IMPRESSIONS:
Who has influenced the styles and sonorities of modern choral music?

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INTRODUCTION

When choral conductors and singers are asked about what modern choral music is, they usually point to two of the most performed modern choral composers. The significance of the choral compositions of Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943) and Eric Whitacre (b. 1970) to the contemporary choral genre is apparent not only in their substantial output of music, but also in the frequency and visibility of the performance of their music. They have had their music premiered and performed by some of the most prominent choirs of this era, including the Kansas City Chorale, Los Angeles Master Chorale, and the Concordia Choir. Both of these composers are frequently commissioned and both, in fact, received the Brock Memorial Commission. In 2001 Whitacre composed *Leonardo Dreams of his Flying Machine* and in 2005 Lauridsen composed *Nocturnes,* both of which were performed by the honors choir at the ACDA National Convention that year.

The popularity of these two composers can be attributed to the harmonic language found in their works. Kenneth Lee Owen states in his dissertation that their music “...shares a basic harmonic language.” There is, however, very little research on exactly what harmonic language is common between the two of them, and an absence of research that investigates where the idea of having these distinct sonorities, harmonies and styles comes from and why they use them. Therefore I made the purpose of this paper to find the historical influence on both of these

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2 Kenneth Lee Owen, “Stylistic traits in the choral works of Lauridsen, Whitacre, and Clausen”. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses;* 2008; pg. 4
composers. To do this, I started by researching and analyzing the works of just Morten Lauridsen and Eric Whitacre in order to define exactly what modern choral music is and what distinct characteristics, sounds, and sonorities their music has. Then I researched other scholarly works and the works of other composers before them in order to determine what influenced them to write in such a style.

Analysis of specific works by Lauridsen and Whitacre revealed three distinct and similar traits throughout their choral music, and that Whitacre goes further into this modern choral sound. Lauridsen and Whitacre both exploit the intervals of seconds and fourths to color their textures throughout the body of the work. Also, all of their works seemed to have been composed in vertical blocks in order to create the texture instead of having the texture formed line by line. Lastly they displace tonic until certain times in their works by using a variety of techniques including using inversions, voice leading, and of course adding seconds and fourths into typical triads. Whitacre then goes further by adding parallel intervals into his music as well. The analysis after this has found that these characteristics from the two composers have their roots in everything from the “atmospheric” sonorities of French composers such as Debussy, to the orchestral and choral music of Aaron Copland, and the pervasive minimalism of John Adams. There is also a lot of influence between the two composers themselves.

This paper will show the harmonic similarities in these two composers as they define modern choral music and what sources they used as they created these works. Textual references will only be made in this paper when the words are emphasized or de-emphasized by the music. By going past the text and digging into
the styles and sonorities used throughout their careers and finding the sources of them, we can further understand not only the music, but its popularity as well.
PART I: DEFINING MODERN CHORAL MUSIC

Owen gives a great place to start with his dissertation on the styles of Whitacre and Lauridsen’s music: seconds. The use of intervals of a second in works by both composers and many of their contemporaries is not just a stylistic trait at this point as much as it is common practice. This practice is most evident at the beginning of two of their works.

In Figure 1.1, this excerpt from the beginning of Lauridsen’s Ave Maria has the second in the first beat of the entire piece, with the tenor part beginning divided between an E and an F#. The piece grows in density until measure three where the highest basses or baritones sing a second above the root E and the middle tenor part takes the D# right below the root E as well as the F# above the root, doubling the highest basses from before. The use of seconds in this way is consistent throughout the work. In fact, only six measures of this 72-measure piece have absolutely no seconds in them. This growing density of texture at the beginning of a piece through

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3 Ibid, 4
the use of seconds, and the prevalence of seconds in a work can be found in
Whitacre's works as well, specifically in *Water Night*.

![Musical notation of Water Night by Eric Whitacre](image)

*Figure 1.2 - Water Night by Eric Whitacre*

In Figure 1.2, the beginning of *Water Night* has a stagnant Bb minor chord. This simple chord is then highlighted and changed by seconds in the upper part. Whitacre adds a fourth above the root in the tenor part and a second above the root in the soprano part on the word "eyes" at the beginning of measure 2. He then makes the vertical sonorities denser by adding more seconds in the next measure, adding a 6th above the root in the altos. He then thins the texture back out in
measure four before returning to a B minor triad without any dissonance on the word “night” at the end of measure five. Throughout the entire phrase, the basses never move from their root Bb, keeping the harmonic language the same while still giving a melodic line to the piece. This idea of having a running melodic line while still thinking in vertical harmonies helps to shape different words and ideas used in the piece. This idea is apparent in two pieces by both Lauridsen and Whitacre.

In both *O Nata Lux* by Morten Lauridsen and *Lux Aurumque* by Eric Whitacre, the composers use specific sonorities to highlight similar words. This is another use of what Lauridsen calls “added-note triads” to make the words, as Whitacre would say “shimmer and glow”. This makes sense as both texts talk about light as a metaphor for Jesus Christ.

![Figure 2.1 – O Nata Lux by Morten Lauridsen mm. 1-3](image)

In Figure 2.1, Lauridsen again begins the dissonance through the use of seconds in the triad right from the beginning. The altos are given the division and

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4 Carol J. Kreuger, "A Conductor's Analysis of *Les Chansons Des Roses* Cycle and an Overview of the Vocal Compositions of Morten Lauridsen" *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*; 2000;
are only a second apart, which further highlights the dissonance on the words “O Nata Lux”. But there is also one other thing to take note of at the beginning and that is that the inversion. The first chord of the piece not only has added notes, but also is in first inversion to further displace us from the tonic. These two elements combined really make the words “lux” and “lumine” stand out through the dissonance and repose Lauridsen used on them, and the analysis of Eric Whitacre’s *Lux Aurumque* shows that he took note of Lauridsen’s repose.

*Figure 2.2 – Lux Aurumque by Eric Whitacre mm. 1-4*

In Figure 2.2, Whitacre begins the piece with an incomplete C# minor triad. But every part either divides or moves in a slur movement into the second measure where you get a dissonant, inverted, and shimmering chord. Both the tenors and the sopranos share the D# as the second that clashes against another note sung by their voice part. Whitacre also moves the basses down to the G#, putting the chord in second inversion. Finally, he has the altos move up in parallel fifths to add more
dissonance against the normal notes in the triad. This adds even more dissonance and repose to Lauridsen's formula for it in *O Nata Lux*. Both composers obviously looked at the chords on these words through their vertical harmony when choosing how to voice these words pertaining to light. Using these techniques of displacing the tonic through inversions and seconds highlight these important words. Two famous pieces by Lauridsen and Whitacre, however, show that while dissonance can highlight a word, the cathartic release of that dissonance can have an even greater effect.

One of the prominent features of modern choral music that is both unique and interesting is that the music always has a tonal center while writing homophonic chords built using inversions and seconds. Lauridsen exploits this system and the best example of this is found in his work *O Magnum Mysterium*.

![Figure 3.1 – O Magnum Mysterium by Morten Lauridsen mm. 1-4](image)

In Figure 3.1, Morten Lauridsen gives you the tonal center of this piece, but he doesn't give it to you in a traditional way. In this figure above the chord is D Major in first inversion with a second added in the tenors. This now familiar figure
tells us right away that we are using D is the tonal center, but Lauridsen avoids the root position triads in any key of D for sixteen measures. After this, the next instance of sustained consonance repose happens about a measure before the return to the main theme of this piece.

![Musical notation](image)

*Figure 3.2 – O Magnum Mysterium by Morten Lauridsen mm.41-49*

In Figure 3.2, Lauridsen gives us a harmonic progression from mediant or iii chord to tonic, which is a typical in all kinds of choral music. Lauridsen, however, uses the added note dissonances and suspensions to build tension and add colors the texture. Yet even at the most convincing point of arrival at measure 46 he
doesn’t give us a consonant repose that we would expect even as he comes back to what we would consider the I chord when analyzing the piece from a theoretical standpoint. He instead reprises the beginning both harmonically and melodically as a sign that the piece is continuing. Lauridsen continues his reprise until he finally slows down the tempo and increases the duration of the note values on the last page, still leaving seconds in every chord until we get a D Major triad at pianississimo without dissonance in the final measure. This cathartic release of finally hearing what we perceive to be the tonic chord means so much more after so many dissonant chords and added notes because of the duration of the dissonance. When the majority of the vertical sonorities involve a dissonance, the consonance actually draws as much attention in Lauridsen and Whitacre’s works as dissonance does in older choral works. This idea that dissonance can be as prevalent as consonant in previous choral music is something that Lauridsen and Whitacre both exploit, and Whitacre gives us his greatest example of this in his work *Sleep.*
Figure 3.3 – Sleep by Eric Whitacre mm. 1-4

In Figure 3.3, Whitacre’s only foreshadows the dissonance to come. We have very few intervals of a second, and even a root position triad the end of the measure six. As the work continues, it becomes more dissonant. It starts off with just a few seconds and second inversion chords like in Lauridsen’s work. But in Whitacre’s work, the additions of dissonance occur more quickly than in Lauridsen’s work and the harmonic rhythm becomes faster. Because of this, even when there are chords that are technically in root position and consonant, the dissonance around them is so pronounced that you don’t hear it as consonant. Whitacre builds this quickly progressing dissonance until the very top of page 10 at measure 59 when finally we get a release of the tension and dissonance with every voice part ringing full volume in their tessitura. Compare the opening of the piece from Figure 3.3 to the climax here in Figure 3.4.
Figure 3.4 – Sleep by Eric Whitacre mm. 55-62

After Figure 3.4, the piece begins to fade away. Since the cathartic moment happened at the climax of the piece instead of right at the end, Whitacre re-introduces the suspensions and seconds as he fades the music away much like a person fades into sleep, repeating the same oscillating pattern as the piece ends. Just as Lauridsen uses consonance to highlight the end of the piece, Whitacre uses it to highlight the climax of his piece. This is a difference in how the two composers set the dissonance because of the speed at which the composers build the dissonances in these specific works. Both of these composers, however, have truly made simple dissonances the new normal in their works through the duration and amount of it they use. Whitacre goes even further into this dissonant style by adding elements unique to his music in two of his other works.
In older pieces of choral music, specifically Renaissance, Baroque and Classical choral music, writing parallel fifths and octaves weren’t allowed. Unlike Lauridsen, Whitacre not only breaks this rule in his pieces, he uses this unconventional voice leading to great effect.

Figure 4.1 – A Boy and a Girl by Eric Whitacre

In Figure 4.1, the beginning of Whitacre’s A Boy and a Girl, parallel motion is extremely prevalent. This C Major chord, with a second, is moved up a minor third, giving us parallel fifths, thirds, and seconds. He then takes the chord he moved to and starts there on beat three of measure three and moves down in parallel motion again, thus giving the feeling of “stretching” the notes and the phrase as well as text-painting the word “stretched” in measures one and two. This effect can be used to highlight certain words or textual nuances, as do many of Whitacre’s sonorities, and we can find another example in one of his earlier works.
Coincidentally in another work where the famed Spanish poet Octavio Paz wrote the text, Whitacre again calls on parallel motion in his work. In this instance, he uses the movement of a second downwards in the Soprano 2, Alto 2, and Tenor 2 parts to create seconds, signaling the start of the “storm” in this work. He also starts on the root chord in a second inversion, much like the other pieces we mentioned earlier. Whitacre’s use of parallel motion throughout his large body of works highlights the textual nuance in the poetry that he chooses, though these two pieces are the best examples of this.

In all of the works of these two composers, we see very distinct styles and sonorities that make their music both different than other choral pieces from the past and popular at the same time. These sonorities and sounds, however, all had their beginnings somewhere in music. There are sources of these characteristic sounds that can be found in the works of a lot of modern composers. With this in mind, the analyses of the works of these two composers bring forth the question of who influenced these composers to produce this most sought after music. That is what the analyses will be used for as they are examined with other works of music.
PART II: DEFINING THE SOURCES OF MODERN CHORAL MUSIC

In Lauridsen and Whitacre’s music, there are so many sources and places where they draw influence from, and so little writing on it, that finding research on their influences can be overwhelming. There are sources, however, that both composers share which are critical influences on their style of composition. These influences are the impressionist works of Debussy and other late-romantic French composers, the pandiatonic works of Copland, and other contemporary American composers such as John Adams.

The first influence that we see that both composers share is the work of Claude Debussy. Dr. Shane M. Lynch talks about Debussy’s lone work for a cappella choir, Trois Chansons de Charles D’Orléans, he describes it as “...extremely minimal.”

Lynch talks about what Debussy aims for in not just his a cappella music but all of his music, and he calls it musical impressionism. This musical impressionism focuses on the nuance in certain sonorities and not as much on their tonal function. He also notes that Debussy’s “…focus is on the masses of sound that moves with little regard to the traditional rules of voice-leading...and unprecedented use of ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords.”

This description of the chords that Lynch mentions describes the vertical sonorities found across Lauridsen and Whitacre’s music. One example that shows this is the chord in measures 17-18 of the first of Debussy’s Trois Chansons. In this case, the end of the measure uses a second above.

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6 Ibid
the fifth in the tenor. There is also an example of parallel motion in the beginning of the third and final piece of *Trois Chansons* entitled *Yver, vous n'estes qu'un villain*. It is evident that this is similar to the voice leading found in Whitacre’s *Cloudburst, A Boy and a Girl*, and even his *Nox Aurumque*. He also notes that these composers all use “highly specific notation, especially articulations and rhythmic notation used for text clarity.” This is present in a large number of Whitacre and Lauridsen’s pieces, specifically Lauridsen’s *Ave Maria* and Whitacre’s *Lux Aurumque* in the excerpts shown above.

Lynch calls this new era that Lauridsen and Whitacre have brought forth “neo-impressionism”\(^7\). The styles and sonorities that Lauridsen and Whitacre use are so very similar to that of Debussy that it seems to be almost obvious that the two are related to anyone who has studied the composer’s works, though they aren’t clearly able to define why. The reason the sound is similar is because they are choosing it for specific reasons. The chords and sonorities they are using are colors that evoke a certain sound. This practice was common not only to Debussy in this time, but also in pieces by Ravel and Boulanger, two other late-Romantic French Composers. They all line up the chords vertically, aiming for a certain type or color of sound. This is especially prevalent in the works of Whitacre and Lauridsen that have been analyzed. Lynch even uses the beginning of Lauridsen pieces *O Magnum Mysterium* and *O Nata Lux* to prove his claim of neo-impressionism.

\(^7\) Ibid
\(^8\) Ibid, 22
Lynch, however, begins to go into detail on Whitacre’s work specifically later on in his dissertation since the majority of his work is within his defined limits of neo-impressionism. As stated at the beginning of this section, Whitacre’s music draws from a large variety of sources and Lynch mentions this in his paper.\(^9\) Lynch though, goes on and notes that the way that Whitacre and Debussy connect not only through the sonorities in their music but through the way they hear the music can’t be ignored. Whitacre says in *Composers on Composing* that he feels “…so constricted by modern notation…how can I ask for a chord to sound ‘hollow’ or ‘shiny’ or ‘foggy’? This is the way I experience music, and I find that I just don’t have the tools with which to express these ideas.”\(^10\) This is similar to Debussy, who also changed the way he wrote his pieces based on what he wanted them to sound like. One of the most prolific ways he did this was to have the title of his works in small print at the end so that the performer wouldn’t use that to shape the sound of the music.

The connections drawn between Debussy and the works of Whitacre and Lauridsen are very strong and convincing on both the theoretical and the musical level. The influences on their music, however reach further than just Debussy. Another place where you can find the styles and sonorities of Whitacre and Lauridsen’s music can be found in the pandiatonic works of Aaron Copland and John Adams.

\(^9\) Ibid, 53
\(^10\) Ibid, 53
Pandiatonicism is defined as “a compositional technique by which a diatonic scale is adhered to but not used in a conventional manner.”\textsuperscript{11} This is a technique that both Lauridsen and Whitacre utilize consistently throughout their music. While both composers use lots of intervals such as seconds or fourths, they won’t frequently use any notes outside of the diatonic scale they have chosen to use, nor will they stray away from the tonal center they have chosen for their piece. While there are times that Whitacre and Lauridsen do call upon these accidentals to be used, they are no more or less frequent than they are in older compositions.

One example of this outside of the choral world of pandiatonicism is found through Aaron Copland’s \textit{Appalachian Spring}. In this piece, Copland quotes the melody of a shaker tune at the end of his piece. While the original melody has the makings of a tonal functioning harmony, Copland harmonizes the piece with many non-functioning chords, adds seconds, and re-voices the same chords over again, much like Whitacre does in \textit{Water Night} and Lauridsen does in his \textit{Ave Maria}. Copland also was in the business of stacking triads in his \textit{Appalachian Spring}. He does this during the beginning moments of the piece, actually giving each string instrument part a triad to play. This compares very favorably when Whitacre does this in his \textit{Lux Aurumque} and Lauridsen in his \textit{O Nata Lux}.

Another aspect of pandiatonicism is that pandiatonic rarely resolves from dissonance, something that both Whitacre and Lauridsen are famous for with their choral works. The repose created by this consistent dissonance in their works

makes the work of the two composers seem unique due especially to the frequency and duration of the dissonance. They, however, are not the first popular modern composers to use this technique. John Adams, another composer who is still alive and composing, also has this pandiatonic concept in his work from both before Whitacre and Lauridsen started writing in this style and after. In his works *Shaker Loops* and *On the Transmigration of Souls*, there are lots of unresolved dissonances at the ends of phrases. In *Shaker Loops*, Adams string septet he wrote in 1978, Adams begins with a perfect fifth of a D and an A in the violins. From there he adds in more notes that cause seconds and clashes with the original D and A in the other parts, a beginning not very different from Whitacre’s *Lux Aurumque* or his *Water Night*. These chords in *Shaker Loops* remain unresolved as various lines of fast moving notes come out of the texture before the piece moves to the next phrase. This idea is found in the middle of Lauridsen’s *Ave Maria*. The lack of resolution of what might be called suspensions in older music is very pandiatonic. Even Stephen Jaffe in his self interview on “New Tonality” states that “*Shaker Loops* are in the harmonic vein which Copland mined in works such as *Appalachian Spring.*” Adams, despite this comparison and his use of pandiatonic compositional techniques, is not known for the pandiatonicism in his works as much as he is for another musical genre that Whitacre and Lauridsen both take from.

The term “minimalist music” has been around in both the visual and musical arts for quite some time now. Composers such as Steve Reich and Phillip Glass

started defining and re-defining this genre of post-modern music when they began composing in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.\textsuperscript{13} Adams continued in this tradition, and traits of minimalism are now found in almost every one of Adams’ pieces, whether it is \textit{Shaker Loops} or \textit{Phrygian Gates}. In both of these pieces, Adams repeats the same chords or same two chords over and over again and builds on top of them. It isn’t surprising then, that Adams work both from a sonority standpoint through pandiatonicism, and a stylistic standpoint through minimalism, can be found in the works of two other American contemporary composers in Lauridsen and Whitacre.

Andrew Lloyd Larson states in his dissertation on a plethora of Whitacre’s works, “...while Whitacre does not regard himself as an absolute minimalist, his music does exhibit traits associated with that compositional movement. These include a tendency to repeat certain harmonies or melodic figures.”\textsuperscript{14} Whitacre uses this minimalist technique most often, using a repeating melodic and harmonic oscillation at the end of both \textit{Lux Aurumque} and \textit{Sleep}. Lauridsen uses a few minimalist techniques as well, specifically in the beginning of \textit{O Nata Lux}. Lauridsen and Whitacre draw off of each other and Adams for these techniques. But the link between these great modern composers doesn’t just end there. We can actually look and see that Adams has returned the favor. Adams has actually learned from Whitacre and Lauridsen’s workings with pandiatonicism. This is seen most obviously in his 2002 work, \textit{On the Transmigration of Souls}.


\textsuperscript{14} Andrew Lloyd Larson, “\textit{Textural and Harmonic Density in Selected Choral Works by Eric Whitacre}.” \textit{ProQuest Dissertations and Theses}; 2004; p. 1
In 2002, Adams premiered his *On the Transmigration of Souls* for orchestra, children’s chorus, chorus, and pre-recorded sounds. This piece was well received at its premiere in Avery Fisher Hall.\(^\text{15}\) In his piece, we see that the choral music has many of Whitacre and Lauridsen’s most common sonorities and styles. In measures 57-58, we see the Sopranos, Altos, and Tenors all moving in parallel motion, ending in an unresolved dissonance, and repeating the same chord over and over again. The work as a whole uses more minimalism than Whitacre and Lauridsen’s pieces typically do, but it can easily be argued that some of the work that these modern choral composers have done with choral music has certainly found its way into Adams’ work.

It has been noted that there are many people and pieces that have found their way into the minds and the music of both Whitacre and Lauridsen. While they may share other sources outside of late nineteenth and twentieth century music, there is an established connection between their work and the work of these great modern composers. They are also, in turn, influencing their fellow composers and others as well as seen through Adams’ work. The analysis of not only Lauridsen and Whitacre’s works, but also the works of their influences shows this connection between these two popular choral composers is very apparent. This conclusion, however, was not what some modern theorists and composers would like to hear.

CONCLUSION

I started researching this project because of my Theory V class at my university. We studied various composers from Barber to Stravinsky, to Copland and Debussy. However, we touched on almost no choral music at all. We didn't learn any of the theory behind it and it seemed like an after thought compared to the music we were learning about. When I asked my teacher about this, he explained that most newly written choral music, specifically from Lauridsen and Whitacre, didn't have the any of these new features of modern music such as serialism, minimalism, or any of the scales or systems we were learning about. With that said, I became interested in exactly what did influence these two world renowned and famous composers.

Many in the modern composing world also scoff at the works of both Lauridsen and Whitacre. In Gramophone magazine, a highly regarded authority on classical music, there is a featured article on "A New Tonality". In this article, the author Philip Clark slams Whitacre specifically saying, “Eric Whitacre (and Paul Mealor) get away with their pretendy ‘classical’ music and tabloid tonality.” 16 Meanwhile, in just the next paragraph down, he praises John Adams saying that he “…conquered the world...with Shaker Loops”17 and other works. He even applauds Adams for changing the minimalist world around him saying, "Adams, a generation younger than the pioneering minimalists, pulled off his audacious trick – he applied

17 Ibid
what he’d learnt about structure and pacing from minimalism to what was a Romantic harmonic palette in essence; music the minimalists were, in theory at least, ideologically opposed to.”18 Here Clark is praising Adams for developing minimalism in this way and using romantic harmonies. This is essentially what Whitacre and Lauridsen are doing today. They are taking what they know about modern music, using influences from Adams and many of his predecessors of modern music and making it simply beautiful with a tonal palette much more pleasing to the ear, something modern music has not focused on in general.

People like Clark probably find my term “modern choral music” a bit of a misnomer. Sure the music is choral, but how could it be called modern when you have composers such as Adams, Copland, and Stravinsky under that same umbrella? The evidence presented makes it plainly obvious that when you look at the vast majority of Lauridsen and Whitacre’s work, they draw from that same pool of modern music techniques. The world of choral music is different from the band and orchestral world in many ways, but that doesn’t mean that choral music can’t possibly be modern. Many critics who believe that Lauridsen and Whitacre don’t deserve to be named along with the other modern composers have either written them off because of their successes in selling their music, or have not looked closely enough at it. It is hard to imagine Whitacre or Lauridsen writing the beautiful music they have without influence from some of these pillars of modern classical music. But it is what they have added to this world of modern music that makes their music praise worthy.

18 Ibid
The classical or art music world almost makes it seem like a sin for newly written music to sell lots of copies and be performed all over the world. The reason is that their art music is supposed to be written in order to expand the world of music and create the art in its highest form. Uneducated musicians who are aware of modern music and appreciate it tend to believe that if it is selling well, it is simply popular music that has been made specifically to make money. This is not the case with these two composers. Both of them are composing music that expanding not only the realm of choral music, but music as a whole. There are composers everywhere using both of them as an example to follow in their own quest to make new art music that can not only appeal to audiences but also further the art of composition. The influences of Lauridsen and Whitacre, as evidenced by their works and the analysis of them, are the same ones of any modern art composer. They are bringing aspects of modern music to the choral realm. For this they should not be belittled for their success, but instead be praised for their advances.
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