

# **Better Than It Sounds**

*Chamber Opera for Actor, Soprano,  
Bass-baritone, and Piano*

Music and Libretto by  
**Matt Browne**

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## Cast

Emma/Becky Thatcher.....Soprano  
William/Tom Sawyer.....Bass-baritone  
Samuel Clemens.....Actor

## Program Note

*Better Than It Sounds* is a one-act comic opera that takes a skeptical look at the medium of opera as a whole through a cynical lens of Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain. Over the course of the opera, William and Emma, the creators of a Tom Sawyer opera-within-the-opera, attempt to convince Clemens of its merits. After this opening scene we see how high the stakes really are for William and Emma, and learn more about how opera can express things no other medium can. Twain still needs some convincing, though.

The following score represents only the first scene, around twenty minutes. The total production will be a one-act, 70-minute structure with no intermission. The two singers (soprano and bass-baritone) and actor onstage in the first scene will be the only characters throughout. The final orchestration is flexible, but will be a small chamber group such as piano quintet or pierrot ensemble.

*This work was composed for American Opera Projects Composers & the Voice Workshop  
Excerpt premiered on September 28/29<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in Brooklyn, NY*

Duration: c. 70 minutes

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# Better Than It Sounds

Chamber Opera for Actor, Soprano, Bass-baritone, and Piano

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**Cheerful** ♩ = 96

*TOM SAWYER emerges onstage with  
a pail and brush in his hands, taking in the day.*

Becky/Emma

Tom/William

Samuel Clemens

**Cheerful** ♩ = 96

Piano

Pno.

Pno.

Better Than It Sounds

2

12 **12**

Tom *f* 3 3 3

Sa-tur-day mor-ning has come the whole world is

Pno. **12**

Detailed description: This system contains measures 12, 13, and 14. The Tom part (bass clef) starts with a rest in measure 12, then plays a triplet of eighth notes in measure 13, followed by another triplet in measure 14. The lyrics "Sa-tur-day mor-ning has come" are under measures 13 and 14, and "the whole world is" is under measure 14. A dynamic marking of *f* is above the first triplet. The Pno. part (treble and bass clefs) features a consistent eighth-note accompaniment in the bass clef and chords in the treble clef. A box with the number "12" is placed above the first measure of the Pno. part.

15

Tom bright\_ there's a song in my heart\_

Pno.

Detailed description: This system contains measures 15, 16, and 17. The Tom part (bass clef) has a half note in measure 15, then a triplet of eighth notes in measure 16, and another triplet in measure 17. The lyrics "bright\_" are under measure 15, and "there's a song in my heart\_" are under measures 16 and 17. The Pno. part (treble and bass clefs) has chords in the treble clef and eighth-note accompaniment in the bass clef. A slur is present over the chords in measure 17.

18 **21**

Tom and I'm feel-ing so spright - ly\_

Pno. **21**

Detailed description: This system contains measures 18, 19, 20, and 21. The Tom part (bass clef) has rests in measures 18 and 19, then a triplet of eighth notes in measure 20, and another triplet in measure 21. The lyrics "and I'm feel-ing so spright - ly\_" are under measures 19, 20, and 21. The Pno. part (treble and bass clefs) has eighth-note accompaniment in the bass clef and chords in the treble clef. A box with the number "21" is placed above the first measure of the Pno. part in measure 21.

22

Tom

there's a cheer in the fa - ces a

Pno.

25

Tom

spring in their gait

Pno.

27

Tom

All the bloss-oms are fra - grant Oh

Pno.

Better Than It Sounds

4

31 **31**

Tom

boy I'm e - late - ted\_ Oh boy\_ I'm e - la -

Pno.

*mp*

*p*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 31 through 35. The Tom part (bass clef) begins with a triplet of eighth notes (G, A, B) and continues with a melodic line. A dynamic marking of *mp* is placed above the staff. The Pno. part (treble and bass clefs) features chords and arpeggiated figures. A dynamic marking of *p* is placed above the treble staff.

36

Tom

rit. . . . .

Pno.

*pp*

*p*

rit. . . . .

Detailed description: This system contains measures 36 through 40. The Tom part (bass clef) features a long melodic line with several triplet markings. A *rit.* marking is placed above the staff. The Pno. part (treble and bass clefs) consists of chords and a *pp* dynamic marking in the treble staff, and a *p* dynamic marking in the bass staff. A *rit.* marking is also present in the Pno. part.

41 **41** A tempo

Tom

ted

Pno.

*p*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 41 through 45. The Tom part (bass clef) has a single note in measure 41, followed by rests. The Pno. part (treble and bass clefs) has a complex rhythmic pattern with a dynamic marking of *p*. A *A tempo* marking is present above the Tom staff.

Better Than It Sounds

44 *f* 3 3 3

Tom

Though no fun may I have now— my hu-mor they squash there's a

Pno. *f* *mf*

47 3 *mf* *p*

Tom

job I must do here— with this bu-cket of white- wash—

Pno. *p* *f*

50 51

Tom

51

Pno. *mp* 3 3

Better Than It Sounds

6

54 *f* 3 *f*

Tom

Thir-ty three yards of board fence nine feet high,

Pno.

60 *ff* *rit.* *mf* 3 *rit.*

Tom

needs a work - in'

Pno.

*f cresc.* *ff*

63 **63** ♩ = 80 *mp* *mp* 3 3

Tom

My life is oh so hol- low

Pno.

**63** ♩ = 80 *p* *p* *8va*



67 **poco rit.** *mp*  $\text{♩} = 72$  *p*

Tom  
my ex - is - tance a bur - den

Pno. **poco rit.**  $\text{♩} = 72$  *pp* *pp*

73 **75**  $\text{♩} = 104$  *f* *8va*

Pno. *f*

*BECKY THATCHER prances onstage and notices TOM.*

78 *f*  $\text{♩} = 84$  **81**  $\text{♩} = 104$

Becky  
Hi Tom

Tom  
Oh mor-nin'

Pno.  $\text{♩} = 84$  **81**  $\text{♩} = 104$  *mf* *dolce and molto rubato* *mf*

*TOM is struck with BECKY's beauty, but quickly collects himself and non-chalantly goes back to work.*

Better Than It Sounds

8

82

Becky

Hard at work, I see?

Tom

Be- cky

What are you call in' work?

Pno.

86

Becky

Why, ain't *that* work?

poco rit. . . . .

Pno.

*mf*

poco rit. . . . .

89

A tempo

Tom

Well may-be it is may-be it ain't\_ all I know is\_ it

89

A tempo

Pno.

*p*

*mp*

94 **98** A tempo

Becky *You mean you like it?*

Tom *suits Tom Saw- yer...*

Pno. *f* *mf*

99

Tom *Ain't e-v'ry day a boy get a chance to white-wash a fence!*

Pno. *f*

102 **103** TOM gleefully begins to paint the fence. *mf* either hum this or whistle in a higher octave

Tom

Pno. *sffz* *mf* *sub. mp*

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107

exaggerated wide brush strokes on the fence

hum or whistle

brush strokes

Tom

Pno.

116

115

*f*

3

Becky

Say, Tom, let me white-wash a lit-tle

Tom

116

8va

Pno.

*mp*

118

Becky

Tom

No, no Be-cky—

Pno.

*p*

*mf*

122

Becky

Tom

Pno.

*mf*

3 3 3 3

Aunt Pol-ly's aw-ful par - ti-cu-lar a-bout this fence It's got to be done ve-ry

126

Becky

Tom

Pno.

3 3 3

care-ful Ain't no o-ther boy in a thou-sand that can do it right

129

131

Becky

Tom

Pno.

3

Oh Tom, won't you

may-be two thou-sand

131

*pp* *f* *sub. p*

Better Than It Sounds

12

132

Becky

please just let me try? I'll give you the core of my

Tom

Pno.

*mf*

8<sup>va</sup>

135

Becky

ap - ple

Tom

Well here...

Pno.

*mp*

*p*

8<sup>va</sup>

15<sup>ma</sup>

138

141

Becky

I'll give you all of

Tom

No Be-cky, now don't I'm a-feared

Pno.

*pp* *mf* *pp* *mf* *pp* *f*

141

142

Becky

it. And don't you mind me, I have a way to

Tom

Pno.

*ff* *mf*

7

145

Becky

keep me straight on task. A work-in' song, you see.

Tom

Pno.

*f*

148

Becky

Tom

Pno.

*sub. p* *mp* *8va*

3 3

TOM hands BECKY the brush

150

Tom

Piano: *p*, *8va*, *3*

if you're care-ful

153

Becky

Tom

Piano: *f*, *ff*, *8vb*, *3*, *6*

Now let's hear a bit of your song.

154

You're the best,

156

Becky

Tom!

Piano: *mp*, *sub. f*

It's a-bout a steam - boat



Better Than It Sounds

166

162

Becky

on the might-y Miss is - sip!

Stop her, sir!

*f*

Pno.

*mp*

*p*

166

167

Becky

Ting-a-ling-ling! Step up to back Ting-a-ling-ling! Back on the stab-bord

Pno.

*f*

*p*

*f*

*p*

171

Becky

Ting-a-ling-ling! Chow! ch-chow- wow! Stop her, sir!

Tom

Stop her,

Pno.

*f*

*mf*

3

Better Than It Sounds

16

175

Becky

Ting-a-ling-ling! Step up to back Ting-a-ling-ling! Back on the stab-bord

Tom

sir! Ting-a-ling - ling! Step up to back Ting-a-ling - ling! Back on the

Pno.

*f* *mf* *f* *mf*

179

Becky

Ting - a - ling - ling ting - a - ling - ling Ting - a - ling!

Tom

stab-board Ting - a - ling - ling - ling Ting - a - ling!

Sam

(cutting off others)  
What in the hell is this??

181

Pno.

*f*

182  $\text{♩} = 104$

Emma 

Spoken: *(startled)*  
Oh, Mr. Clemens! I'm so hap - py you could make it!

Sam 

Pno. 

*mf*

185

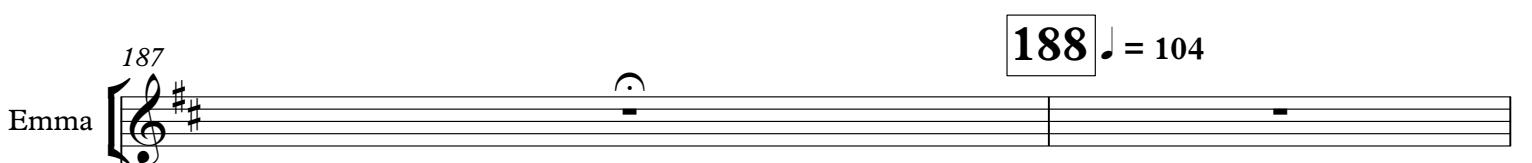
Emma 

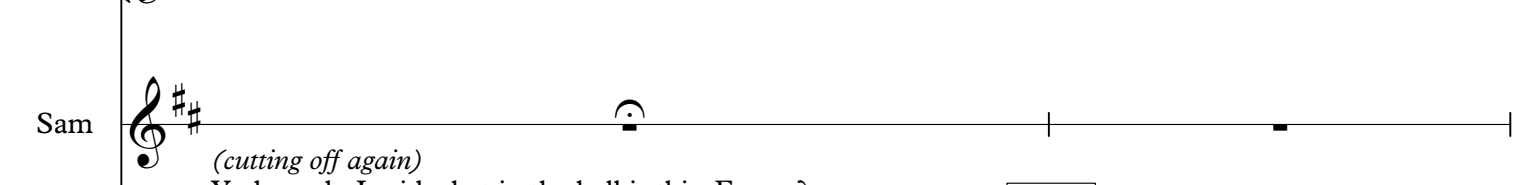
We were just re-hear - sing a lit - tle bit, Have you met my hus - ba -

Sam 

Pno. 

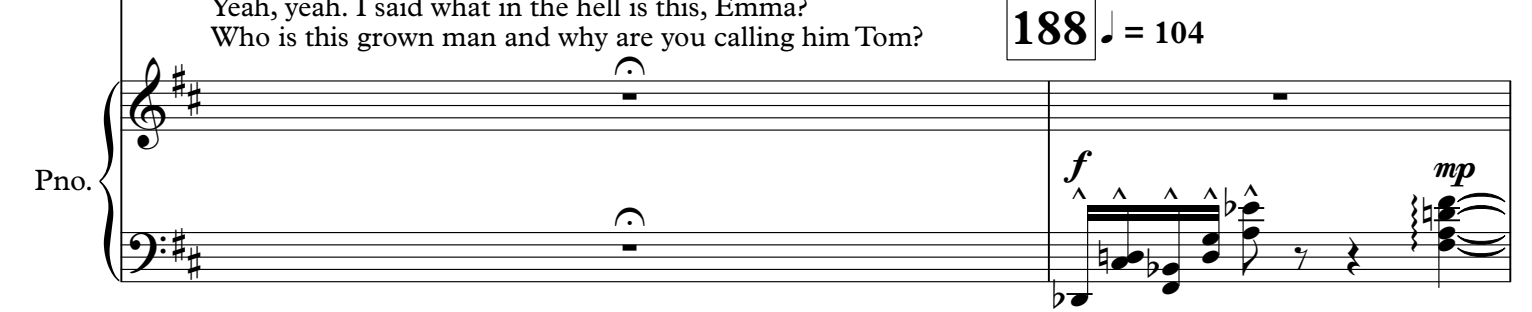
187 188  $\text{♩} = 104$

Emma 

Sam 

*(cutting off again)*  
Yeah, yeah. I said what in the hell is this, Emma?  
Who is this grown man and why are you calling him Tom?

188  $\text{♩} = 104$

Pno. 

*f* *mp*

Better Than It Sounds

18

189

Emma

Sam

Pno.

This is my hus-band Will iam\_\_ Mis-ter Cle-mens He's the one who a dap-ted the li-bret to

192

Emma

Sam

Pno.

from your book. He's al-so a won-der-ful bass-bar-i - tone and is per for-ming the

195

Emma

Sam

Pno.

role of Tom Saw-yer. I'll be play-ing Be-cky!

198

199 ♩ = 120

Will.

Sam

This... this gargantuan... oaf! No offense intended, sir. This oaf is meant to be a spry 12-year old boy? What in God's good name gave you that idea?

199 ♩ = 120

Pno.

*f*

201

Will.

*f*

If I may\_\_\_\_\_ Mis-ter Cle-mens.

Pno.

*f*

206

Will.


Such a con-fi-dent and ass-sured\_ cha-ract-ter as Tom

Pno.

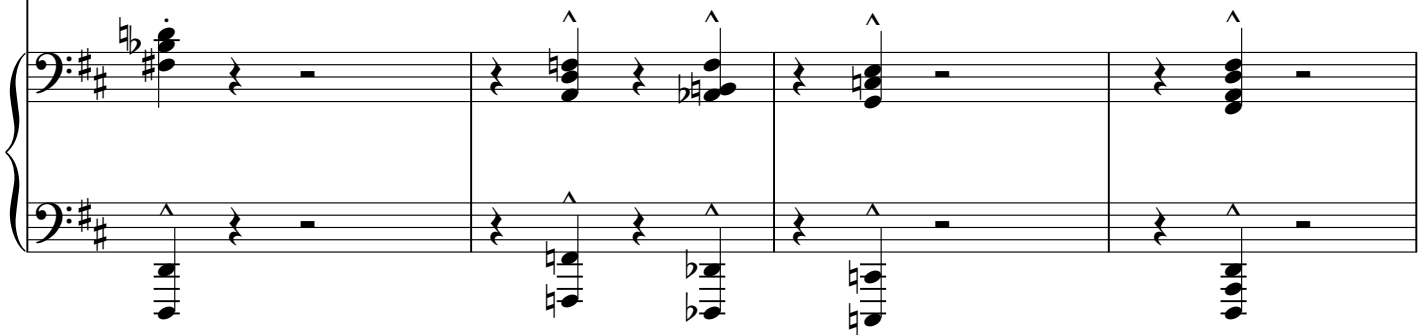
Better Than It Sounds

20


210 *ff*

Will. 

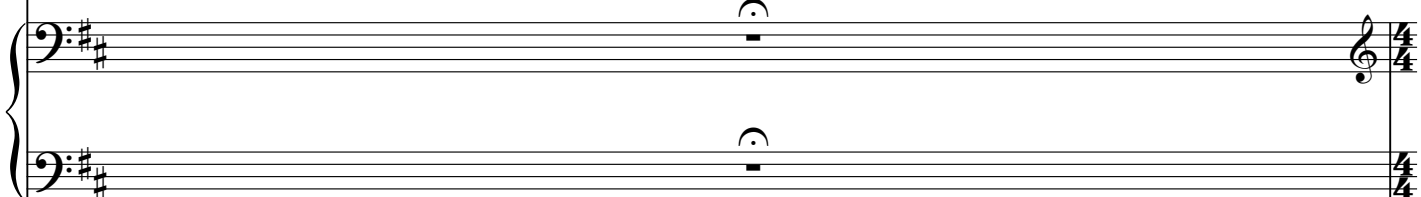
needs a big brash voice to match.

Pno. 

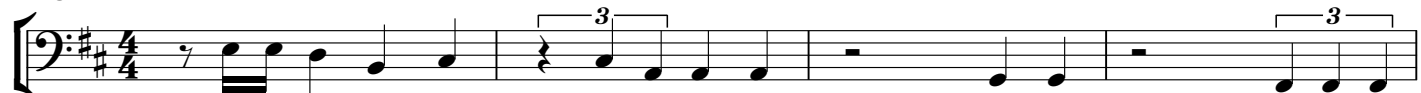
214 *f*

Will. 


His moral-ly ma-ture mo- ments ad-dit-ion-al-ly call for a more ser-i-ous tone of voice

Pno. 


215 **Slower**

Will. 

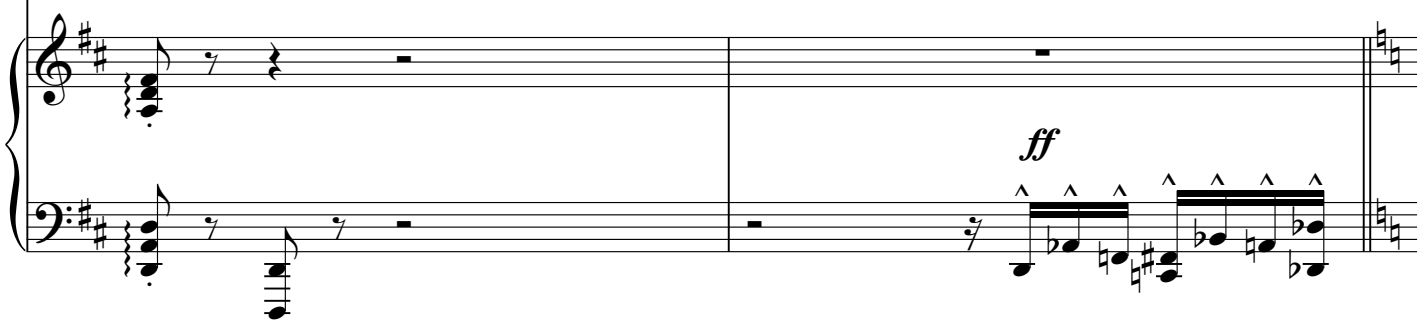
that is best por-trayed in a low - er vo - cal re - gis - ter

Pno. **Slower** *mf* 

219


Will. 

It's a me-ta-phor,\_\_\_ you see!

Pno. 

221

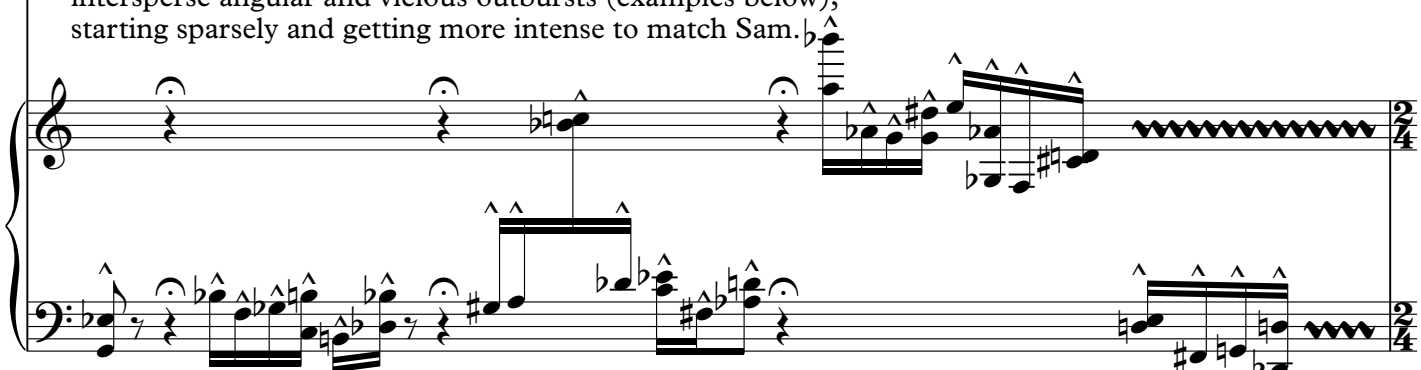
221

Sam 

A metaphor? Who needs a damn metaphor for Tom Sawyer?  
 He's a precocious, smooth-talking boy that acts like a kid most  
 times and is serious when it calls for it, like all kids. That's it!  
 We don't need a damn three-octave plummet to convince the  
 audience he's in earnest! You must be out of your minds to read  
 into it any more than that! Also, what the hell is this set? This fence  
 is, what, two feet high... how do you expect us all to see this as  
 imposing? And by the way, the fence was thirty yards long, none of  
 this thirty-three nonsense.

221

intersperse angular and vicious outbursts (examples below),  
 starting sparsely and getting more intense to match Sam.

Pno. 

222

Will. *3*  
But the scan-sion-

Sam  
*(Ignoring WILLIAM)*  
Jesus, and what the hell were you doing with your arms  
*(waves outstretching his arm in wayward directions)*, you look  
like you're trying to catch a fly! And that lavish, melodramatic  
orchestra; this ain't a palace on the Rhine, it's middle-of-nowhere  
Missouri! And another thing...  
*(to the pianist/conductor)* Would you shut the hell up!

Pno.  
continue outbursts with same intensity in the right hand  
*fff*  
repeat this ostinato, gaining intensity with Samuel's rant  
*mp cresc molto* *fff*

224

Emma

Will.

Sam  
*(Slower and more deliberate, to EMMA and WILLIAM)*  
And by the way, what are you both still singing for?

Pno.  
raise your hands as if to say  
"okay okay, sorry"



226

226  $\text{♩} = 104$

Emma

*(Try to reply, but struggle to find a note) Please Mis ter Cle mens. You've on-ly seen this one lit-tle bit.*  
*(motion to the pianist for a reference pitch)*

226

226  $\text{♩} = 104$

Pno.

play this note when  
gestured to by Becky

228

Emma

Here, let me give you a bit of Aunt Pol-ly's a-ri-a I just fin-ished up to day!

Pno.

230  $\text{♩} = 104$

Emma

Oh that boy, \_\_\_\_\_ can't I ne-ver learn a thing-

Sam

230  $\text{♩} = 104$

Pno.

Better Than It Sounds

24

234

Emma <sup>234</sup> Well, yes. Be-cky, Pol-ly, Ma-ry, and...

Will.

Sam *(Interrupting)*  
Polly? You just said you were playing Becky.

Pno. *mf*

Emma <sup>238</sup> Muff.

Will. Yes, Mis-ter Cle- mens. We

Sam Muff Potter? The gruff, middle-aged drunkard?!

Pno. *f*

240 ♩ = 120

242

Will. thought it would be an in-terest-ing de - vice to have Em-ma por-tray all the

Pno.

246

Will. cha-rac-ters that are sym-pa-the-tic to Tom. It's ar-che-typ-al.

Pno.

250

Will. *(gesture to Emma and yourself as if to say "we're all there is")*

Sam It's god awful and stupid.  
How big is this cast anyway? Is Emma playing the whole damn town?

Pno.

Better Than It Sounds

26

253 ♩ = 132

252

Emma *f* Mis-ter Cle-mens

Will. *f* Mis - ter Cle-mens

Sam Oh for God's sake, this is outrageous. You assured me when I agreed to let you go on with this mockery that everything would be fine! Remember, Emma?

Pno. *f* 253

254

Emma Mis-ter Cle-mens Mis-ter Cle-mens

Will. Mis-ter Cle-mens Mis-ter

Sam read this naturally, trying to time it roughly to the barline  
*(mimicks Emma)*  
 "Oh Mr. Clemens, you won't regret doing this you won't have to do any work

Pno.

257 **accel.**

Emma  
Mis-ter Cle-mens Mis-ter Cle - mens Mis-ter Cle-mens

Will.  
Cle-mens Mis-ter Cle-mens Mis-ter

Sam  
and the story will be just as you wrote it! And you will make so much money! Our crowds loooooove operas

Pno.

260 *cresc. poco a poco*

Emma  
Mister Cle-mens Mis-ter Clemens Mis - ter Cle-mens Mis-ter Cle-mens

Will.  
Cle - mens Mis-ter Cle-mens Mister Cle-mens Mister Cle mens

Sam  
about folksy people!" Well I ain't seen any lick of something that can with a generous eye be called Tom Sawyer here

Pno.

Better Than It Sounds

28

(♩ = c. 160)

263

Emma

Mis - ter Cle - mens Mis - ter Cle - mens *ff*

Will.

Mis - ter Cle - mens Mis - ter Cle - mens *ff*

Sam

and I've definitely not seen any money! You've done a great job of swindling me, alright!

Pno.

(♩ = c. 160)

265

266 ♩ = 104

Emma

We-

Will.

We-

Sam

And why in God's name are you still singing!?

266 ♩ = 104

Pno.

267

Emma

Well it's-

Will.

Well it's-

Sam

Knock it off and talk to me like normal people! Stop Singing!!

Pno.

$\text{♩} = 104$

270

Emma

*(Spoken, motioning to Sam in a pleading gesture)*  
It's just... can we... okay?

Will.

Sam

*(reluctantly gesture in acceptance)*  
I just don't get it.  
Why sing when you could just speak it?

Pno.

Better Than It Sounds

30

272 ♩ = 104

Emma

Will.

Sam

Pno.

Why speak, when you could

272 ♩ = 104

Emma

Pno.

**Cadenza**  
*molto rubato p*

*mp*

*mp*

*cresc.*

274

sing

**Cadenza**



Emma *mf* 275 *rit.*

Pno. *rit.*

Emma *f* 276 *rit.* *p mp ff*

*(wave off SAM when he tries to interrupt)*

Sam *My w-*  
*(interrupted by Becky)*

Pno. *rit.*

Better Than It Sounds

32

♩ = 120

280

Emma

Sam

(pause to make sure she doesn't start up again)  
My way is quicker.

And besides...

280

Pno.

♩ = 120

*ff*

♩ = c. 60

Sam

281

(begin just after piano enters)  
Singing is one of the most entrancing and bewitching  
and moving and eloquent of all the vehicles invented by man for the  
conveying of feeling... (shoo off pianist to stop underscoring you)

♩ = c. 60

Pno.

*p placid and lush*

Sam

284

... but it seems to me that the chief virtue in song is melody, air, tune, rhythm, or what you please to call it, and that when this feature is absent what remains is a picture with the color left out. I was not able to detect in any of what you "sang" here anything that might with confidence be called rhythm or tune or melody.

It was just... just... intoned speech!

Pno.

cut off abruptly  
when Sam shoos you

♩ = 104

287

Emma

Will.

Well yes. In fact, Wag-ner says that—

Sam

(interrupting) Oh Voggner (*mocking correct pronunciation*), Vogggner! Please, do tell me what his holiness, Saint Waggner (*Americanized pronunciation*) has to say!

Pno.

mp

♩ = 104

290

♩ = 120

290

Emma

Will.

Well you know, sir

Sam

290

♩ = 120

Pno.

ff

f

mp

Better Than It Sounds

34

294

Emma

Will.

Sam

Pno.

Wag-ner's mus ic is bet-ter than it sounds.

3/4 4/4

298

Emma

Will.

Sam

Pno.

Oh please, Mis-ter Cle-mens.

Yes yes, I've heard.  
And haggis is really much better than it tastes.

Well look, I've just about had it. I think it's about  
time to pack this up and go home. I'm afraid I just  
can't let this go on.

$\text{♩} = 120$

*f*

*p*

$\text{♩} = 120$

4/4

301

Emma *mf* *rit.*

We want to do right by you.

Will.

Sam

Pno. *ff* *sub. p* *p*

305 ♩ = 88

305 -

Emma *p*

We love your book, and would do a-ny thing \_\_\_\_\_ to make this work.

Will.

Sam

Pno. *dim.*

Better Than It Sounds

36

311

Emma

Will.

Sam

Pno.

*pp*

We real-ly need to make this work.

No no no, don't go doing that.  
I'm not here to bestow charity.

316 ♩ = 104

Emma

Will.

Sam

Pno.

*mf*

*mf*

Please Mis-ter Cle-mens Just di-rect us a - ny way you wish,

319

Emma *p* Please.

Will. *p* we can sing ex - act - ly how you like. Please.

Sam

Pno.

322

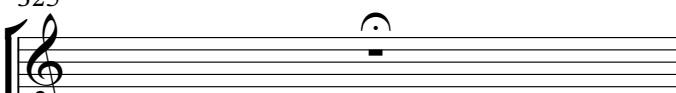
Emma

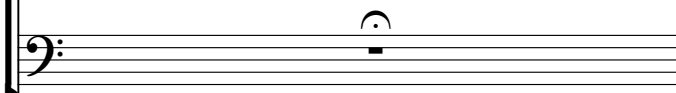
Will.

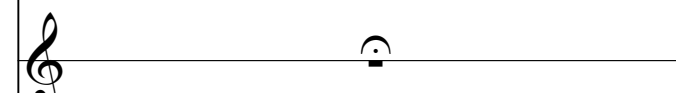
Sam Well... (deep sigh) al - right then.

Pno. *p*

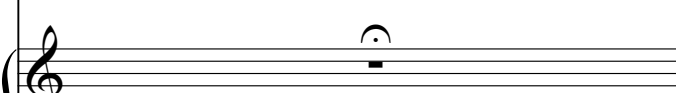
325

Emma  (Nod 'yes' to Sam's question)


Will.  (Nod 'yes' to Sam's question)


Sam  I suppose I was seldom able to see an opportunity until it had ceased to be one. That's one of my quotes.  
Let's try it, you both know *The Old Hundreth*, right?

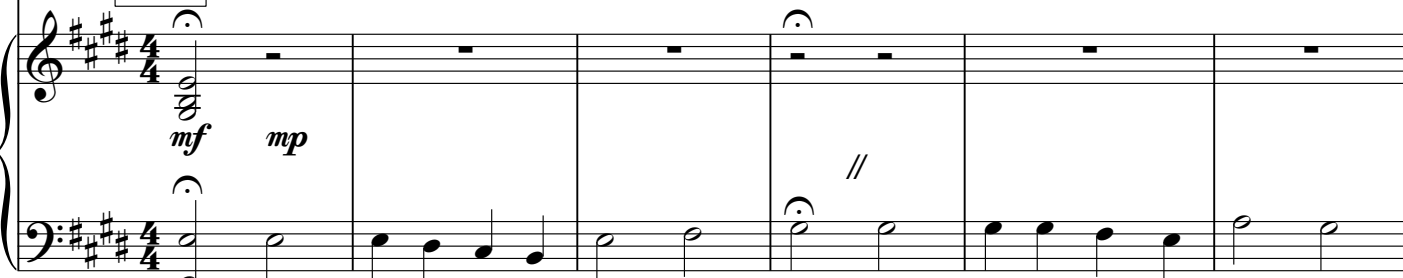
Let's sing that. Just the tune, nothing fancy. Just let us hear the simple beauty of the melody and words. Plain question and plain answer make the shortest road out of most perplexities, after all. Don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an extra note, kill it. It's in the simpleness that you'll find Tom and Becky.  
(gesture to the pianist to begin playing)

Pno. 

327 **327** ♩ = 96 //

Emma 

Will. *mp sheepishly, with minimal vibrato*  All peo-ple that on earth do dwell, Sing to the Lord with cheer - ful

Pno. **327** ♩ = 96 *mf mp* 



Better Than It Sounds

333 // *mp* slightly sheepish, but with growing confidence 39

Emma  
Him serve with fear, his praise forth tell, Come ye and

Will.  
voice; With fear, his praise forth tell, Come ye be - fore him,

Pno.

338

Emma  
re - joice. Ah

Will.  
and re - joice. Ah

Pno.

sing on 'ah' to the end, as if you are just disregarding the text, whatever it is

*mf*

343

Emma

Will.

Pno.

*f*

Better Than It Sounds

40

348

Emma

Will.

Pno.

352

Emma

Will.

Pno.

*ff*

*ff*

*ff*

356

356

Emma

Will.

Pno.

*mf*

*mf*

356

Better Than It Sounds

359 rit.  $\text{♩} = 96$  41

Emma

Will.

Pno.

Detailed description: This block contains the first system of a musical score. It features three staves: Emma (treble clef), Will. (bass clef), and Pno. (grand staff). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 96. The first measure (359) is marked with a ritardando (rit.) and a dynamic of forte (f). The Emma and Will. parts consist of eighth-note patterns. The Pno. part is mostly silent in the first measure. The second measure (360) has a dynamic of mezzo-piano (mp) and a fermata over the first note. The third measure (361) has a dynamic of forte (f). The system ends at measure 41.

363

Emma

Will.

Pno.

Detailed description: This block contains the second system of a musical score. It features three staves: Emma (treble clef), Will. (bass clef), and Pno. (grand staff). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 4/4. The first measure (363) has a dynamic of fortissimo (ff). The Emma and Will. parts have eighth-note patterns. The Pno. part has chords and eighth-note patterns. The second measure (364) has a dynamic of fortissimo (ff). The third measure (365) has a dynamic of fortissimo (ff). The fourth measure (366) has a dynamic of fortissimo (fff) and a 'va' marking. The system ends with a fermata over the final note.

Better Than It Sounds

42

368

Emma

Will.

Sam

Pno.

*Spoken: Mr Clemens?*  
*(chase after SAM)*  
*Mr. Clemens!*

*(look at them, mouth agape, then at the audience helplessly, shake your head and stroll offstage in a daze, throwing up your hands.)*