

FOR THE LOVE OF SOPRANOS:  
THE LIVES AND SONGS OF ERNST BACON, OTTO LUENING AND JACK BEESON

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ernst Bacon (1989–1990), Otto Luening (1900–1996) and Jack Beeson (b. 1921) form a musical lineage, although one more of friendship and mutual support than stylistic similarities. Bacon and Luening, born at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, maintained a close, supportive relationship throughout their adult lives, though often separated by the span of the continental United States. Beeson, who came along more than 20 years later and was part of the next generation of composers, was Luening’s friend and professional associate for more than 50 years. All have made major contributions, both musically and professionally, in defining, creating, and promoting a truly American musical idiom.

All three composers believe in the primacy of song as musical expression, and made song-writing a major focus of their creative efforts. The three composers’ musical styles are quite disparate, although all demonstrate an exquisite talent for wedding poetry and music in a way that draws out the full expressive content of both. The early stylistic influences on Bacon and Luening’s vocal writing were largely the romantic German Lieder, while Beeson’s earliest musical influence came via the Metropolitan Opera Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts. Bacon and Luening’s vocal music is largely songs, with only limited excursions into opera, while the majority of Beeson’s vocal output is operatic. The mature songs of Bacon and Luening are exclusively settings of English

words. Beeson has been known to write his own lyrics and librettos, but more often looks to British and American poets and librettists.

Besides their love for and mastery of vocal writing, the three shared a number of other traits. All were born in and grew up in the mid-West and all were, and are, blessedly long-lived: Bacon lived to be a vigorous ninety-one (91), Luening ninety-six (96), and Beeson, at eighty-one (81), is still quite active in the American musical scene. All began their academic careers as opera coaches—Luening and Bacon at the Eastman School Opera Company, and Beeson at the Columbia Opera Workshop, under Luening's tutelage—where they gained first hand experience with singers of all types. All enjoyed lengthy and influential academic careers, passing on their knowledge, theories, and opinions to students of composition as well as the general student body. All were, and are, active in promoting American music. Fortunately for the researcher, each has expressed his musical philosophy and opinions in a variety of writings.

## INTRODUCTION

*All deep things are song. It seems somehow the very central essence of us, song; as if all the rest were wrappings and hulls.*

THOMAS CARLYLE<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, the differences among Ernst Bacon, Otto Luening and Jack Beeson may be more apparent than the similarities. Bacon lived his entire life outside the mainstream of American musical events, while Luening and Beeson spent most of their professional careers in New York City, helping to create the center of America's 20<sup>th</sup> century musical universe. Bacon's compositional style is clearly influenced by earlier masters of song, while Luening is best known for his pioneering work in electronic music, and Beeson's style is uniquely his own. Bacon wrote mostly songs, and even his instrumental works demonstrate the importance to him of melody. Luening's compositions run the gamut of vocal and instrumental forms and ensembles, and Beeson's output is largely operatic. But although none of the composers belongs to any particular school or movement, their music, except for a few early works of Bacon and Luening, is thoroughly American.

Ernst Bacon wrote over 250 arts songs and two operas, *A Tree on the Plains* (1942) and *A Drumlin Legend* (1947). "His settings of texts by Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman are considered by many to be among the finest examples of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American art song."<sup>2</sup> Even in his instrumental pieces, which include a violin sonata, numerous pieces for keyboard and chamber ensemble, and an orchestral suite, melody is the key element and melodies from his own or folk songs can often be heard in them. Bacon had only one formal composition teacher; he considered his most important teachers to be the great masters of the past, including Bach, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Liszt. He was a life-long student of this country's indigenous music, from folk song to the blues and jazz, and these influences are evident in much of his music.<sup>3</sup>

Otto Luening's compositions are quite diverse. His songs, of which he wrote over 80, and his three-act opera, *Evangeline* (1931), lean toward the romantic in expression, while his numerous orchestral and chamber works are more experimental. He studied composition with several influential composers in Zürich from 1918 - 1920. In academic circles, he is best known for his pioneering efforts in the field of electronic music. In 1952, he contributed several works to "a historic concert of tape music at the Museum of Modern Art."<sup>4</sup> In 1959, he and Vladimir Ussachevsky founded the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, which was highly influential in the emerging field. Although most of his works are relatively traditional in instrumentation, he continued to champion and support the work of the Ultra Moderns, including Edgard Varèse, Milton Babbitt, Harry Partch and Roger Sessions.<sup>5</sup>

Jack Beeson's output is largely operatic, with nine operas and an 'operina' (a theater piece for soprano and pianist/actor) to his credit. He studied composition at the Eastman School with Burrill Phillips, Bernard Rogers and Howard Hanson (1941-44), and had private lessons in New York with Béla Bartók in 1944-45. A close associate of Douglas Moore, his operas share that composer's feel for the lyrical line and his commitment to the American scene as the dramatic backdrop for their stories. Like Bacon and Luening, he freely "borrows from a variety of sources—popular songs, folksong and dance, jazz, Italian opera—to enrich the musical and dramatic background."<sup>6</sup>

I have studied and performed numerous works for soprano by these three composers. My preparations included a comprehensive review of the three composers' songs, both in print and on recording. The songs in the recital were selected to demonstrate each composer's range of compositional techniques and, to a limited extent, his stylistic evolution. I chose songs with a range of styles, tempos, tonalities, and it is clear that they share a love for the human voice and for the

English language. Many of Bacon's songs were either written for or transposed for the high voice. As is often the case in opera, many of Beeson's most exciting characters, like Lizzie Borden, are sopranos. Luening had a strong motivation for writing for soprano, being married to one for many years. So it is equally clear to me, notwithstanding my soprano fach, that these three American composers often wrote for the love of sopranos.

## THE LINEAGE

### Personal Histories

All three composers were born and spent their childhoods in the Midwest and enjoyed long and productive careers. Ernst Bacon was born in Chicago on May 26, 1898, and although nearly blind in old age, continued to compose until the very end of his ninety-one (91) years. Otto Luening, born in Madison, Wisconsin, on June 15, 1900, wrote his last song cycle at the age of ninety-three (93) and continued to compose until his death at ninety-six (96). Jack Beeson was born in Muncie, Indiana, on July 15, 1921, and at eighty-one (81), is still quite active on the American music scene, having recently completed his first ‘operina’ for soprano and pianist.<sup>7</sup>

Bacon and Luening met in Chicago in the early 1920s, when both had recently returned from studies in Europe. Although the specifics of the beginning of their friendship are unclear, they must have encountered one another often as part of the lively circle of musicians in Chicago, the core of which was formed by former students of Bernhard Ziehn. Both were also friendly with Carl Sandburg.<sup>8</sup> These associations are discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Whatever the circumstances of their first encounters, they soon became close. In his unpublished autobiography, Bacon writes, “Luening and I became colleagues and, in time, devoted friends.”<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Bacon’s widow just after his death, Luening wrote, “Ernst was a deep and rewarding well of information and opinion about the world, musical and otherwise. We were of course more like brothers than anything else; our backgrounds and aims were similar.”<sup>10</sup> They were even close enough to borrow money from one another. In the early 1930s, Luening, obviously feeling the effects of the Depression, wrote to apologize to Bacon for his tardiness in repaying the \$50 Bacon had loaned him and to thank him for his patience.<sup>11</sup>

Another significant person in their circle of friends was Ethel Codd, whom Luening first met in about 1925 while coaching the Eastman Opera Company. She was one of the stars of the company, and Luening admired her great musicality, her acting skills, and her interest in contemporary music. After a stormy engagement, they were married in 1927.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout their careers, the two composers helped each other out whenever possible and offered advice, encouragement, and, usually, high praise for their regrettably neglected compositions. In a letter dated October 23, 1928, Luening wrote to Bacon, “Ethel and I play and sing your songs often and with much interest and pleasure. My choices are (after repeated study) *Beat Beat Drums* and *First Day*, both of which I feel show a strong and convincing personality.”<sup>13</sup> The Luenings performed Bacon’s songs in recital as often as practical, and Bacon arranged for them to give recitals whenever the opportunity arose at institutions where he had influence. While teaching at Converse College (1938 - 1945) in Spartanburg, SC, Bacon did a production of Luening’s *Evangeline* with two pianos. In 1949, when Luening was involved in the decision-making regarding commissioning operas at Columbia University, Bacon received a commission to write his second opera, *A Drumlin Legend*, which was premiered by the Columbia Opera Workshop (to lamentable reviews).<sup>14</sup>

The Luenings often performed Otto’s works in recital, as well. Their New York debut recital on March 22, 1937, won kudos for both in the *New York Evening Journal* for providing an “entertaining and convincing argument in favor of our modern musical thought.”<sup>15</sup>

An early collaborative effort provides an enlightening example of how the two men brought out the mischievous sides of one another. In 1940, Bacon enlisted the Luenings’ aid in his campaign to elevate and expand the cultural horizons of the students at Converse College, where he was dean of the School of Music. The Luenings performed a concert of Bach, Mozart, Schubert, and

contemporary Americans, including Bacon. Bacon insisted that they also present a program of musical satire, so Luening devised a musicological lecture “entitled 'The History of the Violin Bow from Horse to Hindemith,' which gave plenty of background material about horses, eventually arrived at the wood in the bow, and left out music altogether.”<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most curious thing the two composers did was to jointly compose a jazz piece, *Coal Scuttle Blues*, for two pianos, four hands. Luening wrote the original in 1922, and played it many times at the Eastman School. Bacon created an embellished concert version in 1928, and then the two began revising it jointly, mailing revisions back and forth across the country (since Luening was living in New York and Bacon in San Francisco). It was Bacon’s idea to create a virtuoso, two-piano version. On November 25, 1933, Luening sent his latest re-write of the piece to Bacon along with a letter, predicting in an uncharacteristically self-aggrandizing vein: “The ultimate in American jazz will have been reached when we get loose, and it amuses me to think that it takes two of the more reticent, reserved and serious younger composers to show the jazz babies how it ought to be done.”<sup>17</sup> The piece was finally published in 1945 and premiered in New York’s Times Hall on March 3, 1946. According to Luening, the audiences loved the piece and Virgil Thomson praised its “interest in melodic, rhythmic and prosodic design,” but the piece soon faded from the stage.<sup>18</sup>

The clearest manifestation of the Bacon-Luening-Beeson lineage lies in their academic beginnings as opera coaches, where their work with singers provided first-hand experience in the art and science of vocal production. In the fall of 1924, Bacon secured his first academic position as coach at the Eastman School of Music’s very lively opera project, where Martha Graham was doing the choreography and Eugene Goossens the conducting. When he realized that Howard Hanson, the school’s director, was still looking for young faculty members, Bacon recommended Luening and

arranged for an interview in his (Bacon's) parents' home in Chicago over the Christmas holidays. Luening was hired as opera coach immediately.<sup>19</sup>

Twenty years later, Luening found himself at Columbia University, trying to run the recently-organized Opera Workshop with very little musical help. Just before Christmas 1944, a chance encounter with Beeson prompted Luening to offer him his first academic appointment as opera coach at the Workshop.<sup>20</sup> Douglas Moore, Chair of Columbia's Music Department, had conceived and managed the Workshop with the goal of creating a new interest in the American lyric theater on the part of composers and audiences alike.<sup>21</sup> The Workshop presented both of Bacon's operas (*A Tree on the Plains* in 1943 and *A Drumlin Legend* in 1949), Luening's *Evangeline* (in 1948), and two of Jack Beeson's ten operatic works (*Hello Out There* in 1954, and *The Sweet Bye-and-Bye*, in collaboration with the Juilliard in 1956).<sup>22</sup>

Luening and Beeson tell slightly different stories about how their friendship began, although both agree that Ethel played an important part. Both also agree that it began with a chance encounter in a Chock Full O' Nuts coffee shop in December of 1944. The way Beeson tells it, Luening was enjoying his breakfast, reading a review of a recital Ethel had performed the previous evening. Beeson, reading over his shoulder, asked if he had attended and, receiving a positive response, mentioned that there had been a wonderful soprano. His new friend smiled and answered "That's my wife."<sup>23</sup> Luening writes that the two met after Beeson had attended the dress rehearsal of the Pergolesi opera that Luening had conducted at the Columbia Opera Workshop.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the exact circumstances, the two struck up a close friendship that was to span over five decades.

Earlier in 1944, Douglas Moore had convinced Luening to accept the position of Chairman of the Music Department at Barnard College and Music Director of Opera Projects at Columbia's Brander Matthews Hall. Learning of Beeson's operatic leanings, Luening invited him to coach the

singers at the Workshop for their next production, Normand Lockwood's *The Scarecrow*. This marked the beginning of Beeson's long career at Columbia.

Beeson had received his Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in composition at Eastman after Luening had already left. By then, Eastman's opera offerings had become "less interesting" and Beeson dropped the study of opera altogether.<sup>25</sup> It wasn't until he met Luening at Columbia and got involved in the Workshop that he revived his old infatuation and began composing operas again, which he has continued to do ever since.<sup>26</sup>

Luening and Beeson worked together as conductor and assistant conductor on eight Columbia productions, including Luening's *Evangeline*, Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Medium*, and Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All*. As assistant conductor and principal coach of the Workshop, Beeson was principally responsible for preparing the singers, a job he relished: "I like working with singers because I always say singers are just like people, but more so . . . I had a very good mentor, Otto Luening, who was then married to a quite fabulous dramatic coloratura [Ethel Luening]."<sup>27</sup> By 1954, when the Workshop produced Beeson's opera *Hello Out There*, he was no longer directly involved, but still worked with the cast because "it was my piece and I like coaching singers."<sup>28</sup>

### **Musical Philosophies**

All three composers made writing for the voice a major focus of their creative efforts: Bacon wrote over 250 songs; of Luening's total output of 400 compositions, 80 were for voice; Beeson wrote nine operas, an operina, and 66 songs. Does the belief in the primacy of melody in music spur composers to write songs, or do composers who frequently write songs just naturally believe in the primacy of melody? The answer to this rhetorical question is not apparent in the writings of any of

the three composers, although Bacon addresses it most directly. In his chapter on the singer in his book, *Words on Music*, Bacon clearly delineates his theory of the origins of music and melody:

When we strip music of its cultured clothes, we find, as in painting, that the human body is its first model. But instead of *seeing* its contours and postures, we *feel* the body's movements and its rhythms; our sentences and phrases correspond to the breath. We feel the sensations of strain and release, pain and pleasure; systole and diastole. What we hear substantiates what we feel. *The physiological man is music's primary source*. And his speech is the prosaic model of his melody.<sup>29</sup>

When asked by Edgard Varèse to define his musical credo, Luening replied that he “thought the melodic-rhythmic element in its broadest meaning best represented the composer’s personality; that it doesn’t matter what systems a composer uses, but he should think and feel music and cultivate a balance of emotions, with thought that is charged with feeling.”<sup>30</sup> Luening also concerned himself with the wider impact of contemporary music, and urged composers to “develop a sense of responsibility and a deep desire to bring human satisfaction to large numbers of individuals.”<sup>31</sup>

According to *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini, Beeson was quite pleased with music historian Nicolas Slonimsky’s description of his style in *Baker’s Dictionary of Music* as “marked by enlightened utilitarianism.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Beeson has a disconcertingly practical outlook on most matters, leaving little room for philosophical pondering. His trenchant views on the business of the composer, and especially the opera composer, cut to the heart of the matter. On the economics of writing and producing opera, he said, “Writing an opera is like playing a large and expensive slot machine. The composer puts in an enormous amount of time, energy and money, and it rarely pays off. But no matter how little money comes out, it always makes a big racket.”<sup>33</sup> Instead of lamenting the competition for audiences posed by big screen spectaculars, he thanked movie producers for relieving the opera composer of the need for stage pageantry, leaving him free for “the lyric investigation of psychological relationships, which is the chief subject matter of

contemporary opera.”<sup>34</sup> Beeson is ever aware of the dramatic element of music, and demands of his libretti a “plain, strong dramatic shape”<sup>35</sup> in which the “the action should be clear even if none of the words project.”<sup>36</sup>

Bacon and Beeson often wrote and talked about the central role of language in defining a national musical idiom, and Luening, while not loquacious on the subject, used only English texts for his vocal writing after his earliest German settings. Bacon theorized that new musical styles often grew out of the need to find a new type of musical expression for an existing linguistic form, such as the introduction of music into Italian theater. He found the unexplored wealth of American poetry “rich in lyrical substance,”<sup>37</sup> and decried the characterization of our own language as not lyrical because of its impure vowels. On the contrary, he found the vocal idiosyncrasies of American English admirable.<sup>38</sup> Beeson believes that the strongest influence on vocal style is language, and extols the rhythmic variety inherent in American English, with its vowels of varying length and strongly articulated consonants, suggesting that it is “better suited to musical drama than Italian!”<sup>39</sup>

### **Academia and Legacies**

Although none are considered academic composers, Bacon, Luening and Beeson were committed teachers and enjoyed lengthy and influential academic careers, passing on their knowledge and opinions to students of composition as well as the general musical public. Bacon wrote that “teaching is an intellectual parenthood; your debt to the past is best paid to the future.”<sup>40</sup> Having studied Freud while living in Munich, Luening used his knowledge “to size up the *potential* of every one of [his students] and then to encourage them as much as [he] could to be what they *were*, to be themselves.”<sup>41</sup> Beeson wrote that “the composer of today, whenever he teaches Introduction to Music courses on campuses or on television or radio, is . . . participating in a social

and educational experiment which, if successful, will bring new and larger audiences to his music and to all music in the future.”<sup>42</sup>

Bacon left the East Coast to accept a teaching position at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (1928-1930). While in San Francisco, he founded and conducted the Carmel Bach Festival and was supervisor of the city’s WPA Federal Music Project. He went on from there to accept a position as dean and professor of piano at Converse College in Spartanburg, SC (1938-1945), and then to subsequent appointments as director of the school of music at Syracuse University (1945-1947) and composer in residence and professor of piano until his retirement in 1963; he continued there as professor emeritus after his retirement.

His influence on American composers spans a large part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both Carlisle Floyd (b. 1926) and Jake Heggie (b.1961) began studying with Bacon when they were seventeen years old. Floyd went on to write some of America’s most popular operas. Heggie is part of the current generation of vocal composers whose works are beginning to be performed widely. Mezzo-soprano Frederica van Stade performs and promotes his songs widely and his opera, *Dead Man Walking*, received wide critical acclaim. Of his relationship with Bacon, Heggie says: “I think he recognized that I had a knack for songwriting . . . He was the one who first introduced me to serious poetry and got me started listening to classical vocalists. That’s when I fell in love with the classically trained voice.”<sup>43</sup> Singers everywhere have good reason to applaud that love affair.

Luening served as Music Department Chair at Barnard from 1945–1949, and taught at Columbia until 1960, when he became music chairman of the School of the Arts until his retirement in 1970, and professor emeritus thereafter. He went on to teach at the Juilliard School from 1970-73. In his graduate seminar in composition at Columbia, he instructed and inspired numerous stylistically diverse composers, including John Corigliano, Charles Wuorinen, William Kraft, Elliott

Schwartz, and Ezra Laderman. The relationship between Luening and Wuorinen began at the Columbia Opera Workshop when Luening was conducting the production of Bacon's *A Drumlin Legend*. Wuorinen was eleven and a member of the children's chorus. During the dress rehearsal intermission, he asked Luening to look at his *Fugue in D Major*.<sup>44</sup> Wuorinen went on to earn his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in composition at Columbia, studying with both Luening and Beeson. Luening's feeling for his students is well expressed in his response to a birthday message sent to him by John Corigliano, in which he wrote, "Of course the best present you can give me is the career you carved out for yourself."<sup>45</sup>

Beeson spent his whole academic career at Columbia (1945–1988), where he was named the MacDowell Professor of Music in 1967, and served as Chair of the Music Department from 1968 to 1972. He figures he has taught over 300 composition students, including John Kander, Tony award-winning composer of Broadway musicals, Joan Tower, composer of instrumental works characterized by their colorful orchestral gestures, and Charles Wuorinen.<sup>46</sup> Of their relationship, Tower says, "He's an intrepid soul—and one I've always appreciated because of his basic honesty. One can survive . . . his sharp tongue and caustic humor because there is a basic trust in his underlying kindness—which he doesn't hide that well."<sup>47</sup>

In addition to their influential teaching careers, all three composers worked to promote the cause of American music and American composers. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American music was struggling to gain an audience in the face of the country's apparent preference for European music and musicians. Luening and Beeson invested tremendous energy in promoting the music of other composers from their home base in New York City. Bacon, always living outside the city's influence, did his part to advance American music, largely through his writings.

Ironically, Bacon repeatedly lamented New York's monopolistic grip on the American music scene, even as his friend was working to create the organizations that focused the activities and money in that city. In his *Words on Music*, Bacon wrote:

I have always hoped for a place where all the elements needed for creative and interpretive music could foregather toward a national art, which in its very nationality would achieve an international appeal, and lend us stature abroad as well.<sup>48</sup>

In New York, Luening worked steadily to create just such a place. He founded several organizations that continue to support and advance the cause of American music, including being a founding member and the first chairman of American Composers Alliance (1937), president from 1945 to 1951, and honorary director until his death; a co-founder of the American Music Center (1940) and chairman from 1940 to 1960; founder of Composers Recording, Inc., (1954); a charter member of the National Music Council (1940); a member of the board of directors of the League of Composers (1943); a co-founder of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center (1959); and a trustee of the American Academy in Rome (1953-70).<sup>49</sup>

Beeson has served on the boards of twelve of the organizations that are critical in promoting American music, including serving as co-president of Composers Recordings, Inc.; chairman of the board of the Composer's Forum; member of the board of governors of American Composers Alliance and ASCAP; and treasurer and vice president for music of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.<sup>50</sup>

Columbia's opera productions often received funding from the Alice M. Ditson Fund, a large bequest administered by the University and designated specifically for the support and encouragement of musicians, composers in particular.<sup>51</sup> Luening joined the Ditson Committee, which made decisions about which projects to fund, in 1944 and Beeson in 1960, although he was a participant in its projects well before that time. Luening served on the committee until 1960, and

Beeson was Permanent Secretary from 1960-1988. The Ditson Fund, under the guidance of the Moore-Luening-Beeson triumvirate, made many significant contributions to American music, and particularly to American opera. From 1942-1952, the Fund commissioned nine new operas, including Menotti's *The Medium*, Thomson's *The Mother of Us All*, and Bacon's *A Drumlin Legend*.<sup>52</sup> During the 1940s and '50s, the Music Department, in collaboration with the Workshop and supported by Ditson Fund grants, performed 13 world premieres of American operas, including the three mentioned above, as well as Luening's *Evangeline* and the two Beeson operas mentioned previously.<sup>53</sup> The Columbia University premiere of Menotti's *The Medium*, with Serge Koussevitsky, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Alfred Wallenstein, and Artur Rokzinski in the second row of the audience,<sup>54</sup> was a seminal event in American opera, one that "turned the brook [of new American operas] into a torrent."<sup>55</sup>

## DEFINING AN AMERICAN VOICE

### Early Musical Influences

The German influences on the styles of both Bacon and Luening began in their childhoods—Bacon's mother often played the piano and sang the folk songs of her native Austria to her children, and they regularly spoke German at home<sup>56</sup>; both of Luening's parents were singers of German descent.<sup>57</sup> Beeson's childhood musical influences came via the airwaves from the largely standard Italian and German repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera.

Bacon's earliest teachers in Chicago were in the circle of associates of Bernhard Ziehn, the first major German theorist to emigrate to America. In 1917, at the age of nineteen, Bacon published a theoretical treatise in Chicago's philosophical journal, *The Monist*. In the article, "Our Musical Idiom," Bacon described a system for classifying all of the non-tonal scales and harmonies, based on Ziehn's earlier theoretical writings on harmonic language. Bacon rarely applied this theoretical

knowledge in his composition, opting instead for simplicity and clarity. Years later, Bacon remarked “I gave up Ziehn for Schubert.”<sup>58</sup>

Bacon’s only formal study of composition was with Karl Weigl in Vienna for two years in the early 1920s. While teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory from 1928–1930, he also worked with Ernst Bloch.<sup>59</sup> However, he cites his personal studies of the masters of song—Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Liszt—as his true compositional foundation. In Chicago during a brief period of unemployment, he read through the entire body of Schubert’s songs with a local singer.<sup>60</sup> His personal studies of these great song composers and intensive study of the scores of J. S. Bach, gave him “something first to imitate, then to emulate, and later to grow out from.”<sup>61</sup>

Among Luening’s earliest memories, from 1903, were of his mother singing German and English songs, accompanied by his father. His mother told him that he sang many songs in English and German as early as the age of three.<sup>62</sup> His father had sung in the performance of Beethoven’s Ninth led by Richard Wagner that celebrated the laying of the Bayreuth cornerstone.<sup>63</sup> His brothers brought home American folk songs and folk instruments, introducing a new style of word setting. Carl Sandburg often visited their home, where he and Luening’s father would spend some time spewing invectives against the robber barons, and then, after a few beers, Sandburg could be persuaded to play his guitar and sing Stephen Foster songs and popular tunes like *Erie Canal* and *I’ve Been Working on the Railroad*.<sup>64</sup>

The young Luening often listened through the door while his father coached singers in the songs of Schubert, Brahms, Schumann, and Wolf. Luening’s family moved to Munich when he was twelve, and Luening took up a secret life as a composer, unwilling to submit his early compositions to the light of his father’s harsh critical eye. However, when Otto was sixteen, his father overheard him playing one of his own compositions and mistook it for a work by Max Reger, calling it

“significant and beautiful.”<sup>65</sup> After that, the family took steps to see that Luening got some musical training.

His first songs were set to early German sacred poems. In 1917, when the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, Luening and his sister, Helene, escaped to Zürich, where he continued his musical studies at the Zürich Conservatory, and played percussion and flute in the Zürich Tonhalle Orchestra.<sup>66</sup> Here he also met Hermann Hesse and set his *In Weihnachtszeiten* for high voice and piano. The song was performed at a conservatory concert, marking his debut as a professional composer, and was declared “thoroughly modern.”<sup>67</sup>

Early in his stay in Zürich, Luening attended a performance of two of the operas of Ferruccio Busoni, conducted by the composer, and fell under his spell. After being surrounded for five years by heavy German music, he was thrilled “to discover an art lucid and transparent, melodious and rhythmically clear, yet not superficial; dramatically effective but brief in time, never turgid, and often profound.”<sup>68</sup> As a member of the Zürich orchestra, Luening performed in a series of five concerts at which Busoni, also a great piano virtuoso, played concerti by J. S. Bach, Hummel, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Weber, Liszt, Brahms, Anton Rubinstein, and Saint-Saëns, concluding with his own *Concerto for Piano, Orchestra and Male Chorus*. Luening was struck by Busoni’s ability to project his ideas into each piece he played and to find new relationships in familiar pieces. Busoni’s concerto struck Luening as an entirely new musical form, in which “German expressivity and complexity contrasted with Italian clarity and brilliance.”<sup>69</sup>

Busoni advocated the free interchange of various styles to create the desired musical expression. He also promoted the use of new scales and harmonies, and even electronic music. Busoni agreed to read through a number of Luening’s compositions, and his comments and

suggestions had a profound effect on Luening's composing. He noted that his writing "became much more contrapuntal and was tonal and polytonal at different times. . . I was much more preoccupied with . . . the musical style and idea and the expressive content than in my earlier works."<sup>70</sup>

In Zürich in 1918 and 1919, using the stage name of James P. Cleveland to avoid problems arising from conflicts with his orchestral duties, Luening was an actor and stage manager for the English Players, a theater company founded and managed by James Joyce. The poems in Joyce's *Chamber Music* were "the first contemporary poems in English that affected [Luening] as strongly as the great German lyric poems."<sup>71</sup> During their association in Zürich, Joyce often read passages of *Ulysses* to Luening to get his comments on the musical allusions. Joyce's musical opinions had considerable and lasting influence on Luening's compositional style, as is evidenced by his choice of selections from *Chamber Music* for his last song cycle (1993).<sup>72</sup>

Like Luening, Jack Beeson decided at a very early age that he would be a composer, and more specifically, a composer of opera. He tells the following story:

When I was seven, I told my parents that if they would give me a piano, I would practice it. So I studied piano seriously from seven on. Then, when I was about twelve, the Met started broadcasting. I would put a little radio on the piano, with a large console radio across the room and I would tune in both. I used my spending money, which I got from teaching piano to other students, to buy Schirmer scores and I would accompany the Met, stumbling along. So I was about twelve when I decided I would be a composer and write operas.<sup>73</sup>

These opera broadcasts were the earliest influences on Beeson's musical style. Listening and playing along, he absorbed the styles of the great operatic masters—Italian, German and French, but little American—taking in the techniques for setting text, writing for the voice, orchestrating for accompanying the voice and for conveying the import of dramatic moments, communicating a cogent story, and all of the other components that the opera composer must master.

Lacking the musical skills to write a full opera score, the teenage Beeson began by writing libretti. The first was a five-act tragedy in verse based on Shelley's play *Beatrice Cenci*, the second a rewrite of Byron's *Manfred*. Eventually, Beeson turned to a subject about which he had some firsthand knowledge – an Indian princess was supposedly buried under his Boy Scout camp, so he wrote a libretto based on her story, and even ventured to compose some music for it.<sup>74</sup>

At Eastman, Beeson studied composition, theory, and orchestration with Burrill Phillips, Bernard Rogers, and Howard Hanson.<sup>75</sup> Of the firm opinion that a composer should not pursue a Ph.D.,<sup>76</sup> Beeson moved to New York, determined to convince Béla Bartók to work with him. Bartók, who did not accept composition students, was evidently convinced to meet the determined young composer when Beeson wrote to him that he “thought that it was possible for one to learn something about composition from someone who thought he couldn't teach it.”<sup>77</sup> They worked together from October 1944 until March 1945.

### **Poetic Influences**

When Luening informed his teacher, Busoni, that it was time for him to return to the United States, Busoni was aghast, but made this generous offer: “One city is quite musical, and that is Chicago. Frederick Stock and Wilhelm Middelschulte, the organist, and many former pupils of Bernhard Ziehn live there, and you may use my name in introducing yourself.”<sup>78</sup> Luening took his mentor's advice, moved to Chicago in 1920, and studied harmony, theory and counterpoint with Middelschulte during the early 1920s.

Bacon also landed in Chicago when he returned from Europe in 1921. Both of the composers found the “zooming, speculating, ballyhooing”<sup>79</sup> of Al Capone's Chicago a major culture shock after the darkness of war-torn Europe.<sup>80</sup> Both also associated frequently with Carl Sandburg, whose poetry and exhortations helped awaken in them a fuller appreciation for American

culture and identity. Despite his friendship with the poet, Luening never set Sandburg's poetry to music, and Bacon set only *Omaha*. Perhaps his poetic language was already too musical to benefit by the addition of melody and harmony.

In the early 1920s, when Bacon showed one of his compositions to Sandburg (it is unknown which one, but is assumed to have been *Brady*), Sandburg pronounced "I dub this a folk song!"<sup>81</sup> Sandburg encouraged Bacon to study the work of American folk musicians, and over the years he unearthed and preserved hundreds of American folk songs by writing harmonic realizations for them. Bacon broadened his studies to include all types of indigenous music—dance music like the Charleston, the music of black America and Appalachia, hymn-singing, big band music, and jazz. Ellen Bacon noted that "all of these elements eventually found their way into his music, much the same as Bartók and Villa Lobos synthesized the cultural elements of their own native tradition."<sup>82</sup> To learn more about how the great English masters set the poetry of their native tongue to music, Bacon undertook a study of the Elizabethan songs of Dowland, Campion, and Rosseter; the madrigals of Weelkes, Wilbye, and Byrd; and the songs and operas of Henry Purcell and John Gay.<sup>83</sup>

In the early 1920s, both Bacon and Luening searched for American equivalents of the German poets they so admired. Bacon was looking for these "essential requirements—brevity, singleness of mood, absence of classical allusion and metaphor, metrical simplicity, and a language musical enough to invite music, yet not so musical as to be sheer music on its own."<sup>84</sup> Poetry had become an essential part of Luening's daily life. In his compositions, "phrases, punctuation, sounds to awaken imaginative, aural and visual responses became just as important as the musical processes of counterpoint, harmony and other music formulas."<sup>85</sup>

Their separate and shared journeys brought them, down long and winding paths, to the works of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Bacon initially encountered Whitman's poetry, with its "all-embracing sympathy and generosity, his Biblical eloquence, his poetic geography and love of places, his respect for the commonplace, and his vast faith in democracy,"<sup>86</sup> and was inspired to set a total of twenty of his works..

The Californian poet Sara Bard Field introduced Bacon to the genius of Emily Dickinson by showing him poems not found in the anthologies. Dickinson's poetry was a revelation to Bacon, and he wrote 30 settings before 1930 and a total of approximately 67. Although two earlier composers wrote a few songs to Dickinson's words, Bacon was the first composer to make extensive use of her texts.<sup>87</sup> In Dickinson, Bacon found a kindred spirit, one who could, "with an economy as great as the classical Chinese poets and painters, conjure ecstasy, poignancy, immensity, grief, passion, and intimacy with nature."<sup>88</sup>

Bacon also found great inspiration in other American poets, more the women than the men—Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Elinor Wylie. His songs include numerous settings of the prose of Dr. Samuel Johnson, Lao-tzu, Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Butler, and Blaise Pascal, as well as anonymous aphorisms of our own and foreign lands.<sup>89</sup>

In 1940, as director of music at Bennington College in Vermont, Luening participated in a production of Martha Graham's "Letter to the World," a ballet based on Dickinson's life and works. He was greatly moved by the piece and immediately read all of the available Dickinson poems. He selected nine of them to set as a cycle for soprano and piano. After his discovery of "her clear voice, . . . she soon became [his] friend, companion, and mentor. [His] musical motifs began expanding, as in poems, but into melodic lines."<sup>90</sup> He also set nine songs to Whitman texts, and found considerable inspiration in the works of the English poet William Blake, whose *Songs of*

*Experience* he set for baritone and piano, along with eleven other songs for voice and piano, and two choral pieces.

Beeson can be counted upon to discover the most dramatically coherent texts for both his operas and songs. In selecting subjects, he quickly learned that “by and large the ones that I finally get most interested in turn out to be the ones which have something to do with the American experience, or, to put it another way, the kind of experience I think I know something about.”<sup>91</sup> All but one of his operas are based on thoroughly American characters and experiences. His libretti are taken from stories ranging from the escapades of a woman evangelist loosely modeled after Aimee Semple McPherson (*The Sweet Bye and Bye*) to the psychotic passions of the title character of *Lizzie Borden* to the romantic illusion of youth recaptured in *Dr. Heidegger’s Fountain of Youth*, based on the Nathaniel Hawthorne story.

### **Mature Styles**

Bacon, Luening and Beeson never aligned with any compositional school and defy categorization. They were committed to using the musical style and technique that worked best for the current musical composition. All embraced and celebrated eclecticism.

Bacon remarks, “Some people have called me ‘eclectic.’ I am complimented by the designation . . . Whether ‘ahead of your day’ or ‘behind your day’ matters little, once that day has passed. . . . There remains only the result, enjoyed less for its one-time novelty and audacity than for its ultimate integrity and beauty.”<sup>92</sup>

When Leopold Stokowski introduced Luening’s electronic music in 1952 and thrust him into the company of the international avant-garde, Luening remarked:

Many of my old friends and associates looked on my venture into the world of electronic sound as a caper from which they hoped I would soon recover. When I tried to acquaint both new and old friends with those parts of my career they knew nothing about . . . I was asked repeatedly why I was not content to be either a

traditionalist who moves slowly forward or an avant-gardist who never looks back. Why, I was asked, would I want to combine such drastically opposed points of view?<sup>93</sup>

As a composer of one-act and full length operas, Beeson regards the use of a wide range of styles a practical necessity. “It is only in the opera house than an audience is subjected to two or three hours of one composer’s music, and this circumstance requires a broader musical palette than that proper for a symphony or a chamber work. . . . Let those who may call it ‘eclectic’ be damned to endless rehearsals of works composed from too-limited palettes!”<sup>94</sup>

Bacon’s style encompasses numerous harmonic and rhythmic techniques, all managed with great subtlety and imagination. He frequently misplaces the beat, creating syncopation that is so natural that it is hardly recognized as such (see the first measure of Example 4.) Contrasts between major and minor are frequent, sometimes from one measure to the next (as in the fifth and sixth measures of Example 1), and often between the vocal line’s ending note and the piano’s final measures (as in the last two measures of Example 6). In 1941, St. Edmunds described his style: “Dissonances occurring constantly and always with the force of conflicting motions give his work substantial hardiness, especially as he avoids over-harmonization as the plague. . . . It is a positive music, utterly unpretentious, [tender] without a suggestion of sentimentality.”<sup>95</sup>

Bacon’s songs *Schilflied* and *First Day*, written around 1928, reflect the influence of the German Romantic lied. In *Schilflied*’s long, liquid lines and gracious, flowing accompaniment, we hear Schubert’s influence, until we come to the climax of the song (see Example 1 below), where the tension between piano and voice swells and releases through a series of mounting dissonances, resolving to a sweet-sounding V<sup>7</sup> chord.

INSERT schilflied1.bmp

INSERT schilflied2.bmp

Example 1: **Schilflied**, measures 43-50. Copyright © 2000, Ellen Bacon.

Although a highly-regarded concert pianist, Bacon rarely wrote virtuosic accompaniments. With its crashing chords and swift scalar passages in thirds, *First Day* (a setting of the words of Bacon's first wife, poet Mary Prentice Lillie) is an exception. Its piano accompaniment and sweeping harmonic progression display his admiration for the songs of Franz Liszt.

INSERT first day.bmp

Example 2: **First Day**, measures 29-32. Copyright © 2000, Ellen Bacon.

The five songs published in *Romantic Arts Songs: 50 Songs by 14 Composers, for High Voice and Piano*, are the only examples of any of Bacon's songs in a collection of American composers' works. The brevity and apparent simplicity of expression and the piano accompaniment's subtle contributions in all five songs, published in 1944, are characteristic of his settings of Dickinson's poetry. *It's All I have to Bring* (see Example 3), with its fields, meadows and bees, is set in the sunny key of B-flat major, with primarily diatonic harmonies, except for the occasional accidental surrounding the pastoral images. The melodic line is long and legato with a few joyous leaps (compare measures 1-4 to measures 10-14 in Example 3 below). The piano, with its misplaced beats and unexpected harmonies, contributes a rocking undertow of darker thoughts only hinted at. The meter is the straightforward 2/4, mirroring the common meter of Dickinson's verse. The occasional addition of a 3/4 bar (for example, in measure 16 at the beginning of the second verse), "hints at the tremendous sophistication underlying the apparent simplicity of all Dickinson's poetry."<sup>96</sup>

INSERT its all I have to bring.bmp

Example 3: **It's All I have to Bring**, measures 1-4, 10-15. Copyright © 1944, G. Schirmer, Inc.

An amateur but skilled painter, Bacon sometimes referred to his settings of Dickinson's words as "watercolors."<sup>97</sup> *To make a prairie*, which also appears in *50 Romantic Arts Songs*, is typical of his word painting. The flitting, skittering accompaniment suggests the bee's visits to the prairie's clover. The setting of the word "revery" [sic], with its long ascent to the high A and then a decrescendo to the fermata on the final syllable, gives us time to ponder for a moment. After our moment of reverie, Dickinson lightens the mood for the poem's last phrase, and the tune and its accompaniment skip along to the end (see Example 4).

INSERT to make a prairie.bmp

Example 4: **To make a prairie**, measures 13-16. Copyright © 1944, G. Schirmer, Inc.

Whitman's language elicits a more dramatic palette, with extensive dissonance and atmospheric word setting, as is evidenced in Bacon's *On the Frontiers*. As the "great cloud masses, mournfully, slowly" roll over the listener's horizon, the vocal line holds steady in the midst of the piano's crashing, clashing chords and rolling arpeggios (see Example 5). At the end of the poem, as the soul whose journey the listener has been observing finds its final rest, both voice and piano are reduced to the bare minimum of melody and harmony, with the performer granted the freedom to sing the penultimate phrase in whatever rhythm the dramatic moment evokes. As is often the case in Bacon's song endings, the piano has the final statement, raising the vocal melody's F-flat to an F-natural, creating a modern version of the Piccardy third (see Example 6).

INSERT On the frontiers 1.bmp

Example 5: **On the frontiers**, measures 34-38. Copyright © 1974, Ernst Bacon.

INSERT on the frontiers 2.bmp

Example 6: **On the frontiers**, measures 58-62. Copyright © 1974, Ernst Bacon.

According to Ellen Bacon, Bacon's *No More Milk*, dedicated to Luening, is just the sort of humor that the two composers shared. Setting Dr. Samuel Johnson's admonishments about Truth with a capital T, Bacon uses a "canon in keyboard symmetric inversion."<sup>98</sup> This is a very inside joke between the two composers, a reference to Bacon's early treatise classifying all of the potential harmonies in the 12-tone system. (In autographing Luening's copy of that article just seven years after its publication in 1917, Bacon noted, "This is pretty puerile."<sup>99</sup> By that time, Bacon's heart was telling him to "seek out the gift to be simple."<sup>100</sup>) This satirical song, with its separate time signatures in the voice and piano parts, its esoteric canon that even the accompanist could not be trusted to notice without the composer's leading comment, and the melody's spiky and totally unrelated line (see Example 7), must have given both composers a hearty laugh.

INSERT no more milk.bmp

Example 7 **No more milk**, measures 1-13. Copyright © 1974, Ernst Bacon.

Many of Luening's songs were written for and premiered by soprano Ethel Luening between 1927, when they were married, and 1944, when they separated.<sup>101</sup> In 1927, Luening vowed that he "would never write another note that he couldn't imagine with his inner ear, [realizing] that while many of [his] colleagues were moving toward a greater complexity, [he] was seeking clarity and simplicity."<sup>102</sup> In a letter to Bacon dated October 23, 1928, Luening wrote: "It seems to me that harmony (vertical sound) must be put so clearly that it is understandable, and melody (horizontal, also counterpoint) too must be completely crystallized."<sup>103</sup> Even so, Luening's harmonies are rarely straightforward, and almost always hold surprises. Henry Cowell de-

scribed his “penchant for giving the most radically unexpected turns to familiar material . . . [and to] start along a well-trodden path and then slyly lead us astray, good-humoredly expecting us to enjoy our own discomfort.”<sup>104</sup> Bacon assessed Luening’s style in his unpublished autobiography:

Otto inclined as composer toward radical experimentation, championing Varèse, Carl Ruggles, Becker, etc., and joining Ussachevsky in pioneer [sic] electronic music, but he never lost touch with grammatical music and showed in his opera, *Evangeline*, and in his songs a basic disposition toward what is loosely termed “romantic.”<sup>105</sup>

Luening’s *Requiescat*, written in 1917 in one and one-half hours according to a note on the manuscript, was inspired by Oscar Wilde’s “melancholy and . . . highly perfumed”<sup>106</sup> poem, written to memorialize his sister’s untimely death. The unembellished melody and stark chordal accompaniment emphasize the song’s poetry, while the unexpected harmonic progressions and tonal shifts serve the poem’s highly-charged emotional state (see shifts between second and third measures and sixth and seventh measures in Example 8 below).

INSERT requiescat.bmp

Example 8: **Requiescat**, measures 27-36. Copyright © 1917, Otto Luening Trust.

Luening began his *Nine Songs to Poems of Emily Dickinson* shortly after his first encounter with Dickinson’s poetry, and worked on the group for over nine years (1941-52). Of the cycle, Luening wrote, “I imagined mostly simple diatonic accompaniments, in themselves expressive. Emily’s fine speech rhythms set the musical rhythms for the cycle.”<sup>107</sup> His setting of *Our share of night to bear* is typical of the cycle. In the short introduction, repeated resounding open fifths set up the grand simplicity of the piece. Sometimes the piano supports the vocal line, at other times, to emphasize the contrasts in the poetry, the lines move in opposite directions. When the poetry shifts from “stars” to “mists,” the tonality shifts from major to minor. On the words “Some lose their

way,” the time signature changes from 4/4 to 3/4, the accented bass line shifts to the off-beat while the right hand’s triplets support the vocal line. For the counterstatement “Afterwards day,” the same triplets are raised an octave and the same basic bass line shifts back to the beat and down an octave, bringing the poem to an almost ecstatic close. For the coda, the open fifths of the opening are repeated, but now with a “triplet agitation in the bass” (see Example 9).<sup>108</sup>

INSERT our share of night to bear.jpeg

Example 9: **Our share of night to bear**, measures 9-18. Copyright © 1952, Highgate Press.

The poetry of Lord Byron stimulated Luening’s most romantic leanings. *She Walks in Beauty*, composed in 1951 and marked “Andante (Freely, following the word inflections),” moves with the stately grace of the poem’s subject. The piano accompaniment supports the voice throughout, with lush harmonies and rolled chords. The main theme is introduced in the piano and reprised several times throughout, although not always at the beginning of a verse. The time signature shifts between duple and triple to accommodate Byron’s meter, and the score is littered with reminders to the musicians to make good use of *rubato* to clearly express the meaning of the words (see Example 10).

INSERT she walks in beauty.bmp

Example 10: **She Walks in Beauty**, measures 31-35. Copyright © 1951, Otto Luening Trust.

An interesting peculiarity of many of Luening’s songs is the frequent use of the dynamic marking of forte. This marking often appears at the beginning of songs and in places where the singer might not be inclined to sing loudly. A good example is found at the end of this song, on the phrase “A heart whose love is innocent!” (see above). I often interpreted this marking less as a

dynamic than as an indication to sing firmly and with full voice, an instruction for which there is no simple musical mark. After hearing his songs so often sung by his full-voiced wife, the composer must have been anxious to make sure that future singers offered an equally lush sound.

For the *Joyce Cycle*, Luening borrows styles from the old English masters of song and tempers them with his own sense of harmony and rhythm. The first song, *Strings in the Earth and Air*, begins with open rolled chords in the piano, voiced to suggest the sound of the lute. The harmonic progression, I–IV–vi–V–) also lends an ancient flavor (see Example 11). Except for some distantly related chords in the closing measures, the piece never strays far from its B-flat diatonic center.

INSERT strings in the earth and air.bmp

Example 11: **Strings in the Earth and Air**, Measures 1-4. Copyright © 1993, Otto Luening Trust.

The next song in the cycle, *My Love Is In a Light Attire*, appears to continue the straightforward tonality, until odd stray accidentals begin creeping into the melodic line. The frivolity of both words and music and the way they are set to fall trippingly from the tongue hearken strongly back to Purcell, but Luening returns us to the 20th century with his own ideas of “acoustic harmony” in the final chords. After the voice cadences convincingly in the key of F major, the piano responds with a nice F-major chord, but while suspending that chord, softly adds a d-minor chord, voiced with the third, F-natural, in the bass (see Example 12) – a charmingly mysterious ending to a charmingly mysterious piece.

INSERT my love is in a light attire.bmp

Example 12: **My Love Is In A Light Attire**, measures 19-23, Copyright © 1993, Otto Luening BMI-ACA.

In *From Dewy Dreams*, piano interludes provide the misty atmosphere with atonal chords and sixteenth-note figures that move in no apparent harmonic direction, while the vocal line and its accompaniment remain firmly diatonic. The final song in the cycle, *Sleep Now*, stays within a very limited vocal and harmonic range. The melody spans less than an octave at the very bottom of the soprano range, while the sparse piano accompaniment comprises primarily varied voicings of the C-major chord. This diaphanous lullaby addressed to the performer's "unquiet heart" draws the cycle to its subdued close.

Beeson described Luening's approach as follows: "Because Luening was a contrarian, what he was doing stylistically was usually what most other composers were not doing at the time."<sup>109</sup> This could apply equally well to Beeson himself, whose music can be spiky, lyrical, romantically tonal or aggressively atonal. Whatever the style, Beeson always sets the words so that they can be sung without struggle and are immediately discernible to the audience. He has a complete command of the physiological and acoustic properties of the voice. Speaking of the soprano role in the love scene from *The Sweet Bye and Bye*, Beeson declared: "If a composer wants clarity, why choose any but 'ah' words [for high notes]? My 'high'—on a high note, naturally—includes a diphthong, a final 'ee' sound. But that's quickly disposed of by a portamento downwards, in the Italian manner."<sup>110</sup>

He is also not afraid to sacrifice beauty of sound for clarity of words and the appropriate emotional delivery. In the score of his most famous opera, *Lizzie Borden*, he variously encourages the singers to sing with a menacing tone or breathlessly, depending on the situation.<sup>111</sup> His final words of advice to me before a lecture recital including several of his works were: "Don't forget your final consonants."

As Susan Hawkshaw, editor of the Yale Oral History, who has taped over 20 hours of interviews with the composer, describes his marriage of text, voice and line:

Beeson's settings of English can be colorful, sonorous, or hard-hitting, but the language is always intelligible. It is a language of extraordinary fluidity and emotional vitality. . . . Aspiring composers have a lot to learn from Beeson—how to capture the sweep of a story from a novel or a play; make a seamless transition from the singing to the spoken voice and back again; how to orchestrate so that the color of an instrument does not shadow and thus render the voice inaudible.<sup>112</sup>

Both Luening and Beeson consider themselves 'time-travelers,' willing to use earlier styles of music when it suits their purposes.<sup>113</sup> In an affectionate nod to his early teacher Busoni, Luening sometimes referred to Beeson as 'his Beesoni.' Beeson composed *Death by Owl-Eyes*<sup>114</sup> in 1971 and dedicated it "to Otto in admiration." The subtitle, "a history of music in 64-odd measures," is loaded with meaning. The poem was suggested to Beeson by Douglas Moore's youngest daughter, after it had been rejected as a suitable song text by her father. Poet Richard Hughes' stanzas progress from simple ditty to chilly madness. Looking for a way to organize the music to express the poetry, Beeson begins with simple musical intervals found in 16<sup>th</sup> century music (see Example 13) and progresses through numerous styles to the 1960s, when the pianist begins improvising (see Example 14). The term "64-odd measures" is surely meant to be taken in both of its interpretations—the exact number of measures is difficult to discern since the final measures are to be repeated *ad libitum*, and as the song progresses, the measures become progressively odder and odder.

INSERT death by owl eyes 1.bmp

Example 13: **Death by Owl-Eyes**, measures 1-5, Copyright © 1973, Boosey & Hawkes.

INSERT death by owl eye 2.bmp

Example 14: **Death by Owl-Eyes**, measures 54 - ??, Copyright © 1973, Boosey & Hawkes.

*Widow's Waltz*, from *Dr. Heidegger's Fountain of Youth*, is a fine example of the influence of Richard Strauss on Beeson's operatic style. Although the tonal center shifts constantly, both the melody and the harmonic progressions seem natural and even inevitable. Dynamics, tempi and even the piano's pedaling are minutely marked and vary constantly. The melodic line rises and falls in eminently singable phrases. Because the aria employs numerous visual metaphors, word painting abounds, as when "beneath its load of ice and snow, the bare bough bends low" (see Example 15).

INSERT widows waltz.bmp

Example 15: **Widow's Waltz**, from *Dr. Heidegger's Fountain of Youth*, measures 36-47 Copyright © 1973, Boosey & Hawkes.

Beeson's narrative songs are like miniature operas, and his *Ballad: O What Is That Sound?* is an excellent example. W. H. Auden's poem, written in the 1930s, is a response to the dark clouds gathering in Europe with the growing threat of war. The song, a dialogue between a man and a woman, begins in a terrified hush, the melody accompanied only by alternating tonic and dominant deep in the bass. As the heroine grows more desperate, the writing becomes more rhythmically complex and far more dissonant. At the two turning points in the poem, when the man first realizes the true import of the approaching soldiers and later when he finally understands that he is doomed to join them, the piano stops abruptly, leaving the voice to make its statement stark and unadorned. By the end of the song (see Example 16), when the heroine realizes that she is being abandoned at the home front to face the coming scourge alone, the piano is racing up and down in 32<sup>nd</sup> notes while the soprano wails her despair in unrelated chromatics.

INSERT o what is that sound.bmp

Example 16: **Ballad: O What Is That Sound?** from *From a Watchtower*, measures 92-95. Copyright © 1993, Boosey & Hawkes.

## THE MUSIC TODAY

This paper has merely grazed the surface of the rich musical materials found in the vocal music of these three too obscure American composers. The centennial celebrations of Bacon and Luening's births, in 1998 and 2000, respectively, brought new attention to their music, although largely in limited venues and to little lasting effect.

The Ernst Bacon Society is active in promoting the composer's music, and maintains a Web site ([www.ernstbaconsociety.org](http://www.ernstbaconsociety.org)) about the man and his music, including performances, recordings and reviews. The Society co-sponsored two centennial concerts in Syracuse University's Crouse College Auditorium—one on October 4, 1998, of all vocal works, and the other on October 6, 1998, of all instrumental pieces. Songs took center stage at other centennial concerts, as well, including a recital at New York's Merkin Concert Hall on September 17, 1998, with soprano Amy Burton and baritone William Sharp, and John Musto at the piano; and, on May 17, 1998, a song recital by Janet Brown, soprano, and Herbert Burtis, piano, at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, MA. Reviewing the Cambridge concert, Richard Dyer of the *Boston Globe* said: "Bacon's melodic lines have both the flowing inevitability and the durability of folk tunes. . . Bacon had a wonderful ear for poetry and for capturing the weight, color, and rhythms of words in music."<sup>115</sup>

On February 20, 2000, at New York's Alice Tully Hall and again on March 1, 2000, at the Barbican Center in London, diva Renee Fleming included two of Bacon's songs on her recital of Dickinson songs—*The Heart Asks Pleasure First* and *It's All I have to Bring*. In his review of the concert, *New York Times* critic Paul Griffiths remarked: "Dickinson preferred 'the simple pure art of feeling.' Bacon, and Ms. Fleming singing his setting, came nearest to taking her at her word."<sup>116</sup>

In the summer of 2002, Composers Recording, Inc. (CRI) released *Fond Affection*, a collection of 21 of Bacon's songs, sung again by Janet Brown, Amy Burton and William Sharp.

Again the reviews were excellent. *American Record Guide*'s Mark Lehman described Bacon's music as displaying "a tension between delicacy and ruggedness, an interplay of gentle and tough, that's hard to describe but easy to hear."<sup>117</sup>

To celebrate its founder's centennial, CRI released two new all-Luening CD's—*Songs of Otto Luening* (CD 840), a collection of 30 songs performed by soprano Judith Bettina and pianist James Goldsworthy, and *Chords at Night: The Rare Piano Works of Otto Luening* (CD 872), a collection of unrecorded piano repertoire played by Marc Peloquin. The songs on the CRI recording were praised, although the singer's reviews were mixed. *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini found the songs beguiling, direct, and lovely, but with a "modern edge and a quality of surprise."<sup>118</sup>

The Otto Luening Trust sponsored and organized both the CRI recording and an all-Luening centennial concert at Columbia University's Miller Theatre on May 24, 2000, which included the premiere of a new work commissioned from young composer Dan Cooper, one of Luening's last musical assistants. In addition, the Trust published a collection of tributes and historic photos. In 1998, Parnassus Records released *She Walks in Beauty* (PACD96-025) by soprano Danielle Woerner, who had collaborated extensively with Luening on the selection of the songs, which include two of his major works for flute and soprano.

Although when asked about performances of his works, Beeson responded, "Most of them are not performed much,"<sup>119</sup> productions of his operas are not all that rare. His latest work, *Practice in the Art of Elocution*, received two New York performances in 2002. His ninth opera, *Sorry, Wrong Number*, was premiered by the Center for Contemporary Opera at the Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse on May 25, 1999, to a warm reception. The New York City Opera, the company that premiered *Lizzie Borden* in 1965, returned it to their repertory in 1999, in a production on loan from Glimmerglass Opera, which presented it in 1996. In July 1995, Beeson's one-act *Hello Out There* was the only operatic offering in the Museum of Modern Arts' retrospective of American

music during the 25 years after World War II.<sup>120</sup> In 2001, Albany Records released *Fire, Fire, Quench Desire* (Albany 382), a collection of his songs for soprano, with a couple of arias thrown in for good measure, which was warmly received.

The indefatigable Jack Beeson has undertaken yet another new project, the creation and launching of the Douglas Moore Fund for Opera. The Fund recalls many of the ideas behind the Columbia Opera Workshop. It is designed to give aspiring composers and librettists an opportunity to “learn something about the standard repertory and at the same time to work with a composer who’s having his first work produced.”<sup>121</sup> Planning for the Fund began more than two years ago, and the first fellowship should be available in 2004.

### SUMMARY

In his review of three recordings of American songs in December 2000, *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini wrote: “When singers present songs from earlier decades, the same handful of composers tend to turn up on programs. A great deal of interesting repertory is being sadly overlooked.”<sup>122</sup> With the great wealth of songs whose beauty, wit and American genius deserve a wider audience, it is truly unfortunate that so many recitals present the same worn songs. For American music to grow and prosper, it must have a home, and it is up to American performers, presenting organizations, and recording companies to create that space.

Among the composers writing beautiful American arts songs during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the three composers of this study alone have created more than 400, for all voice types and in many different styles. Their songs range from those that are easily accessible and appropriate for undergraduate vocal students, to the thorny and dramatic to be performed by the more adventuresome and mature. We should be hearing more of them, and other American treasures, on

our concert stages and on undergraduate and graduate recitals in all of our universities and conservatories.



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- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *The Hero as Poet, from on Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, Lecture Iii, Delivered 12 May, 1840.*, Sterling Edition [Internet] (1840, accessed December 2002); available from <http://www.history1700s.com/etests/html/texts/history/heros10.txt>. Quoted in heading of chapter "The Singer," in Ernst Bacon, *Words on Music* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1973), 32.
- <sup>2</sup> Philip L. Miller, *Bacon, Ernst* [Internet] (The New Grove Dictionary of Music Online ed. L. Macy, accessed September 2002); available from <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
- <sup>3</sup> Ellen Bacon, *Centennial Celebration of Ernst Bacon (1898-1990)*. (New York: by Syracuse University, 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> Paul de Jong, ed., *Otto Luening Centennial 2000* (New York: Otto Luening Trust, 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Howard Shanet, *Beeson, Jack* [Internet] (New Grove Dictionary of Music Online ed. L. Macy, accessed September 2002); available from <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
- <sup>7</sup> In a characteristically contrary way, Beeson's longevity is in defiance of the diagnosis of the University of Chicago's head of medicine when Beeson was six years old that he had about six months to live.
- <sup>8</sup> A conversation with Mrs. Ellen Bacon, who has read and edited the composer's unpublished autobiography, shed no light on their earliest relationship.
- <sup>9</sup> Ernst Bacon, "Autobiography, Excerpts from the composer's unpublished autobiography, DeWitt, NY: Ernst Bacon Society., 214.
- <sup>10</sup> Otto Luening, New York, "To Ellen Bacon, Dewitt, Ny. Private Correspondence.," (19 June 1990).
- <sup>11</sup> Otto Luening, New York, "To Ernst Bacon. Private Correspondence," (New York: Otto Luening Papers, Research Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, October 1928 - November 1933).
- <sup>12</sup> Otto Luening, *Odyssey of an American Composer: The Autobiography of Otto Luening* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), 275.
- <sup>13</sup> Luening, "To Ernst Bacon. Private Correspondence." Both songs were written in approximately 1928.
- <sup>14</sup> Jack Beeson, "Columbia Report: Opera at Columbia University, 1941-1958," *Current musicology* 70 (Fall 2000).
- <sup>15</sup> Luening, *Odyssey.*, 389.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 413.
- <sup>17</sup> Otto Luening, New York, "To Ernst Bacon. Private Correspondence," (New York: Otto Luening Papers, Research Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, October 1928 - November 1993).
- <sup>18</sup> Luening, *Odyssey.*
- <sup>19</sup> Bacon, "Autobiography., 214, and Luening, *Odyssey.*, 262.
- <sup>20</sup> Luening, *Odyssey.*, 256.
- <sup>21</sup> Douglas Moore, "Opera Productions at Columbia University," *Opera News* 9, no. 24 (16 April 1945), 12.
- <sup>22</sup> Harlie Sponaugle, *Columbia University, the Columbia Opera Workshop and the Efflorescence of American Opera in the 1940s and 1950s* [Internet] (U.S. Opera Web, Autumn 2002, accessed December 2002); available from <http://www.usoperaweb.com/2002/september/columbia.htm>. Bacon and Beeson didn't work together at the Workshop, since Beeson had not yet arrived when Bacon's first opera was produced and Beeson was in Rome on a Fulbright fellowship when his second was performed. However, the two did meet at various times: Bacon attended piano rehearsals being conducted by Beeson for one of the premiered operas at the Workshop, and on several social occasions when Bacon was in New York City and staying with the Luenings.
- <sup>23</sup> Harlie Sponaugle, *At the Center of Things: Jack Beeson* [Internet] (U. S. OperaWeb, Autumn 2002, accessed December 2002); available from <http://www.usoperaweb.com/2002/september/beeson.html>.
- <sup>24</sup> Luening, *Odyssey.*, 455.
- <sup>25</sup> Jack Beeson, (Interview by author. Tape recording of phone conversation. Arlington, VA: 29 October 2001).
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Sponaugle, *Jack Beeson. Jack Beeson.*
- <sup>28</sup> Beeson, "Interview, 29 October 2001."
- <sup>29</sup> Ernst Bacon, *Words on Music* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1973), 32-33.
- <sup>30</sup> Luening, *Odyssey.*, 472.
- <sup>31</sup> Otto Luening, "An Unfinished History of Electronic Music," *Music Educators Journal* 55 (November 1968), 145.
- <sup>32</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "Opera That Takes an Ax to Strict Definitions of Style," *New York Times*, 28 February 1999.
- <sup>33</sup> Joan Peyser, "Future Indefinite," *Opera News* 66, no. 2 (August 2001), 18.

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- <sup>34</sup> Jack Beeson, "American Opera: Curtains and Overtures," *Columbia University Forum* (Fall 1960), 26.
- <sup>35</sup> Jack Beeson, "Autobiography of Lizzie Borden," *Opera Quarterly* IV, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 30.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 28
- <sup>37</sup> Ernst Bacon, "Poetry in Search of Music," *Sewanee Review* (1941), 5.
- <sup>38</sup> Bacon, *Words on Music.*, 36.
- <sup>39</sup> Jack Beeson, "Grand and Not So Grand," in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, ed. Barney Childs (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 321
- <sup>40</sup> Bacon, *Words on Music.*, 174.
- <sup>41</sup> de Jong, ed., 8.
- <sup>42</sup> Jack Beeson, "Magic, Music and Money," *Columbia University Forum* (1958), 35.
- <sup>43</sup> Jake Heggie, *Interview with Jake Heggie* [Internet] (2001, accessed August 2002); available from <http://www.usoperaweb.com/2001/heggie.html>.
- <sup>44</sup> Sponaugle, *Columbia Opera Workshop*.
- <sup>45</sup> de Jong, ed., 13.
- <sup>46</sup> Susan Hawkshaw, "A Master of American Opera," *Columbia Magazine* (Spring 2002), 48.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> Bacon, *Words on Music.*, 12.
- <sup>49</sup> Emily Good, *Otto Luening* (New York: BMI, 1991).
- <sup>50</sup> Hawkshaw., 47.
- <sup>51</sup> Jack Beeson and Elizabeth Mahaffey, *Activities of the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University: Allocations and Administration* (New York: Columbia University, Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, January 1989), Unpublished report outlining the activities funded by the Alice M. Ditson Fund from 1940 through 1980.
- <sup>52</sup> It is interesting to note that Bacon's *A Tree on the Plains* was performed at Columbia in May of 1943, just months before Moore invited Luening to join the faculty of Barnard.
- <sup>53</sup> Beeson, "Opera at Columbia." Appendix B.
- <sup>54</sup> Luening, *Odyssey.*, 461.
- <sup>55</sup> William Mayer, "Chamber Opera: An American Evolution," *Music Journal* 23, no. 7 (October 1965), 45. The Columbia production marked the emergence of Menotti as a well-known composer and his debut as a stage director. Luening and Beeson worked closely with Menotti on the preparations, including auditioning over 100 singers and coaching the cast. In an interview with the author on October 29, 2001, Beeson told the story of casting Monica as an example of the acuity of Luening's ear. During the auditions, Luening confided to Beeson that he was concerned about Menotti's choice for the role of Monica, feeling that she sounded as if her cords were not vibrating together or that she might have nodes. Luening was proved correct a few months after the performances when the singer had nodes removed from her vocal cords. Beeson later surmised that Menotti was looking for just that 'sick' sound for the role.
- <sup>56</sup> Bacon, *Centennial Celebration of Ernst Bacon (1898-1990)*.
- <sup>57</sup> Otto Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson," *Parnassus: Poetry in review* X, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 1982).
- <sup>58</sup> Severine Neff, "An American Precursor of Non-Tonal Theory: Ernst Bacon (1898 - 1990)," *Current musicology* 48 (1991), 20.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>60</sup> Bacon, *Centennial Celebration of Ernst Bacon (1898-1990)*.
- <sup>61</sup> Ernst Bacon, "On Words and Tones," in *Ernst Bacon: Fifty Songs* (Georgetown, CA: Dragon's Teeth Press, 1974), v.
- <sup>62</sup> Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson." 225.
- <sup>63</sup> Jack Beeson, "Songs of Otto Luening (1900-1996)," (New York: Composers Recordings, Inc., 2000).
- <sup>64</sup> Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson." 229.
- <sup>65</sup> Luening, *Odyssey.*, 111.
- <sup>66</sup> Ralph Hartsock, *Otto Luening : A Bio-Bibliography*, vol. 35: Bio-Bibliographies in Music (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 4
- <sup>67</sup> Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson." 230.
- <sup>68</sup> Luening, *Odyssey.*, 168.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.
- <sup>71</sup> Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson." 231.
- <sup>72</sup> Beeson, "Songs of Otto Luening."

- <sup>73</sup> Sponaugle, *Jack Beeson*.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid..
- <sup>75</sup> Hawkshaw., 45.
- <sup>76</sup> Beeson, "Interview, 29 October 2001."
- <sup>77</sup> Sponaugle, *Jack Beeson*.
- <sup>78</sup> Luening, *Odyssey*., 184.
- <sup>79</sup> Bacon, "Poetry in Search of Music." 6.
- <sup>80</sup> Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson." 232.
- <sup>81</sup> Bacon, *Centennial Celebration of Ernst Bacon (1898-1990)*.
- <sup>82</sup> Ellen Bacon, *Talk About Ernst Bacon - Onondaga Community College* (Syracuse, NY: Ernst Bacon Trust, February 6, 2001), Lecture delivered at Onondaga Community College, preceding performance of Bacon's 1st Symphony.
- <sup>83</sup> Bacon, "Poetry in Search of Music." 6.
- <sup>84</sup> Bacon, "On Words and Tones." v.
- <sup>85</sup> Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson." 232.
- <sup>86</sup> Bacon, "On Words and Tones." v.
- <sup>87</sup> Carlton Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere: Emily Dickinson and Music* (Berkeley, CA: Fallen Leaf Press, 1992). xxvi.
- <sup>88</sup> Bacon, *Centennial Celebration of Ernst Bacon (1898-1990)*.
- <sup>89</sup> Bacon, "On Words and Tones." v.
- <sup>90</sup> Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson."
- <sup>91</sup> Duke Johns, "Connections: An Interview with Jack Beeson," *Music Educators Journal* 66, no. 2 (October 1979)., 45.
- <sup>92</sup> Bacon, "On Words and Tones." vi.
- <sup>93</sup> Luening, *Odyssey*., 1.
- <sup>94</sup> Beeson, "Autobiography." 29.
- <sup>95</sup> John St. Edmunds, "Songs of Ernst Bacon," *Sewanee Review* (1941)., 2.
- <sup>96</sup> Ruth C. Friedberg, *American Art Song and American Poetry*, vol. I: America Comes of Age (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1981)., 112.
- <sup>97</sup> Bacon, *Centennial Celebration of Ernst Bacon (1898-1990)*.
- <sup>98</sup> Of Luening's relation to "the Truth," Beeson says: "Students and friends seeking Truth had to find it for themselves from his gnomic, questioning questions."(de Jong, ed., 11.)
- <sup>99</sup> Neff.,18.
- <sup>100</sup> Bacon, *Words on Music*., 67.
- <sup>101</sup> Beeson, "Songs of Otto Luening."
- <sup>102</sup> Luening, *Odyssey*., 486.
- <sup>103</sup> Luening, "To Ernst Bacon. Private Correspondence."
- <sup>104</sup> Henry Cowell, "Evangeline," *Musical Quarterly* 34 (1948)., 599.
- <sup>105</sup> Bacon, "Autobiography.", 214.
- <sup>106</sup> Luening, "A Winding Path to Emily Dickinson." 230.
- <sup>107</sup> Ibid. 233.
- <sup>108</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>109</sup> Beeson, "Songs of Otto Luening."
- <sup>110</sup> Susan Hawkshaw, "The Music of Jack Beeson: An Appreciation," *Columbia Magazine* (Spring 2002).
- <sup>111</sup> Wilton Mason, "Lizzie Borden, a Family Portrait in Three Acts. (Review)," *Notes. Music Library Association* XXV, no. 4 (June 1969)., 818.
- <sup>112</sup> Hawkshaw, "The Music of Jack Beeson: An Appreciation."
- <sup>113</sup> Jack Beeson, (Telephone interview by author. Arlington, VA: 14 November 2002).
- <sup>114</sup> Jack Beeson, *Nine Songs and Arias: For Soprano and Piano*. (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1990).
- <sup>115</sup> Richard Dyer, *Song Recital by Janet Brown* [Internet] (Boston Globe, May 19, 1998, accessed September 2002.); available from Available from <http://www.ernstbacon.org/reviews.htm>.
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- <sup>118</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "Punch and Charm in Overlooked American Songs," *New York Times* December 26, 2000.

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<sup>119</sup> Sponaugle, *Jack Beeson*.

<sup>120</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "Beeson's Gritty Tale of Danger and Longing," *New York Times* July 3, 1995.

<sup>121</sup> Sponaugle, *Jack Beeson*.

<sup>122</sup> Tommasini, "Overlooked American Songs."