

Queering the Kiss: Rodney Sharman's *The Garden*
Spencer Kryzanowski
Dr. Milton Schlosser
University of Alberta Augustana Campus

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Stylistic novelties in music are arguably analogous to the ongoing creation of new automobile models: as time passes, we continually crave aesthetically-pleasing, technology-saturated designs that reflect the demands of contemporary cultures and society. In this sense, postmodernism, as Frederic Jameson writes, is "a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features"¹. This short statement effectively illustrates the process of postmodernism in numerous fields, and in regards to contemporary musical discourse, Jameson's description is indicative of American composer and pianist Frederic Rzewski and Canadian composer Rodney Sharman. The latter composer extends previous postmodern music innovations and includes queer subject matter that separates him from normative postmodern practices. This reflective essay examines Rodney Sharman's solo piano work *The Garden* and the ways in which it juxtaposes the complexities and politics surrounding homosexual acts of desire with nostalgic reminders and the entrancing qualities of a single kiss. Additionally, I explore *The Garden*'s musical aspects, connecting Sharman's postmodern compositional techniques to Paul Eliot Weiss's provocative text before outlining my subjective physical and emotional responses to *The Garden*.

Commissioned by American pianist Anthony de Mare with support from the Canada Council Commissioning Program, *The Garden* is written for a speaking pianist with additional challenging passages that include singing and percussion. As I will discuss, Sharman's piano score features bi-tonal dissonance, tonal lyricism, and numerous genres, creating a postmodern pastiche that serves to heighten Weiss's text. Additionally, Sharman inserts descriptive instructions in the score of *The Garden* that demand nearly impossible techniques from the solo performer. Prior to entering a Rock-n-Roll-inspired section of the piece, Sharman instructs that "The pianist [should] stand to perform the glissando, turning to face away from the piano. The following section is performed standing, hands behind the pianist's back"². In the early stages of my preparation of *The Garden*, I attempted and discussed this instruction with Dr. Milton Schlosser, my piano instructor. Although Sharman's instruction is nearly impossible to coordinate as a solo performer, incorporating an additional performer or formatting the role of a page turner as piano performer during this section are alternative solutions to Sharman's challenging instruction. Various sections of *The Garden* include a singing component that places further demands on the solo performer. The pianist must coordinate numerous rhythmic features, high-pitched vocal regions, and Sharman's bi-tonal harmonies between the piano and vocal lines, creating tuning challenges that require extensive rehearsal and awareness. *The Garden*'s subject matter places the greatest demand on the solo performer. She or he must comfortably sing and speak lines such as "I've been hard since noon"³ and "He could really suck cock, he was hard as a rock, but he never ever kissed me and he didn't like to talk,"⁴ courageously reflecting both sexual memories and present moments in full characterization.

The Garden centres on Tony, a sexually frustrated, middle-aged man who can be interpreted as a business person longing to escape his corporate surroundings. Where does Tony aim his escape? A popular gay club called The Garden. His excitement is illustrated through the piece's opening text: "I've heard so much about it. I've been excited all day!"⁵. Yet, the gay club is not the only reference to a "garden" in this work; prior to Tony's arrival at the club, he experiences a nostalgic flashback to his Italian grandmother and her garden, a place of peace and innocence. Here, Tony reflects on his grandmother's lessons of love and investment: "Learn from me when you are young, you see with your eyes. But to see with your heart makes you wise"⁶.

Continuing, Tony's grandmother explains the unpredictability of love and its surprising affects, stating in Italian, "l'amore é cieco"⁷ or "love is blind." Before entering the club, Tony mentions that he is looking for fun and nothing serious. Inside, Weiss's text reflects moments of nostalgia and observation. Initially, Tony notes the diversity of men at the club, their physical appearances, and actions, stating, "So many guys. Ev'ry size, ev'ry race, ev'ry age, talking, boozing, laughing, cruising"⁸. Following this, Tony seamlessly reminisces on a past lover and specific sexual and non-sexual memories. Flipping back to the gay club scene, Tony exits the bar at the back into bushes that are a popular cruising spot. Here, we reach the climax of the work (pun intended): Tony experiences a single, innocent kiss from another man. This kiss, as Tony notes, is an act of considerable release: "I feel like I'm soaring from a kiss, just a kiss. Nothing safer than this"⁹. Before the work closes, Tony reminisces one final time on his grandmother. Her closing statement that "What we give in a lifetime, or give in a night, we give with the heart"¹⁰ sums the entire work in three short phrases, describing the full-bodied experience of both long-term and brief passion-filled moments.

The influence of Frederic Rzewski, former instructor and friend of Rodney Sharman, and *De Profundis*, Rzewski's multi-layered composition for solo performer is deeply imbedded in Sharman's *The Garden*. In *De Profundis*, "Not only does the pianist need to master Rzewski's challenging piano writing... but he must also perform as reader, percussionist (mostly on the instrument), whistler, and singer"¹¹. The text of *De Profundis* centres on Oscar Wilde's work under the same title that he wrote during his imprisonment for homosexual activities. Wilde's text "is a searing experience, a deep exploration of the soul's dark night, and a paean to the heroism of the artistic spirit in the face of seemingly insuperable oppression"¹². Noting a local Augustana Campus connection, Dr. Milton Schlosser has recorded *De Profundis* and commissioned Rzewski to write a work called *Nanosonatas* that also requires a speaking pianist (*Nanosonatas and Songs; De Profundis*).¹³ Although texts in both Rzewski's *De Profundis* and Sharman's *The Garden* raise questions regarding homosexuality and politics, *The Garden* presents Weiss's challenging text in heavy-hitting, fast paced segments, capturing the innocence of a kiss between two men and addressing taboos surrounding this act in an open, unapologetic format. The purity of this moment juxtaposes heteronormative impressions of kissing between men and women in popular media and culture where "men's socially constructed heteromale identities are framed upon exclusively opposite-sex sexual behaviors"¹⁴. Additionally, Tony's peaceful kiss in *The Garden* juxtaposes the politics surrounding homosexual kissing on American television programs. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," a controversial sixth-season episode of American television comedy *Roseanne*, contains a woman-to-woman kiss between characters Roseanne and Sharon. The episode was shelved until Roseanne herself demanded that ABC air it, and according to media critic Alfred L. Martin, Jr., "Although ABC relented, a warning about the episode's "mature" content preceded its start and skittish advertisers, such as Kraft Foods, pulled all of its consumer products advertising from the episode"¹⁵. In contrast to ABC and Kraft Food's actions, this reflective essay and Sharman's *The Garden* do not include any formal content disclaimers; yes, audience members will be surprised by Weiss's text in Sharman's work and perhaps avoid presentations of *The Garden*. However, Sharman's explicit, multi-faceted compositional techniques are what designate *The Garden* as an idiosyncratic postmodern work.

By referencing numerous musical genres and styles in *The Garden*, Sharman successfully heightens Weiss's descriptive text, appropriately adjusting to its various moods, time periods, and

locations, fitting musicologist Jonathan D. Kramer's statement in "The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism" that "postmodern music is not a neat category with rigid boundaries."¹⁶ Following *The Garden's* opening text, "This is it. The Garden. A Club for Men,"¹⁷ Sharman writes complex, loud, and highly dissonant piano figurations. On first hearing, audiences might assume that *The Garden* centres on these difficult figurations; however, when examined in context to the work's opening text, it is clear that Sharman's complex writing comfortably coexists next to Tony's sexual frustration and boredom. This coexistence continues in the next section as Tony nostalgically reminisces on his Italian grandmother. Here, Sharman writes floating, consonant piano figurations that reflect the peaceful qualities of both Tony's grandmother and her garden. Additionally, when Tony reflects on his grandmother's singing, Sharman includes simple, transparent piano accompaniment that creates the impression of a lullaby. Interestingly, towards the end of *The Garden*, this lullaby-like figuration reappears in a new context: it heightens the simplicity and peace of the kiss between Tony and a stranger in the bushes behind The Garden, the gay club, before reflecting one final time on Tony's grandmother and her words of wisdom regarding the heart's investment during both long-term commitments and brief, passion-filled moments. The middle portion of *The Garden* is the most stylistically diverse area of the work. Here, Sharman synchronizes rhythmic Rock-n-Roll piano figurations with Tony's observations of the gay club and 50's Pop Ballad figurations with Tony's reflection on a past lover, perhaps hinting at Tony's age and demanding immediate shifts in both characterization and playing style from the performer. Many of Sharman's postmodern blending techniques in *The Garden* make the work more accessible to audiences. In relation to the popular music references in *The Garden*, Sharman appropriately keeps his inclusion of bi-tonal dissonance relatively short, allowing audience members to fully absorb recognizable content and genres in the middle portion of the work. In conclusion, Sharman's multi-faceted musical references ask the audience to simply "accept each passage of music for itself"¹⁸.

Performing *The Garden* can easily take the pianist out of their comfort zone. However, as an open member of the LGBTQ+ community, I have found that rehearsing and performing this work has allowed me to explore my personal stories of intimacy in relation to Weiss's text and Sharman's multi-layered writing. This is my first time preparing a work for a speaking pianist, and as a performer that has extensively studied western classical conventions, preparing *The Garden* has allowed me to combine both classical and popular music styles that I enjoy. I, admittedly and without shame, am not afraid to use provocative language when I have the chance. Weiss's sexually explicit text, containing words such as "cock" and phrases that reference erections and other sexual responses, has been fulfilling and exciting for me. In addition to my piano performance studies, I have completed multiple drama courses as an undergraduate student. These courses have helped shape me as an open and occasionally provocative person, aiding my characterizations, actions, and vocal projection in *The Garden*. In playing this piece, I often struggle to keep Weiss's intensely expressive text "under wraps." When rehearsing areas of *The Garden* centered on Tony's grandmother and Sharman's serene piano writing, I frequently feel chills throughout my body. These sections, with emotive text and music combined, nearly bring me to tears and allow me to nostalgically reminisce on both living and passed loved ones. Throughout *The Garden*, I am asked to sing in numerous styles against consonant and dissonant piano passages. As a performer, I often find it difficult to contain myself during the pop ballad section of *The Garden*; in rehearsal, I frequently pause and remind

myself to "tone it down" and not get carried away. I am thankful for my extensive vocal and choral training when rehearsing this work as it requires formidable singing skills.

When Dr. Schlosser introduced Rodney Sharman and *The Garden* to me in April 2014, I was skeptical of its credibility and breadth. Today, after months of in-depth analysis and preparation, I feel incredibly privileged to perform this Canadian rarity at a liberal arts institution nestled in rural Alberta. How does one program a work like Sharman's *The Garden* in a recital setting next to works from the classical canon? Given *The Garden*'s queer subject matter and postmodern compositional techniques, programming the work next to compositions by Bach, Beethoven, and other classical composers deemed "heteromasculine" is challenging; however, placing *The Garden* next to works by these composers creates an interesting juxtaposition that can be highlighted in recital situations. In general, *The Garden* is an ideal match with works by Schubert, Poulenc, Britten, and other queer artists. Performing works by these and other queer composers in concert deconstructs normative performance conventions, encouraging new conversations that question the role of sexual orientation during the compositional process. Does openly identifying as a queer composer or part of the LGBTQ+ community suddenly create compositional freedom, or are these labels unnecessary and problematic? Analyzing this question is beyond the scope of this presentation; however, my current view is that each artist will have subjective responses to this question, some privileging techniques that highlight their queer statuses and some focusing on strategies that emphasize other societal or identity aspects. By analyzing Paul Eliot Weiss's provocative text in relation to Rodney Sharman's postmodern work *The Garden*, I have explored juxtapositions between complex homosexual acts of desire, the simplicity and peace surrounding nostalgic remembrances, the kiss as an innocent, euphoric moment, and my responses to the work as a performer.

I will now perform *The Garden*. I invite you to relax and enter into the many images and feelings that *The Garden* attempts to construct. Be it through laughter or tears, I encourage these and other responses as you enter with me into *The Garden*.

Notes

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5. Sharman, Rodney. 2001. p. 1 (*as n.2 above*)
6. Sharman, Rodney. 2001. p. 3 (*as n.2 above*)
7. Sharman, Rodney. 2001. p. 4 (*as n.2 above*)
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18. Kramer, Jonathan D. 1999. p. 9 (*as n.16 above*)

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