a tonal melody suggesting D until a tense A# sounds in measure 26, suggesting the tonality of F# major. Again, the relationship of the P4 echoes in the conclusion of the accompaniment’s interlude. As the voice enters, the G in the bass line of the accompaniment shifts to a G# in measure 30, suggesting the tonality of E major until, like measure 26, an A# sounds in the vocal line. The image of the autumnal prairie grass lit on fire with light is shown in the ascent of the voice to F#5 in measure 35, creating a half cadence in the key of D major (Figure 25).

Figure 25. *The Prairie Sings* “…of beauty” (measures 30-35) \(^{59}\)

\(^{58}\) Ibid, 12.

\(^{59}\) Ibid, 13.
Although compositional material in the accompaniment in measure 36 echoes the beginning motive of the piece, the vocal line is much different. Gaining in intensity to color the personification of the prairie, the range utilized by the voice increases substantially, the tessitura is much higher. As Wharton once again alters the rhythm of the ostinato pattern, the voice climbs the scale by alternating semitones and whole tones, until this melodic pattern is shifted to again emphasize the word “beautiful.” Gaining momentum in measure 40, the voice descends and ascends by thirds, culminating in an ascending P5 to another F#5 in measure 43 (Figure 26).

Figure 26. The Prairie Sings “…of beauty” (measures 40-43)

Again the relationship of the tonal centers G and D is evidenced, as the first F#5 occurs over a root-position D chord and the second over a root-position G chord. The rain motive returns, this time in B minor. In marked contrast, the voice drops over an octave in its next entrance, the monotone returning in the stepwise progression from the E4 to D4 as the voice utters its last text statements in a drone-like manner. The final statements of the piece settle in the key of B flat major, a key which coherently concludes the G/D struggle. The voice sings a drone-like D4 while the accompaniment quiets itself with a delayed and eerily distant completion of the tonic chord (Figure 27).

Sandburg’s words, fashioned in prose-like poetry, provide its readers and listeners, in the case of the music influenced by those words, with a very visual and aural stamp of a life that is

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\[60\] Ibid.
sadly dying, but is such an important part of our past. Philip Wharton’s song cycle, *The Prairie Sings*, exists as the most current setting of Sandburg’s verse. While under the influence of those American composers who shaped a national voice in composition in the 20th century, Wharton’s own unique style is apparent in the five songs of the cycle. Wharton states that he cannot be classified as a post-modern composer. He believes that his non-minimalist, non-romantic compositional style has not of yet been labeled. He prefers the term “evocative” and “American,” believing that these two qualities, apparent in his work, have appeal to the masses.62 He composes always with his audience in mind, creating an aural sensation in the way the text and music intertwine. The connection between audience and subject matter is a unique gift, one element that is often missing in current compositional trends of 21st century music. This is an aspect that connects Wharton’s music to Sandburg’s free verse poetic style; as the great American poet also always thought of his audience in the creation of aural images of the American prairie through his words. Barnieck states,

[Wharton’s] music is not “fast food” music, yet it is not as abstract as music of Boulez or Stockhausen. Wharton gives the audience something to hold onto, not leaving the

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61 Ibid.
audience bewildered in the dust. “Evocative” is also in the sense, that he does not turn to complete post-modern tonality…[his] music is accessible but not at all shallow.  

This connection between the text, composer, player and audience is often missing in current compositions. The revolutionary style of Wharton’s composition emulates the connection Sandburg also created in his work.

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63 Jens Barnieck, interview by author, 15 October 2007, Decorah, electronic mail interview, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.
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Scores