

# THE CLEVER ARTIFICE OF HARRIET AND MARGARET

Music and Libretto Adaptation by Leanna Kirchoff

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*Winner of the 2014-16 National Opera Association Dominick Argento Chamber Opera Composition Competition*

**SUMMARY:** Based on Alice Gerstenberg's 1913 play, *Overtones*, the opera depicts the cat-and-mouse conversation between Harriet and Margaret, as they each try to accomplish their agenda without the other one knowing it. As a representation of Freudian ego/id ideas, Harriet and Margaret are shadowed on stage by their inner selves, Hetty and Maggie, who interject sideline commentary.

**CAST:** HARRIET, mezzo soprano, 33-40 years old, dignified, formal, manner  
HETTY, soprano, Harriet's inner self, proud, haughty, "flapper-girl" mentality  
MARGARET, soprano (highest voice), 30-37 years old, overbearing, garish  
MAGGIE, mezzo soprano (lowest voice), Margaret's inner self, melodramatic

**INSTRUMENTATION:** saxophone (sop/alto/ten/bari), string quartet, piano, percussion (also vocal/pn version available)

**DURATION:** 50 minutes

**PERFORMANCE HISTORY:** University of Missouri – St. Louis Opera Theater (2020), Opera del West (2019), Missouri State University (2017), Gateway Opera (2016), National Opera Association (2016), Indiana Wesleyan University (2016), Really Spicy Opera (2015), University of Colorado (Premiere, 2013). Excerpts performed at National Opera Association Convention (2015), Music by Women Festival (2017). Developmental readings/workshops at John Duffy Institute for New Opera (2012, 2013).

**SCENE BREAKDOWN:** Scene 1 - Harriet Goodrich, an upper class woman, is expecting a visit from an acquaintance, Margaret Caldwell. As Harriet fixes last minute details, she stops in front of a large mirror hanging in the room. Instead of seeing her reflection, Harriet sees her inner self, Hetty, played by a second actress. Hetty emerges from the mirror and the two begin to have a heated conversation. Hetty says that she will never forgive Harriet for not marrying painter, John Caldwell, who is now Margaret's husband. Harriet claims that John was "too poor a gamble" and instead married wealthy, Charles Goodrich. Determined to win John back, Hetty schemes with Harriet about what to say when Margaret arrives.

Scene 2 - Margaret arrives, shadowed by her inner self, Maggie. Over tea and pastries, Harriet and Margaret exchange pleasantries while Hetty and Maggie interject sideline commentary. Maggie laments that life has been difficult for Margaret and John. They have recently returned to New York from Paris with little money, or prospects for work. Margaret hopes Harriet will agree to have her portrait painted by John, and subsequently get John into Harriet's affluent social circles. Maggie's jealousy lashes out as Margaret, accidentally spilling tea all over Harriet's dress. In the ensuing chaos, Hetty claims that Maggie spilled the tea on purpose while Harriet tries to cover up being aghast. Margaret fusses over cleaning up the tea. After the foursome settles down from the tea incident, Margaret carefully tries to arrange a portrait deal without Harriet suspecting that such a deal is exactly why Margaret came. Simultaneously, Hetty coaches Harriet to boast about her wealth and connections in hopes of persuading Margaret to set up a painting session with John. Absentmindedly, Harriet lets it slip that John painted her once many years previously. Her surprise disclosure upsets Margaret and Maggie, and triggers memories for Harriet and Margaret of the first time they each posed for John. As all four characters are caught up in reverie, they reveal true feelings about their marriages, and how life has arranged itself. Coming out of their reminiscing, Hetty pointedly asks Margaret if she is going to have her over for a portrait sitting. Maggie pleads with Margaret that they need the money. Pretending to be delighted with the plan, Margaret and Maggie leave.

Coda - Alone again, Harriet and Hetty wonder what to wear to the portrait session. Hetty asks, "What about Charles?" After briefly deliberating, Harriet ironically answers that she will tell Charles the truth: She is going to have her portrait painted by John Caldwell.

**MORE INFORMATION:** [www.cleverartifice.com](http://www.cleverartifice.com)

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