

Search for the American Sound:  
**Samuel Barber's**  
*Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

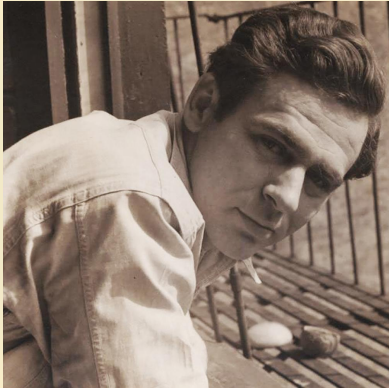
Op. 24  
for Voice and Orchestra, with text by James Agee (“A Death in the Family”)



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Valparaiso University Symposium on  
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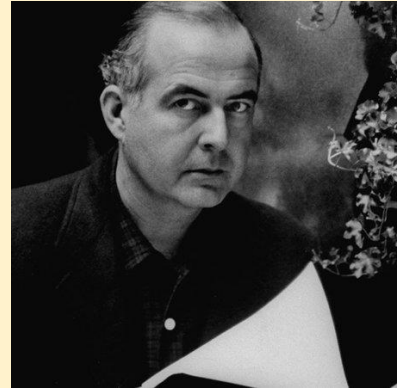
Research Question:

How do existing definitions of American sound help us better understand Barber's *Knoxville* [text by James Agee] as a key musical work that captures the distinct quality of the American life and experience?



James Agee

Slide 2



Samuel Barber

# Methods: Music Analysis and Historical Context

## Music Analysis

- Defining “American Sound”
- Rhapsodic Episodes
- Structure of the Score

## Historical Context

- Contextualizing the Score
- Nostalgia and Cultural Memory
- Understanding the Prose

# Literature Review

Agee, James. 2009. *A Death in The Family*. Edited by Steve Earle. London: Penguin Books.

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Barbara Docherty (1989) Syllogism and symbol: Britten, Tippett and English Text, *Contemporary Music Review*, 5:1, 37-63, DOI: [10.1080/07494468900640531](https://doi.org/10.1080/07494468900640531)

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Taylor, Benedict. "Nostalgia and Cultural Memory in Barber's Knoxville: Summer of 1915: JM JM." *The Journal of Musicology* 25, no. 3 (Summer, 2008): 211-229. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.valpo.edu/10.1525/jm.2008.25.3.211>.  
<https://ezproxy.valpo.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.valpo.edu/docview/204940603?accountid=14811>.

# American Sound

## Copeland Americanism

- Jazzy polyrhythms and irregular meters
- The vigor and angularity of some melodies
- The lean and bare textures and the favored extremes of closely knit harmonies and widely spaced sonorities
- The distinctly brittle piano writing and brassy and percussive orchestrations

## Rhapsody (genre)

- Freedom
- One movement work
- Episodic
- Free-flowing Structure
- Contrasting Tonality
- Sense of improvisation

# Musical Analysis of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

Andante, un poco mosso  $\text{♩} = 58$

Fl. I 1

*p* legato

Cl. *pp*

Harp *pp*

Voice *p*

Andante, un poco mosso  $\text{♩} = 58$

It has be-come that time of eve-ning when peo-ple sit on their por-ches,

VI. I 1 *pp*

VI. II *pp*

Vla. pizz. *pp* *p*

Vcl. pizz. *pp* *p*

Bass pizz. *pp*

# Cultural and Historical Background of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*



Streetcar at Gay & Union in Knoxville, TN 1915

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# Conclusion

The compositional techniques found in *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, paint a picture of a uniquely American life delivered through the lens of two men - one a musician, one a poet - of a time before the 20th Century thrust them into adulthood.

As we consider the musical motives that transcend throughout this work, I encourage you to **Consider of a piece or song in which the sound, the text, and the historical context, evoke a nationalist view of an era or philosophy in American life.**