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The hero-villain binary as a queer construct in Stewart Wallace's *Harvey Milk Reimagined*

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Abstract

Stewart Wallace's opera *Harvey Milk Reimagined* depicts the assassination of one of the first openly gay politicians in the United States. The depiction of LGBTQ activists reflects the period of the Stonewall Riots and the earliest demonstrations following the events on Christopher Street. An analysis of Michael Korie's libretto uncovered three important overarching themes: activism, identity, and othering. Wallace's score also engages with each of these themes, primarily through the depiction of Dan White as the villainous homophobe in stark contrast to the predominantly gay cast. The ensemble is given moments of humor, popular culture references, and a variety of musical techniques to position them on the "right side of history." *Harvey Milk Reimagined* occupies a place in the growing operatic repertoire by openly queer composers. While queer theorists reject binary categorization, the opera presents a distinct binary polarization between the queer community and its supporters and the straight community, raising questions of social agenda, heterophobia, and queer discourse.

Keywords: Queer theory; Opera; Gender; Binaries; Queer aesthetics; Activism; Identity

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1. Introduction

The influence of queer and gendered perspectives has particular resonance in the world of opera, serving both as a vehicle for reflecting changing societal values and as an agent for social change. Stewart Wallace's opera *Harvey Milk Reimaged* offers queer theorists a perspective in which a queer protagonist and a homophobic villain are manifested in a musical and creative context. Beginning with the identification of "queer aesthetics" in Wallace's score, we undertook a hermeneutic analysis of larger phenomena related to representations of queerness and social discourse in this opera. Although stylistic and technical assessments of markers of "queer aesthetics" were expected in a work in which both the title character and the composer of the opera embody queer identity, the novelty of *Harvey Milk Reimagined* lies in its reflection of important events and concepts from queer history on a macro-level—both in the libretto and the musical composition—as well as in the carefully crafted operatic characters.

Most importantly, in the context of this work, the librettist and composer subvert the conventional representation of the queer community as "other." In this opera, the queer community represents normality and mainstream culture. Although at first this might sound like an unrealistic and idealized scenario, the gradual increase in public

confidence for queer communities since Stonewall is espoused in the literature. For example, de Kuyper[1] refers to a Freudian theory that homosexuality is not a feature confined to a small minority of the population but instead is a "fundamental aspect" of heterosexuality as well. Wallace presents Milk's world from a queer perspective, attributing to its queer characters an extensive list of positive traits, including empathy, passion, determination, commitment, and love. Any character not sharing in this value system is portrayed as "other."

The difficulty that heterosexual individuals experience in acknowledging homosexual desires within themselves may lead to homophobia and the othering of queer individuals and communities, as expressed by Dan White's aggressive character. It should also be noted that, whereas many other queer-themed operas focus on celebrating queerness or applying specific aesthetic ideals—such as the juxtaposition of Apollyonic and Dionysian ideals in Karol Szymanowski's opera, *King Roger*—or constructing the narrative around a singular hero character and their entourage, *Harvey Milk Reimagined* offers a raw and merciless depiction of a societal conflict. The clash between a white, heterosexual society frightened of an emerging world they do not recognize, and a racially diverse queer community demanding political representation, equality, access, and an end to heteronormative hegemony, is concentrated in the phenomenological manifestations of the two main characters, Dan White and Harvey Milk.

Opera provides a versatile platform for new media research, both from aesthetic and technical perspectives.[2] Moreover, as fluid gender identities and queerness have become critical constructs in operatic repertoire, this opera represents a new form of queer opera, one in which queer themes are not codified, but are central to the narrative. The proliferation of "queer operas" in the last decade includes, *Before Night Falls* by Jorge Martín (2010); *Two Boys* by Nico Muhly (2011); *Oscar* by Theodore Morrison (2013); *As One* by Laura Kaminsky (2014); *Brokeback Mountain* by Charles Wuorinen (2014); *27* by Ricky Ian Gordon (2014); *Sweets by Kate* by Griffin Candey (2015); *Fellow Travelers* by Gregory Spears (2016);

Pleasure by Mark Simpson (2016); *Not in My Town* by Michael W. Ross (2016); *Les Feluettes* by Kevin March (2016); *Three Way* by Robert Paterson (2017); *Lessons in Love and Violence* by George Benjamin (2018); *Stonewall* by Iain Bell (2019); *The Stonewall Operas* by Bryan Blaskie, Brian Cavanagh-Strong, Kevin Cummines, and TJ Rubin (2019); and *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing* by Justine F. Chen (2021).

Harvey Milk Reimagined thus provides an important case study in the changing landscape of sexual representation in opera, addressing themes of othering, identity, and activism. Moreover, although the framework of this article does not allow for a wider discussion of Milk's Jewish background and its implications on his identity, we considered this dimension in our coding of the musical material, as his religious background and homosexuality emerge as inseparable aspects of his complex operatic character.

2. Challenging the political status quo

The murder of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk in 1978 by fellow supervisor Dan White extinguished the visionary leadership of the first openly gay elected official in the United States.[3] San Francisco had long served as a haven for social outsiders, in particular members of the increasingly restless queer community.

Groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis had already become active in the 1950s, helping to establish the foundation of a burgeoning homophile movement.[4] Motivated to address the stark social and financial disparities in the rapidly developing city, Milk ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1973. Although unsuccessful, he ran again in 1975, this time with an increased focus on queer issues and a determination to provide a political voice for the queer community.

Milk moved to a San Francisco neighborhood called the Castro with his lover Scott Smith, 2 years after leaving his job as a Wall Street broker. The Castro became one of the first recognizably gay neighborhoods in the United States and remains the center of San Francisco's gay community, symbolizing queer activism. After a heated exchange with a local business leader, who advocated for a levy on small businesses, Milk earned the nickname "Mayor of Castro Street" after standing on a crate marked "soap" to launch his candidacy.[5] Noting San Francisco's shifting demographics—from a primarily white, working-class population to one increasingly characterized by ethnic minorities, young childless couples, queer individuals, singles, and the elderly—Milk vowed to represent this broader constituency. In death, Milk became both an icon and martyr for the struggles of queer Americans in the years following the 1969 Stonewall Riots. Wallace's operatic score participates in a growing list of artistic offerings that pay deference to his leadership.

3. Queer theory and the binarism of characters

Queer theory continues to evolve through criticism and discourse, deliberately resisting labeling and categorization.[6] Pioneering theorists such as Sedgwick[7,8] emphasized notions of fluidity and variation, yet in *Harvey*

Milk Reimagined, such fluidity is reflected primarily in the range of sexual identities represented by the large queer cast. In contrast, the application of delineated labels of "good" and "evil" remains less fluid, reinforcing categories of "queer" (including allies) and "other." By subverting strong echoes of biblical representations of "good" and "evil,"[9] the opera introduces an alternative queer perspective to prevailing heteronormative narratives that dominated the twentieth century. Queer theory as a whole promotes discourse that challenges preexisting concepts of gender, sexual normalcy, and deviancy as social constructs.[10] Moreover, as argued by McDonald,[11] all knowledge should be subjected to critical interrogation; although queer theory does not operate under a set of shared assumptions, it remains committed to disrupting binaries, destabilizing sexual categorizations, and challenging processes that constrain agency and repress diversity.

The formation of queer theory has been closely connected with activism, which, alongside the institutionalization of gender studies in universities during the late twentieth century, has fueled the broader queer movement as it exists today. The libretto and score of *Harvey Milk Reimagined* are deeply rooted in this tradition, foregrounding queer activism and the demand for representation. Queer theorists such as Halperin[12] emphasize the centrality of subjective experience, rejecting rigid binaries and instead understanding queerness through multiplicity. This approach, however, has been criticized for destabilizing coalition-building and limiting the capacity for collective advocacy on behalf of specific minority groups.[13]

The umbrella term "queer" encompasses a wide variety of gender and sexual identities,[1] but the heterogeneity of the community complicates the pursuit of universal political and societal goals. Edelman[14] reminds us that queer theorists should reject politics altogether, given that politics has always rejected queer communities. Because of the individualistic focus espoused by many queer theorists, such a theoretical framework is useful for a hermeneutic discussion—especially in analyzing the operatic case study of *Harvey Milk Reimagined* and the binaries it reveals.

4. Methodology

The libretto was analyzed using thematic analysis to establish underlying themes.[15] The text was examined for queer content, such as gender appropriation in discourse, stage directions specific to queer activity, homophobic content, and moments of same-sex desire. These findings were presented in a table. After a process of familiarization with the text, two additional columns were inserted on the right-hand side of the table: the first to identify specific categories and the second to formulate overarching themes. The specific categories were derived by assessing the text and applying concepts from queer theory to form succinct expressions of meaning. These categories were then grouped into broader, sympathetic themes. Three overarching themes emerged: othering, identity, and activism. The second author reviewed the themes, and agreement was reached regarding their organization.

The next phase involved analysis of the musical score. Using the first author's table of relevant excerpts from the libretto, the second author compared the music and text to illicit a deeper understanding of how queerness is represented in the opera. Descriptions of the corresponding musical events were added to the table, with the aim of observing how the thematic categories identified above manifested in the compositional language of this opera. Techniques such as changes in dynamics, orchestral and vocal texture, and instrumentation were all considered in relation to their impact on the audience's experience of queerness. To achieve reliable conclusions, the case study was approached as an abstract research object, ensuring that the analysis was not dependent on any particular production. The study was guided by the following research question: how do binary representations of straight versus queer political activism align with notions of non-binary categorization advanced by queer theorists?

5. Results

The three overarching themes to emerge from the thematic analysis were othering, identity, and activism.

5.1. Identity

Queer identity can be fundamentally understood as non-heteronormative identity. The ambiguous, deconstructionist, and individualistic use of the term "queer" complicates assumptions of individual behavior or attraction.[16,17] Both individual and group queer identity in *Harvey Milk Reimagined* are frequently expressed through self-deprecating humor. The libretto employs stereotypes as a shared language in the community, depicting men as effeminate and women are seen as masculine. In Act One, Part Three, set in Harvey's Walk-In Closet in the 1960s, the audience is introduced to a group of friends known as the Closet Lovers. When Closet Lover Scott comments about the poor ventilation—remarking, "A girl could suffocate"—Anne the Beard responds, "…half the queens

[1] "Sexuality is performative—that it is understood and enacted through and by the reiterative language and connotative practices that restrict sexuality into certain binarial divisions that rely on gender-object-of-choice rather than any notion of sexual fluidity that displaces gender as the central determinant in which side of the divide a sexual subject can be positioned"[22].

in town would scream for a walk-in closet!" (Figure 1). Self-deprecating humor here acts as a vehicle for releasing tension regarding topics specific to minority groups, while simultaneously building solidarity between speaker and audience, since shared knowledge is essential for message acceptance.[18] Queer communities often use such humor both to relate to others and to deal with socially significant stereotypes.[19]

This humor is also translated into music. For example, in bars 27–33, the character's melodic line avoids linear flow and instead takes on an angular, playful contour (a leap of a minor seventh followed by a leap of a minor sixth). The accompanying pizzicato in the strings section further emphasizes the silliness of the musical phrasing. Phrases like this celebrate queer identity by reclaiming and recontextualizing language often used pejoratively. Scott further asserts queer identity when he tells Harvey, "You don't have to stand there and take that from her, a big butch number like you." By referring to Dan White as "her," Scott ironically positions White as a member of the group. For the queer-identifying characters, this is an intended compliment; however, for White, it would be a harsh slander. Harvey cautions Scott's language, reminding him that they could be arrested.

The queer community has long shared an affinity with Dyer *et al.*[21] Her death on the first night of the Stonewall Riots in New York has resulted in her frequent commemoration in queer media. In Act Two, Harvey reflects, "Good-bye Judy Garland. Good-bye, my beautiful Men Without Wives. Those days are gone now." Harvey sings these lines while signing legislation for the San Francisco Gay Rights Ordinance. This marks a pivotal moment in which Harvey moves from political activist to elected official, bearing the power and responsibility to make change.

The queer community in the opera is frequently characterized as entertaining and amusing. In Act Two, part two, the Judy Garland reference is expressed musically through falling figures, a growing texture of unresolved suspensions and upward-reaching intervals associated with love and nostalgia (Figure 2). These are underlined by the muted sonority of violas and the unusual combination of piccolo flute and bass clarinet, producing a whimsical orchestral sound. The passage unfolds slowly (half note = 60), enhancing its reflective tone.

When the Stonewall Girls are introduced, the score is marked "Party time!," during which the rhythmical unison and accentuated beats change into playful, syncopated melodies in the chorus parts. The use of drum kit, snare drum, and "wah" effects on brass instruments underscores the change of mood with clear references to popular music. Later in this scene, when Scott kisses Harvey, it is marked by a hit on the drum kit and a bass drum. The celebration of the Stonewall girls continues with the syncopated, jazz-inspired orchestration, affirming the sense of community. Similar techniques recur in Act One, Part Four, when the "Milk Train" supporters, led by Anne, celebrate Milk's campaign. Harmon mutes in the brass, brushes on the snare drum, and tempo indications such as "Lay Back" evoke association with queer musical culture. These stylistic choices underpin much of the opera's queer scenes, situating the narrative through grooves, timbral effects, and popular idioms. In doing so, they emphasize the binary distinction between straight and queer worlds while simultaneously celebrating queer identity.

Queer identity is also musically expressed through eroticism and intimacy.[22] In Act One, erotic excitement is juxtaposed with sudden silence, followed by a rhythmic duet between the timpani and vibraphone, representing ritualism. The words "homo" and "God" are given special importance through dramatic silence. Later, in Act One, Part Three, as Harvey and Scott embrace on the summit, gradually thickening textures ascend, simultaneously communicating the exhilaration of the marching crowds and the euphoria of Harvey and Scott. Towards the end of the opera, Harvey states to his mother, "Mama, I've slept with over a thousand men. If you don't know by now… I'm gay. Queer. Feigelah…" This is both a confession and an affirmation of his dual identity as queer and Jewish. Harvey is shown to be constantly seeking approval from his mother, another shared attribute of the queer community.[23] The process of coming out heightens fears of potential familial abandonment and ostracization, which deeply impacts the mental well-being of queer individuals.[24]

Identity theorists have long proposed that identity can exist in multiple forms concurrently[25-27] Harvey's dual queer and Jewish identities are explored at several key moments in the opera. Referencing the Nazi practice of marking prisoners' uniforms with color-coded stars, he states, "My star is a pair of triangles: one pink, one yellow.

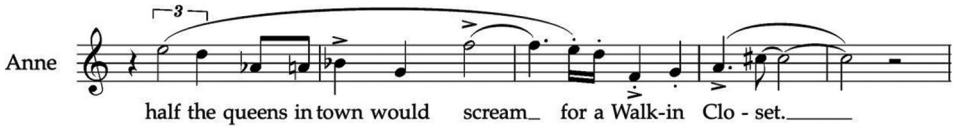

Figure 1. Anne's phrase in the closet (Act One, Part Three)[20]

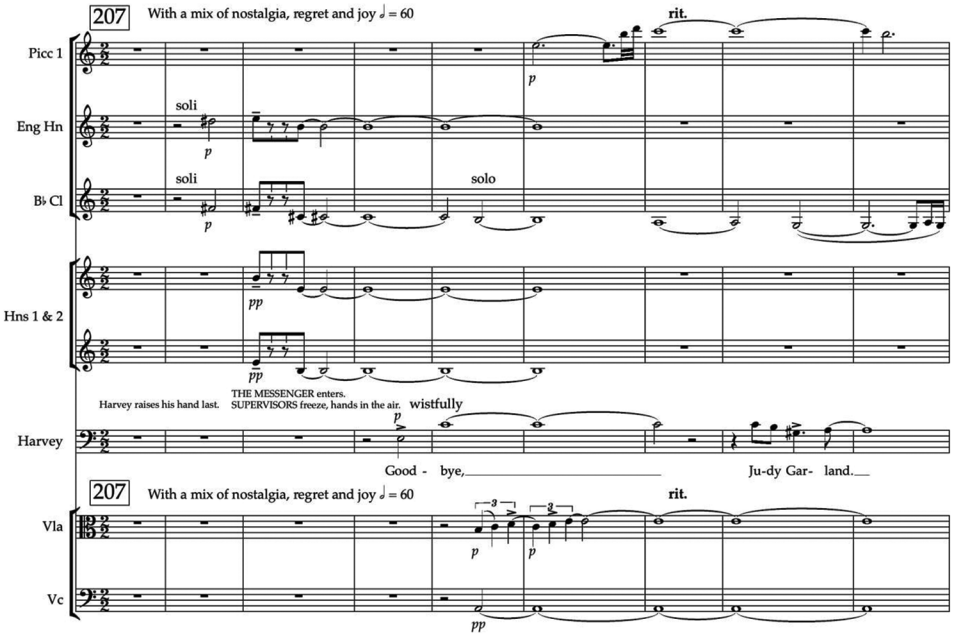

Figure 2. Harvey's Judy reference at city hall (Act Two, Part Two)[20]

They overlap as I do." Henrietta Wong provides another example when she exclaims, "I am Henrietta Wong of Asians for Affirmative Action. With Gays moving in and whites moving out, now is our chance to build bridges." Her dichotomous labels of "gays" and "whites" suggest that she views minority groups as having a shared opposition to the white, male patriarchy. Ironically, her categorization of people into ideologically opposed groups undermines the very idea of bridge-building. She later remarks, "I liked what he did, and not just for gays," suggesting that Harvey represented minority groups beyond the queer community. Harvey later posits, "Do you think they want their government run by Blacks, women, Asians, Latinos, and gays?," confirming his belief in shared lack of representation among minority groups.

Wallace emphasized the importance of Milk's dual identity: his queerness and his Jewishness. The opera begins with the amplified chorus whispering and making breathing sounds suggestive of secrecy and concealment. This section makes way for accentuated vocal "attacks" in the choral part in Hibrish, referencing Milk's Jewish identity. This dual identity is further expressed in Act One, where relentless excitement and anticipation are conveyed through ritualistic rhythmical pacing, loud dynamics, and faster tempo. Furthermore, the use of bell organ and synthetic voices amplifies the mysterious atmosphere of the scene. In bar 123, the music transforms into a waltz for two men dancing together. Harvey's vocal lines, filled with excitement and curiosity, are expressed concurrently with Mama's lamentation, referring to the collective tragedy of Jewish history. The orchestral texture alternates between ritualistic rhythmic patterns in the horns, harp, and pizzicato violas and cellos, gradually thickening with additional layers. By contrast, the orchestral accompaniment becomes delicate and subdued during Mama's lines about Jewish persecution. The erotic and mystical qualities of this passage highlight the internal conflict between Harvey's sexuality and his cultural heritage. Wallace also evokes Tibetan-style chant with guttural and nasal vocalizations, employing wordless rolling vowels in the men's chorus to emphasize "otherness." These gradually evolve into Jewish text before being interrupted by Mama.

During social interaction, individuals consciously or subconsciously project their notion of identity, and their behavior becomes a reflection of their identity.[28,29] Several displays of intimacy between same-sex couples are depicted in the opera, differentiated symbolically from the more sanitized version of heteronormative exhibitions common in opera. Early in Act One, Young Harvey is led outdoors and witnesses public sex. The stage directions state, "*Young Harvey sees Two Men in the bushes, one on his knees*." This depiction of intimacy is not a polite embrace but an unapologetic representation of queer behavior and identity. It also highlights the need for queer lovers to seek intimacy in hidden places within a society still intolerant of homosexual acts. A ceaseless quaver ostinato marked "relentlessly" communicates Harvey's thoughts and feelings. Piccolo, flute, and oboe share a heterophonic

semiquaver pattern, their flickering texture suggesting anticipation and danger, leading to Harvey's own sexual encounter in Central Park. Sustained string chords are complemented by rhythmic timpani octaves. While the harmonic foundation largely rests on A7, syncopated rhythms evoke jazz and contemporary idioms. The climax emerges in an urgent unison semiquaver figure, culminating in a rapidly repeated cluster that abruptly releases tension at bar 190. The sudden silence that follows is broken by Mama's solemn solo, in stark contrast to the preceding orchestral tutti.

Further examples of behavioral identity include Anne's observation during a street campaign: "people going to movies, shopping, cruising." By listing cruising for sex alongside ordinary activities, she normalizes it as part of queer identity. This is reinforced by the stage backdrop of a Castro Street Theatre sign saying, "Give me your muddled, your oppressed, your horny looking for action."

In Act One, Part Four, Scott's vocal line conveys his passion for Harvey (Figure 3) through wide upward intervallic leaps resolving by a descending minor seconds, a typical technique in romantic opera arias. His tessitura mainly lies in a high register, using long note values against faster ascending orchestral textures, another common feature of the romantic operatic tradition. Moreover, the work contains several references to Harvey's love for bel canto opera, another facet of his musical identity. One such example is Harvey´s comment in Act Two, presented in a flamboyant, bel canto style with several ascending intervallic leaps: "I'm number one queen with a big bone in my pocket."

Contrasting techniques are used to depict sexual trauma. During Scott's reflection on being raped in jail, the orchestration becomes sparse, with some measures left empty. A jarring anvil strike punctuates the word "RRRaped," accentuating the horror of the incident. The bitonal harmonies, combining D minor and C major in swelling strings and woodwinds, subtly underline the gravity of Scott's experience: "fourteen times in one (nnn) night."

An important moment occurs towards the end of Act One, when Scott convinces Harvey to change his appearance to be taken seriously as a politician. Scott sings, "It's your image, Harvey. You wanna win? Change your clothes. Cut your hair. Lose your ponytail." Harvey's resistance is foreshadowed by a monophonic oboe solo in melancholic A-Aeolian mode. Like in many other instrumental passages of the opera, the composer uses orchestral writing to reflect the emotions and thoughts of the main character. Harvey protests, "No! Scott – it's my strength. I grew it when I left the closet." For Harvey, his appearance is far more than a fashion choice; it represents a visual expression of identity. Several scenes earlier, the stage directions state, "Harvey appears, transformed – a hippie with ponytail and moustache, wearing a T-shirt and jeans. He cruises Buff Young Man." Across the opera, Harvey changes his visual identity twice: first to embrace his queerness and join a community of queer activists, and later to symbolically cast off elements of queerness considered unpalatable by mainstream society to join the white male patriarchy.

Unlike White, Milk is provided with musical material that allows the audience to understand and empathize with him. In Act One, when Milk considers the potential consequences of indiscretion, the music is reduced to a broken A minor chord at half tempo. Soon after, he sings, "…as a man who loves men," in an uplifting C major, ending with a broken, sunny C major chord. The moment of Harvey's coming out is supported with the full fortissimo orchestra, a tremolo tam-tam, and the sound of breaking glass amplified through the speakers. The dramatic effect is once again heightened by an abrupt orchestral silence.

5.2. Othering

Puar[30] argues that, in the United States, queerness is considered sexually exceptional through a rhetoric of sexual modernization, and that tolerance of a perverse "other" is granted by an imperialist, centralist position that enjoys sexual, racial, and gendered normality. The libretto includes a variety of ways in which othering is expressed. The character most frequently engaged in othering is Dan White, whose overt homophobia frames his role. Terms such as "Faggot!" and "Dyke" contextualize him as a villain. His concise vilification of queer individuals contrasts sharply with the relative celebratory nature of his targets. He is represented as a somewhat one-dimensional character, who seems incapable of uttering anything other than hate speech, with phrases such as "Shut up, faggots! Move it along."

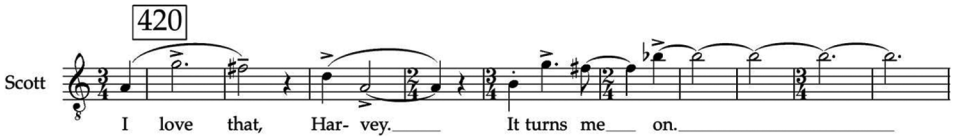

Figure 3. Scott's vocal line showing romantic upward leaps (Act One, Part Four)[20]

To emphasize queer theory, both the music and text were given a queer reading. For example, the presence of two opposing polarities is constantly manifested in the music, contrasting a light-hearted, humorous worldview (playfully syllabic and natural word setting) with violent, toxic masculinity (brutal, loud rhythmic gestures falling on the beat). White is introduced when the sensual, ritualistic, and delicate orchestral texture is abruptly interrupted by his aggressive outburst, "FAG-GOT-T!," accompanied by tremolos in horns 1 and 2, and sudden, loud glissandi in the strings (Figure 4). White's violent and callous character is also reflected in the orchestration: a stark contrast to the previous delicate passage that conveys an erotic, free-flowing atmosphere rich with sonic colors. Wallace reinforces this rupture in the closet scene with a loud buzzer, crash cymbals, tom-toms, and temple blocks, disrupting the playful atmosphere. White's material, by contrast, is built from rhythmically rigid, accentuated textures, combined with loud dynamics and shrill bursts in the woodwinds. The stark contrasts in musical material and orchestration mark White as the "other," set against the playfulness of the queer community.

In Act Two, White is marginally more subtle in the formal setting of City Hall, singing, "What we have here is not what it seems. We have people flaunting preferences that the vast majority of us do not approve of." He then others that Diane Feinstein with the insinuation: "you hosted a Lesbian wedding in your backyard. Isn't that so, Dianne?," suggesting such an act requires admission. Feinstein redirects the discussion to the establishment of a halfway house for children, to which White responds, "What do gays care about children?" This phrase further demonizes White, whose lack of interest in child welfare contrasts sharply with the efforts of Feinstein and Harvey. Despite his bullying, White is not always victorious in verbal sparring. When he retorts, "I don't put my mouth where it don't belong, and I don't swallow," Harvey replies, "Don't knock it till you've tried it." Humor is attributed to several queer characters throughout the libretto, but never to White, who is instead depicted as unfriendly.

Wallace consistently characterizes White with a fortississimo glissando, an effect symbolizing terror, first employed when White, in his earlier guise as a policeman, arrests Young Harvey (Figure 4). This technique is sometimes rendered in the strings, but towards the end of Act One, during clashes between police and protesters, Wallace intensifies it with trombones.

Early in Act Two, White's vocal part contains discernibly more accents than those of any other characters, highlighting his conservatism and obsession with "order," as well as his penchant for aggressive behavior. Accents on the first beat and during leaps to a higher register make him sound rigid and oppressive. In contrast, Harvey's material is delicate and lyrically melancholic. The orchestra subtly accompanies his lament with slow time values and sustained chords. Harvey's lament is placed between White's brusque monologue, delivered with dry, percussive textures ("We are the people who pay their taxes, go to church faithfully ev'ry Sunday"), and is further distinguished through abrupt changes of tempo, instrumentation, sonic color, accentuation, and dynamics. Later, Harvey's gentle line "For kids, Dan!" has no orchestral accompaniment, contrasted with White's explosive response, "What do gays care about children?," underpinned by a heavily accentuated orchestral background, followed by a rigid, rhythmical, percussive chase scene. Harvey's mother, Mama, appears only at the beginning and final moments of the opera. She

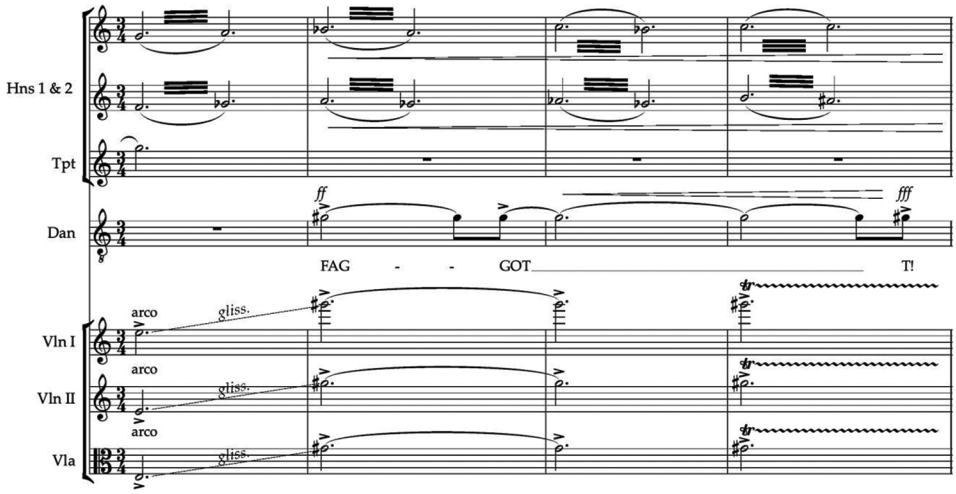

Figure 4. Entry of Dan White (Act One, Part One)[20]

advises the 17-year-old Young Harvey to "Watch out for Men who are Different." This warning, though motivated by concern rather than overt homophobia, illustrates how othering can impair the formation of a positive self-identity in an impressionable teenager. Young Harvey's curiosity later emerges when he encounters a group of tuxedoed men at the opera, asking, "Who are these Men Without Wives?" His curiosity is shaped by his mother's earlier caution that they were "different." Mama's warning returns in the penultimate scene, seemingly foreshadowing the "different" man Harvey should watch out for—White, who ultimately assassinates him. Mama's warning phrase is characterized by a tritone interval, a dissonance long associated with evil (Figure 5), which foreshadows the menace of White's character.

In general, the work is structured around polarities: the queer community is presented as the locus of normality, characterized by love, freedom, and joy, whereas heterosexual society is depicted as the "other," associated only with coldness, restriction, and hostility. White's villainous character epitomizes this "otherness." His statement, "We are the people who pay their taxes, go to church faithfully ev'ry Sunday," suggests that he represents not only himself but also the customs and values of the broader "other" (heterosexual) society, which disallows individuality or freedom. In contrast, Mama appears as a gentle, idealized dream figure. She does not seem entirely real, appearing only occasionally as a symbolic guardian angel for Harvey. Whereas White's appearance on stage is usually accompanied by loud, dissonant textures with upward glissandi, Mama's lines are free-flowing and gentle. Both roles are archetypal: white represents a toxic, brutal father figure, while Mama radiates innocence, purity, and passivity. Like in the myth of Oedipus, anger and tension dominate the relationship between the "father" (White) and the "son" (Harvey), culminating in deadly conflict. As De Kuyper[1] argues, homosexuality is also a fundamental part of heterosexuality: "the other is in himself and around him." Homophobia stems from the frustration of not being able to be "at the same time the other gender and being 'total'."

In Act One, we are introduced to a "hooker." The stage directions indicate her annoyance at losing a prospective client to a man. She observes, "This used to be a nice, normal neighborhood. A girl could earn a living." Although the irony seems to be lost on her, she explains that something has changed. She is irritated that "Now these guys give it away for free." These comments connect her concerns—having her patch of San Francisco street corners inundated by these "others," displacing a perceived normalcy with confusing new conventions—with the broader rise of queer visibility in the late 1970s. She concludes, "This place is Halloween all year 'round," further othering her new competition by likening them to nightmarish characters.

As the queer community in large cities such as San Francisco became increasingly visible, the media struggled to understand how to reference them. During Harvey's election campaign, a CBS reporter asked rhetorically, "A ho-mo-sexual running for office?" This extreme form of othering confirmed the perception that existing outside the heteronormative paradigm precluded an individual from pursuing a career in politics. In an attempt at humor, an NBC reporter extended the othering process with deprecation, stating, "Harvey Milk should be running for Dairy Queen." Appealing to homophobic viewers, the reporter used a pun to belittle the queer candidate.

The most extreme form of othering is given through stage direction rather than sung text. Act Two opens with a violent, homophobic attack. A buff young man and a gay doctor are strolling in the moonlight of a warm fall night. The stage directions state:

> "Suddenly, Five Young Bashers with baseball bats spring from a trap door. They surround Buff Young Man and Gay Doctor and start pushing them around. The couple pushes back. Bashers close tighter around them. Buff Young Man and Gay Doctor try to flee. Gay Doctor breaks out of the circle. He is knocked down by two Bashers, pinned down, and made to watch as Bashers taunt Buff Young Man."

The violence escalates:

> "A Basher cracks Buff Young Man with a bat. Another kicks him in the gut, knocking him down. One Basher breaks from the group and leaps on top of him, a knife in each hand. Buff Young Man spits in his face. Alternating hands,

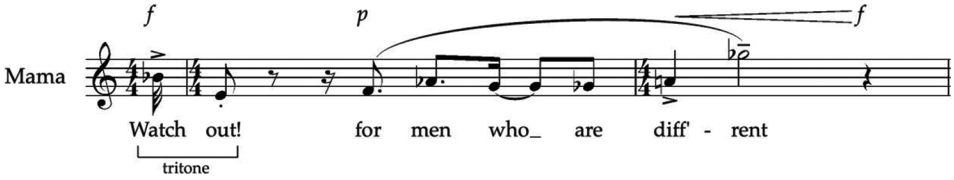

Figure 5. Mama's foreshadowing of Dan White through the association with the tritone (Act I, Prologue)[20]

> the Basher stabs him repeatedly in the chest. Anne runs on blowing a police whistle. Gays and Lesbians follow, running, blowing police whistles. Basher drops the baseball bat. Bashers run. No Cops. No help. Gay Doctor tries to revive Buff Young Man. It's too late. Dan White rises through the same trap door as the sun rises on an overcast day. Wearing a jacket and tie, he is eerily lit over the body in the grey light of morning. Unconsciously, he picks up the baseball bat."

Although framing such an unprovoked attack in terms of othering may risk minimizing its severity, the scene clearly depicts violent homophobia. The queer community is targeted explicitly for their perceived difference, and the presence of Dan White in this sequence prompts the audience to consider Harvey's assassination as premeditated. Wallace underscores this with the chorus singing the word 'Faggots' in a persistent paired-quaver rhythm, alternating emphasis of each syllable through accents. Such word setting provides a primal, violent context to the unfolding, deadly attack on stage.

Dan White's entry further establishes his character through musical contrast. In contrast to the quiet pizzicato ostinato underpinning Young Harvey's curiosity about the strange men in the park, White is given dissonant minor seconds in the horns and screaming upper strings following a glissando. The tessitura of this outburst is uniformly high: white, a tenor, sings at the upper end of his range, while the instruments are all written uncomfortably high to imitate screaming. There is pure anger in these four bars, providing stark contrast to the calmer material at the opera's opening.

5.3. Activism

The third overarching theme forms an integral part of the narrative. Many queer activists view Stonewall as the beginning of their movement of social reform and human rights, while others consider the events of the early morning of June 28, 1969, as an act of violent opposition to sexual hegemony and resistance to mainstream American values.[31] Scott introduces activism to Harvey in Act One, singing, "Christopher Street. It's brick-throwing time, Harvey Milk, Midnight at The Stonewall Bar. This time, let's go to jail for us. Is it a date?" Harvey is reluctant, noting that he could lose his job on Wall Street. However, in an indication that he is being persuaded to join the cause, he reflects, "I stand up for myself as a Jew. Why not as a man who loves men?" Soon after, the stage directions indicate the symbolic change in Harvey's position:

> "Harvey lifts his hands over his head and snaps his handcuffs apart. Sounds of shattering glass. Men at the Opera shed tuxedos. Stepping into high heels, they become impoverished Street Drag Queens, applying lipstick and rouge and filling their bras (or not). Drag Queens start a riot that unfolds around Harvey."

What follows is the scene entitled "Christopher Street, The Stonewall Uprising," in which dialogue from various characters encapsulates the unfolding action during the demonstrations. Wallace utilizes rhythmically accentuated ostinato with the full orchestra, highlighting the action with specific percussion instruments such as bullhorn, woodblocks, police whistle, and bass drum. Accents once again fall squarely on the beat, simulating the sound of marching. Anne's shout of "GAY POWER!" (Figure 6), noted only with approximate pitch, evokes the effect of *Sprechstimme* and functions as a demand for society to listen.

Scott then comments, "You think homosexuals are revolting? Bet your sweet ass we are!" A chorus of rioters then adds, "Christopher Street belongs to the queers!" This is followed by a group of drag queens, supported by a chorus of rioters, singing:

> "We are the Stonewall Girls!
> We wear our hair in curls! We have no underwear!
> We show our pubic hair!
> We wear our dungarees above our nelly knees!"

The scene finishes with one last chant from the chorus of rioters as they leave the stage, 'Out of the closets and into the streets! Out of the closets and into the streets!' (Figure 7), sung *a capella* by the tenors and basses of the chorus. For the first four bars, the chorus sings in a rhythmic unison on D natural. Pairing this rigidly paced choral part with bass drums gives a vivid impression of a demonstrating crowd. In Act One, Part Two, the tempo marking, "In a groove" and the ostinato of the bell organ signal a change in attitudes of the characters and the introduction of the first activism section. The music is rhythmically constant, following the beat and imitating the cadence of marching protesters.

The next moment of queer activism occurs when Harvey is sworn in as a Supervisor, along with his nemesis, Dan White. He seizes the opportunity to make a clear statement of representing the queer community, saying, "Thank you, Mayor Moscone, and thank you, San Francisco! Thank you to the Castro! My lover, Scott!" His carefully chosen words leave no ambiguity about the community he intends to support. His statement is followed by the Gay Pride Parade. The stage directions state:

> "In parade formation, banner-carrying contingents follow: Gray Gays, among them a grandmother

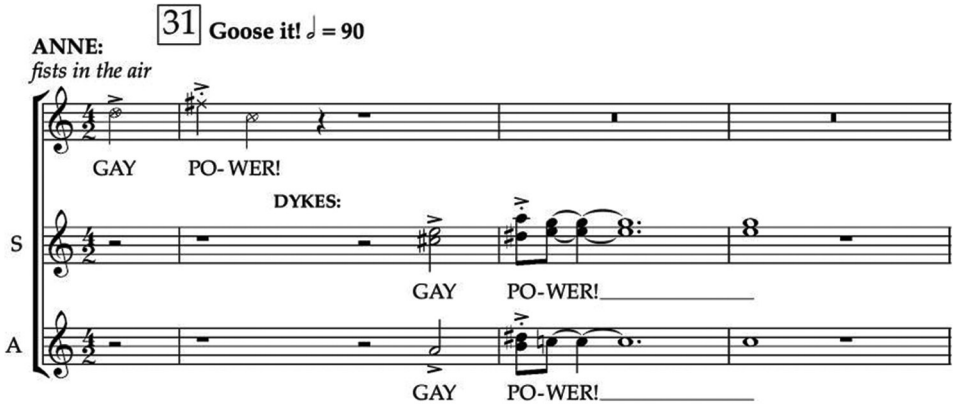

Figure 6. Partially specified pitch in Anne's protest with the chorus of Dykes' response (Act One, Part Three)[20]

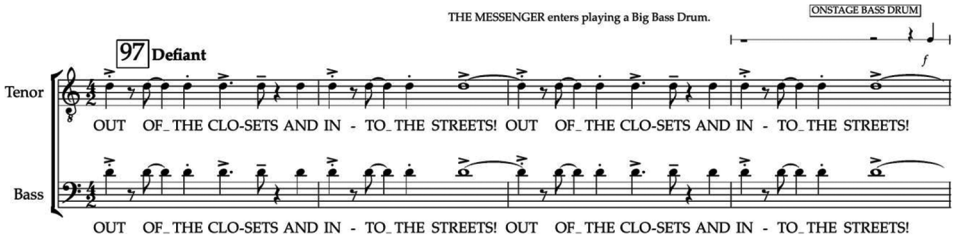

Figure 7. Defiant protesters singing in *a capella* unison (Act One, Part Three)[20]

> with a sign "I Love My Gay Grandson"; Eureka Valley Gay Bowlers; Gay Rodeo; Lutherans Concerned for Gay People; a lesbian contingent which re-enters twice as Dykes on Bikes and Dykes on Trikes; Anita Sunshine, a drag queen dressed as Anita Bryant with a Miss America banner and orange tree branches for arms; Gays in the Millinery, veterans in uniforms wearing outrageous hats."

White's line, "Get the Dyke!" is followed by the shrill blast of a police whistle and an ardent crescendo in the strings, horns, and woodwinds. The incessant, rhythmical pulsation on the timpani accompanies the police rushing after Anne. Their struggle is underscored by a sudden silence of the orchestra, leaving only the piercing sound of the whistle. Wallace makes further use of silence in the subsequent scene with the rioters. In Act Two, Part One, a lesbian kazoo marching band joins the procession. The originality of this passage lies in its instrumentation: the kazoo, while not entirely unconventional, is rarely used in orchestral settings. Here, it underlines the liberal, carnivalistic, and nonconforming nature of the protesters.

In the final scene before the epilogue, extracts from Harvey's will are recited. The first extract reads, "I fully realize that a person who stands for what I stand for, an activist, gay activist, becomes the target for a person who is insecure, terrified, afraid, or very disturbed themselves." Immediately after, Harvey is shot 3 times by White. The reading of the will continues, "I wish I had time to explain everything I did. Almost everything was done with the eyes of the gay movement. I would hope five, ten, a hundred thousand would rise. I urge them to do that. Urge them. Come out." Harvey's final moments thus reaffirm both his desire to be remembered as part of the activist struggle and his hope that queer activists would rise up to continue the work he had begun.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Grounded on queer theory, this research has applied a "queer reading" to Wallace's *Harvey Milk Reimagined* by analyzing the musical score and the libretto. The analysis reveals how queerness is manifested through musical and textual strategies. Rather than employing melismatic, Late Romantic operatic gestures, the vocal writing is set in a naturalistic style, resembling spoken language. Emotional intent is signposted not only through conventional Italian musical terminology but also through direct English instructions such as "relentless," "magisterial," "Stunned!," "in a groove," and "mock patriotic." These markings ensure that the lyrical message remains at the forefront.

The opera provides an insight into the changing landscape of San Francisco's queer community. While the

events leading to Harvey Milk's murder unfolded in the 1970s, a period of struggle, the opera itself was composed decades later (1995/2019), when the issues relating to queerness had changed dramatically on the West Coast of the United States. In Act One, the queer community is depicted as emerging from the shadows, with Milk as a symbol of legitimacy and unity. Korie's libretto and Wallace's score portray a community strengthened by a focused, common purpose.

Equally driven by his convictions is Dan White's character, portrayed with all the menace of the archetypal villain. From his first utterance to the devastating final act, White is given no redeeming features. There is little backstory, aside from references to low wages and an incessantly crying baby. Musically, his lines lack melodic contour, are rhythmically simple, and largely syllabic—starkly opposed to the rich material given to the queer characters. White is the "other": a figure isolated by his words, his music, and his opposition to the community around him. He is also emblematic of the broader hostility of the heterosexual majority, glimpsed only in shadows. Read symbolically, White recalls the oedipal "father" figure whose deadly conflict with the (homosexual) "son" can be theorized through the framework of the plicate Oedipus complex.[32] According to Lewes,[32] the consequences of this conflict emerge in sexual behavior, interpersonal relations, superego functioning, and transference.

This paradigm, in which the straight white man is painted as the frustrated "other," rejected by the community in which he lives, and the fearless queer community—banded together with Milk as the figurehead—is at odds with reality. It is possible that such a vision of the plight of the queer community is more reflective of contemporary lived experience. Korie and Wallace provide a reversal of the depiction of queer characters in Hollywood under the Hays Code, which operated from 1930 to 1968.[33] Under Hays, queers were depicted as sadists, psychopaths, and nefarious, antisocial villains. In *Harvey Milk Reimagined*, the roles are reversed, and with little subtlety. The opera intervenes in hegemonic perceptions of reality by displacing the marginalized group, demonizing the straight community, and exalting the queer community and its allies.

We sought to understand how binary representations of straight versus queer political activism align with notions of non-binary categorization perpetuated by queer theorists. Without making excuses for or lessening the horror of a homophobic-driven assassination, by disallowing a humanistic portrayal of White and his community, the possibility of allowing constructive dialogue between opposing agendas is diminished.[30] To understand White's social context is not to condone his actions, but to better understand how the queer community can further its notions of representation, equality, and access. As an effective agent for social change, the opera provides a window into the queer experience, and such agency carries the responsibility to be mindful of existing divisions.

Opera narratives told from a queer perspective are a relatively recent phenomenon.[34] Although coded representation of queerness in opera has existed almost as long as opera itself, it was not until well after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and Stonewall (1969) that tentative steps appeared, with works such as Tippett's *The Knott Garden* (1970), Harrison's *Young Ceasar* (1971), and Bernstein's *A Quiet Place* (1983). Since 2010, operas with distinctly queer narratives have proliferated and continued to challenge historical understandings shaped through the heteronormative lens.

Wallace creates a powerful telling of Milk's story. His murder is as violent as it is visceral, made more poignant by the musical performance of the reading of his will as he lies dying on the stage. He was our captain, whose contribution to the struggle of an oppressed community paved the way for many future queer politicians to champion queer rights. He achieved success in the world of politics that few queers in 1970s America dared to hope for. He is immortalized in opera, his favorite art form, without blemish: the idealized queer hero of the people. This tribute to Milk, along with the 2008 film from Gus Van Sant, preserves his legacy but, more importantly, makes an unambiguous statement about society through the actions of Dan White. Yet, the opera's stark juxtaposition between "righteous queers" and the "villainous straight white man" does not so much elevate Milk's heroism as it condemns the cisheteropatriarchal order. In doing so, it risks reproducing the same dynamics of demonization that queer theory originally sought to dismantle.

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Writing–original draft: All authors
Writing–review & editing: All authors

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The libretto and music score are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

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