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Songs without words : the forgotten piano works on Nadine Dana Suesse

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SONGS WITHOUT WORDS:
THE FORGOTTEN PIANO WORKS OF NADINE DANA SUESSE

A Written Document

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

in

The School of Music

by
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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to bring attention to Nadine Dana Suesse, a gifted composer who gained particular acclaim during the 1930's and 40's. Suesse was among the composers of Tin Pan Alley who captured the tone and atmosphere of this important period in American music through their popular songs and instrumental works. In this predominantly male setting, a handful of female composers also made significant contributions. These women are often left in the shadows and are not known as well, even though many of their works are noteworthy and their dedication to the arts inspirational. Among them was Nadine Dana Suesse, who composed popular songs, orchestral works, and short pieces for solo piano. Although she made quite a name for herself during this period, today her compositions are often overlooked.

Suesse was described as being an unusual composer for her time. “[S]he was a woman composer in a dominantly male field,” and her interest in jazz set her apart.¹ She gained notoriety with her contributions to the popular genre and at a young age performed her more serious compositions on stage with Paul Whiteman. It did not take long before she was known as the “Girl Gershwin” for her exceptional pianistic abilities and success in composing.² Her contributions to this era are worthy of recognition and renewed attention. This paper will discuss her life and several of her early compositions for solo piano.

1. Dana Suesse, interview by Harold Bower, New York, 1973.

2. Clifford Orr, Harold Ross, and Charles Cooke, The Talk of the Town, “*The Girl Gershwin*”, *The New Yorker*, December 16, 1933, 12, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1933/12/16/1933_12_16_012_TNY_CARDS_000229055 (accessed August 3, 2013).

Introduction

Arguably some of the most important contributions to twentieth-century American music were made by a group of musicians that included George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and Richard Rodgers. They helped pioneer an American compositional style that combined the traditions of European classical music with the influences of jazz and ragtime.³ The frequently overlooked members of this collection of songwriters are the women of Tin Pan Alley.⁴ One who made particularly significant contributions was Nadine Dana Suesse.

Nadine Dana Suesse composed popular songs, orchestral works, and short pieces for the piano, many of which have not been published, and are rarely performed today. While she gained a name for herself during the glory days of the Tin Pan Alley era, her works have gone mostly unstudied and are underappreciated in the history of American popular music. The purpose of this study is to bring overdue attention to her career and to the contributions she made during the 1930's and 40's.

Past research on the life and compositions of Dana Suesse is sketchy and often inaccurate. Given the ambiguity of the current published information regarding her life, personal interviews and archival data collections were used to present a more cohesive picture of her life and contributions to music. All scores and personal documents were obtained through the sponsorship of Suesse's good friend and literary executor of her estate, Peter Mintun.

Following this introduction, Chapter One will focus on background details of Suesse's early life and career. Chapter Two examines selected solo piano pieces from the 1930's and 40's. Finally, Chapter Three offers a brief discussion of Suesse's later career. From her first

3. Edward Pessen, "The Great Songwriters of Tin Pan Alley's Golden Age: A Social, Occupational, and Aesthetic Inquiry" in *American Music* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 1985), 180-197.

4. Terry Benes, *Yours for a Song: The Women of Tin Pan Alley*, Thirteen Public Broadcasting Services: New York, 1999. A few of the women featured in this video in addition to Dana Suesse included Dorothy Fields, Kay Swift, and Ann Ronell. They were a few of the most famous female songwriters of their time.

pieces produced at the age 17, Suesse proved to be a prodigy with enormous talent and remarkable intuition as a composer. Both George Gershwin and her teacher Nadia Boulanger recognized Suesse's natural gifts and flair for composing beautiful melodies. She made a name for herself by composing popular songs that were played on the radio and made the tops of many charts, and also short piano compositions influenced by baroque, romantic, impressionist, and jazz traditions.

This paper offers a broad analysis and discussion of several short piano pieces by Suesse in the hope that it will provide a springboard for future study and performance of her music. The earliest pieces under discussion are "Berceuse" – which was inspired by Satie –and "Scherzette (Whirligig)." Also included in the discussion are three later works that were published by the Boston Music group: "Midnight in Gramercy Square," "Swamp Bird" and "At the Fountain." Her jazz-inspired nocturnes, "Jazz Nocturne" and "American Nocturne," also display the influence of Gershwin. The most extended work under discussion is "Afternoon of a Black Faun," which displays impressionistic tendencies and influences of Debussy and Ravel. Finally, the study will include a discussion of her *Cocktail Suite*, her only multi-movement work for piano and one that highlights her keen rhythmic sense and melodic gifts.

Chapter One: Historical Background

Early Life

Nadine Dana Suesse was born December 3rd, 1909, in Kansas City, Missouri. She was a musical prodigy and began learning piano at an early age. “I gave my first recital at the age of eight after having studied six months with the traditional Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Mozart, and so forth.”⁵ In later years she commented that her early musical education was inadequate, noting her early teachers were “provincial, uninspired, and boring.”⁶ By the age of eight she knew she wanted to compose, and in 1926 at the age of 17, she moved to New York to explore new musical opportunities. When she arrived in New York she was already an active composer and traveled with a trunk full of compositions – Etudes, Preludes, and Nocturnes – themes which she later incorporated into her popular songs.

Her initial goal was to study with Rubin Goldmark (1872-1936), a renowned pedagogue who at the time was one of the more prestigious teachers of composition in New York. In addition, since she was an aspiring performer, she took lessons with Alexander Siloti (1863-1945), one of the last surviving pupils of Liszt. She gave up her piano studies early on, however, after coming to grips with the reality of how much work is required to become a concert performer. “I had some notion I might concertize pianistically [sic] but I soon found out that in order to do this I would have to keep on practicing six hours a day which left me very little time, if any, for composing so I abandoned any idea of becoming a concert pianist.”⁷ From that point on she focused her energy on composition rather than the pursuit of a concert career.

5. Bower, interview 1973.

6. Peter Mintun, literary executor of estate, unpublished diary notes from 1947-1950, 5. These notes cover her years with Boulanger in France.

7. Bower, interview, 1973.

In her compositions Suesse would often reuse melodies from previous efforts. Most of her works likely began as piano arrangements, since she was an accomplished pianist, and were later adapted into orchestral arrangements and popular songs.⁸ An example is “Syncopated Love Song,” which she published with lyrics as “Have You Forgotten.” She composed “Jazz Nocturne” for solo piano which was also orchestrated by others including Jack Mason. The orchestral works were played on the radio, increasing her popularity and name recognition, while the piano arrangements were published in sheet music form to provide home entertainment for aspiring pianists.

The 1930’s

Composing was her main passion, and she was particularly interested in writing concert works. A newspaper article about her was even titled “At 19 She Writes Jazz for Profit and Symphonies for Pleasure.”⁹ Her early compositions were influenced by composers such as Debussy, Ravel, MacDowell, Satie, and Liszt.¹⁰ Once she moved to New York, George Gershwin became one of her major influences. Like Gershwin and other contemporaries, Suesse infused jazz harmonic and rhythmic elements into her compositions. Examples of this include *Concerto in D for Piano and Orchestra*, *Concerto in Three Rhythms*, *Eight Waltzes for Piano and Orchestra*, *Afternoon of a Black Faun*, *Symphonic Waltzes* and many others.

Her goal to produce concert works met with notable success. At the age of twenty-two Paul Whiteman commissioned a symphonic work from Suesse, resulting in *Concerto in Three*

8. Suesse was at first uncomfortable with orchestration but was determined to become accomplished in this area. She later studied with Nadia Boulanger in France to work on improving this skill.

9. Doris Montague, “At 19 She Writes Jazz for Profit and Symphonies for Pleasure,” in *American Magazine* cxii, 1932, 73.

10. Peter Mintun, phone interview by author, September 21, 2012. She performed compositions by MacDowell, Rachmaninoff, Debussy and Ravel.

Rhythms.¹¹ She composed the solo piano part and Ferde Grofé orchestrated it. She was featured performing this work at her Carnegie Hall debut on November 4, 1932. The piece was well received by the audience and critics. According to Suesse “Whiteman and Grofé thought the Concerto marvelous—had no criticism.”¹²

The Fortune Magazine mentioned her as the next up and coming songwriter.

There always seems to be one woman songwriter in the limelight...Now it is nineteen-year-old Dana Suesse, who wrote two recent hits, *Silent Love* and *Whistling in the Dark*. Dana Suesse recently attempted to duplicate George Gershwin’s success with the *Rhapsody in Blue*. She wrote a *Concerto in Three Rhythms* and soloed it, none too effectively, at a Paul Whiteman concert.¹³

Through the concerts with Whiteman she became acquainted with George Gershwin. She often went to parties at the “Gershwins’ and of course there was always a ‘fight for the piano’ with Harold Arlen, Berlin, and George.”¹⁴ Suesse and Gershwin had a mutual respect for each other’s compositions, and Gershwin was an influential figure in her compositional output.

In addition to her symphonic works, Suesse’s solo piano pieces brought her some notoriety in the 1930’s. Peter Mintun describes these works as “short kind of mood pieces that were in vogue at the time such as ‘Jazz Nocturne’ and ‘Syncopated Love Song’.... In the early days they might have called them Novelties or Novelettes.”¹⁵ These pieces are charming short character works using the formal structures of 18th and 19th century piano music by such composers as Chopin. In addition to the use of classical form, many of them utilize jazz harmonies.

11. For *Concerto in Three Rhythms* Suesse originally provided the piano part and Ferde Grofé orchestrated it for the symphony.

12. Suesse telegram to her mother, Nina Louise Quarrier October 21, 1931.

13. “A Word About the Gentleman Opposite,” *Fortune Magazine*, (January, 1933).

14. Suesse, unpublished diary and notes.

15. Mintun, interview.

The radio was one of the most effective ways for composers to gain notoriety during the 1930's. Suesse received a great deal of attention on radio programs and popular charts. In one instance, Major Edward Bowes featured Suesse on his radio show in a guest appearance with a performance of the orchestral arrangement of "Jazz Nocturne." The original publication of this work included a dedication to Major Bowes. Inside the cover was printed his statement: "Our 'Capitol Family' is proud to have introduced by Radio Symphony and Orchestra and Ballet this beautiful and brilliant composition—the young composer is surely destined to high place in American Music."¹⁶ In 1934 George Gershwin also featured her on his program *Music by Gershwin*. This program served "not only as a means of presenting his own music but also as an outlet for younger composers he respected: Harold Arlen, Oscar Levant, Morton Gould, Dana Suesse, Rube Bloom."¹⁷ Suesse was also the only American composer besides Gershwin to be featured on the General Motors Symphony national radio broadcasts.

Despite gaining critical acclaim as a concert composer, she struggled to make a living from her serious works. "I looked around and I found out that there was no market for this kind of music, commercially, so I said to myself what can I do about making my talent support me. And I found out that people were writing popular songs."¹⁸ Publishing popular songs was initially a challenge, but the seventeen-year old Dana Suesse was determined. At first no publishers in Tin Pan Alley would listen to her works, but a new publisher heard "Whistling in the Dark" at an informal meeting site for music scouts called Publisher's Corner and issued her a contract for what became her first big international hit.¹⁹

16. Mintun, original manuscript from first publication of "Jazz Nocturne" for solo piano.

17. Edward Jablonski and Lawrence D. Stewart, *The Gershwin Years*, (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 211.

18. Suesse, interview 1974.

19. Dana Suesse, interview by John Reed King, New York, 1942. Suesse mentions this event when discussing her difficulty publishing her early songs. She does not mention the publishers name in this interview.

Suesse was determined not to spend too much time working on her popular songs and claims to have worked only a few minutes on each tune. This practice was possible for her since (as mentioned earlier) many of her songs incorporated ideas from other compositions. For example, her first popular song “Have You Forgotten?” with a lyric by Leo Robin, was derived in part from her instrumental piece “Syncopated Love Song.” From 1931 through 1935 she worked with noted lyricist Edward Heyman, producing such songs as “My Silent Love.” This particular work was one of the most popular songs in 1932.²⁰ In this tune Suesse used both melodic and accompanimental material from her “Jazz Nocturne” composed a few months earlier. The principal melodic idea for “My Silent Love,” composed for piano and voice, is taken from measures 41-45 of the “Jazz Nocturne.” (See Examples 1.1 and 1.2)

Example 1.1: Suesse, “Jazz Nocturne,” mm. 41-45

Un poco più lento

The musical score is for a piece titled 'Un poco più lento'. It is written for piano (L.H. and R.H.) in a key with three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and a common time signature (C). The tempo is marked 'Un poco più lento'. The score consists of five measures. The first measure has a forte dynamic (mf) and is marked 'con espressione'. The second and third measures contain triplets in both hands. The fourth and fifth measures also contain triplets in the right hand. The score ends with a repeat sign. Below the staff, there are handwritten notes: 'Rea' and '*' alternating in each measure, and 'L.H.' under the fourth measure.

L.H.

mf con espressione

R.H.

Rea * Rea * Rea * L.H. Rea * Rea * Rea *

20. Warren W. Vaché, *The Unsung Songwriters: America's Masters of Melody*, (Scarecrow Press, Inc.: Lanham, Maryland, 2000), 485. This was recorded by three different artists due to its popularity including Ruby Newman and his Orchestra with Gordon Graham on vocal, Isham Jones and his Orchestra with Billy Scott on vocal and Roger Wolfe Kahn and his Orchestra with Elmer Feldkamp.

Example 1.2: Suesse, “My Silent Love,” mm. 1-3

p - mf a tempo

I reach for you like I'd reach for a star,

p - mf a tempo

Another popular tune from this decade was “Yours for a Song” with lyricist Ted Fetter, which became the theme song for the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Others include “You Oughta Be In Pictures” (1934), “Ho Hum!”(1931), and the “The Night is Young and You’re so Beautiful” (1936). For these, she collaborated with lyricists such as Edward Heyman, Allen Boretz, Sammy Lerner, and Malcolm McComb. Her tunes were used in movies and for the Ziegfeld Follies. Her success in the popular song genre allowed Suesse a measure of financial independence even during the Great Depression.

The 1940’s

The 1940’s were extremely important years in Suesse’s career. She and her close friend Virginia Faulkner collaborated on a screenplay entitled *It Takes Two*, which was picked up by RKO Pictures.²¹ With her \$50,000 proceeds from this sale, Suesse decided to follow her lifelong dream to study with Nadia Boulanger in France. She left on October 21, 1947 and remained in Boulanger’s studio for three years. After an initial interview on November 1st, Boulanger decided to accept Suesse into her personal studio rather than having her study with an assistant.

21. Suesse was an amateur playwright, not only did she compose scores for musicals, but she wrote play scripts throughout her lifetime. Many of these plays were collaborations with her friend Virginia Faulkner.

In an excerpt from a letter to her mother Suesse wrote:

It's unfortunate I should have to spend all these...preliminary months learning things I should have learned twenty years ago, but there it is, and there's nothing I can do about it. I cannot call myself a serious musician or composer until I have these things under my belt, because they are what gives one the necessary technique, the real tools of one's trade. Heretofore, I have mostly written music by instinct and some of the things have been right. But a good many have been wrong, and there is not one thing I have written so far that is 'all of a piece,' as it were; all one style and without those flaws that wouldn't be there if I had more knowledge and more technique. Native talent carries one just so far and no farther...and in order to get the most out of the talent I have, I must develop it to its limits. The only person in the world who can help me with this is Boulanger.²²

During her time with Boulanger, which was originally going to last six months, Suesse had lessons in counterpoint, harmonic and formal analysis, and orchestration. She enjoyed her lessons so much that she decided to extend her stay indefinitely. Boulanger asserted “it would be a waste of time for her to stay only six months to make it worthwhile.”²³ Although she was extremely homesick she persevered with the idea that she needed to finish what she started. She realized “it is the most important thing that has ever come up in the source of my so far, very badly managed career (insofar as making progress in the field of serious music is concerned).”²⁴

After countless counterpoint exercises, Suesse's final challenge was to write a string quartet. She completed most of it before she set sail for the States, and Boulanger was pleased with the result. Before Suesse returned home she playfully warned her mother “if, ‘after three long years,’ you are expecting a flock of bigger and better *Jazz Nocturnes*, I'm afraid you will be sadly disappointed.”²⁵ It is interesting to note that during Suesse's time with Boulanger she never disclosed her fame as a successful American songwriter to her teacher. Boulanger was approached by a news reporter from the Paris Herald-Tribune about a famous song writer from

22. Suesse, unpublished diary and notes.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid. This particular excerpt was taken from a letter to her mother.

America. When Boulanger asked Suesse about it, Suesse said she did not think that information was relevant to her studies.²⁶

By the time Suesse finished studying with Boulanger she had mastered orchestration, a skill that she felt was one of her most glaring deficiencies. Suesse felt comfortable writing in small forms and eventually became proficient at counterpoint, but she believed that her orchestration technique was a crucial element that separated her from other composers of her era. Developing this important skill empowered her as a composer. Upon her return to the United States, she applied her newly developed skills by re-orchestrating many of her earlier works.

26. Suesse, unpublished diary and notes.

Chapter Two: Short Piano Compositions

Suesse was well versed in performing the classical standards, and like many great composers, she allowed these pieces to form the framework for her own compositional style. Most of her piano works predate her studies with Boulanger, and reflect a more intuitive approach. Despite Suesse's lack of formal training, her marvelous ear for harmonies and attractive melodic ideas made her a natural composer. Even Boulanger aptly noted that Suesse composed "music by intuition."²⁷ This intuition, no doubt, allowed her to imitate the popular jazz idioms effectively and work them into classical forms such as Nocturnes, Scherzos, and Suites. Many of Suesse's piano works, as stated before, are short character pieces.

Early Unpublished Works

Of her early unpublished works, the "Berceuse" and "Scherzette" are perhaps the best known. These two pieces have recently been recorded.²⁸ "Berceuse" was probably composed before her arrival in New York. It is a very short piece influenced by the first of Eric Satie's *Trois Gymnopédie*, using a strikingly similar harmonic and formal structure. In this work Suesse presents an accompanimental pattern in the left hand that moves from tonic to dominant, as compared to Satie's pattern of sub-dominant to tonic. Her melodic ideas are also similar, beginning in the same register and employing the same basic motion. (See Examples 2.1 and 2.2)²⁹

27. Suesse, unpublished diary and notes.

28. "Berceuse" was recorded on Sara Davis Buechner's CD *The Collected Piano Music of Dana Suesse* and "Scherzette" was featured on the PBS video series *Yours for a Song: The Women of Tin Pan Alley*.

29. Peter Mintun, literary executor of Dana Suesse's estate, provided access to all her unpublished scores. Eric Satie, *Gymnopédie*, score, 1920, Public Domain. http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/a/a1/IMSLP237519-PMLP04215-Satie__Erik-Klavierwerke_Peters_Klemm_Band_1_03_Gymnopedies_scan.pdf (accessed June 28, 2013).

Example 2.1: Satie, *Gymnopédie* No. 1, mm. 1-13

Piano

Lent et douloureux

pp

pp

f

pp

Example 2.2: Suesse, “Berceuse,” mm. 1-8

Piano

Pensively ♩ = 96

dolce, smpre legato

“Berceuse” does not feature many of the characteristics found in her later work, but nonetheless demonstrates her ability to craft attractive melodies.

Another early work that remained unpublished is “Scherzette (Whirligig).”³⁰ This short piece is etude-like in its technical demands. Motoric rhythms and rapid figurations are featured throughout, as illustrated in Example 2.3 below. It is difficult to deduce any melodic content from the printed score, but in Suesse’s own recording she clearly voices the melodic idea C-D-F-E beginning in measure 5.³¹ (Example 2.3)

Example 2.3: Suesse, “Scherzette,” mm. 1-7

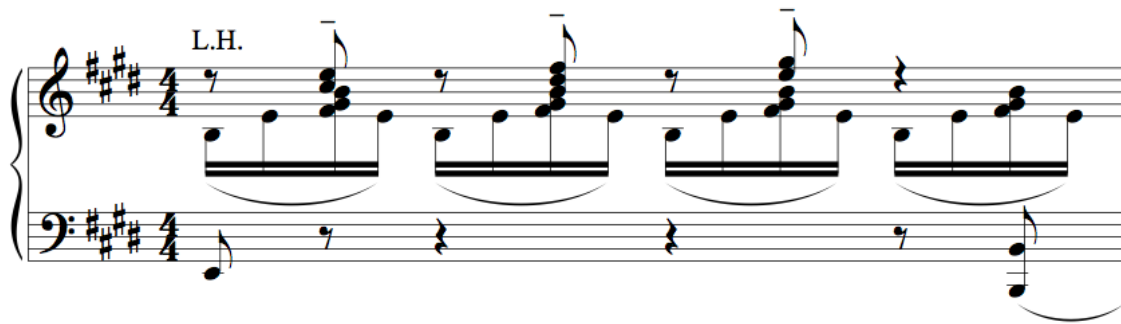


The introduction continues until measure 16 where the A section begins. At measure 16 the sixteenth note pattern persists in the right hand, while the left crosses back and forth with a new three note ascending melodic idea, E-F-G, harmonized in thirds. (See Example 2.4)

30. Whirligig was a descriptive title that Suesse added to her recording, “Dana Suesse Plays Her Piano Compositions.”

31. Dana Suesse, “Dana Suesse Plays Her Piano Compositions,” Vintage Masters Inc: 2012.

Example 2.4: Suesse, “Scherzette,” m. 16



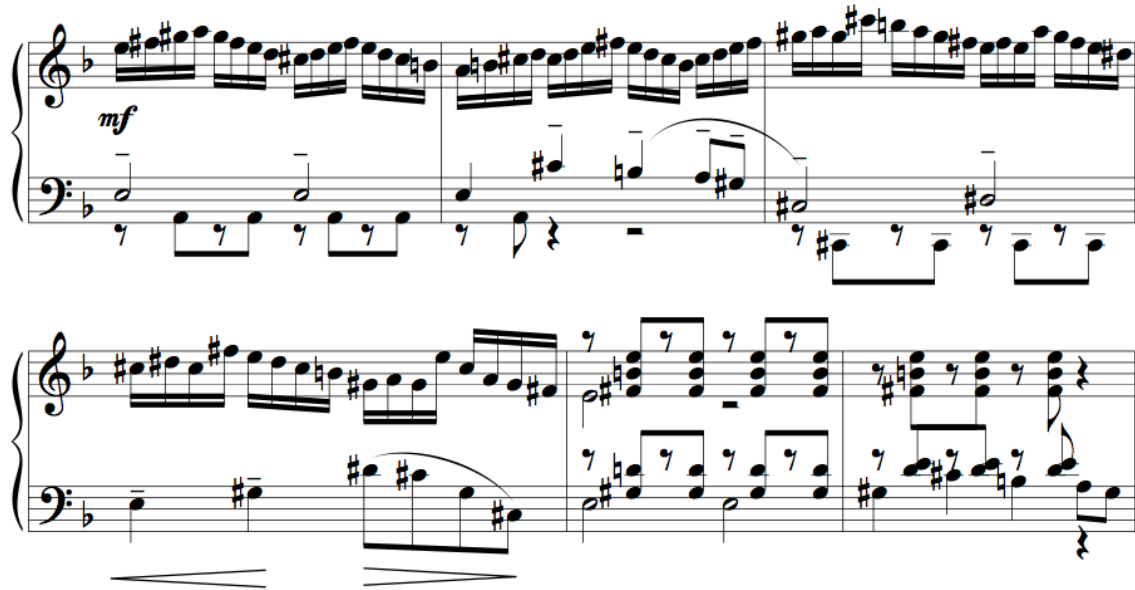
The B section begins in measure 35 with a variant of the melodic idea, C-D-E, now rhythmically augmented and given much more prominence in the left-hand.

Example 2.5: Suesse, “Scherzette,” mm. 35-36



The only break from the prevailing motoric texture occurs in measure 47 where a slower rhythmic pattern built on chords presented in eighth notes is introduced. (Example 2.6) This pattern lasts until measure 57 where the melodic idea that was introduced in measure 16 reappears, this time solely in the right hand supported by left hand accompaniment. This idea continues until measure 73 where the coda begins. Thus the entire piece is based primarily on a three-note motive.

Example 2.6: Suesse, “Scherzette,” mm. 43-48



Published Works

In 1941 Suesse published three works – “Midnight in Gramercy Square,” “Swamp Bird” and “At the Fountain” – through a Schirmer subsidiary, Boston Music.³² It is possible that these three works were pieces that Suesse composed prior to her first arrival in New York. They display a variety of moods, technical challenges and compositional influences.

“Midnight in Gramercy Square” is a short thirty-six measure piece that demonstrates Baroque influences. The opening measures, for example, suggest the main theme to J.S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations. Measures one through four present the melodic idea in the right hand, decorated with appoggiaturas. The left hand supports the melody with broken chords outlining a simple I-vi-ii-V chord progression as seen in Example 2.7.

32. Peter Mintun, email correspondence to author, September 21, 2012.

Example 2.7: Suesse, “Midnight in Gramercy Square,” mm. 1-7



Although the tempo is not altered, measure 17 is marked by a sudden change of character, harmony and texture. The setting becomes more chorale-like, featuring descending chromatic lines in the tenor and bass voices. In addition, the *con espressione* marking highlights the change in character.

Example 2.8: Suesse, “Midnight in Gramercy Square,” mm. 17-20



In this contrasting section, the overall harmonic progression is more chromatic, featuring a descending chain of diminished seventh, half-diminished and minor seventh chords to dramatic effect. This passage lasts only eight measures, after which the melodic idea from measure 9

returns. The final return of the main idea is marked *f or pp a piacere*—the dynamics are left up to the discretion of the performer. (See Example 2.9) The piece concludes with a final statement of the opening theme, this time with additional expression markings in the score. Although this piece was published in her lifetime, Suesse never recorded it.

Example 2.9: Suesse, “Midnight in Gramercy,” mm. 25-28



“Dana Suesse had a soft spot in her heart for Louisiana, and sometimes told reporters, untruthfully, that she hailed from there.” In reality she had only visited when she was a child and performed in Shreveport as an adult. Perhaps it was her fondness for the south that inspired her work “Swamp Bird.” She even toyed with the idea of writing a suite dedicated to the south called *Louisiana Legends*. Unfortunately the manuscript was never found.

“Swamp Bird” begins with a figure that effectively imitates a bird call in the right hand. (See Example 2.10)

Example 2.10: Suesse, “Swamp Bird,” mm. 1-2



The bird call idea is a dominant feature of the piece, and Suesse treats it to variations in contour as the piece unfolds. In measure 15, the pattern is altered to create an ascending figure that is almost question-like in character. It is clear that Suesse wants a slight change in sound from the piano and instructs the performer to play *pp*, suggesting an even more muted timbre.

Example 2.11: Suesse, “Swamp Bird,” mm. 15-18

Except for two measures, the left hand part of “Swamp Bird” consists exclusively of open perfect fifths. Measures 35 and 36 interrupt the prevailing rhythmic and harmonic motion with a cadence featuring two altered dominant chords on a B-flat root, the first containing an augmented fifth (enharmonically spelled as a g-flat in the score), the second containing a flatted fifth (enharmonically spelled as an e natural). (See Example 2.12)

Example 2.12: Suesse, “Swamp Bird,” mm. 35-36



The piece concludes with a statement of the original bird call, which gradually fades away, replaced by the ascending question-like variant, which contributes to the overall unsettled, restless and somewhat unresolved character of this work.

The final piece from this set, “At the Fountain,” is more impressionistic in style. “At the Fountain” focuses on repetitive moving figures to suggest the watery imagery implied by the title. Set in 6/4 meter, the piece begins in the key of D Major with a figuration built on arpeggiated chords in sixteenth notes, the lowest notes of which form a simple melody in quarter notes. This pattern is split between the hands resulting in perfect fifths that are always separated by a major or minor second. (See Example 2.13)

Example 2.13: Suesse, “At the Fountain,” mm. 1-2



Measure 14 marks a dramatic shift to B-flat major, the flatted sub-mediant key. This modulation is preceded by a two and a half beat rest.

Example 2.14: Suesse, “At the Fountain,” mm. 12-13



After this rather abrupt pause the sixteenth note figuration gives way to simple quarter-note motion. This new theme features simple chordal outlines of both B-flat major and B-flat augmented triads briefly interrupted by a shift to a G major harmony. Here the dynamics are louder than the opening, accentuating the abrupt change in character. (See Example 2.15)

Example 2.15: Suesse, “At the Fountain,” mm. 14-18



This section continues for fifteen measures before returning to the home key in measure 28. The final return of the first idea is short lived, lasting only three measures and offering a brief remembrance of the opening material before fading away.

Jazz Influenced Nocturnes

The nocturne was popularized by Frederic Chopin, although composers such as John Field, who is credited with establishing the genre, laid the groundwork. A typical nocturne in the 19th century style displayed a calm mood and character that was preserved throughout, although Chopin's nocturnes often displayed contrasting moods.³³ During the twentieth century composers continued this trend and composed piano pieces using the form and style of the nocturne. Suesse wrote two nocturnes, the "Jazz Nocturne" in 1931 and the "American Nocturne" in 1939, both of which feature a wide range of mood and character.

The "Jazz Nocturne," as noted before, was one of Suesse's more popular orchestrated works. This piece is set in a two-part form beginning with an introduction marked *Moderato misterioso*. The twelve-measure introduction is built on a succession of half-diminished seventh chords.

Example 2.16: Suesse, "Jazz Nocturne," mm. 1-8

The image displays a musical score for the first eight measures of Suesse's "Jazz Nocturne." The score is written for piano and is in 3/4 time. The tempo and mood are indicated as "Moderato misterioso." The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first system (measures 1-4) features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The melody consists of half-diminished seventh chords. The bass line consists of eighth notes. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the melody and bass line. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp* and *f*, and articulation marks like slurs and asterisks.

33. Many great American composers such as Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, Norman Dello Joio, and Lowell Liebermann in addition to less known composers wrote nocturnes.

Section A begins in measure 13, featuring a syncopated melody that is harmonized primarily in parallel seventh chords, supported by a single note accompaniment in the left hand that suggests an upright bass. (See Example 2.17)

Example 2.17: Suesse, “Jazz Nocturne,” mm. 13-20

Measure 21 presents the first theme again, this time an octave higher.

Example 2.18: Suesse, “Jazz Nocturne,” mm. 21-24

Here Suesse revises the left hand accompaniment, employing a left-over-right hand crossing technique that she utilizes again in the B section of the piece. The A section continues until measure 40 where the music cadences on a single E-flat in the bass.

This solitary E-flat serves as a dominant preparation for section B, which is in A-flat major and features a new theme. It is taken from Suesse's hit tune "My Silent Love," and offers a distinct Broadway-styled melodic contrast to the first theme. It is marked *con espressione* and the player is instructed to use *rubato* in some places. As noted above, in this section the left hand accompaniment features prominent hand-crossing technique as can be observed in Example 2.19.

Example 2.19: Suesse, "Jazz Nocturne," mm. 41-45

Un poco più lento

Piano

L.H.

mf con espressione

R.H.

L.H.

The first theme returns briefly from measures 73 until 78 before the final grand reentrance of the second theme. The grandiose return of the second theme suggests the atmosphere of a Broadway "show-stopper" and features a much thicker texture, particularly in the left hand which accompanies the melody with walking tenths.

The “American Nocturne,” composed in 1942, follows a format similar to the “Jazz Nocturne,” beginning with a brief introduction that leads into the first melodic theme. (See Example 2.20)

Example 2.20: Suesse, “American Nocturne,” mm. 1-7

The musical score for Example 2.20, Suesse's "American Nocturne" measures 1-7, is written for piano in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first system (measures 1-4) begins with a piano introduction. The treble staff features a melody of eighth and quarter notes, while the bass staff provides a simple harmonic accompaniment. The second system (measures 5-7) introduces the first melodic theme. The treble staff continues the melodic line, and the bass staff becomes more active with eighth-note patterns. Dynamics include *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *p* (piano).

In this piece Suesse employs two principal melodic themes; the first is presented in measure 5, the second in measure 21. The first theme serves as a unifying idea that returns twice, in measures 53 and 79. It is based on a relatively brief two-measure idea in the key of E Minor.

The second theme is set in the parallel key of E Major. (See example 2.21) It utilizes a thicker texture that contributes to the shift in character.

Example 2.21: Suesse, “American Nocturne,” mm. 21-24



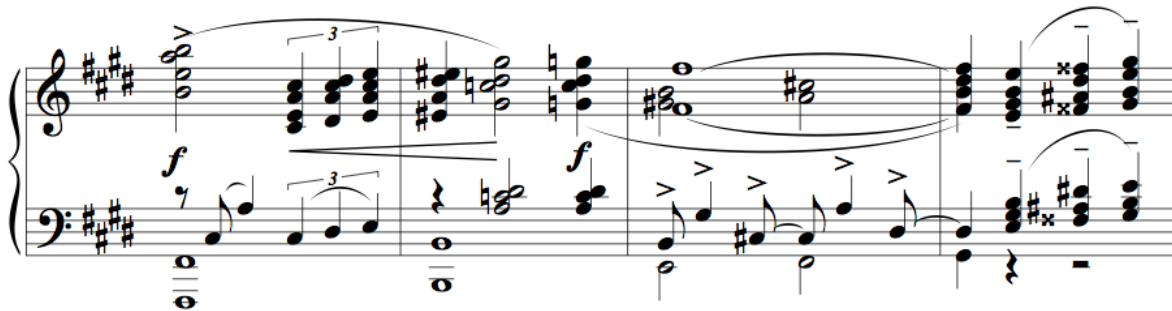
This theme is more romantic and song-like. (See Example 2.22) Before the return of the second theme, Suesse writes a virtuosic cadenza offset by a dramatic pause. It is built on an extended dominant harmony, displaying the influence of the 19th-century composer Liszt.

Example 2.22: Suesse, “American Nocturne,” m. 60

This musical score excerpt shows measures 60 and 61 of Suesse's "American Nocturne," which are part of a virtuosic cadenza. Measure 60 is marked "Cadenza ad lib." and begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The right hand features a series of chords, some with triplets, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 61 continues this texture, with the right hand moving to a more active role. The key signature and time signature remain consistent throughout the excerpt.

The final statement of the second theme begins in measure 61. As in the “Jazz Nocturne” the return of the second theme features a much grander character and is set in a thicker chordal texture.

Example 2.23: Suesse, “American Nocturne,” mm. 61-64



The final return yields the same climactic effect as the similar passage in “Jazz Nocturne,” and also transitions to a calm conclusion. The final cadence features an echo of the first theme. The “American Nocturne” is one of the few piano works by Suesse that has been recorded by multiple artists.³⁴

“Afternoon of a Black Faun”

In 1938 Suesse composed “Afternoon of a Black Faun (A Modern Composition for Piano).” This composition contains both Impressionistic and jazz influences. The programmatic influence of Debussy’s tone poem, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, is obvious, of course. But the musical tendencies also demonstrate the impressionist influence, as in the introduction where Suesse presents a series of similarly constructed vertical sonorities that move in parallel motion. This “non-functional” harmonic progression creates a distinctive suspended quality that is also enhanced by the arpeggiated, harp-like flourishes.

34. Sara Davis Buechner, “Suesse: Jazz Nocturne-The Collected Piano Music of Dana Suesse,” Koch International Classics: 2009, CD. Lara Downes, “American Ballads,” Postcards: 2001, CD.

Example 2.24: Suesse, “Afternoon of a Black Faun,” mm. 1-4

Slowly (*Lento*)

p (*misterioso-rubato*)

3

rapido

3

rapido⁷

The main theme appears in measure 11 expressed in a legato fashion over a detached bass line in single staccato notes that is suggestive of an upright jazz bass as in the “Jazz Nocturne.” It is flirtatious in character.

Example 2.25: Suesse, “Afternoon of a Black Faun,” mm. 9-14

Moderately (*very marked*)

mf

p

with expression

3

3

(*ben ritmato*)

con *And.*

4

3

3

3

Due to the quiet nature of the main idea, the change in character and texture in measure 17 seems abrupt. At this point, the quiet main theme is interrupted rather suddenly by a four-measure interlude marked “Playfully” (*scherzando*), recalling a similar moment in Gershwin’s “It Ain’t Necessarily So.” (See example 2.26a and 2.26b)³⁵

Example 2.26a: Gershwin, “It Ain’t Necessarily So” from *Porgy and Bess*



Example 2.26b: Suesse, “Afternoon of a Black Faun,” mm. 17-18



After the brief scherzo section, the main theme returns for several measures before the B section begins in measure 31.

35. George Gershwin, “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” *Porgy and Bess*, [http://imslp.org/wiki/Porgy_and_Bess_\(Gershwin,_George\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Porgy_and_Bess_(Gershwin,_George)) (accessed June 28, 2013).

The B section begins in the relative major key of E flat. As in the *scherzando* interlude in measures 17-20, section B displays a playful character and is performed at a slightly quicker tempo. The right hand plays syncopated, ragtime-like eighth note rhythms and triplet figures accompanied by a technically challenging stride pattern in the left hand. Instead of rolling the interval from bass note to top note, as is more common with stride piano technique, Suesse reverses the pattern, which requires the pianist to execute a more difficult thumb-to-fifth finger technique. (See Example 2.27)

Example 2.27: Suesse, “Afternoon of a Black Faun,” mm. 31-33



After the B section an improvisatory segment lasting thirty measures leads into the final A section. The work ends, in measure 120-127, with an improvisatory cadenza-like texture similar to the ones found in the “American Nocturne.” These passages build to a final arpeggiated flourish in the tonic key of E-flat major. (See Example 2.28)

Example 2.28: Suesse, “Afternoon of A Black Faun,” mm. 123-127

Cocktail Suite

Suesse wrote one multi-movement work for solo piano, *The Cocktail Suite*. The suite is comprised of four movements with titles borrowed from the names of popular mixed drinks (cocktails): “Old-Fashioned,” “Champagne,” “Bacardi” and “Manhattan.” Each movement illustrates a specific character and popular musical style associated with the 1930’s, but also displays classical influences observed in Suesse’s other pieces. The date of composition is uncertain, but it was originally published in 1942 by G. Schirmer Incorporated.

“Old-Fashioned” is in the style of a polka. It is set in the key of D-flat Major and organized in a simple ternary form. The A section features a playful character with a melodic idea decorated with grace notes and is rhythmically straightforward. The accompaniment features typical polka-style writing for piano that suggests the “oompah-oompah” character of a brass band. (See Example 2.29)

Example 2.29: Suesse, “Old-Fashioned,” mm. 1-4



The B section is more virtuosic. The right hand now must execute finger-staccato in sixteenth notes that alternate with somewhat awkward chord landings. The left hand is now more active, as well, featuring wide-ranging progressions. (See example 2.30)

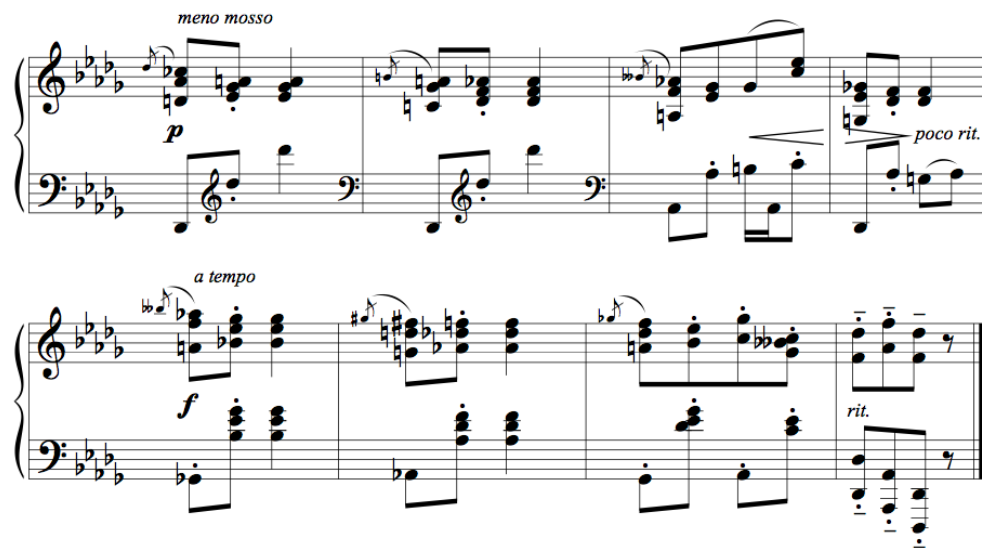
Example 2.30: Suesse, “Old-Fashioned,” mm. 17-24

f

Measure 34 marks the final return to the A section. This return is identical to the original, but there is a short coda following the recapitulation. At this point Suesse uses the dynamic marking

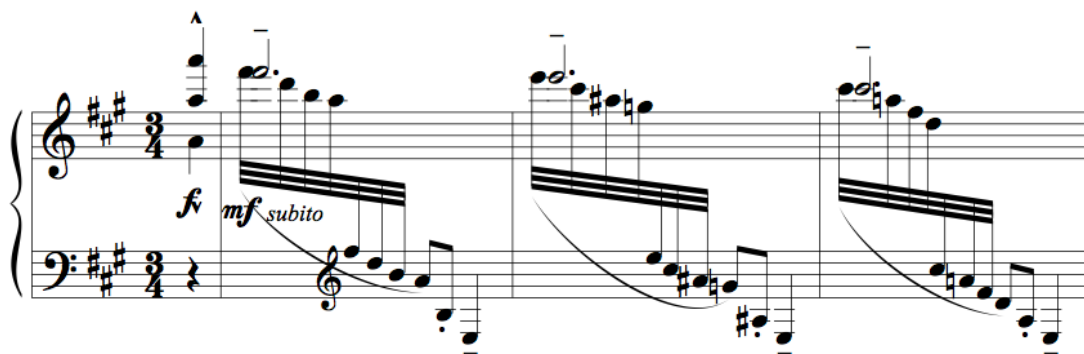
p for the first time. The tempo slows down for four measures before the boisterous conclusion.
(See Example 2.31)

Example 2.31: Suesse, “Old-Fashioned,” mm. 49-56



“Champagne” is impressionistic in style, showcasing the influences of Debussy and Ravel. It begins with an improvisatory six-measure introduction built on descending seventh chords. (See Example 2.32 below)

Example 2.32: Suesse, “Champagne,” mm. 1-3



The overall form of this piece is somewhat more elaborate than the others in the suite; it is outlined in Example 2.33.

Example 2.33: Overall form of “Champagne”

Intro	A ₁	B ₁	A ₂ '	B ₂ '	A ₃ ''	Coda
1-6	7-34	35-62	62-78	79-99	99-117	117-end

After the virtuosic introduction, a waltz theme is presented in measure 7, marking the beginning of section A. (See Example 2.34)

Example 2.34: Suesse, “Champagne,” mm. 7-14

Tempo di Valzer moderato

The musical score for measures 7-14 of Suesse's "Champagne" is presented in two systems. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked "Tempo di Valzer moderato". The dynamic marking *mf* (mezzo-forte) is indicated at the start of the first system. The right hand (treble clef) plays a waltz theme characterized by flowing eighth notes and quarter notes, often beamed together. The left hand (bass clef) provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines. The notation includes various musical symbols such as beams, slurs, and dynamic markings.

The B section’s main theme is embedded in running eighth notes played in the right hand while the left hand outlines the basic harmonic structure. The theme presented here is reminiscent of the seventh movement of Ravel’s *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. (See Examples

2.35 and 2.36)³⁶ This idea is presented twice, and each time it becomes more intricate, rhythmically and melodically.

Example 2.35: Maurice Ravel: *Valses nobles et sentimentales* No. 7, mm. 68-72



Example: 2.36: B theme from Dana Suesse's "Champagne," mm. 35-42

Like the B section, each return of the A section is altered by the quickening of the accompaniment in the left hand to build the momentum to the end. For example, the second

36. Maurice Ravel, *Valses nobles et sentimentales* No. 7, score, 1911, Public Domain, [http://imslp.org/wiki/Valses_nobles_et_sentimentales_\(Ravel,_Maurice\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Valses_nobles_et_sentimentales_(Ravel,_Maurice)) (accessed June 25, 2013).

return of the A_2' section in measure 62 used descending eighth-note patterns, whereas A_3' in measure 99 features sixteenth notes.

Example 2.37: Suesse, “Champagne,” mm. 59-68

meno mosso

p subito

rit.

a tempo

mf

Example 2.38: Suesse, “Champagne,” mm. 95-104

cresc.

ff p subito

con grazia

p

Measure 117 marks the beginning of the Coda, which is characterized by rapid, descending arpeggios that recall the introductory material of this piece.

“Bacardi” is one of the most stylistically engaging movements in the *Cocktail Suite*. It features the dance rhythm of the rumba, which was very popular in the 1930’s. The rumba and many other Latin dance rhythms were used frequently by jazz and popular composers. In this movement Suesse presents the rumba dance rhythm in the left hand; as written here it is essentially a two-measure rhythmic ostinato that pervades most of the piece. (See Example 2.39)

Example 2.39: Suesse, “Bacardi,” mm. 1-4



A deviation from the principal rhythmic pattern occurs at measure 57, where the left hand rhythm assumes a hesitating quality. This section is cleverly written and plays with the timing in the triplet figures. (See Example 2.40 below) Suesse includes some witty pauses in both hands, creating a sudden and unexpected break in the melodic flow.

Example 2.40: Suesse, “Bacardi,” mm. 57-66



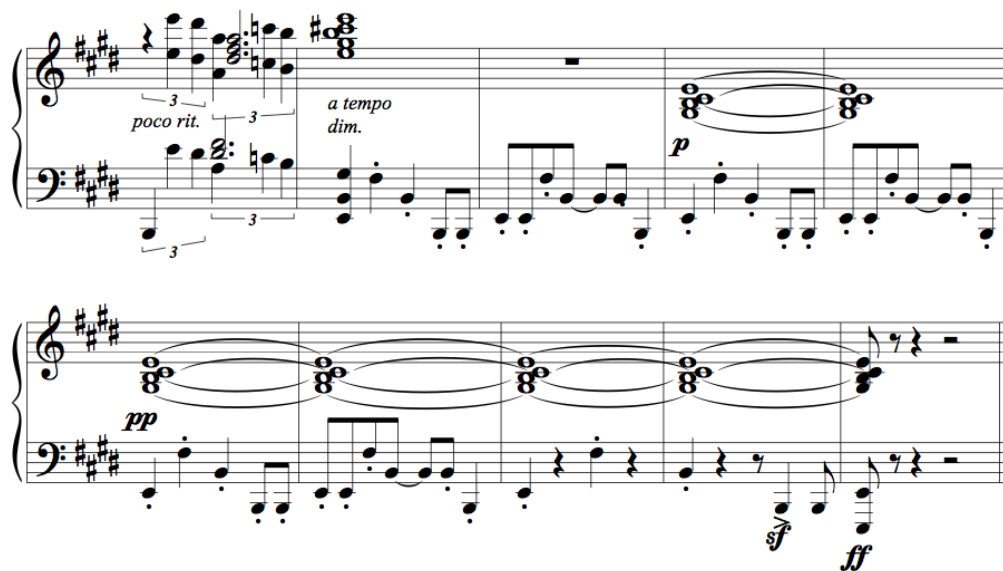
The rumba pattern returns in measure 112 where it is presented in octaves, a dramatic arrival that serves as the piece’s climax. (See Example 2.41)

Example 2.41: Suesse, “Bacardi,” mm. 112-116



After this climactic final presentation, the volume steadily decreases and the rhythm fades away, bringing the music almost to a stop. (See Example 2.42) The final dominant-tonic bass notes, marked *sforzando* and *fortissimo*, make for a surprise ending, slightly jarring but very effective.

Example 2.42: Suesse, “Bacardi,” mm. 129-138



“Manhattan” is a dark brooding piece with a slow jazz feel. It is the least playful movement of the suite and provides a serious conclusion. The movement opens with a twelve-measure introduction featuring lush harmonies that suggest Gershwin’s influence. (See Example 2.43)

Example 2.43: Suesse, “Manhattan,” mm. 1-6



Measure 13 marks the beginning of the A section, with a melody that is languorous yet distinctively rhythmic. A striking feature of this section is the interaction between the melody and accompaniment. The rhythmic interaction between the hands largely comprises overlapping triplet figures that serve to highlight the chromatic nature of the individual parts. Note the motion of the right hand melody and the counter-melodic, three-note idea in the left hand tenor voice that moves in contrary motion over the course of the measure. (See Example 2.44)

Example 2.44: Suesse, “Manhattan,” mm. 13-16



The use of *rubato* and dramatic dynamic shifts help accentuate the moody character.

The B section begins in measure 33 with a modulation to D-Major. Here the melody should be played “*con espressione*,” which necessitates a warmer tone. The melody also contains some chromaticism, linking it to the harmonically colorful nature of the main idea. (See Example 2.45) As in “Bacardi,” the melodic line of “Manhattan” is interrupted by dramatic rests, creating sudden breaks in the otherwise continuous line.

Example 2.45: Suesse, “Manhattan,” mm. 33-36



In the final statement of the A theme, the melody is presented in octaves, contributing to the pull towards the final cadence. (See Example 2.46)

Example 2.46: Suesse, “Manhattan,” mm. 67-72

Musical score for measures 67-72 of Suesse's "Manhattan". The score is in A major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment in the left hand and a melody in the right hand. The left hand has a bass line of quarter notes. The right hand has a melody of eighth and quarter notes. The dynamic marking *mp* is present. Triplet markings (3) are present over groups of eighth notes in both hands across all measures.

Suesse replaces the quiet dynamics of the beginning with a continual crescendo in which the B section theme features prominently, presented again in octaves marked *marcata la melodia*. The final cadence is extremely emphatic, boldly stating the rhythm of the introduction in octaves that finally cadence in the key of A Major (See Example 2.47)

Example 2.47: Suesse, “Manhattan,” mm. 99-102



While the aforementioned pieces reveal influences of Satie, Bach, Debussy, Ravel, and Gershwin, Suesse demonstrated an ability to convey a convincingly personal compositional style. Her intuitive skill at combining jazz and traditional idioms, as well as her gift for writing memorable melodies, set her apart as a composer to remember and celebrate.

Chapter Three: Conclusion

There is a twenty-year gap in Suesse's career after her time spent with Nadia Boulanger. Most of her compositions are from the 1930's and 1940's, but there is little evidence of compositional activity during the 1950's and 60's, which is ironic given her intense study with the great French teacher with the goal of improving her skills as a composer. In the 1970's Suesse began to consider retirement, however, before she did so she wanted to make a final musical statement. To that end she made plans to present a concert of her music. Close friend Peter Mintun wrote about the months leading up to the concert in his unpublished notes:

In late July, 1973 I spent a week at the Delinks home, hearing Dana play entire scores of her unproduced musicals, listening to her stories about working with the great stars of the past, and hearing about the Broadway of the golden age. It didn't take long before boxes of manuscripts, old records, press books and photographs appeared from the attic. More than anything, Dana wanted to promote her symphonic works and her musical comedies.³⁷

With support from her second husband Charles Edwin Delinks and close friends including Mintun, she was able to fund and coordinate this event.³⁸ For this program she arranged a few of her piano compositions for full orchestra, including a piece entitled "110th Street Rhumba." She also reorchestrated *Concerto in Three Rhythms*. She realized "in later years I decided that Grofé's treatment isn't exactly what I had in mind."³⁹

The result of her hard work paid off and on December 11, 1974 Suesse and Delinks produced a two-hour performance at Carnegie Hall with her fellow composer and pianist Cy Coleman. Frederick Fennell was featured conducting the American Symphony Orchestra. This concert featured a selection of her original compositions, which showcased her wide range of

37. Peter Mintun, unpublished notes about the 1974 Carnegie Hall Performance.

38. Ibid. Mintun and Suesse worked tirelessly sending out letters to raise support. Contributions were received from Johnny Green, Edward Heyman, James Van Heusen, Margaret Whiteman (Paul Whiteman's widow), Hans Spialek and Mrs. E Kemper Carter.

39. Ibid.

musical interests. Suesse herself joined the orchestra on stage to perform the “Blues” movement from the *Concerto in Three Rhythms*. The New York Times heralded Suesse by featuring an article praising the event.

The highlight of the evening came when Miss Suesse herself joined the Orchestra to play ‘The Blues,’ which is the second movement of the concerto she played with Paul Whiteman at her debut forty-two years ago...the nostalgia evoked by it all was most agreeable.⁴⁰

The renewed notice was what Suesse was looking for. A few weeks later she told Mintun in a letter:

[the concert] now seems like some sort of crazy dream...I am still a little punch drunk from it. After things settle down from the holidays I will explore whatever avenues may have been opened as a result of the concert. There may be some publishers interested, and I think both Cy [Coleman] and Robert Barlow [the harpist] are interested in performing their respective pieces further...Thanks again for your devoted help - words sound so inadequate, but I know you know I mean them.⁴¹

After this performance it is uncertain if Suesse continued composing, but she continued writing scripts for screenplays and was working on one in the months leading up to her death.⁴² She died of a stroke at her apartment in New York in 1987. Her obituary in the New York Times celebrated her for her success at composing popular songs in the 30’s, her composition featured at the 1939 World Fair, her outstanding ability as a pianist and her dedication to studies with Boulanger.⁴³

In view of these significant contributions to the music of the 1930’s and 40’s, Dana Suesse was a remarkable composer whose works deserve to be remembered and performed. Her intuitive and evocative style remind the listener of other famous classical and jazz composers of

40. Peter Mintun, unpublished notes about the 1974 Carnegie Hall performance.

41. Ibid.

42. Composed incidental music for “Seven Year Itch” and “Music for Josephine.” A few of her plays include *It Takes Two* and *Come Play With Me*.

43. Uncredited, “Dana Suesse, 76, Dies; Wrote 30’s Hit Songs,” *New York Times*, October: 1987. The obituary incorrectly cited the year and location of her birth.

the time, yet every musical work is uniquely her own. Her piano works contribute exciting new repertoire that captures the sound of a revolutionary period in American music history.

Reflecting on her abilities and gifts, she remarked: “[t]his is a gift that is given you and the only responsibility you have and the only credit you can take for any gift like that is the development of it and the care of it. What is basically given to you, you cannot take credit for.”⁴⁴

44. Suesse, diary and notes.

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Appendix: Letter of Release

Release

I, Peter Mintun, authorize Sarah Johnson to reprint the attached samples from the musical scores of Dana Suesse in her doctoral monograph at Louisiana State University. I agree that the musical score samples will be reproduced accurately in the music notation software Finale, printed in Mrs. Johnson's monograph, and distributed to her doctoral committee for the defense process. Mrs. Johnson agrees that the musical score samples will not be distributed or printed separately or independently of the doctoral monograph and defense process without further permission.

Name Peter Mintun
(Peter Mintun)

Date 22 July 2013

Vita

Sarah Jane Johnson received a bachelor's degree in music from University of Central Missouri in piano performance and piano pedagogy. In addition she received her master's degree in Music in piano performance from University of Central Missouri. During her time at Central Missouri she worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in Class Piano, Graduate Assistant for the Music Department, and a Graduate Assistant at the Kirkpatrick Library.

She has been twice featured as a soloist with the University City Symphony and once with the Belleville Philharmonic. Mrs. Johnson was a 2006 winner of the SAI Concerto competition, and runner-up in the Missouri Music Teacher Association Competition.

At Louisiana State University Mrs. Johnson worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for group piano and an assistant for the Performing Arts Academy. She has also worked as a class instructor for the LSU Leisure College teaching beginning piano to adults. In 2012 Mrs. Johnson won the LSU Concerto Competition and was featured with the LSU Symphony. Currently Mrs. Johnson is teaching private piano, group piano, and accompanying.