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SONGS FOR CONTEMPORARY VOICES:
PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES OF WOMEN MAKING
MUSIC IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Songs for Contemporary Voices:
Perspectives and Strategies of Women Making Music
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“I confess I enjoyed accentuating the character, perhaps as a provocation!” Thus Isabelle Aboulker, a renowned contemporary French composer, justified setting a viciously misogynistic text by Jean de la Fontaine in her song “La femme noyée” (The Drowned Woman). Her comment demonstrates a deliberate strategy for proactively and provocatively engaging with her own problematic cultural history through composition. This is just one of many approaches that contemporary female composers take to the negotiation of gender in their work.

This dissertation addresses Aboulker’s approach, together with those of Libby Larsen, Caroline Shaw, Pamela Z, and other composers and composer-performers of the current generation to the composition of art songs and vocal music in the twenty-first century. Engaging with musical-textual interpretation, performance studies, and emerging theories of collaborative musicianship, I develop an approach to their work that takes account of both creative musical acts and the social and historical place of the composers in question. My research addresses three central issues in feminist musicological scholarship through the analysis of both notated music and live and recorded performances of art song: first, the relationships and tensions between

poetic text and musical composition; second, the focus of female bodies in performance as a site for the construction of meaning; and third, the category of the “female composer” as a marked and often derogatory term. Using a variety of examples by women composers with diverse compositional styles, I offer fresh insight into the multifaceted musical experiences of women in performance and composition.

My work draws on interdisciplinary methodologies both to destabilize traditional hermeneutic interpretation and to develop a new set of tools for a feminist understanding of musical works by women. Ultimately, I argue, the conventional focus on musical text as the primary object of study is a detriment to more dynamic areas of cultural production. Drawing attention away from the “text,” I focus instead on the women and on female body as conduits of composition, performance, listening, and understanding.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Laurie, who taught me that with love all things are easy.

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Introduction: Women's Music and Women's Words

A recent performance of Caroline Shaw's four-movement piece for voice and string quartet, *By and By*, featured many of the standard trappings of a classical-music concert: a dimmed house, a silent, attentive audience, and a string quartet arranged on center stage, dressed in concert black and seated on a raised proscenium. Other aspects of the performance, however, struck me as rather unusual: first, the composer herself was seated amidst the string players as the vocal soloist; second, I could hear the soft crackling of an amplifying microphone perched in front of her; and finally, once the music began, I recognized the words of a song that I heard last not at the symphony, but in church. "Will there be any stars in my crown?" is a hymn, and it is also performed frequently by country singers. *By and By* features songs adapted from country-western and gospel standards, re-contextualized and re-harmonized in a classical chamber idiom. The performance had all the rhythmic flexibility of a gospel solo and featured improvisatory gestures throughout. When I finally looked at the score, weeks after this performance, I was struck by how sparse it was; Shaw had left a great many of the musical decisions in the hands of the performers. I considered how little of the rich musical experience I had witnessed translated onto the page, and conversely, how many possibilities for markedly different musical experiences were captured in it.

Months later, at a musicological conference, I gave a presentation about my research on Shaw's piece. I shared recordings of the composer's own performances of this piece and discussed her unique approach to musical notation. I remarked on the ways that Shaw's participation in performance challenges the distinction between composer and performer. Following my presentation, a senior scholar asked me what kind of

analytical approach I would take for this music, given Shaw's novel approach to notation and performance. The question gave me pause. Shaw's piece certainly does not lend itself to most standard modes of analysis; traditional approaches to tonal music, such as Schenkerian models, prioritize harmonic and voice-leading procedures that are largely absent in Shaw's work. The harmonic language is simple; one song contains an alternation of just two chords. Shaw is not concerned with the issues that can generally be uncovered through any kind of reductive model, which might be more relevant to a Romantic-era string quartet. Shaw's piece is rich in timbral contrast, improvisation, explorations of repetition bordering on the hypnotic, and, importantly, meaningful text set in a rhythmically flexible, declamatory style. As a result, each iteration of the piece in performance can vary dramatically. Traditional modes of analytical inquiry cannot capture these salient features.

The question from the scholar in my audience revealed a prioritizing of a very particular set of principles, ones that some academics and critics within classical music continue to value. It is a text-centered value system, in which the score remains the ultimate artifact of the work and serves a prescriptive purpose for future performances. Shaw and contemporary composers like her are actively creating a body of work that resists these text-centered modes of scholarly engagement. Whereas sub-fields such as popular music studies and jazz studies often engage critically with music in ways that do not require a written score at all, studies of contemporary classical music often employ traditional hermeneutic approaches grounded in musical texts. In order to grapple with music that slips through the cracks of traditional modes of critique and analysis, new tools are needed.

Text-centered scholarly approaches, crafted primarily as descriptive and analytic tools for the canonical works of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have also assisted in validating the compositional work of men. Literate musical traditions, based in the academy and other social institutions that have historically excluded women, are, I argue, fundamentally biased against them. The result is a broad cultural understanding that composition is considered an overwhelmingly male act, despite the many composers and scholars who work against this trope. The ubiquity of the term “female composer” as a marked signifier is indicative of this deep habit of thought in the western classical music tradition.

Within this evolving tradition, women have been permitted into musical circles as performers far longer than they have been accepted as composers, and publishing options for women were limited well into the twentieth century. While today these legal and social barriers have largely been removed, ingrained habits of thought and well-worn analytical models employed by critics and analysts persist, resulting in major disparities in concert programming, awards for composition, and opportunities for female composers. In many cases, the prevailing narratives of western music history—narratives that favor, among other things, contributions by men over women—seem difficult to upend.

The work of contemporary female composers, even within the relatively narrow frame of American- and European-based art-music composers, represents a wide range of compositional, stylistic, and ideological perspectives that warrant analysis and representation in scholarly literature. Traditional hermeneutic frameworks, crafted, in many cases, by men to treat a male-dominated canon, are, however, insufficient. In order

to deal with this new repertoire by female composers, we must also fundamentally rethink our approach to music by women.

My research addresses three central issues in feminist musicological scholarship: first, the relationships and tensions between poetic text and musical composition; second, the focus of female bodies in performance as a site for the construction of meaning; and third, the category of the “female composer” as a marked and often derogatory term. Ultimately, I argue, the conventional focus on musical text as the primary object of study is a detriment to more dynamic areas of cultural production. Drawing attention away from this logocentric model, I focus instead on the women and on female body as conduits of composition, performance, listening, and understanding.

The dissertation contains four case studies, examining songs and other vocal works of women composing art music in the twenty-first century: Libby Larsen (b. 1950), Isabelle Aboulker (b. 1938), Caroline Shaw (b. 1982), and Pamela Z (b. 1956). Methodologically, I attempt to approach the work of each composer in the terms that suit it best. Perhaps most significant is my commitment to hearing and interpreting the words of these women: I center my work around interviews with each composer. This approach encourages consideration of the central issues from multiple female perspectives, and also allows composers to speak for themselves, contributing to the generation of new musical ideas and the preservation of primary source material concerning their lives and work. Numerous published interviews with Libby Larsen are available, and I have drawn on them extensively in my readings of her work. Other voices are less well-documented. I have conducted interviews myself with Isabelle Aboulker, Caroline Shaw, and Pamela Z, seeking to meet them on their own terms with respect to their musical experiences and goals. I frame and interpret their music through the lens of these interviews, and I attempt

to understand the interviews through a scholarly apparatus that sometimes cuts against the grain of the composers' intentions.

My project aims to uncover the specificities of particular composers' approaches and develop appropriate tools for criticism and analysis that account for compositional techniques that diverge from older models. The authoritative notated musical score is a waning phenomenon in contemporary art music, as performer-centered or collaborative approaches increasingly weaken the score's authority. My toolkit contributes to a growing body of scholarship that resists the privileging of the written word as the primary source of musical meaning; instead, I emphasize cross-disciplinary knowledge, inspired by gender studies, performance studies, new materialism, and feminist musicology. These approaches accommodate the increasingly permeable barrier between composer and performer and provide alternatives to traditional hermeneutic models that are often inherently biased against women composers by virtue of their fundamental logocentricity.

Historically, the term "female composer" has been treated as a broad, unified category. Women have, of course, been composing in the western art music tradition for centuries, but their underrepresentation in canonized repertoire has led to a certain essentializing, as if their identities as women mean that their musical styles will all fit into a single category. There is certainly precedent in scholarly literature for considering certain kinds of music "feminine" or "masculine," and women's musical contributions have been frequently and erroneously conflated with this kind of gendered discourse in musical analysis.¹ I identify this term as a manifestation of what Derrida calls

¹ Sally Macarthur, *Towards a Twenty-First-Century Feminist Politics of Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

“phallogocentrism,” a portmanteau of “phallocentrism” and “logocentrism,” which implies that phallocentrism is embedded in our language, and in turn, our perception of phenomena.² In this dissertation, one of my goals is to explore the ways that these entanglements have impacted the life and works of the women I study, women who have otherwise received the same kinds of training in the western art music tradition as their male counterparts.

My approach, which combines first-person accounts by the composers with hermeneutic readings of musical texts and recordings, as well as performance studies analyses, contributes to contemporary musicological literature by developing new tools and approaches appropriate to the work of contemporary composers. My cross-disciplinary approach to musical critique and interpretation encourages new perspectives for future study.

My own research follows a robust body of work that engages with feminist musicology from a number of viewpoints. In the relatively short history of this subfield, certain broad themes have emerged. Many of the scholars engaging with critical feminist musicology, for example, have rightly pointed to composers’ choice of source material as a pervasive and gendered issue in much of the vocal canon: how does a composer choose the poetry, libretto, or text that is set to music, and why? How do the composer’s poetic choices affect the meaning of the work for listeners today? These problems have been addressed in the past primarily in opera studies, in seminal works such as Clément’s *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* and McClary’s *Feminine Endings*.³ Opera’s portrayal

² Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

³ Catherine Clément, *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

of women is notoriously problematic; for example, McClary highlights the pervasive link between femininity and madness in her examination of the popularity of the “mad scene” in opera, tracing similarities from Monteverdi to Schoenberg. The persistence of these tropes through centuries of musical development and styles, through the creation and dissolution of tonality itself, indicates a deeply embedded link that seems difficult if not impossible to upend.

The lyric content of canonical song repertoire, where I focus my inquiry in Chapter One of this dissertation, can be as troubling as opera in its portrayal of women. Ruth Solie addresses this problem in her discussion of contemporary performances of Robert Schumann’s song cycle *Frauenliebe und -leben*.⁴ She asks her readers to consider the analytical possibilities of new (ca. 1990s) critical feminist musicology.

A great deal of recent work in musicology has contributed to re-thinking critical paradigms that support feminist perspectives. A number of scholars seeking to understand the trajectories of women’s contributions to art music, and the institutional and structural challenges therein, have made inroads in developing these modes of engagement.

A number of studies engage with the musical text in pursuit of feminist perspectives. Many early examples of these can be found in the collection *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, and particularly in Marcia Citron’s “Feminist Approaches to Musicology.” This essay is a call to action, to which many of us have responded. Another critical piece of scholarship in this vein is Suzanne Cusick’s “Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance.” In this, she

⁴ Ruth A. Solie, *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

explicitly defines feminist critique and identifies the personal problems that female scholars encounter when they engage in this mode of thought:

...what Elaine Showalter has called “feminist critique”—the deciphering and demystification of gender messages in our repertoire’s canonic works. Once we’ve begun the deciphering, many of us feel with gathering regret that we can never listen to music again. Our urge to eschew classical music amounts to the temptation of separatism. Like separatism, it promises our psyches temporary safety from and moral superiority over misogynist and homophobic messages. But like separatism it threatens to rob feminist musicology of its political power, its power to challenge classical music’s complicity in sustaining ideas of gender and sexuality we find anachronistic and oppressive.⁵

Additionally, in the same essay, Cusick questions the assumptions that performances of canonical works must be *faithful* to some universal meaning imparted by the composer, what she terms the “ideology of faithful performance.” In this line of questioning lays a starting point for my project, as she is encouraging a move away from the idea that musical meaning lies in the “music itself,” in other words, in texts. Her later work takes up this approach, in a study of twentieth century women.⁶ Ellie Hisama, likewise, focuses on the materiality of playing the music of women like Marion Bauer, juxtaposed with a study of the composer’s writings.⁷

Cusick has also made substantial contributions to queer musicology, the products of which also inform my approach. I strive for an intersectional understanding of feminist musicology, one that does not limit itself to the concerns of white, upper-class women, and consciously works to incorporate scholarship from outside that demographic. I also

⁵ Suzanne Cusick, “Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance.” *Repercussions* 3, no. 1 (1994): 77.

⁶ Suzanne Cusick, “‘Eve ... Blowing in Our Ears’? Toward a History of Music Scholarship on Women in the Twentieth Century.” *Women & Music* 16 (January 1, 2001), 125-141.

⁷ Ellie Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

recognize that my own positioning as a cisgender, culturally white woman colors my lived experience, and I must therefore continue to seek diverse perspectives. The watershed collection *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* has been an important starting point for these kinds of resources.⁸ Additionally, in my pursuit of non-white perspectives, I have also found Naomi André's contributions to opera scholarship invaluable.⁹

In the related fields of ethnomusicology and performance studies, important work has been done that informs my methods, and I hope that my own work can contribute to this body of knowledge. Dwight Conquergood's essay in *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, is foundational to my approach to performance studies; in this work, he identifies the fundamentally discriminatory nature of a logocentric knowledge base and posits performance studies as a scholarly venue for a more equitable dissemination of truths. I argue, in turn, that this evaluation applies to text-centered music as well.¹⁰ The other foundational performance studies text I draw upon is Diana Taylor's *Performance*; Taylor's cross-disciplinary and decolonizing approach to performance studies has important applications for alternative approaches to classical music.¹¹

⁸ Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas. *Queering the Pitch : the New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

⁹ Naomi Adele André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Naomi Adele André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor, *Blackness in Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*. Edited by E. P. Johnson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

¹¹ Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Recent forays into performance ethnographies and ethnographies of classical music have also taken up this performance studies model; these studies destabilize traditional assumptions about the approach to the study of classical music, opening that music up to ethnomusicological and socio-cultural inquiry. An important early work in this vein is Henry Kingsbury's study on the conservatory system, and Ellen Koskoff's recent *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Gender and Music*.¹² Self-ethnography and ethnography as performance are also important new methodologies in this vein of music-performance studies. Deborah Wong's works, in particular "Moving: From Performance to Performative Ethnography and Back Again," and *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* provide excellent models.¹³

This dissertation takes its inspiration from a number of scholars across disciplinary boundaries whose approaches and methodologies inform my own. The seeds of this project began when I was introduced to the concept of New Materialist feminist philosophy through the collection *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman.¹⁴ This approach to gender embraces the actual, lived specificities of sexed bodies, a component sorely lacking in earlier literature, and reconciles the real experiences of women within the social constructs of gender. These essays encouraged

¹² Henry Kingsbury, *Music Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Ellen Koskoff, *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Gender and Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

¹³ Deborah Wong, "Moving: From Performance to Performative Ethnography and Back Again." In *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, eds. Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 76–89; Wong, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁴ Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

me to think about the female body on the musical stage as a site for the construction of meaning.

Another important model in gender studies is Lena Gunnarsson, a self-described “Marxist-Realist” whose work has provided important critiques to other recent postmodernist and new materialist feminist literature.¹⁵ Her article, “In Defence of the Category ‘Women’” has also provided me with some of my guiding principles in grappling with “female composer” or “woman composer” as a meaningful category.

This kind of understanding of the lived materiality of gender fits well with a performance-centered approach to musical interpretation. The most influential book in this vein is Christopher Small’s *Musicking: the Meanings of Performing and Listening*, which refocuses the study of music on the activity of music-making, rather than on the music as a work, score, or other fixed object. Nina Eidsheim takes this concept further in her monograph, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*.¹⁶ The multisensory attributes of her vibrational practice generate new perspectives from which to understand the music I study. Her case studies of interdisciplinary art all broadly regarded as “opera” also provides a useful model for my study of music broadly regarded as art song.

Methodologically, I also follow Jennifer Kelly’s approach of allowing her subjects to speak for themselves and advancing knowledge about women who compose from an emic perspective. *In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the*

¹⁵ Lena Gunnarsson, “The Naturalistic Turn in Feminist Theory: A Marxist-Realist Contribution.” *Feminist Theory* 14, no. 1 (April 2013): 3-19.

¹⁶ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Sign, Storage, Transmission* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

United States allows the composers themselves to shed light on important questions relating to the diversity of women composing across genres.¹⁷ This collection of interviews forms part of my model for analysis and critique of the music. In my conversation with Pamela Z, for example, she expressed how frequently critics, musicologists, and theorists, interpret her music to serve their own ideological goals, to the point of misinterpreting or obscuring Z's work.¹⁸ Kelly's approach inspired me to use the conversation itself, a kind of Socratic dialogue, as the starting point for musical exploration. It is a distinct benefit of studying contemporary composers that I have the ability to communicate directly with them and include their own words in my research. This approach allows both the music itself and the music-makers, the generators of musical ideas, to inform the analysis.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation examines the compositional work of four women whose style, goals, and musical aesthetics differ dramatically. The specific concerns that arise from each case study shed light on the various strategies that each composer employs with respect to the negotiation of gender in their work. The musical works discussed throughout the dissertation can all be generally defined as "songs." The focus on a genre that has historically made extensive use of women's singing voices provides fertile ground for the exploration of how conventional models of art song are alternately upheld, modified, challenged, and ultimately, deconstructed. Each successive chapter takes the reader from a text-centered, logocentric approach to song composition, to one that

¹⁷ Jennifer Kelly, *In Her Own Words - Conversations with Composers in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Pamela Z, Interview with the author. See full transcript in Appendix C.

destabilizes the musical work entirely, locating it entirely within the composer-performer's body.

Chapter One investigates two song cycles by American composer Libby Larsen. In both *Songs from Letters* and *Try Me, Good King*, Larsen claims to give voice to first-person accounts of historical women. Through a close textual reading of Larsen's songs as well as research into primary source texts and biographies, I uncover the ways in which Larsen's representations perpetuate traditional models of femininity (rooted in bourgeois ideals formed during the eighteenth century) rather than upholding accurate depictions of the women for whom she speaks.¹⁹ Ultimately, Larsen's work upholds many nineteenth century conventions of art song composition, including the tendency to represent women who fulfill these traditional gender roles. She imbues those representations with a sense of visceral historicism by virtue of their performance by women. I aim to unmask the so-called "benevolent sexism" inherent in these kinds of representations and explore alternative ways in which fictionalizations have proven to be more empowering.²⁰

Larsen's work demonstrates a clear lineage from nineteenth-century *Lieder*, and her value system as a composer is very much aligned with conventional Romantic aesthetics. She has been vocal in her concern for musician's adherence to her meticulously notated scores. The traditional logocentric model is very much at play in her

¹⁹ Richard D. Leppert, *Music and Image: Domesticity, Ideology, and Socio-Cultural Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²⁰ For clarification on the terminology, see Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, "The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 3 (March 1996): 491–512.

works. In the remaining chapters, I explore the music and methods of other composers who have begun to question, challenge, and provide alternatives to these models.

In Chapter Two, I explore the ways in which French composer Isabelle Aboulker struggles with her own problematic cultural history through song composition. I focus my research on her collection of songs for female voice and piano, *Femmes en Fables*, which features texts drawn from Jean de la Fontaine's famous seventeenth-century collection of fables. The texts of these fables, compiled from international folklore and other fabulists like Aesop, are often blatantly misogynistic; regarded as morality tales for children, they are often dismissed as archaic and patriarchal. Even so, the texts continue to appear in various forms of cultural production, including music; this begs the question: how do audiences today receive and interpret the misogynistic texts of the past?

Musical settings of these tales abound, and Aboulker has written no fewer than three large-scale vocal works based on Fontaine's famous *Fables*. Aboulker's work represents a new phase in the tradition of French modernism encompassing Fauré, Massenet, Les Six, and Aboulker's own grandfather, Henry Février. *Femmes en Fables* is a group of four songs scored for medium female voice and piano, and features fables that include female protagonists. The songs have proved controversial, and have been avoided by singers for containing texts that are derogatory towards women. Aboulker's reverence for the literature is often, however, complicated by the misogynistic language of the texts. She struggles, as many do, to reconcile the art she loves with its sexist content.

Aboulker's setting actually provides stunning feminist insight into the famous stories. I argue that the interpretation of stories about women in settings by a female composer and performances by a female singer enables a new perspective. My

interpretation of Aboulker's cycle draws on both performance studies and new materialist philosophy in developing a methodology that can accommodate multiple, synthesized viewpoints of female experiences, calling attention to bodies that write, perform, and listen. Using methodologies that focuses on the specific, material qualities of the singer's voice and interpretive choices, I emphasize the moment of performance not as an ephemeral experience but as an embodied repetition of historical memory, which presents new avenues for analysis beyond traditional hermeneutic models.

In Chapter Three, I explore themes of authorship and collaborative musicianship in two vocal chamber works by Caroline Shaw. Shaw's music lends itself to a collaborative model; she emphasizes that scores are not fully prescriptive documents and embraces an eighteenth-century style of "thin notation" that leaves a great degree of interpretive flexibility for musicians.²¹ Moreover, she often assumes an ensemble role in performances of her own work, complicating the conventional hierarchy dividing composers and performers. Using Shaw's compositional technique as a model, this chapter argues that the logocentrism of western musical practice is one of the major obstacles to gender parity in the field. Shaw's work calls for new interpretive and analytical approaches that embrace the performance as the central site of inquiry.

The collaborative model I outline can contribute to the development of new perspectives, with certain caveats. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of Shaw's musical collaborations with rap artist Kanye West, whose status as a celebrity and genius complicates the model; the pervasive history of women's roles as singers in the recording

²¹ See Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music a Period Performer's History of Music for the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

studio, rather than creators, often reflects the same traditional composer/performer binary that also exists in classical music.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I examine the solo repertoire of Pamela Z, and her approach to composition as primarily performance-based rather than notation-based. Her engagement with live electronic instruments and the centrality of vocal performance are both central to her compositional habits. She synthesizes her classical vocal training with experimental approaches, and focuses her compositional efforts largely on work intended for her own performance, thus eliminating the composer/performer divide entirely.

Focusing on Z's solo repertoire, I examine live and recorded performances of two pieces, "Badagada" and "Quatre Couches," to demonstrate the ways that Z's engagement with electronic instruments has evolved along with technological innovation. I identify her instruments as crucial tools for exploring embodied composition, and the ways the tools shape her musical output.

Though her work does not explicitly invite it, Z is often sought after for demographically-programmed performances and recordings, emphasizing her female or African-American identity. Z's multiple and intersectional positioning creates a space in which she, through her own body, challenges and resists the essentializing tendencies of demographic programming, while still embracing those identities.

While each case study reveals specific goals, aesthetic values, and compositional approaches, certain shared concerns emerge: the need to address and negotiate gender in texted music with regards to source material; questions about the role of the performer as interpreter, and the impact of a female body as the central component of performance. Finally, each composer expresses dismay about her frequent categorization as a "female composer"—another shared experience—but their various responses, expressed through

composition itself, reveal a complex relationship between gender, identity, and their material manifestations in the act of music making.

Chapter 1

Libby Larsen: Representation of Women in Art Song History

“It is a dangerous thing to conflate feminism with liking all women. It limits women to being one thing: *likeable*.” – Jessica Knoll, *The Favorite Sister*¹

Libby Larsen (b. 1950) is among the most prolific and well-known American composers active in the classical tradition today. She is a rare example of a composer working full-time in the United States without any other musical post or university affiliation. She has avoided these types of appointments because it is solely in the academy, she says, where she has experienced gender bias. “The only people who do it [i.e. show bias] are academicians, when they are trying to create categories or bins or arguments. I don’t think it will get better; I think the academy will make it worse. It’s just not an issue anywhere else, but it is an issue in the academy.”² Aside from these critical remarks, Larsen largely abstains from discussing issues of gender in interviews. However, her song compositions focus considerable attention on the experiences of women.

Two of Larsen’s best-known song cycles purport to set primary-source texts by historical women: *Songs from Letters* (1989) features letters written by Martha Jane Canary (better known as Calamity Jane) to her daughter; *Try Me, Good King* (2001) is subtitled, “Last Words of the Wives of King Henry VIII.” Her program notes to these works and comments that she has made in interviews about her choices of texts emphasize a desire to champion the women portrayed—to present a musical representation of their subjective, emotional experiences in a historically accurate

¹ Jessica Knoll, *The Favorite Sister* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 18.

² Michael Slayton, *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music: Nine American Composers* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 212.

manner. In her program note for *Try Me, Good King*, for example, Larsen states, “In these songs I chose to focus on the intimate crises of the heart that affected Henry’s first five wives. In a sense, this group of songs is a monodrama of anguish and power.”³

This chapter investigates these two cycles using the text/music relationship as the primary object of study. I propose distinctive methods of approaching Larsen’s unique style, which evokes the text-driven musical style of chant while infusing it with frequent intertextual quotation. My discussion, furthermore, addresses the issues involved musical works that seek to give voice to female experiences. Larsen carefully curates the texts that she sets, drawing from multiple sources, some anachronistic or inauthentic, and frames them as the honest and straightforward words of women. As I will show, these texts have been shaped to support Larsen’s desired image of those women. Although she endows and frames them with an air of historicity, this historicist approach is undermined by Larsen’s own subjective experience and views.

Larsen’s goal is generally to paint her subjects favorably; as Tina Millhorn Stallard says of Larsen’s musical portrayal of Anne of Cleves in *Try Me, Good King*, for example, “Larsen seeks to restore Anne’s dignity and grace.”⁴ Stallard’s analysis identifies Larsen’s position as both *actively interpreting* and *advocating for* the women whose words she sets. While this analysis is valid, Larsen’s approach to setting women’s experience places her in a long tradition of representing fictionalized versions of women in Lieder and art song as truthful, historical accounts. In these two song cycles, Larsen

³ Libby Larsen, *Try Me, Good King: Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴ Slayton, *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music*, 212.

invokes what Amy Lynn Wlodarski terms a “testimonial aesthetics,” imbuing the texts with a sense of veracity that is ultimately disingenuous or questionable.⁵

As such, Larsen enters into dialogue with the established canonical works of art song, and also with the prolific and dynamic archive of material culture related to the women whose words she sets. In this vast body of written, sounded, and performed culture, including representations in sources like biographies, artistic renderings, and works of fiction, these proliferating stories entwine and overshadow any sense of the historical women and their lives. These text form what Diana Taylor calls the “dynamic archive,” within which texts interact and meaning becomes layered and flexible.⁶ With this crucial understanding, the dynamic archive becomes a space of negotiation, rather than fixed representation, of women’s experience. There is space, I argue, for fictionalization as an empowering feminist practice; Larsen’s strategy, however, differs in that she presents these fictions as truth. Recognition of the flexible meaning-space created by dynamic materiality highlights Larsen’s subjectivity in both receiving and contributing to the dynamic archive.

Calamity Jane: *Songs from Letters*

Larsen attributes the development of her compositional style and her professional successes to her upbringing in Minnesota and the musical traditions she learned there. Scholars have made particular note of her vocal writing, which attends more closely to

⁵ Amy Lynn Wlodarski “The Testimonial Aesthetics of Different Trains,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010), 101-102.

⁶ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

speech patterns rather than to lyrical melodies.⁷ The lack of lyricism, Larsen herself explains, is derived from her training in the performance of Gregorian chant as a child. She presents her vision of historical characters through the texts she chooses to set; her declamatory style prioritizes clarity of text above all other aspects of the musical texture.

Songs from Letters, a song cycle for voice and piano, sets the text of letters from Calamity Jane to her daughter, who was said to have been sent away to live with relatives. Again, in her program notes, Larsen emphasizes the personal, intimate nature of the letters as a path to understanding Jane as a historical figure. As she writes,

In the forward of *Between Ourselves*, a compilation of letters between mothers and daughters, editor Karen Payne quotes Rosa Luxemburg, “It is in the tiny struggles of individual peoples that the great movements of history are most truly observed.” I think she’s on to something. The diary of Martha Jane Canary Hickock (Calamity Jane) reveals the struggle of an individual soul, a tender soul, a woman and pioneer on many frontiers. Calamity Jane was a working woman, good in her profession, working at what she loved and making choices because of her will to work....in her time she was odd and lonely. One hundred years later, her life sheds light on contemporary society. She chooses rough-tough words to describe her life to her daughter. I’m interested in that rough-toughness and in Calamity Jane’s struggle to explain herself honestly to her daughter Janey.⁸

Larsen’s comments suggest that this song cycle constitutes an attempt to lift up and glorify a misunderstood woman. Crucially, these program notes make no mention of the widely accepted understanding that these letters are fraudulent. Larsen has, apparently, accepted the correspondence at face value, and she sets them to music in a manner that claims historical veracity.

The historical lineage of *Songs from Letters* is best understood from the perspective of Larsen’s long engagement with and priority of the classical western canon.

⁷ Denise Von Glahn, *Libby Larsen – Composing an American Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

⁸ Libby Larsen, *Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to Her Daughter Janey, 1880-1902* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Both musically and textually, *Songs from Letters* bears the markers of its historical predecessors in nineteenth century *Lieder*. The most obvious musical ancestor is Schumann's *Frauenliebe und -leben*. Like Schumann's cycle, Larsen's *Songs from Letters* makes use of a similar type of text – what Rufus Hallmark identifies in Schumann's songs as “lyric-epic” poems. Like Chamisso's *Frauenliebe und -leben*, these texts are “at once individual, first-person lyrical utterances and, when taken as a whole and in sequence, delineate a narrative.”⁹ Hallmark states further that “Chamisso provided an array of women's monologues, bringing depth and sympathy to his portrayals of feminine perspectives. Chamisso is known for his warm-hearted and sometime sentimental portraits of many characters, but there is a greater immediacy to the portrayals when the characters speak to the reader in the first person, in their own voice, as it were.”¹⁰ This sympathetic reading contrasts sharply with work of musicologists like Ruth Solie, who argues, “It is entirely to the point that these songs were not made by a woman – in which case they might conceivably (though not necessarily) convey the authority of experience – and they are not even a man's portrait of a woman – in which case they would make no pretensions to that authority: rather, they are the *impersonation* of a woman by the voices of male culture, a spurious autobiographical act.”¹¹ In a similar way, *Songs from Letters* implies the authority of experience through first-person narrative. These letters are, rather, an impersonation of Calamity Jane, and in all

⁹ Rufus E. Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben: Chamisso's Poems and Schumann's Songs* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ruth Solie, “Whose Life? The Gendered Self in Schumann's *Frauenliebe* Songs” in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries* ed. Steven P. Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 221.

likelihood an impersonation by the woman who claims to be Janey, the recipient of the letters.

Larsen's cycle, like Schumann's, is both narratively and tonally closed. Hallmark concedes that Schumann's Frau is "trapped in an endless circle of B-flat related keys; she is essentially repeatable."¹² While Larsen's songs are not strictly tonal in the traditional sense, they do form around a pitch center, and she includes certain recurring harmonic and melodic figurations that create a similarly cyclical effect. The cycle consists of five songs, representing letters written between 1880 and 1902; it begins with a mother's sadness over giving up her young daughter to be raised by friends, and ends with the tearful goodbye of an ailing, old woman.

Table 1.1: List of songs, *Songs from Letters* by Libby Larsen¹³

1	So Like Your Father's (1880)
2	He Never Misses (1880)
3	A Man Can Love Two Women (1880)
4	A Working Woman (1882-1893)
5	All I Have (1902)

¹² Hallmark, *Frauenliebe und -leben*, 125.

¹³ Larsen, *Songs from Letters*.

Most prominently, Larsen makes use of a short, repeating motive that appears at the end of both the first and last songs of the cycle, creating both a return to the original pitch area and providing a rounded form (see Ex. 1.1 and 1.2).

Ex. 1.1: “So Like Your Father’s (1880)” mm.13–17

13 *again, wistfully* *rit.*

like your fa - ther's, brought back all the years.

in the distance

mp *p*

attacca

Examination of Larsen’s choices of text for this song cycle reveals that the cycle says more about Larsen’s subjectivity and connection to these writings than they do about the historical Calamity Jane. Larsen, in a communication to music theorist Rosemary Killam, supported this observation, noting that, “instead of a mask, the music is a mirror.” Killam explores this metaphor at length in her analysis of *Songs from Letters*.¹⁴ This analysis, the only rigorous music-theoretical undertaking of Larsen’s work in a scholarly journal to date, focuses primarily on the relationship of the words to the music, as well as the deliberate choice of instrumentation, which evokes the medium of Romantic Lied.

¹⁴ Rosemary N. Killam, “Women Working: An Alternative to Gans” *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (1993): 230.

Ex. 1.2: “All I Have (1902)” mm.46 –48

45 *Freely, recitative*
quietly

Good- night, — lit- tle girl, and may God — keep you from harm.

pp

46 $\text{♩} = 56$ *rit.*

warmly, bell-like
p

Larsen’s decision to set the (fictionalized) texts of Calamity Jane using soprano voice and piano is crucial to her project. Although she writes prolifically in several classical genres, art songs for solo voice are among her most frequently programmed and recorded pieces. The art song is a genre closely associated with both women’s performance and composition. As Marcia Citron notes, “The Lied, that very special musicoliterary genre that emerged shortly after 1750, attracted female composers, resulting in many fine pieces of music written by women. From its inception the Lied constituted a type of chamber music and as such fit comfortably in a domestic environment, a setting in which women had long been accepted as performers, in clear contrast to the public arena, whose

large-scale operas, sacred music, and orchestral music were off limits to women”¹⁵ This genre also forms the core repertory of published music by women in the nineteenth century.

Regarding *Songs and Letters*, Killam argues that “Larsen’s choice of piano and female voice provides an irony which enriches our approach to her work....Larsen’s writing for female singer and piano reinterprets nineteenth-century stereotypical roles for women as ornamental objects, confined to the privacy of the home.”¹⁶ Another possibility, however, is that the choice isn’t ironic at all. Larsen composes prolifically with this duo configuration, and makes no indication that she is challenging nineteenth-century ideals. She notes that she has “by choice spent a great deal of my time and efforts composing works for orchestral instruments developed in the 1800s”¹⁷ Of her numerous songs and cycles, she says, “many of my solo vocal art songs are composed for female voice because I am pursuing the idea that an art songs recital can be an opportunity for dramatic presentation as well as an opportunity for technical recitation. Tying a song cycle to a characterization is a helpful way of exploring this notion.”¹⁸ These statements reinforce the notion that Larsen accepts the genre of the Lied, with all of its historical associations, as a suitable and meaningful medium for women’s performance and female representation.

Killam’s suggestion that Larsen is engaging ironically with the nineteenth-century Lied convention seems to be informed not by Larsen’s own words, but by Killam’s own

¹⁵ Marcia J. Citron, "Feminist Approaches to Musicology." *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994, 17.

¹⁶ Killam, “Women Working,” 231.

¹⁷ “Women in Music” Libby Larsen (website), <https://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=230>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

favorable opinion of the cycles. Of “A Working Woman (1882-1893),” the fourth song in the cycle, Killam says, “I acknowledge that I heard the song just prior to the twenty-fifth anniversary of my choice of single parenthood.”¹⁹ Killam’s mapping of the relatable text onto her own experience perhaps obscures Larsen’s more straightforward objectives.

In fact, Larsen’s strategy seems to be deliberately to reproduce the aesthetics of nineteenth-century Lied culture without critiquing or resisting it. The narrative created by Larsen’s selections emphasize traditionally feminine aspects of Jane’s identity, primarily motherhood. The letters certainly make Jane a more sympathetic figure in the eyes of a generally patriarchal society. In his biography, *Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend*, James McLaird identifies the letters to Jane McCormick, who claimed to be the daughter of Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok, as forgeries.

McCormick, it turned out, was born in 1880 – four years after Hickok’s death – and was no relation to either of the famous characters she said were her parents. The diary was a fiction she had created, but people believed it because they wanted to. It confirmed a romance between Hickok and Calamity that never existed but had always been so appealing to the public. And here was a Calamity who was her reckless and adventurous self, but also more conventionally feminine than she had previously seemed to be – wifely, motherly, sentimental, almost domestic – and, thus, perhaps easier to understand, accept, and sympathize with. Even after the diary became widely acknowledged as being a fake, it remained in people’s imaginations. Its story line was woven into films about Calamity and became the basis of books – and the letters have even been set to music and performed.”²⁰

The wild popularity of the fake letters, McLaird argues, is likely because they recast Calamity Jane as conforming to traditional gender roles.

There remains the question why McCormick’s diary and letters have gained such popularity despite being obvious forgeries. The answer, it seems, has to do with

¹⁹ Killam, “Women Working,” 233.

²⁰ James D. McLaird, *Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 252.

the character of Calamity Jane in legend. Prior to McCormick's documents, this Calamity Jane was primarily masculine, scouting, riding, smoking, and drinking her way through the West. Evidently, this image was inadequate to fully captivate the public imagination, for early in the twentieth century Calamity's nursing and charity were increasingly emphasized, giving her feminine qualities. Calamity's humanitarianism quickly became one of the most compelling aspects of her legend. In 1941, Jean McCormick added motherhood to Calamity's character, reinforcing her femininity. McCormick's Calamity Jane has since become so popular that she often displaces the actual Martha Canary in histories of the West.²¹

This selective characterization obscures some of Calamity Jane's historical relevance; her behaviors and actions were not congruent with societal expectations, and many found Calamity an unsavory character. McCormick's letters, and Larsen's songs, by extension, preserve a feminine ideal, eschewing the notion that women are often flawed humans, or are possessed of qualities at odds with convention. While Larsen purports to give voice to Calamity Jane, with all the rough-tough language intact, she is actually reinforcing a fictionalization of Jane that prioritizes traditional notions of femininity at the expense of historical accuracy.

Try Me, Good King

Larsen's well-known song cycle for soprano and piano, *Try Me Good King*, uses prose sources, whether transcribed from speech or excerpted from correspondence, representing five of Henry VIII's wives. While the texts are derived from personal letters as well as public speeches from moments of great crisis—for example, Anne Boleyn's and Katherine Howard's gallows speeches—Larsen has also done a fair amount of reorganization. The ordering and splicing of texts from different letters, as well as the

²¹ Ibid.

interpolation of texts from other sources, introduces a layer of intertextual reference and, importantly, fictionalization, within the score.

Despite the title's claim that the cycle reproduces "the last words" of each of Henry's wives, Larsen's selections represent a rather wider variety of source material; her role in curating the text is central to my critique. The first song, "Katherine of Aragon," uses the text of a famous letter from 1536, which is thought to be Katherine's last correspondence to her husband.²² The second song, "Anne Boleyn" draws on three textual sources: the first is a 1536 letter, in which she pleads for a fair and unbiased trial ("Try me, good king") following a string of accusations made against her by the king, including adultery and witchcraft. The second source is an undated love letter from Henry to Anne, which is presented in the cycle as a quotation. The third source is Anne's execution speech, dated May 19, 1536; this text exists in several transcriptions from witnesses to Anne's beheading, with very little variation among the versions.²³ The third song, "Jane Seymour," likewise juxtaposes multiple text sources: a letter in which Seymour announces the birth of her son to the king, and the text and melody of the lute song "Tudor Rose." The fourth song, "Anne of Cleves," sets the text from a letter from Anne to Henry dated July 11, 1540.²⁴ It should be noted that Anne lived another seventeen years after penning this letter, so these are hardly her last words, but this letter did effectively mark her last written act as queen consort prior to the annulment of her

²² Herbert of Cherbury, Edward Herbert. *The Life and Reign of King Henry VIII* (London: Printed by Andr. Clark for J. Martyn, S. Mearne and H. Herringman, 1672). Microfilm.

²³ The major biographies include: Paul Friedmann, *Anne Boleyn; a Chapter of English History, 1527-1536* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884); Retha M. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn: Family Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁴ Strickland, Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England* (New York, J. Miller, 1843).

marriage to Henry. The fifth and final song in the cycle, “Katherine Howard,” sets a partial transcription of her last words on the gallows prior to her execution.²⁵

Table 1.2: List of songs, *Try Me, Good King* by Libby Larsen

1	Katherine of Aragon
2	Anne Boleyn
3	Jane Seymour
4	Anne of Cleves
5	Katherine Howard

Try Me, Good King encapsulates numerous hallmarks of Larsen’s musical style. Like *Songs from Letters*, unifying musical devices across five songs create a sense of narrative progression and cyclical return. This cycle uses three primary compositional techniques that provide a structural framework for the cycle as a whole. First, Larsen incorporates quotations from Elizabethan-era lute songs, which she identifies in her program notes.²⁶ Each song provides commentary and adds semiotic density to the texts of the letters and speeches; Larsen claims these call to mind the music of the time, while still acknowledging that these lute songs were all composed well after Henry VIII’s reign.

²⁵ Lacey Baldwin Smith, *A Tudor Tragedy; the Life and Times of Catherine Howard* (London: J. Cape, 1961).

²⁶ Larsen, *Try Me, Good King*.

Second, she uses a repeating, pulsating figure that she explains “recalls the lute and creates psychological tension,” (see Ex. 1.3). Lastly, a recurring bell-tolling figure serves as both a sign of formal closure and a representative figure of spirituality and harbinger of death.

These devices are prominent throughout the musical texture and easily identified audibly. Quotation is, as I have noted, a common device in much of Larsen’s output; here it recalls her early education in medieval music.²⁷ The lute songs recur in relatively predictable ways throughout the cycle, implying a sense of shared experience across the movements, and therefore among the women’s lived experiences. Both the composite texts and compositional techniques used throughout the cycle work to accomplish Larsen’s goal of creating a single narrative thread. The final song, “Katherine Howard,” closes on F, the same pitch as the pedal note that pervades the first song, “Katherine of Aragon” (Ex. 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5). The same lute-song excerpt also appears in both of these songs in Larsen’s cycle (marked with an asterisk throughout the score), creating a cyclical and unified musical structure. Musically and textually, Larsen has constructed a monodrama, rich in organic unity, from a multiplicity of disparate sources.

Larsen is explicit about her desire to highlight the similarities among all the queens’ experiences and present these women’s mutual struggles in their own words.²⁸ This approach is applicable beyond this particular cycle, and Larsen identifies her use of female characters as a broad and deliberate trend. In an interview, she states, “I am drawn to first-person texts, and a certain expression of spiritual struggle. When I study texts for men to sing, it’s very difficult to find the raw struggle towards honesty that

²⁷ Von Glahn, *Libby Larsen*.

²⁸ See program notes in Larsen, *Try Me, Good King*

interests me in first-person female texts. There's a distancing that I often find in male texts. Almost all of the emotions are held at arm's length to be extracted and examined objectively through technique and a particular kind of language. In many texts written by women, the language is subjective and very personal. The author risks exposing herself directly to the reader."²⁹ This comment implies an essentializing of women in the form of a tendency towards emotionality in their writing.

However, Larsen has, in fact, shaped her texts through careful editing and curation of primary sources in order to achieve this essentialized end; this can be seen through consideration of the historical sources about each of Henry's wives, as I will discuss below. In recent years, each of Henry's wives has experienced a second life in historical biography, literary fiction, and popular culture that has created multiple and often contradictory versions of her character. Larsen's song cycle makes a contribution to the legacy of these women through her musical interpretation of their words. Through an investigation of the textual sources that Larsen uses for each song, and her choices in setting those texts musically, I uncover the specific and subjective contribution that Larsen makes to the dynamic archive.

²⁹ Slayton, 212

Ex. 1.3: Larsen, Excerpt from “Katherine of Aragon,” Opening, *Try Me, Good King*.

$\text{♩} = 50$
 $\text{♩} = 50$
p $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ throughout
legato, pedal ad lib.

The score consists of three staves. The top staff is a single melodic line. The middle staff is a treble clef staff with a piano (p) dynamic marking. The bottom staff is a bass clef staff with a continuous eighth-note pedal point. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 50.

Ex. 1.4: Larsen, Excerpt from “Katherine of Aragon,” Closing, *Try Me, Good King*

3
 a - bove all things, a-bove
bell-toll
bell-toll to end
rit.
 all things.
rit.
Ped. II

The score consists of two systems of three staves each. The top staff is a single melodic line with lyrics. The middle staff is a treble clef staff with lyrics and musical notation. The bottom staff is a bass clef staff with a continuous eighth-note pedal point. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 50.

Ex. 1.5 Larsen, “Katherine Howard” *Try Me Good King*, mm.43-45.

43 *molto agitato, accel.* *molto rit.*

molto agitato, accel. *molto rit.*

fff *p*

**“In darkness let me dwell”

“Katherine of Aragon”

Katherine of Aragon’s final letter to Henry, which forms the basis of Larsen’s first song, is an example of the ways that Katherine’s contemporaries and biographers, with their own political and religious agendas, have claimed Katherine’s words to serve their own ends. The original letter, which “has been quoted for centuries as a wonderful example of Katherine’s saintly nature,” is actually lost³⁰; the oldest appearance of the text comes from Polydore Vergil’s *Anglica Historia*, first published in the 1530s.³¹ In her biography of Katherine and her sister, Juana, Julia Fox argues that the genuine nature of the letter is in question, as Vergil, a contemporary of Henry VIII, vehemently opposed the king’s separation from the Catholic Church, and may have inserted the speech into his narrative to elevate Katherine’s pious Catholic nature.³² The authenticity of the letter is made even more dubious given other conflicting first-person accounts of Katherine’s last days. Fox explains:

³⁰ Julia Fox, *Sister Queens: The Noble, Tragic Lives of Katherine of Aragon and Juana, Queen of Castile* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 347.

³¹ Polydore Vergil, ed. Simon Grynäus, and Hans Frank, *Polydori Vergilii Urbinatis Anglicæ historiæ libri XXVI* Basileæ: Apud Io. Bebelivm, 1534. Microfilm.

³² Fox, 348.

One account of Katherine's death refers to 'a writing...made in her name addressed to the king' and a letter to Charles. Yet Chapuys (Charles V's ambassador to England) alleges that 'among the last words she said,' she sent apologies to Charles for not being able to write. And, according to the account of Katherine's last hours given to Chapuys from the servant he sent to find out what happened, while Katherine certainly dictated her final requests (which she wanted sent to Chapuys), her only other messages were oral. Also, Chapuys's account of Henry's reaction to Katherine's death is markedly different from the affecting scene described by Vergil.³³

While Fox declares Vergil "largely reliable," she has cast doubt on the authenticity of the letter.³⁴ Even if the letter were authentic, readers would still need to account for the standard practices of letter-writing in the Tudor era, and to consider how these practices may further complicate and distance the words from Katherine's person. In a recent, comprehensive review of surviving documents from this era, James Daybell "challenges traditional understandings of letters as private documents, highlighting the often collaborative nature of the composition process....The ways in which letters were dispatched and read further complicates a model of epistolary as an exchange of letters between two individuals."³⁵ Katherine's letter is an interesting case study, as it combines what Daybell labels a "letter of petition," which, he argues, afforded women the possibility of exerting power, with the "marital letter," which often includes much more informal modes of address. Katherine famously dedicates her letter to "My dear Lord, King and Husband."³⁶

At the time Katherine might have composed this letter to Henry VIII, she would have been near death, having spent the last several years in virtual exile, separated from

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

³⁶ Daybell, 27.

the king and her daughter, Mary. Katherine never recognized her divorce and referred to herself as the king's only true wife until her death. Historical documents make note of Katherine's strict adherence to her Catholic faith, and much of the letter emphasizes her concerns with matters of the spirit.³⁷ It is likely, of course, that Katherine's letter was carefully worded, knowing it would pass through the hands of many messengers and servants. Thus, as Daybell also argues, it cannot be taken as private, intimate correspondence between husband and wife.³⁸ The candor of Katherine's communication is, as with all formal letters, unclear. Larsen's alterations of the text emphasize the less formal, more emotionally-charged sentiments, and remove more formal or mundane passages.

Table 1.3: Comparison of Katherine of Aragon's letter to Henry VIII, between *Life and Reign of King Henry VIII* by Lord Herbert Cherbury and Libby Larsen's *Try Me, Good King*

<i>Primary source version:</i>	<i>Larsen's version:</i>
My Most Dear Lord, King and Husband, The hour of my death now approaching, I cannot chuse, out of the love I bear you, advise you on your Soul's health, which you ought to prefer before all considerations of the world or flesh whatsoever. For which you have cast me into many	My most dear Lord, King, and Husband, The hour of my death now drawing on, the tender love I owe you forces me... to commend myself unto you and to put you in remembrance of the health and welfare of your soul....You have cast me into many calamities and yourself into many

³⁷ Herbert of Cherbury, *The Life and Reign of King Henry VIII*.

³⁸ Daybell, 27.

<p>calamities, and your self into many troubles. But I forgive you all; and pray God to do likewise. For the rest I commend unto you Mary our Daughter, beseeching you to be a good Father to her, as I have heretofore desired. I must intreat you also, to respect my Maids, and give them in Marriage, which is not much, they being but three; and to all my other Servants, a years pay besides their due, left otherwise they should be unprovided for. Lastly, I make this Vow, that mine eyes desire you above all things.</p> <p>Farewell.</p>	<p>troubles. For my part, I pardon you everything, and I wish to devoutly pray God that He will pardon you also. For the rest, I commend unto you our daughter, Mary, beseeching you to be a good father unto her...Lastly, I make this vow, that my eyes desire you above all things. ³⁹</p>
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Larsen's alteration of the source shows one layer of her adaptation, as she emphasizes certain aspects of Katherine's words at the expense of others. The effect of Larsen's version is decidedly less chastising in tone than the original letter; it omits a reference to "the pampering of your body," likely a reference to the king's sexual

³⁹ Herbert of Cherbury, *The Life and Reign of King Henry VIII*.

appetite, and perhaps a disparaging remark about Anne Boleyn, his new wife.⁴⁰ The alterations seem designed to paint Katherine in as favorable a light as possible.

Larsen's choice to repeat Katherine's opening salutation, the words "dear" and "husband," is significant. This is also the only instance of a repeating melodic fragment in the vocal line. This fragment is part of the quotation of the well-known lute song by John Dowland, "In darkness let me dwell," which is heard in a high register in the piano part several times. The interaction between Larsen's original material and her quotations of Dowland's song demonstrates Larsen's role in interpreting Katherine's words. This song endows the cycle with both melodic and structural coherence, as it is used in quotation in both this first song and the final one, "Katherine Howard." The unsung text of the lute song is as follows:

In darkness let me dwell:

In darkness let me dwell
 The ground shall sorrow be.
 The roof despair to bar all cheerful light from me.
 The walls of marble black that moistened still shall weep
 My music hellish jarring sounds to banish friendly sleep.
 Thus wedded to my woes and bedded to my
 Tomb
 O let me living die
 Till death, till death do come
 In darkness let me dwell⁴¹

The dark tone of this lute song furthers Larsen's portrayal of Katherine as supremely pious, desolate, and wronged. This intertextuality functions in a similar way to Vergil's biography of Henry, which depicts Katherine as the innocent victim of anti-

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Robert Dolwland, *Musicall Banquet Furnished with Varietie of Delicious Ayres, Collected Out* (London: Proquest EEBO Editions, 2010).

Catholic fervor.⁴² The letter, even if it is authentic, is not the private, intimate document that Larsen claims it to be, but a public statement, carefully worded to preserve and defend Katherine's reputation.

These circumstances place call into question Larsen's claim that she is presenting Katherine of Aragon's last and most personal words. If we consider Larsen's song as its own entity rather than a veridic replication of Katherine's words, then, the song does not represent the real Katherine. It is, however, a piece of fiction that grows out of Katherine's experience; shaped by Larsen's perspective, the song presents Katherine's experience through a performer to an audience equally capable of deriving new meaning.

"Anne Boleyn"

History remembers Anne Boleyn most infamously because of her meteoric rise to the throne, and her depiction in histories as the Helen for whom Henry dismantled the entire Catholic Church in England. Her historical persona is also shrouded in mystery, as she left few verbal documents to assist historians in assessing her true character. She was famously beheaded in 1536, and her final address to the spectators at the Tower of London is well-documented in multiple sources, with little variation from one account to the next:⁴³

Good Christian people, I am come hither to die, according to law, and therefore I will speak nothing against it. I come here only to die, and thus to yield myself humbly to the will of the King, my lord. And if, in my life, I did ever offend the King's Grace, surely with my death I do now atone. I come hither to accuse no man, nor to speak anything of that whereof I am accused, as I know full well that aught I say in my defence doth not appertain to you. I pray and beseech you all, good friends, to pray for the life of the King, my

⁴² Herbert of Cherbury, *The Life and Reign of King Henry VIII*.

⁴³ Versions appear in Vergil, Cherbury, and Friedmann.

sovereign lord and yours, who is one of the best princes on the face of the earth, who has always treated me so well that better could not be, wherefore I submit to death with good will, humbly asking pardon of all the world. If any person will meddle with my case, I require them to judge the best. Thus I take my leave of the world, and of you, and I heartily desire you to pray for me.⁴⁴

Alison Weir also notes that after Anne's speech, she is recorded as having said private words to her ladies-in-waiting, and then granted forgiveness to the headsman, as was the custom.⁴⁵ Larsen uses only a small portion of this speech as part of her text, and uses it towards the end of the song. In Larsen's version, it reads as, "Good Christian People, I come hither to die. And by the law I have been judged to die. I pray God save the King. I hear the executioner's good, and my neck is so little."⁴⁶

The song as a whole includes segments from Anne Boleyn's actual final words, as the cycle's subtitle claims, but they do not comprise the majority of the song's text. Most of the song quotes Anne's petition letter, which includes the titular phrase, "Try me, Good King," In this letter, she refutes the court's charges, namely adultery and treason. This reconfiguring of historical moments fits with the practice of many biographers, novelists, and screenwriters in shaping the actions of a historical person to serve particular narrative motivations. Larsen emphasizes the *subjective* and *intimate* nature of the texts. Since the personal letters were often dictated and adherent to strict conventions among the upper class, however, they do not always reflect subjective and intimate moments.

An examination of the original text shows how Larsen has reinterpreted Anne's letter. The words "try me, good king" do not appear first, but are instead buried in the

⁴⁴ Alison Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).

⁴⁵ Weir, 336.

⁴⁶ Larsen, *Try Me, Good King*.

middle of a paragraph. Larsen sets the text as, “Try me good king, let me have a lawful trial,” but Anne’s words are, “Try me, good King, *but* let me have a lawful trial” (emphasis mine). This subtle alteration changes drastically the overall tone of the sentence. Anne’s text is truly acquiescing: she agrees to be tried but asks that it be lawful. Larsen seems to have her beg for a trial that she has not yet been granted. Combined with the “furiously” sung text, the accommodating and pleasant tone of the letter disappears. Indeed, accounts of Anne’s trial (which seems to not have been fair after all, but her guilt a foregone conclusion) describe the queen as utterly composed, listening and refuting each accusation calmly and with great eloquence. A full transcription of the Queen’s letter, unfiltered, demonstrates a rather different impression than Larsen’s wildly emotional and hysterical setting.⁴⁷

Sir,

Your Graces displeasure, and my Imprisonment are things so altogether ignorant. Whereas you send unto me, (willing me to confess a truth, and so obtain your favour,) by such a one whom you know to be mine ancient professed Enemy, I no sooner receiv’d this Message by him, than I rightly conceiv’d your meaning; and as if you say, Confessing a truth indeed, may procure my safety, I shall with all willingress and duty perform your command.

But let not your grace ever imagine, that your poor Wife will ever be brought to acknowledge a fault, where not so much as a thought thereof ever preceeded. And to speak a truth, never Prince had Wife more loyal in all duty, and in all true affection, than you have ever found in Anne Bolen, with which name and place I could willingly have contented my self, if God and your Graces pleasure, had so been pleased. Neither did I at any time so far forget my self in my exaltation, or received Queenship, but that I always looked for such an alteration as now I find; for the ground of my preferment being on so surer foundation than your Graces fancy, the least alteration I know was fit and sufficient to draw that fancy to some other object. You have chosen me from a low estate to be your Queen and Companion, far beyond my desert or desire; if then you found me worthy of such honour, Good your Grace, let not any light fancy, or bad Counsel of mine Enemies withdraw your Princely favour from me; neither let that stain, that

⁴⁷ Weir, 358.

unworthy stain of a disloyal heart towards your good Grace, ever cast to foul a blot on your most dutiful Wife, and the Infant Princess your Daughter: Try me good King, but let me have a lawful trial; and let not my sworn Enemies sit as my Accusers and Judges; yea, let me receive an open trial, for my truth shall fear no open shame Then shall you see either mine innocency cleared, your Suspicion and Conscience satisfied, the ignominy and slander of the World stopped, or my guilt openly declared. So that whatsoever God or you may determine of me, your Grace may be freed from an open censure, and mine offence being so lawfully proved, your Grace is at liberty both before God and Man, not only to execute worthy punishment on me as an unfaithful Wife, but to follow your affection already settled on that parry, for whose sake I am now as I am, whose name I could some good since have pointed unto, your Grace being not ignorant of my suspicion therein.

But if you have already determined of me, and that not only my death, but an infamous slander must bring you the enjoying of your desired happiness; then I desire of God that he will parton your great sin therein, and like wise mine Enemies the Instruments thereof, and that he will not call you to a strict account for your unprincely and crule usage of me at his general Judgement Seat, where both you and my self must shortly appear, and in whose judgement I doubt not (whatsoever the world may think of me) mine innocence shall be openly known, and sufficiently cleared.

My last and only request shall be, that my self may only bear the burthen of your Grace's displeasure; and that it may not touch the innocent souls of those poor Gentlemen, who (as I understand), are likewise in strait Imprisonment for my sake. If ever I have found favour in your sight, if ever the name of Anne Bolen hath been pleasing in your ears, then let me obtain this request; and I will so leave to trouble your Grace any further, with mine earnest Prayers to the Trinity to have your Grace in his good keeping, and to direct you in all your actions. From my doleful Prison in the Tower, this 6th of May. Your most Loyal and ever Faithful Wife, Anne Bolen⁴⁸

Larsen's complex reconfiguration of multiple texts indicates that she has in mind a certain impression of Anne Boleyn that she wishes to communicate to a listening audience. Miriam Elizabeth Burstein demonstrates the ways in which novelists have variously interpreted the life of Anne Boleyn; she identifies many instances in which Anne's biography has been used as source material, usually for historical romance or

⁴⁸ Cherbury, 397-398.

erotic historical novels.⁴⁹ In truth, there is very little known about Anne Boleyn, and biographers and novelists alike have filled in the gaps of historical evidence in various ways. Novels often emphasize Anne developing a sort of historical agency, a feminist agenda, or a sexual freedom that probably does not correlate with the historical figure. Others paint her as a would-be angel of the Reformation, demonstrating a religious piety that was at odds with the highly scandalized and politicized English court. As Burstein notes, “the romances insist on Anne’s intellectual and erotic agency, but undermine that agency by insisting on her threatening excessiveness – usually represented in terms of her hysterical speech.”⁵⁰

Larsen’s musical setting draws on the long history of the operatic mad scene and other iconic representations of the hysterical woman.⁵¹ Starting with very first sung note, a *forte* high A, the music viscerally represents the screaming, wailing, and erratic behavior of a speaker gone mad, the latter especially through the introduction of sudden fluctuations in tempo. The figuration of the opening words “Try me!” is repeated a total of six times throughout the song, always accompanying specific editorial marks from the composer, such as “in desperation,” and always *f* or *ff* (see Ex. 1.6).

Choosing to depict Anne as outspoken and angry, and later, defeated at the scaffold, puts her character in sharp contrast to the wives surrounding her in the cycle, Katherine of Aragon and Jane Seymour. In sequence, she comfortably occupies the role

⁴⁹ Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, “The Fictional Afterlife of Anne Boleyn: How to Do Things with the Queen, 1901-2006.” *CLIO* 37, no. 1 (September 2007), 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Catherine Clément, *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

of the impulsive mistress, replacing the pious, aging wife, and succeeded by her opposite: a docile, sweet, and fertile new wife. These portrayals, again, are conscious choices by the composer that are informed by the existing archive of fictionalizations of Anne. By juxtaposing four separate texts and musically depicting Anne as hysterical through virtuosic vocality, Larsen makes certain physical demands of the singer supporting this particular view of Anne. Similarly, this portrayal invites a particular set of interpretations to a listening audience.

“Jane Seymour”

Jane Seymour’s greatest achievement in history’s eyes is undoubtedly producing Henry’s male heir, who would become King Edward VI. Unsurprisingly, Larsen sets the text from Jane’s letter to Henry, announcing the birth of their son. The choice of this text not only represents a major moment in her short tenure as queen, but also perhaps the most important and distinctly female event in her life, the birthing of a child. It also focuses the attention on this success, although the setting does make veiled reference to her imminent death due to complications from childbirth.

Ex. 1.6: Larsen, excerpt “Anne Bolyen” *Try Me, Good King*.

61

and my in - no - cence shall be known. Let me ob - tain this re -

64

quest and my in - no - cence shall be cleared. Try me. Try

68

me. Try me.

slowly

slowly

mf desolate

A closer examination of Larsen’s text setting reveals something of her aims. The text from Jane Seymour’s letter is relatively short, “Right, trusty and Well Beloved, we greet you well, for as much as be the inestimable goodness of Almighty God, we be delivered of a prince.”⁵² That Larsen chooses such succinct text focuses the attention on

⁵² Larsen, *Try Me, Good King*.

only a few key elements of Jane's person, and also reminds the listener that she did not occupy her role as Queen Consort for very long. The repetition of the word "prince" twice in the text setting reinforces the importance of her success in giving birth to a son; this is the act that gains her security on the throne and the love of the King, although she would not live long enough to enjoy those rewards. In the score, this text occupies a short fourteen measures of music, and is followed by a recitation of "The peace of the roses," a poem that makes symbolic reference to the union of Henry Tudor (Henry VII) to Elizabeth York, as the red Lancaster rose joined the white York rose at the end of the bitter conflicts of the War of the Roses. Their union produced the Tudor Rose, Henry VIII's older brother Arthur, who died before he could ascend the English throne.⁵³ The poem makes reference to an era of peace following conflict, not unlike the moments in which Jane Seymour delivered the long-awaited heir, following the divorce of Katherine of Aragon and the beheading of Anne Boleyn.

Larsen approaches the text of the letter and the lyric text of the poem rather differently. The words from Jane's letter are set in a declamatory, almost unmeasured manner, which often collides rhythmically with the syncopated accompaniment. Its unmeasured feel is indicative of one of Larsen's compositional techniques: she sometimes composes melody for a text without meter or bar lines, and places the melody into a metric structure later. This texture gives way to a remarkable three-measure interlude that makes clear the division between Jane's own words and the quoted poem, and alludes to her death (Ex. 1.6, mm. 14-16). A short melodic figure repeats in the right hand of the piano, increasing in dynamic and intensity, which then fails to make the

⁵³ Francis Bacon, *The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh*, ed. Jerry Weinberger (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

triumphant conclusion that a listener might expect. Instead, the figure gives way to a single g natural in the right hand of the piano, *subito piano*, all the building clamor falling away in a moment. The remaining music falls into measured, repeating melodic figure, like a lullaby (and it is labeled as such), as the singer begins “The Peace of the Roses.”

“Jane Seymour” is the only song in this cycle that quotes extensively from text that does *not* come from the woman herself, and the final phrases of the song are sung on an untexted hum. Jane remains a mysterious, elusive figure in Larsen’s setting, and therefore she remains so for the listener; the setting gradually fades from Jane’s own words to an allegorical poem to sound alone. It is clear, however, that her actual words are meant to stand apart from the poetic text. Again, I would emphasize that Jane Seymour’s birth announcement was probably not written in her own hand, and is certainly not informal or intimate in tone. Larsen does not make the same attempt in this song to flesh out or impose a strong personality on Jane, as she does so carefully with Anne Boleyn. The shadow of Jane Seymour, whom Henry considered his “one true wife” for the remainder of his life, loomed large over Henry’s future wives, particularly Katherine Parr, who was replaced in a family portrait with a posthumous rendering of Jane Seymour.⁵⁴ Henry did not remarry for two years, and then only reluctantly. Jane Seymour’s presence in this cycle, however, is brief, quiet, and utilizes very few of her own words. Again, Larsen’s narrative takes a path that is quite distinct from existing historical record.

⁵⁴ Weir, 373.

Ex. 1.7: Larsen, Excerpt from “Jane Seymour” *Try Me, Good King*.

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/8.

- System 1 (Measures 12-14):**
 - Measure 12:** The vocal line has a whole rest. The piano accompaniment features a *triumph* marking and a *ff* dynamic.
 - Measure 13:** The vocal line has a whole rest. The piano accompaniment has a *rit. darkly* marking and a *p sub.* dynamic.
 - Measure 14:** The vocal line begins with the word "a" and a half note. The piano accompaniment has a *mf* dynamic.
- System 2 (Measures 15-17):**
 - Measure 15:** The vocal line has a whole rest. The piano accompaniment has a *bell-toll* marking.
 - Measure 16:** The vocal line has a half note. The piano accompaniment has a *mp* dynamic.
 - Measure 17:** The vocal line has a half note. The piano accompaniment has a *mp* dynamic.
- System 3 (Measures 18-20):**
 - Measure 18:** The vocal line has a half note. The piano accompaniment has a *mp* dynamic.
 - Measure 19:** The vocal line has a half note. The piano accompaniment has a *mp* dynamic.
 - Measure 20:** The vocal line has a half note. The piano accompaniment has a *mp* dynamic.

Lyrics: prince. a prince. I love the rose both red and white, to hear of them is my de - light,

“Anne of Cleves”

Anne was born in the German duchy of Cleves; she was chosen for marriage to Henry by virtue of her Protestant upbringing and the potential for an alliance with her father. She came to the English court an outsider, and was certainly treated as such by Henry. He was purportedly so put off by her appearance that he resolved to divorce her

immediately, despite great risk to his political position on the continent.⁵⁵ As Cherbury notes,

But the news struck her into a sudden weakness and fainting, till at last recovering herself, she was little and little persuaded. First, to refer the Matter to the Clergy: Secondly, to relinquish her Title of Queen; instead whereof, the King had devised another which He thought might content her: And this was (as I find by our Records) that she should have the name and dignity thenceforth of His Adopted Sister; which stile yet, afterwards gave some subject of discourse: However, she accepted it, and subscribed (in these terms) a Letter to the King.⁵⁶

This claim that Anne was so disturbed by the king's decision is mostly conjecture (possibly for the benefit of the king's ego), and Larsen treats it as such; her setting of Anne's letter of acceptance of the title of the king's sister is light, comic, and joyful. Although Larsen rarely composes lyrical melodies, the vocal phrases in "Anne of Cleves" are conjunct and dominated by stepwise motion. Her speech sounds natural and measured, lacking the dissonant, leaping frenzy of "Anne Boleyn." The piano accompaniment consists of highly dissonant, ungraceful (or, as Larsen suggests, "boisterous"), choppy chords, comprising a melodically deformed version of Thomas Campion's "I care not for these ladies." The vocal line, however, is careful, measured, and settled in a comfortable, mid-range tessitura. The clear, melodic vocal line stands in stark contrast to the musical chaos around it. A woman who speaks rashly was certainly in danger in Henry's court. Perhaps, as Weir argues, another woman would put herself in peril by attempting to keep the crown on her head; Anne wisely relinquished it.⁵⁷

Larsen's treatment of the word "sister" in "Anne of Cleves" attests to the importance of language's role in contributing to the consequences that Anne faced. The

⁵⁵ Cherbury, 515.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 521

⁵⁷ Weir, 429

word “sister” is given a glissando each time it appears. “Sister” is a linguistic category of relation, one that is specifically female and communicates closeness, but, particularly for Henry, one that prohibits a sexual relationship. In declaring Anne of Cleves his sister, he removes her claim to two other female categories, “queen” and “wife.” All of this is embedded in the language of the text, but has very real repercussions for the female character; she is physically removed from the palace but maintains her dignity and her head. The musical emphasis on this word is Larsen’s. This material sonic marking makes it the focal point for the listener, by virtue both of its distinctive usage and the fact that it is the highest pitch in the song.

Because Anne of Cleves’s historical reputation is not a strong one, Larsen’s apparent advocacy for her may appear to fulfill a feminist project; indeed, Larsen claims, throughout her program notes and commentary on these songs, to be engaging in just such a project. And yet, enacting this kind of advocacy in a way that distorts the historical record risks turning Anne into a caricature. Previous discussions of Larsen’s work tend to take the texts at face value, assuming that these are complete and faithful reproductions of historical figures, honored musically for the benefit of these women’s legacies. Without interrogation, however, both Larsen and her characters risk losing their complexities. Anne of Cleves’s personal situation was extremely precarious, and the deaths of Henry’s two previous wives were still fresh in public memory. In light of these brutal truths, the tone of “Anne of Cleves” seems incongruous with historical fact.

“Katherine Howard”

The text of “Katherine Howard,” purportedly recorded at her execution “by an unknown Spaniard” is of questionable authenticity.⁵⁸ In truth, Katherine, in all likelihood, had committed adultery and had sexual relations with at least two men prior to her marriage to the king. All three were put to death following a royal inquiry. Larsen’s choice of text emphasizes Katherine’s youth and declares of her innocence; in this respect it is similar to Larsen’s setting of “Anne Boleyn.” The more widely-accepted version of Katherine Howard’s final words tell a rather different story: “All Christian people...take regard unto her worthy and just punishment, of her offense against God heinously from her youth upward in breaking all of His commandments, and also against the King’s Royal Majesty very dangerously.”⁵⁹

Almost all accounts of Katherine’s execution (of which there were only a few witnesses) record her admission of guilt and an urging of the people to “look to her as an example and amend their ‘ungodly lives.’”⁶⁰ Larsen’s choice of text instead privileges her youthful adoration of and intended marriage to one Thomas Culpepper, one of her alleged lovers. It paints her as a young woman unable to control her romantic urges.

Musically, Larsen ties this song thematically with the first movement, “Katherine of Aragon” through quotation of the same lute song, Dowland’s “In darkness let me dwell.” This compositional choice creates a sense of musical closure of the cycle by way of melodic recapitulation, but also presents another historical quandary; what do Katherine of Aragon and Katherine Howard have in common, besides their marriage? The first Queen Katherine was older than Henry at the time of their marriage, when he

⁵⁸ Smith, 145.

⁵⁹ Weir, 481.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

was himself a young man. By contrast, Katherine Howard was just seventeen at the time of her marriage to the fifty-year-old Henry. Certainly their personalities and demeanors, as projected in the cycle, contrast strongly with one another. The two women are not related; Katherine Howard was the cousin of another queen, Anne Boleyn, but those two songs share no obvious musical connections. It seems to be a function of musical and tonal recapitulation more than anything textual or thematic. Larsen draws these women's seemingly disparate experiences together musically, and implies that their shared condition of womanhood and the societal constraints on their behavior and sexuality contributed to their downfalls.

The texts that Larsen omits from these songs speak as loudly about her goals as the texts that she does include. Conspicuously missing from this cycle, for example, is any mention of Katherine Parr, Henry VIII's sixth wife. Larsen obliquely addresses this omission in her program notes, stating, "Henry's sixth wife, Katherine Parr, outlived him and brought some domestic and spiritual peace into Henry's immediate family. Although her written devotions are numerous, her role in the story of...Henry's wives is that of a peaceful catalyst."⁶¹ This justification for the omission of Parr's words is somewhat dubious, given that Anne of Cleves, for example, outlived both Katherine Parr and Henry by a decade, and Jane Seymour was historically given credit for reconciling Henry with his daughters Mary and Elizabeth, restoring their succession, and maintaining a sense of decorum in the home.⁶² Katherine Parr's absence from the cycle is even more surprising, given that she was the first queen in England to publish writings under her own name; her works – primarily translations of sacred texts from Latin – realized the Protestant notion

⁶¹ Larsen, *Try Me, Good King*.

⁶² Weir, 500.

that religious texts should be published in the vernacular. Relatable texts in accessible language are also a major interest and priority of Larsen's, making Katherine Parr's omission all the more curious. Because Parr outlived Henry, perhaps, she could not be fit into Larsen's focused narrative the same way as the other women; instead Larsen projects the impression that Parr played no part in the story.

Women's Representation and Testimonial Aesthetics

In both *Songs from Letters* and *Try Me, Good King*, Larsen frames her songs as representations of women in their own words. The ways that Larsen shaped her presentation of these characters – ways that perhaps were meant to champion them — may be understood equally as misrepresenting them. Larsen is using a “testimonial aesthetics”—a reframing of testimonies framed by secondary witnesses. Wlodarwski used this term in reference to Steve Reich's interpretations of the words of Holocaust survivors, arguing that Reich perhaps inadvertently misrepresented these words in *Different Trains*.⁶³ Larsen, in a different context, makes the same kinds of representational claims that are reinforcing fictitious legacies; moreover, these representations often uphold traditional gender roles and erase the potential for expressing any unsavory characteristics.

For example, in *Songs from Letters*, Calamity Jane's motherhood is placed at the forefront of the entire cycle; the lesson we are meant to take is that a woman who behaves controversially can be redeemed through motherhood. Knowing that she cared for a daughter absolves her of her other sins of non-conformity, including living

⁶³ Wlodarwski, “The Testimonial Aesthetics of *Different Trains*” 120.

independently, doing conventionally male work, engaging in sexually promiscuous behavior, and handling weapons.⁶⁴

A similar strategy emerges in *Try Me, Good King*; in this case, Larsen avoids discussion of these women's sexuality and sexual agency. This omission is notable, given what a crucial role sexuality played in the queens' lives, their relationships with the king, and the end of their marriages. Even in these historical documents, which were by no means the "intimate" letters Larsen claims they are, the subject does come up, but these references do not appear in Larsen's versions. The line in Katherine of Aragon's letter referencing Anne Boleyn's sexual exploits was omitted. Any explicit references to the charges of adultery were removed from Anne Boleyn's and Katherine Howard's songs (Katherine only says, "I have not wronged the king"). Larsen carefully avoids the subject of sexuality, as it was both the source of condemnation for many of the wives and also a component that individuates them and makes them supremely human.

It is by no means the sole duty of a composer to faithfully replicate history in her artistic projects; the framing of these songs, however, as the "last words of the wives of Henry VIII" and "intimate crises of the heart" presents them as historically accurate. The result, which Fox argues applies to Katherine of Aragon, but which could be equally applicable to any of the women represented in these song cycles, is that a woman is turned "into a cardboard caricature. By endowing her with almost saintlike attributes, we not only lose sight of the real Katherine, we strip away her basic humanity and we demean her."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ McLaird, *Calamity Jane*.

⁶⁵ Fox, ix.

Certainly, with so little primary source material from which to draw, certain biases come into play in the setting of these texts. Without recognizing these historical incongruities, however, the enterprise risks demeaning all the women portrayed by omitting their actual histories. Similarly, without scrutinizing the musical composition, we run the risk of demeaning Larsen herself; if we accept these songs as merely portraying the private and intimate struggles of women, we ignore the complex web of relationships in which Larsen is situated as a composer of art songs.

The Dynamic Archive and the Fan Fiction World of Cowgirls and Queens

Although *Try Me*, *Good King* and *Songs from Letters* contain fictionalized and homogenized portrayals of historical women, acknowledging them as such creates new possibilities for interpretation. The understanding of these pieces as fiction is crucial to their contribution to American musical output. With the knowledge that the narratives are Larsen's own, listeners and performers are granted the agency to imagine alternatives. This activity is, in fact, distinctly feminist, as it opens the interpretive act to all.

The mythology of the Wild West and Calamity Jane is well documented, and the forged letters that Larsen sets have contributed to a widening conception of her persona. The version of Calamity Jane supported by those letters was fully embraced and adopted by Hollywood and Broadway. A 1953 film, *Calamity Jane*, starring Doris Day, was later adapted into a stage musical. The Oscar-winning song from that film, "Secret Love," refers specifically to the relationship between that Jane and Wild Bill Hickok, a fiction created by Jane McCormick's letters. Many other films exist, furthering that same storyline; *Calamity Jane's Revenge* (2015) adapts the story differently by implying that Jane, in a lovelorn state, begins to systematically murder Bill Hickok's killers. Jane's

story, amplified by different interpretations and the filling in of missing historical details, provides creative space for artists.

Concerning the histories of Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, and Katherine Howard, I suggest that Larsen's adaptations may be understood within the context of contemporary fan fiction. Fan fiction represents readers' textual engagement with written sources. As DeKosnik explains, "A collective called a fandom, which organizes around one source text that concerns a 'canonical' set of characters, typically generates a large and varied corpus of texts about those characters. In other words, a fandom's members rework a common set of elements again and again, through multiple stories."⁶⁶ This reworking of common elements with canonical characters has a strong correlation to the ways in which primary-source documentation has been used to generate new fiction about the wives of Henry VIII. The fictionalization of historical documents, I propose, may also be viewed as functioning in the same manner as fan fiction. In addition to the many novels that Burstein identifies in the past century, representations manifested even more recently in Hollywood, with television series like *The Tudors* or films like *The Other Boleyn Girl*, itself adapted in turn from Philippa Gregory's novel of the same name. This series of moves away from the original source while remaining in conversation with the existing archive; it resembles what DeKosnik calls the "highly generative narrative world" of fan fiction.⁶⁷ It especially applies to Larsen's work, as fan fiction generally also "emphasizes pastiche, appropriation, and intertextuality."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Abigail De Kosnik, "Fifty Shades and the Archive of Women's Culture." *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (2015), 117.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Considering Larsen's work in this way, framed as a fictional space, situates it in a productive space for performers and listeners.⁶⁹ Each piece of fan fiction contributes to the expanding collection of the existing archive, making reference to both the original source material and the growing body of fan-penned work. Adaptations of Henry VIII's story likewise exist in a relational web with all the other representations that a perceiver may have already encountered. These other adaptations certainly inform the reception of the work, but also shape the creation of the text. Looking at Larsen's text choices, it is evident that her choices were deliberate and guided by particular narrative principles. She chose specific versions of letters, made omissions, and included unverifiable texts. Her view of the queens is but one reworking of the common elements, centered around their relationship with King Henry VIII.

Koshnik makes a similar argument for fan fiction, saying, "women can find fan fiction valuable and affecting precisely because it presents a multiplicity of different versions of the same character pairing, which give women readers the chance to imaginatively engage with a relationship repeatedly, through diverse reworking, and experience the relationship through lenses that alternately reinforce, ameliorate, or transform dominant narratives of gender and sexuality."⁷⁰ Like much fan fiction, the archive of works about Henry VIII's wives are extremely concerned with issues of sexuality and desire. These women lived in a world in which their reproductive functions were of utmost importance, and their sexual desires had serious consequences in their lives. While Larsen usually alludes to these issues rather than dealing with them explicitly, many listeners, being familiar with some versions of these stories already,

⁶⁹ Here I use the term "frame" in reference to Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972).

⁷⁰ De Kosnik, 122.

likely make the inferences on their own. The performers, too, engage in Larsen's text with memories of other text. Like Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse ask, "In what respects is a performance by definition an intertext?"⁷¹

Re-focusing the understanding of the text as an example of dynamic rather than inert materiality contributes further to this shift of authority away from the composer. As Stein notes, "fan authorship triggers broader cultural anxieties surrounding threats to originality and idea ownership."⁷² Likewise, the recognition of the text as dynamic material rather than an authoritative document recognizes and foregrounds the shared nature of the musical and textual ideas. Ultimately, it is a strategy for listeners and performers to use when engaging with this music. Larsen, through her compositions, makes representational claims concerning the experiences of women; the songs themselves are doing a different kind of cultural work.

Speaking for women, particularly through other women's voices, is a core component of Lieder and art song. Larsen's work continues this tradition. Her high estimation of classical forms is well documented. Larsen composes almost exclusively in standard "classical" genres. She is a prolific composer of art song, opera, concertos, symphonies, solo instrumental suites, and choral works. Vocal music is central to her output; her oeuvre boasts over sixty songs or song cycles for voice and accompaniment, as well as eleven operas. Her works that use nineteenth-century forms, and vocal genres like opera and art song, are among her best-known pieces. The historical lineage of *Songs from Letters* and *Try Me Good King* is best understood from this perspective: Larsen's long engagement with and priority of the classical western canon.

⁷¹ Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse. "Limit Play: Fan Authorship between Source Text, Intertext, and Context." *Popular Communication* 7, no. 4 (Oct 2009), 194.

⁷² Stein and Busse, 205.

Chapter 2

Isabelle Aboulker: Impersonating Maleness as a Compositional Strategy

“It is nothing, only a woman who has drowned.” This unsavory quotation is a French idiom, a common turn of phrase excerpted from Jean de la Fontaine’s *Fables*, his famous multi-volume collection of morality tales first published in 1668.¹ The fable from which this line is drawn, “La femme noyée” (The Drowned Woman), tells the story of a widower who follows a river downstream, searching for the body of his wife who has died, likely by suicide. When he encounters two male passersby, they tell him that since a woman’s nature is so difficult and contrary, he’d have better luck searching for her upstream, against the current. This tale is but one of four of Fontaine’s fables set by French composer Isabelle Aboulker (b.1938) in her 1999 collection of *mélodies*, *Femmes en Fables*.² This set features four tales of women variously depicted as irrational, vapid, calculating, self-absorbed, volatile, difficult, antisocial, dour, careless, animalistic, emotional, hysterical, and heartless.

At first glance, these offensive texts seem a surprising choice for any woman to set to music, particularly for other women to sing. Aboulker herself acknowledges that some women have objected strongly to performing these songs for just this reason. Each selection in this group – I avoid the term “cycle” as they were composed independently for four different singers – features one or more stereotypical portrayals of a woman as written by a man, not unlike *Frauenliebe und -leben* or other such mainstays of female

¹ Fanny Népote-Desmarres, *La Fontaine, Fables* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999).

² Isabelle Aboulker, *Femmes En Fables: Mélodies Sur Des Fables De La Fontaine Voix Moyenne Et Piano* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1999).

song repertoire.³ The first, “La jeune veuve” (“The young widow”), expounds on women’s fickle and impressionable nature. “La femme noyée” insists on painting all women as contrarians, as well as emotionally unstable. “La chatte metamorphosée en femme” (“The cat transformed into a woman”) emphasizes the universality of women’s behavior, and also makes some comparisons between women’s and animals’ essential nature. Finally, “La cigale et la fourmi” (“The cicada and the ant”) focuses on women who are both jealous and careless. Aboulker’s compositions, using these fables as source material, provoke two questions: why would Aboulker continue to turn to the *Fables* as source material if it is so blatantly misogynistic? Furthermore, how might a singer approach such texts? Aboulker’s vocal compositions are a mainstay in France, particularly for young singers at the Conservatoire de Paris, where Aboulker taught for many years. She explained her reasoning for making use of the fables when I conducted a personal interview with her:

And I do understand that these pieces can be shocking, and that some people might not care for them; I can understand. It is difficult to understand why a woman would compose music for these texts; I understand. For me, it’s the humor that I find in them. I find the ambiguity of this fable amusing, but it does present challenges. And I really do think that when you’re singing “La femme noyée,” you really have to put yourself in the shoes of a man. You have to imagine that you are a man, and sing with a little bit of distance, and not quite so literally.⁴

Aboulker’s deliberate engagement with sexist language while emphasizing a technique of distancing resembles another strategy that has developed out of feminist

³ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe und –leben* ; Kristina Muxfeldt, “‘Frauenliebe Und Leben’ Now and Then.” *19th Century Music* 25, no. 1 (July 1, 2001): 27–48; Suzanne Cusick, “Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance.” *Repercussions* 3, no. 1 (1994b): 77–110.

⁴ Isabelle Aboulker, interview with the author, June 13, 2018, full transcript in Appendix A.

theory that is related to the concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* as theorized by playwright Bertholt Brecht (1898-1956).⁵ The *Verfremdungseffekt*, also known as the alienating effect or A-effect, is, in theater, the actor's technique of de-familiarizing a word, an idea, or a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see it or hear it afresh. During Brecht's lifetime, this was a radical re-imagining of the role of the actor, who was expected, in traditional acting theory in the mode of Stanislavsky, to encourage the audience to suspend disbelief and try to identify with the actions and motivations of the character.⁶ Proponents of the A-effect countered this thinking, stating their doubt that "an acting method that equips the actor to see rats where there aren't any can really be all that suitable for disseminating the truth."⁷ Gender studies scholar Elin Diamond has adapted the Brechtian A-effect as an analytical framework for feminist philosophy. She says, "feminist practice that seeks to expose or mock the structures of gender usually uses some version of the Brechtian A-effect... That is, by delineating (not simply rejecting) iconicity, by foregrounding the expectation of resemblance, the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator."⁸

My investigation into Aboulker's compositional approach, through close readings of *Femmes en Fables* and a personal interview with the composer, uncovers Aboulker's complex personal and social positioning and clarifies some of her explanations for engaging with this text. I attribute her approach to a strong commitment to traditional

⁵ Bertolt Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique in Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect." In *Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts. (London: Routledge, 2002), 94-95.

⁶ Stanislavsky, Konstantin, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁷ Brecht, 102.

⁸ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Men: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997).

techniques of French *mélodie*, driven by family legacy, education, and national identity. These techniques can include making use of texts from classic and, often, problematic French literature. Aboulker's identity as a woman complicates and calls into question her use of these texts. Recent studies in reception history, research in performance studies and acting theory, and the concept of "musicking" as defined by Christopher Small two decades ago, are useful tools in contextualizing Aboulker's songs for women singers who engage with this music.⁹

Aboulker, whose work represents a new phase in the tradition of French modernism encompassing Fauré, Massenet, *Les Six*, and Aboulker's own grandfather, Henry Février, presents a particularly intriguing strategy for engaging with problematic texts in her song cycle *Femmes en Fables*, and her settings have proved controversial. In what ways does Aboulker's approach address the issue of misogyny within her own inherited musical traditions and practices? Aboulker maintains that she "enjoyed accentuating the character, perhaps as a provocation!"¹⁰ Her approach, ultimately, subverts La Fontaine's texts so as to encourage her audience to both understand it clearly and hear it anew. So rather than presenting listeners with a relic of the past, she is daring listeners and performers to engage with this text, stripped of the comfortable distance which accompanies the assumption that the author is writing with a seventeenth-century mindset.

⁹ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998).

¹⁰ Isabelle Aboulker, Interview with the author.

The *Fables* and *Mélodie* Traditions

The choice of French texts, particularly from the modern era, is a crucially important component of Aboulker's work; this choice shapes her compositional technique profoundly. The overwhelming majority of Aboulker's musical output is vocal music set to French texts. The types of poetry and prose she chooses to set align with a very particular set of values of French *mélodie* writing. As she has explained,

My music is fundamentally French. The style is fundamentally French. The French way of writing is very precise, all the musical indications are very clear in French sheet music. The writing is very clear and almost directive. If the indications in the music are very precise, you know exactly what the composer wants. I inherited this focus on such detail of indication in the music from French musical writing. And they are many, including Massenet, Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc. These are individuals who know exactly what they want. But music doesn't occupy the main component of the *mélodie*. Rather it is in a secondary position. It's the text, and then it's the music afterward. This is exceedingly important.¹¹

Aboulker shared her love of French literature with me during our interview in her home, which was full of bookshelves full of large collections of French writers. She emphasized that *mélodie* places utmost importance on the quality and content of the texts, and that a composer's ability to improve the clarity of the language and align melodic contours with the inflections of speech are the most important criteria by which she should be judged.

I am a composer who is behind the text. I don't place myself ahead of or before it. Do you see what I'm saying? My music is there to give greater color to the words, more expression to the meaning and to the words. In my case, the problem hasn't been whether my music is good or bad, it needs to be in service of the writing. I am like a servant for the music [which is the] servant of the text. My music is in service of the text, simply in service. There's absolutely nothing else aside from that. I love theater, and literature, and I love French writers. There on that shelf, you have a collection of works by Émile Zola. I really love French

¹¹ Isabelle Aboulker, interview with the author.

authors. Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, authors who are clear, and tell stories about things. In my case, I really want my music to be clear as well. That's priority number one for me.¹²

Aboulker's emphasis on clarity in composition manifests in both ultra-particular notation as well as essentially tonal music. In this way, Aboulker acknowledges that she has a fundamentally different approach from her teachers and peers who were also writing from the Conservatoire:

I am, as they say, a bit of a floating electron, a bit marginal, maverick. I'm not a traditional composer. I didn't study counterpoint or fugue. Nope. Why? Because when I was a student, it was the era of the great Pierre Boulez, and the Vienna School, a kind of doctrinal, almost political decree about composition. It was impossible to do tonal music, to do music that was somewhat harmonic, melodic. It was like an illness. And I had a lot of friends who were in this field of composition studies, people I have remained friends with even, and who have absolutely continued to compose their entire lives. However, when I was 22, 23, 24 years old, I was frequently in attendance at their composition classes, because they needed me to play the pieces they were studying. I would observe these composition professors who would take a given piece of music in their hands, and declare, "Oh, no, no, no. No harmony. No melody". And because of these professors, it was impossible to study tonal composition.¹³

Aboulker's understanding of the *mélodie*, and the template from which she crafts her own songs, predates the twentieth century almost entirely. For her, tonal music is *singable* music, and attention to vocal writing that is more declamatory, more closely aligned with speech, is crucial. Tonal music, for her, is a part of the subversion, a thwarting of the status quo when the status quo is the emancipation of dissonance. As a result, the relative accessibility of her work has made her immensely popular among the amateur set. She notes,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Isabelle Aboulker, interview with the author.

I think that is why I'm sung as much as I am now, because given that we are in an era where composers are truly disinterested in the voice... They write well, that's not the concern, but they don't write for the voice. They even write occasionally *against* the voice. And here lies the real problem, when one goes about singing contemporary music, even excellent contemporary works, it is simply not vocal to write such gigantic intervals.¹⁴

Aboulker has treated La Fontaine's *Fables* in music multiple times: in a set of songs for children's voices with an accompanying story book, in a semi-staged chamber work, and in the four songs of *Femmes en Fables*. The salience of this poetry speaks to Aboulker's high esteem for the masterworks of the modern French language. On four separate occasions, she turned to La Fontaine to provide source material for new works for young women to sing, resulting in the eventual publication of *Femmes en Fables* as a group.

As with the historical source material discussed in Chapter One, and like many classical and early modern texts, the *Fables* exist within what Diana Taylor calls the dynamic archive, a living collection of texts whose meanings have proliferated over the centuries.¹⁵ The individual fables themselves were compiled and adapted from various sources, most notably from Aesop's fables, and La Fontaine himself was a devout reader of ancient Greco-Roman philosophers and writers.¹⁶ La Fontaine's collection demonstrates his own philosophical and moral proclivities, rather than merely reproducing fables from around the world in their original form. In other words, he adapted them to suit his French sensibilities. This material has persisted through changes in attitudes toward a wide range of social issues, including attitudes to women. Its status

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Roger Duchêne, *La Fontaine* (Paris: Fayard, 1990); Agnes Ethel Mackay, *La Fontaine and His Friends; a Biography* (New York: G. Braziller, 1974).

as folklore has perhaps shielded it from this kind of literary critique, and its recitation is a staple of early childhood education in France to this day.

As a Humanist, a Catholic, and a reader of philosophy, La Fontaine inscribed these systems of thought in his *Fables*. His stories make frequent reference to ancient and biblical sources, thus providing a deeper reading of the fables that would not have been as readily understood by children. In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau identified this complexity in the fables, saying their morality may be easily misinterpreted by children, and by virtue of their sophistication, are more suitable for adults.¹⁷ While this position is questionable, Aboulker seems to concur to some degree. Some of the fables, she admits, are less suitable for children, including the four she sets in *Femmes en Fables*. One exception is “La cigale et la fourmi,” her finale, which is a common children’s tale beyond France and which she herself also includes in her children’s collection. The common thread in the four songs, however, is the focus on female characters who are deeply lacking in sound moral capacity.

Confronting the Text

Like La Fontaine’s settings of Aesop’s Fables, Aboulker’s adaptations sometimes alter the meaning of La Fontaine’s texts, and certain repetitions and omissions clarify her goals in the retelling of his fables. Aboulker’s treatment of the text reveals a strategy of subversion and irony that benefits from consideration through the feminist lens of the A-effect. Rather than embody the women portrayed in *Femmes en Fables*, Aboulker suggests singers inhabit the perspective of the misogynist, impersonating him for ironic

¹⁷ John Metz, *The Fables of La Fontaine: A Critical Edition of the Eighteenth-Century Vocal Settings* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986).

effect. Compositionally, Aboulker adapts and alters the texts of the fables in particular ways to serve her ends; she emphasizes the stereotypical features of her protagonists, augments the tales' moral ambiguities, and condenses and streamlines the narratives. While these alterations enhance her dramatic goals, Aboulker's reverence for La Fontaine's writing is also evident in the music; for example, she is meticulous in upholding the textual structures of the original fables. Her declamatory, syllabic style adheres strictly to the metrical stresses and overall phrase structure of the French language, and specifically Fontaine's innovative combining of Alexandrian decasyllable with less common lines of seven and eight syllables and end rhyme (see Ex. 2.1).¹⁸

Ex. 2.1: Isabelle Aboulker "La femme noyée" *Femmes en Fables*, mm.57-69.

The musical score for 'La femme noyée' by Isabelle Aboulker, measures 57-69, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 57-63) shows the vocal line with lyrics: 'Nul- le re- prit l'un d'eux, mais cher- chez- la plus bas sui- vez le'. The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex pattern in the left hand. The second system (measures 64-69) continues the vocal line with lyrics: 'cours de la ri- viè re Un au- tre'. The piano accompaniment continues with similar patterns, ending with a final chord in measure 69.

¹⁸ Népote-Desmarres, *La Fontaine, Fables*.

Interruptions of this syllabic style are exceptions, and generally serve to develop exaggerated characterizations of the female characters. For example, the first song, “La jeune veuve” incorporates stylized, vocalized sighing within the young widow’s emotional speech; this sighing does not appear in the original text. The young widow in the story vows she will never remarry; her father assures her that she will change her mind soon, and ultimately will become interested in the new suitor he has chosen for her. She is prone to emotional outbursts with unexplained motivation, and ultimately, is pacified, and her wise father triumphs.

Ex 2.2: Aboulker, “La jeune veuve” *Femmes en Fables*, mm.41-44



These exaggerated sighs are comical; audiences often laugh at the melodramatic woman, confirming her characterization as hyper-emotional. The song exaggerates an uncomfortable portrayal of a grieving woman. In fact, because this song is presented first in the cycle, it sets up the problem of stereotypes of women explicitly to provoke a reaction in the audience, and thus creates a frame for future interpretations.

In keeping with her conceptualization of traditional French *mélodie* as favoring clarity and precision, Aboulker cut two full stanzas from La Fontaine’s version of “La

jeune veuve.” The omissions also serve what I have identified as a third strategy in approaching the text – a complicating or obscuring of the moral message of the fable itself. The first missing stanza implies that the woman’s feelings aren’t sincere; in the following excerpt, boldface lines are omitted from Aboulker’s setting:

“La femme noyée”

La perte d'un époux ne va point sans soupirs.
 On fait beaucoup de bruit, et puis on se console.
 Sur les ailes du Temps la tristesse s'envole ;
 Le Temps ramène les plaisirs.
 Entre la Veuve d'une année
 Et la veuve d'une journée
 La différence est grande : on ne croirait jamais
 Que ce fût la même personne.
[L'une fait fuir les gens, et l'autre a mille attraits.
Aux soupirs vrais ou faux celle-là s'abandonne ;
C'est toujours même note et pareil entretien :
On dit qu'on est inconsolable ;
On le dit, mais il n'en est rien,
Comme on verra par cette Fable,
Ou plutôt par la vérité.]
 L'Epoux d'une jeune beauté
 Partait pour l'autre monde. A ses côtés sa femme
 Lui criait : Attends-moi, je te suis ; et mon âme,
 Aussi bien que la tienne, est prête à s'envoler.
 Le Mari fait seul le voyage.
 La Belle avait un père, homme prudent et sage :
 Il laissa le torrent couler.
 A la fin, pour la consoler,
 Ma fille, lui dit-il, c'est trop verser de larmes :
 Qu'a besoin le défunt que vous noyiez vos charmes ?
 Puisqu'il est des vivants, ne songez plus aux morts.
[Je ne dis pas que tout à l'heure
Une condition meilleure
Change en des noces ces transports ;]
 Mais, après certain temps, souffrez qu'on vous propose
 Un époux beau, bien fait, jeune, et tout autre chose
 Que le défunt.- Ah ! dit-elle aussitôt,
 Un Cloître est l'époux qu'il me faut.
 Le père lui laissa digérer sa disgrâce.
 Un mois de la sorte se passe.
[L'autre mois on l'emploie à changer tous les jours

Quelque chose à l'habit, au linge, à la coiffure.]

Le deuil enfin sert de parure,

En attendant d'autres atours.

[Toute la bande des Amours

Revient au colombier : les jeux, les ris, la danse,

Ont aussi leur tour à la fin.

On se plonge soir et matin

Dans la fontaine de Jouvence.]

Le Père ne craint plus ce défunt tant chéri ;

Mais comme il ne parlait de rien à notre Belle :

Où donc est le jeune mari

Que vous m'avez promis ? dit-elle¹⁹

The second stanza focuses on the widow's father successfully distracting her from her grief with new clothes and a new hairstyle; if she is so easily mollified by her father, then perhaps the final phrase has less impact. Aboulker points to this final moment in the text, when the father's use of reverse psychology triggers action in his daughter.

Aboulker says, "I also like the moment at the end of *La femme noyée*, where the woman is told, 'Don't go with the other man!' It's a mindset of contradiction."²⁰ She has spent the poem rejecting the possibility of a new partner, but as soon as her father says "no," she's ready to move on.

Throughout all four songs, Aboulker prods at the contradictions in the text. The second song, "La femme noyée," escalates this strategy further. The well-known saying taken from this fable is both contradictory and ambiguous; Aboulker crafts it into a refrain heard three times throughout the song: "I am not one of those who say: it is nothing, it is a woman who has drowned."²¹ Through repetition, Aboulker forces the listener to acknowledge the motivation behind such a comment. "I simply can't imagine a

¹⁹ Fanny Népote-Desmarres, *La Fontaine, Fables*.

²⁰ Isabelle Aboulker, interview with the author.

²¹ Original French text: "Je ne suis pas de ceux qui disent: ce n'est rien, c'est une femme qui se noie."

woman saying that phrase,” Aboulker says. This statement underscores the need for the singer to approach this line, and the poem overall, through the methodology of “making strange” — of *Verfremdungseffekt*. The salience of this text throughout the song emphasizes Aboulker’s own interpretation of La Fontaine’s text, and her desire to point out the contradictions. She explains,

Consequently, it’s not actually a very meaningful, substantive remark. It’s a sort of attitude that he puts on to appear intelligent; at least I interpret it that way. It’s not intelligent. I like the ambiguity of this phrase, the ambiguity, because he says, “I’m not like the other men who *do* say this” - “*Je ne suis pas de ceux qui disent*”, and yet he does say it; it’s interesting — “*I’m not one of those men who says... Not a chance, not I!*” It’s very much the macho attitude, but it’s funny, because it’s completely stupid.”²²

Importantly, Aboulker’s critique is squarely aimed at the character who utters these words, and not at La Fontaine himself for adapting or publishing the fable. In addition to a reverence for preserving the metrical structure and emphasis of the text, Aboulker also demonstrates a deep engagement with the author and his historical place. Her admiration for La Fontaine’s work as literature manifests in settings that very subtly interpret and comment on the author’s philosophical positioning, often juxtaposing it with her own. The setting of La Fontaine’s text in the third selection, “La chatte métamorphosée en femme” or “The cat changed into a woman” is the chief example. In the tale, a cat is transformed into the body of a woman, a body that is not actually her own. In the fable, a man enamored with his cat uses prayers and magic to transform his companion into a human wife. Her body has changed, but her nature has not; therefore, the sight of a mouse in the bedroom sends her into an instinct-driven frenzy that the man did not anticipate. The story simultaneously provides a space for Aboulker to explore the

²² Isabelle Aboulker, interview with the author.

issue of gender musically and explicates La Fontaine's adherence to Epicurean philosophy.²³

This central issue of the nature of difference between humans and animals pertains to the philosophical tenets of Epicureanism; Epicurus subscribed to the idea of the dualism of the human soul. As adults (male or female), we possess both an instinctual animal nature, as well as a capacity for higher reasoning; therefore, human children begin life with the same instinct-driven "lower soul" as animals, but can grow in enlightenment in a way that non-human animals never can. In the case of "La chatte," the physical transformation of the cat into a woman did not give her the mental capabilities of a human, only the physical form. This idea of dualism creates a binary relationship not between men and women, but between the enlightened and unenlightened. This thinking was widespread in the seventeenth century, and quite different from attitudes that took shape in the early nineteenth century, when a binary conception of opposing female and male genders took hold in the general consciousness of European society. Historian Thomas Laqueur argues,

The early modern period did not conceive of the masculine and feminine as fixed opposites. Rather biological sex and gender were imagined as a continuum, a ladder with adult masculinity at the top and adult femininity and childhood on the lower rungs. Each body and gendered subject was understood to begin at the bottom of the ladder and grow up to its proper stage. The fully achieved masculine subject would be emotionally and sexually continent, acting on principle rather than feeling, while the feminine subject was seen as sensual, narcissistic and impulsive, driven by passions such as desire, pity and vindictiveness. The fascinating danger was that subjects may not maintain their proper places: ambitious, passionate women might surpass the normal limits of 'femininity' while undisciplined men might slide back down into the 'effeminate' realm of feeling and self-indulgence.²⁴

²³ Mackay, *La Fontaine and His Friends*.

²⁴ Thomas W. Laqueur, "The Rise of Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Historical Context and Historiographical Implications." *Signs* 37, no. 4 (June 2012): 803.

This conception of gender was prevalent when La Fontaine adapted the *Fables*, and nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in his setting of “La chatte métamorphosée en femme.” Aboulker demonstrates a deep understanding of La Fontaine’s beliefs, and creates music that aligns with this particular understanding of gender difference. There is a tendency in this song, and indeed, throughout the cycle, to use functionally tonal gestures in juxtaposition with scales and progressions that challenge the authority of tonal counterpoint, the latter often representing moments of operation of the ‘higher soul’. This song features sequences of parallel fifths in mm.18-20 and mm.41-44, a gesture that is recurring throughout the set, and makes reference in this piece to the supernatural element of magic transforming the cat into a higher being (Examples 2.3 and 2.4).

Ex 2.3: Aboulker, “La chatte métamorphosée en femme” *Femmes en Fables*, mm.17-20.

17 *a tempo*

plus fou — que les fous. Cet hom- me, donc, par pri- ères et par

poco accel. *p*

Ex. 2.4: Aboulker, “La chatte metamorphosée en femme” *Femmes en Fables*, mm. 39-46.

39 *retenu* - - - - *bien retenu*

tant son fa- vo- ri que fait cette é- pou- se nou- velle son hy- po-

43 *molto rit.* **Tempo primo** *sans lenteur, rubato*

con- dre de ma- ri il l'a- ma- doue... , el- le le flat- te, il n'y

molto rit.

♩ = 116

In my reading of this work, a gesture like this, unconventional in common-practice tonal writing, signals the presence of something beyond the natural; it is certainly atypical in Aboulker's style. The remainder of the man's actions are described musically in more conservative tonal language. In this musical narrative, then, Aboulker casts the man in a negative light; he was overcome by his emotions (now shown to be an effeminate characteristic), and therefore could not reason that he cannot change the nature of an animal by merely changing her outward appearance. The weak/feminine correlation that develops in the song implies a modern conception of gender that Aboulker maps onto her seventeenth century characters. She layers these historical understandings of gender difference; women exist on the continuum between the lower-

souled, instinct-driven animal and the enlightened man, but she is also presented as his opposite, possessed of a fixed nature that guides her behavior.

The final song in this group, “La cigale et la fourmi” synthesizes many of the same strategies employed in the first three songs and employs new ones. “La cigale et la fourmi” is a special case. The rhyming poem is extremely well known in France, which may explain why the text is essentially unaltered in Aboulker’s version. In fact, Aboulker notes that just about all Parisian schoolchildren can recite this poem on command. “The Cicada and the Ant,” or, as it is better known in the United States, “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” is arguably the most famous tale in La Fontaine’s entire collection. The story is familiar: The cicada spends her summer singing and playing, while the ant diligently prepares for winter. When the weather turns colder, the cicada asks the ant for help, and she is rebuffed.

Although this is the only fable of Aboulker’s four not to include humans, she qualifies her choice, “It’s two women; it’s not actually a cicada and an ant. Women can be very cruel toward each other.” Aboulker’s assertion that the cicada and the ant in the story are meant to represent human women is well supported in other artistic media; “La Cigale” became a popular subject for French artists in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and she is often portrayed as a beautiful woman with a somewhat vacant expression, as in the 1872 painting by Lefebvre (see Fig. 2.1) . Because of the feminine articles that accompany the French words for cicada and ant, “La cigale” and “La fourmi,” both characters are generally portrayed as women.

Fig. 2.1: *La Cigale* by Jules Lefebvre, 1872 (Victoria: National Gallery of Victoria).²⁵



Aboulker uses the same technique of adding wordless vocalization as a means of female stereotyping, upholding the structures of the meter while including additional space for vocal expression. This vocalization, in the final moments of the song, represents the cicada's demonstration of her singing to the ant. This is accomplished with a blank measure of notation in which Aboulker instructs the singer to perform a short vocalise. There is no determined length and no other instructions for the content of the vocalise,

²⁵ Jules Lefebvre, *La Cigale*, 1872, oil on canvas, 186.7 x 123.8cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/76694>.

except that the pianist is meant to interrupt her with a low, accented, and dissonant chord. The use of florid coloratura, as is the vocal implication in this context, has immediate iconic connections with operatic mad scenes, and other vocal depictions of female hysteria (see Ex 2.5).

Secondly, as the text is minimally altered in Aboulker's setting, she creates emphasis and contrast by calling on the singer to recite certain portions of the text in ordinary speech. The alternation of speech and song with piano accompaniment creates a timbral contrast in the voice, while emphasizing the musical nature of speech, particularly of spoken verse. The function of the spoken segments varies; it is simultaneously used as both a communicative tool and a timbral one. Speech is used as a tool of repetition, explanation, or percussive punctuation.

Ex. 2.5: Aboulker, "La cigale et la fourmi" *Femmes en Fables*, mm. 49-52.

49

nant, je chan- tais Ne vous dé- plaise. Vous chan- tiez?

On peut, sur cette mesure à vide chanter une très courte vocalise

très retenu

f sf

Example 2.6 "La cigale" text usage in Aboulker

La cigale, ayant chanté
 Tout l'été,
Se trouva fort dépourvue
Quand la bise fut venue.
 Pas un seul petit morceau
 De mouche ou de vermisseau.

Elle alla crier famine
 Chez la Fourmi sa voisine,
 La priant de lui prêter
 Quelque grain pour subsister
 Jusqu'à la saison nouvelle.
 «Je vous paierai, lui dit-elle,
 Avant l'août, foi d'animal,
Intérêt et principal.»
**La Fourmi n'est pas prêteuse;
 C'est là son moindre défaut.**
 «Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud?
 Dit-elle à cette emprunteuse.
 -- Nuit et jour à tout venant
 Je chantais, ne vous déplaie.
 -- Vous chantiez? J'en suis fort aise.
Et bien! dansez maintenant.»

In the above example, unbolded text is sung,
Bolded text is spoken,
Bold and italicized text is sung and spoken (repetition)

These repetitions and alternations of speech do not disrupt the metric structure of the text, and the stanzas are marked musically as well; one strategy it does accomplish is the sonic highlighting of contradiction and ambiguity in the moral. Without altering the composition of the writing that she so admires, Aboulker manages to arrange that text in such a way as to call attention to the problematic features of its content.

Women's Bodies in Performance

The communication of this text, the laying bare of the misogyny, and the specificities of Aboulker's compositional choices are only fully observed in performance. Score analysis alone is insufficient for communicating her interpretation of the text. Christopher Small, in his foundational volume *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, encourages us, in our search for musical meaning, to look beyond the work itself and account instead for the entire activity of performance and all of its

components, of which composition is just one part. “If we widen the circle of our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance, we shall see that music’s primary meanings are not individual at all but social.”²⁶ Questions of who, where, and when are consequential in the consideration of Aboulker’s composition. Considering Aboulker’s songs in this light emphasizes the roles of performer and listener in ways that challenge conventional assumptions, including Aboulker’s, about those roles in traditional French *mélodie*. Furthermore, this line of inquiry has implications for the performers themselves, and feminist musicology more broadly.

Aboulker understands the impact that different voices performing these texts have on a listening audience; the impact of a woman’s voice affects listeners differently than a child’s—a notable point since these fables are most often recited by the very young:

And as far as “La Cigale et la fourmi” is concerned, it becomes very different when it is sung by a child versus when it’s sung by an adult soprano like you, because in your case, you will adopt two distinct voices as you perform it. In the voice of an adult, the voice and thus the text are different. The phrase, “Well then, how about you try dancing *now*,” becomes quite vicious. Take that! Very mean, cruel even.²⁷

The musical event, rather than the score, is thus the most meaningful focus of study. This conceptual leap is easily achieved, as the *Fables* are part of a long oral tradition as well as a literate one, even in contemporary France. The meaning communicated through the musical event is quite different from a passive reading of the score or the text. According to Small, historiography and criticism of western music have come to privilege the musical work over the musical event, thus rendering performances

²⁶ Small, *Musicking*. 8.

²⁷ Isabelle Aboulker, interview with the author.

somehow inferior to scores by definition. He critiques these traditional modes of thought, noting, “There are even those who believe that, since each performance is at best only an imperfect and approximate representation of the work itself, it follows that music’s inner meanings can never be properly yielded up in performance. One wonders, in that case, why we should bother performing musical works at all, when we could just sit at home, like Brahms, and read them as if they were novels.”²⁸

This conventional attitude, which Small argues pervades western music scholarship, renders performers minimally responsible for imbuing a piece with meaning. Rather than interpret music, they exist as mediators between composer and audience. They convey, imperfectly, the intentions of the performers. Aboulker’s understanding of the conventions of *mélodie* actually supports this view, and she represents those beliefs through her meticulous musical notation. In a personal interview, she described her thoughts on the role of the performer.

RL: I have two questions: With so much in the music written and indicated, what is the role of the performer? How much freedom of expression do you envision?

IA: The question of freedom is a very good one, a very intelligent one. However, in truth, there really isn’t much freedom, to be honest. There really isn’t a notion of liberty. While I might not be a “great” composer, nonetheless, if I compose, I want you to do what I’ve written. You’re the interpreter, not the composer. And yet, in my life, I am not like that in any way; I am very tolerant, and accept a lot of different things. I am a flexible person, and it’s not my character to impose, but the music is the music.

RL: It is so specific...

IA: Specific, yes, and if you are working with a “big” composer, you have the freedom to give your sensibility, or your personality, the color of your voice. But even in this case, I believe that the freedom you have is nonetheless not

²⁸ Small, *Musicking*, 5.

enormous, especially with music which is very precisely and meticulously written.²⁹

This kind of approach seems, at first glance, to represent a rigid and old-fashioned understanding of the role of the performer. Looking at this issue with a wider lens, one that considers the circumstances under which these songs were first written and performed, contextualizes her comments. Aboulker wrote all four of these songs for her students, at one of Europe's most storied conservatories. The written score represents Aboulker's attempt to describe a specific set of stylistic conventions that notation is simply insufficient in expressing; it was this set of conventions that Aboulker was trying to impart to young singers immersed in the ideologically specific curriculum of the Conservatoire. Of course, the limitations of notation provide space for performers; their deployment of performance practice and stylistic trends depends on their training and skill. As Steven Scher notes, "If every aspect of sound-production could be encoded in a score, performers would have no freedom; creative performance is made possible because of inadequacies in notation."³⁰ When the score is understood this way, it allows performers to engage with it in conjunction with their own memories, experiences, and creative impulses to formulate an "intertextual dialogue" in performance, without the burden of aspiring to a perfect representation of the work itself.

Yet, Aboulker strives for precision in her notation, and frequently coaches singers on her own work. For musicians, the dynamic of working with a living composer certainly differs from performing historical works. Aboulker's own intentions are not

²⁹ Isabelle Aboulker, interview with the author.

³⁰ Steven P. Scher, *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12.

only encoded in the score, inert and fixed, but also embodied and verbalized by the composer; this dynamic allows for a comprehensive understanding of the composer's intentions, of course, but also the added pressure to realize those intentions in performance — to channel the composer's will.

The question arises, then, how a performer might choose to approach songs she finds objectionable, and how listeners might engage with problematic subject matter. This question has long been a central theme of feminist musicology. The persistence of these tropes through centuries of musical development and styles, through the creation and dissolution of tonality itself, indicates a deeply embedded link that seems difficult if not impossible to upend.

Ruth Solie addresses this problem in her discussion of contemporary performances of Robert Schumann's song cycle *Frauenliebe und -leben*. She identifies some strategies that listeners have long employed to ease their discomfort:

It seems that we have developed a number of defensive strategies that enable us to listen in relative ease: one is to seek refuge in autonomism, to focus on "the music itself" and to insist that it, on its own, carries no "meaning." Another is to take comfort in a kind of naive historical relativism, to assume that "things were like that" then, and that it is simply inappropriate to hold 1840's society to 1990's social standards. For a third, there is a thin but helpful veil of distance for us in the kinds of performance situations in which we encounter such songs, formal and professional, so unlike the intimate domestic *Liederabend* of their own period.³¹

She later notes that, "Such defensive arguments are merely sloppy intellectual habits, and historically inaccurate as well."³² In sum, there is no shortage of scholarly research that provides critiques of the place of misogyny in the western canon. Literature and music, in Aboulker's case, are closely intertwined, and thus negate attempts to focus on musical

³¹ Solie, *Musicology and Difference*, 221.

³² Ibid.

autonomy. For her part, Aboulker is generally untroubled by sexism in literature, citing a certain amount of personal privilege that prevents her being directly affected by the misogyny.

A lot of really fantastic writers were completely misogynistic. But in my case, these happen to be authors that I really like. I don't know if you're familiar with Jules Renard. He wrote some absolutely extraordinary things. He was someone who wrote very little, his sentences were *like that*. And yet, aside from his wife and daughter, one could do away with all other women as far as he was concerned. He was incredibly misogynistic, but I adore Jules Renard. What can I say? I'm not going to dismiss him completely because of this one aspect of his writing. And generally, these types of men are funny, because the things they are saying are so over the top that they end up making you laugh.³³

Aboulker's ability to find humor in sexist language reveals a certain amount of social privilege, which she acknowledges. This vantage point does allow, however, for new considerations of alienating strategies in performance. In a vocal coaching, she encouraged me to try experience what it might be like to hear misogynistic text if it *didn't* personally affect me. While my initial instincts were generally to resist, qualify, or distance myself from the words I sang, Aboulker imagines that I might instead be able to temporarily embody a privileged male experience.

This approach to acting enters into dialogue with the embodied realities of singer in performance. The text asks the singer to portray a variety of characters; she must adopt certain physical strategies to make the characters' positioning clear. Because women are the central theme in this set of songs, the performance highlights the complex relationship of specific bodily traits to culturally constructed perceptions of gender.

Applications of new materialist philosophy inform this attention to women's bodies in performance, particularly in the multisensory realm of narrative musical

³³ Isabelle Aboulker, interview with the author.

performance; it is a kind of embodied storytelling, a medium which provides space to explore this issue. As Maguire identifies in his discussion of the actress, writer, and performance artist Peggy Shaw, “there is a deliberate interplay...between the fixity of identity of Shaw’s materially present self as a sexed female body and the fluidity of identity through the behavior which that body can then perform.”³⁴ This statement echoes the philosophy of new materialists in contemporary gender studies, who resist the idea that gender is a purely social construct. Maguire’s assertion about interplay between body and behavior indicates that gender is performative, but it is the manifestation of the semiotic codes in a specific body which gives them meaning; in other words, our bodies are sexed, but the signs of those sexed bodies do not exist in a simple gender binary. As Elizabeth Grosz notes, “Sexual difference is still in play even to the extent that one identifies with or actively seeks the sexual organs and apparatus of the ‘opposite’ sex: at most one can change the appearance and social meaning of the body, but the sexually specific body that is altered remains a sexually specific, if altered, body. Sexual difference has no one location, no one organ or condition. This is why surgical or hormonal alterations do not actually give one the body of the other sex, instead providing an alteration of only some of the key social markers of gender.”³⁵

The crucial components of these gender studies analyses are synthesized by Diamond; her application of Brechtian theory to feminist studies provides useful framework for Abouker’s songs, particularly because these songs remove the comforting distance provided by historical works, replete with antiquated views of women, because

³⁴ Tom Maguire, *Performing Story on the Contemporary Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

³⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

the work is contemporary. Diamond proposes an analogue between the alienating distance that Brecht prescribes and the understanding of sexual difference:

The Brechtian “not, but” is the theatrical and theoretical analog to the subversiveness of sexual difference, because it allows us to imagine the deconstruction of gender—and all other—representations. Such deconstructions dramatize, at least at the level of theory, the infinite play of difference that Derrida calls *écriture*—the superfluity of signification that places meaning beyond capture within the covers of the play or the hours of performance. This is not to deny Brecht's wish for an instructive, analytical theatre; on the contrary, it invites the participatory play of the spectator, and the possibility for which Brecht most devoutly wished, that significance (the production of meaning) continue beyond play's end, congealing into choice and action after the spectator leaves the theatre.³⁶

Brecht advocated recognizing and emphasizing difference on the theatrical stage, saying, “When our theatres perform plays of other periods they like to annihilate distance, fill in the gap, gloss over the differences. But what comes in our delight in comparisons, in distance, in dissimilarity— which is at the same time a delight in what is close and proper to ourselves?”

Diamond's model provides a new avenue for considering Aboulker's songs. It emphasizes the strangeness of a woman portraying and moralizing about the inferior status of women. This perspective can be useful to a feminist musicology in confronting composers' use of problematic texts, as Aboulker does. It is also a deeply embodied perspective; without the performing body, the irony is unclear. The impact of a female body on stage is yet another aspect of the performance that the composer fully intends and the audience perceives, but which notation is insufficient to describe.

Aboulker has encountered resistance from performers and critics concerning her setting of these fables. Through this investigation, I conclude that her writing alternately

³⁶ Diamond, *Unmaking Memisis*.

questions, amplifies, and subverts the discriminatory assumptions about gender in La Fontaine's *Fables*. Presenting La Fontaine's seventeenth-century view of women in a contemporary concert context forces the audience to experience uncomfortable stereotyping in an overt manner, through performance by a woman. This multisensory experience can create a strong reaction. The idea of facing these controversies directly, audibly, and through a female voice is a powerful tool in calling for a reconsideration of these often trite and sometimes vicious portrayals of women.

Femmes en Fables represents one contemporary composer's strategy for handling the gender imbalance in much of western cultural production. It is by no means a universally lauded approach. Aboulker works strictly within the accepted musical and formal practices of western art music, and calls attention to its problems within its own context. And yet, as Small and other scholars of reception history have noted, what is heard and experienced in performance may in fact be quite different than what the composer or author intends. A performance of *Femmes en Fables* yields vastly different results than a reading of the *Fables*. The structures of the text and the composition of language remain intact; it is this quality that Aboulker values above all. The performance does not require that anyone involved in the performance event ascribe to the values embedded in the content of that literature. In fact, what is performed can be deeply ironic, funny, or problematic. There is no single interpretation. Aboulker's strategies for composition reflect her own positioning; what she does accomplish in asking women to embody this music in performance is to engage with rather than gloss over the discomforts of misogyny. Her strategy provokes thought and sheds light on alternative viewpoints. These songs embrace rather than attempt to explain away Aboulker's

contradictory positionings. In her own words, “It’s a mindset of contradiction. But I think there’s some truth to an outlook that embraces contradiction.”

Chapter 3

Caroline Shaw: Performance, Authorship, and Collaborative Models

American poet Claudia Rankine contemplates the notion of musical “genius” in her 2004 book *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* through consideration of the term’s usage with respect to the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson:

Mahalia Jackson is a genius. Or Mahalia Jackson has genius. The man I am with is trying to make a distinction. I am uncomfortable with his need to make this distinction because his inquiry begins to approach subtle shades of racism, classism, or sexism. It is hard to know which. Mahalia Jackson never finished the eighth grade, or Mahalia’s genius is based on the collision of her voice with her spirituality. True spirituality is its own force. I am not sure how to respond to all this. I change the subject instead.¹

Rankine makes the observation that “genius” is a term that tends to be used to describe men, since the man with whom she is speaking is reticent to describe a woman of color as such, has roots that go back to the pre-Christian Roman Empire. Joyce Chaplin explains that, “In Roman times (and here we see one origin of a long-standing and insidious prejudice), only men were thought to possess a genius. All men had a genius for something, which gave shape to their individual character, but the greatest individuals could lay claim to a superior force of this kind...”² Although the word’s connotation and usage evolved over the centuries, its association with men remains remarkably secure. Lucy Delap notes that “It was a common assumption in Victorian and Edwardian Britain that women were by nature unlikely to display genius.”³ Although

¹ Claudia Rankine, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely : an American Lyric*. (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004).

² Joyce E. Chaplin, ed. *Genealogies of Genius* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 13.

³ Lucy Delap, “The Superwoman: Theories of Gender and Genius in Edwardian Britain.” *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 1 (March 2004), 102.

today, the term is more often fused with that of the celebrity, the association with maleness persists. As Jayson Greene notes, “A genius is always male — not just a male, but a Great Man, as “genius” has always been more bellow of patriarchal conquest than any kind of descriptor.”⁴ Like so many other examples of gendered discourse, the genius concept has “performed specific cultural work within each of the societies in which it has had a historical presence,” and in its nineteenth- and twentieth- century iteration in western culture, “has powerful connotations of elitism, and is likely to have boundaries that exclude the socially marginalized or disempowered.”

The archetypal genius is very often a creative figure, and many composer-heroes of the western canon have been dubbed “geniuses” in their own time. In particular, the nineteenth-century conception of the genius coincides with the development of what Durkheim coined the “cult of individualism” as the ideal for the development of a moral, rational, modern society.⁵ This kind of reverence for an individual’s superior intellect and creative ability coincided with the usage among “great composers” of increasingly detailed notation of musical works, and the concomitant expectation that performers would adhere to the parameters set forth in that notation. Thus, the modern conception of the musical text was formed; the score is a musical work, one that exists over and above any single iterations, such as performances or recordings.⁶

⁴ Greene, Jayson, “Kanye West and Why the Myth of ‘Genius’ Must Die.” *The Pitch* (Blog), *Pitchfork*, May 3, 2018. <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/kanye-west-and-why-the-myth-of-genius-must-die/>.

⁵ Emile Durkheim, Mirjam Miethling, Eddie Hartmann, Jean Terrier, Yves Sintomer, Hans-Peter Müller, and Michael Beetz. “The political and social thought of Emile Durkheim.” *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 19, no. 2 (June 2009): 164–267.

⁶ Lydia Goehr. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Peter Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

Beyond the obvious interpretive and historiographical problems that this idea of “genius” creates, recent scholars have noted that it is also inherently misogynistic. The persistent myth of the genius in the classical western tradition has manufactured perceived barriers for women who wish to compose. For example, Sally Macarthur articulates her desire “to reopen in a productive way the unsolved case of women’s ability to crack the ‘new’ music system.”⁷ While gender disparities in programming, awards, and opportunities certainly persist, I would argue that, depending on the criteria used, a number of women have already successfully “cracked the system” of new music, albeit in ways that resist the hegemonic position of the composer-genius. Chief among these in the United States is Caroline Shaw, whose receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2013 for her *Partita for Eight Voices* as a relative unknown sent shockwaves through the new-music scene. Shaw’s style is distinctive among that of her peers in its focused attention to harmonic resonance and timbre, its reverent treatment of both ancient and modern poetry, and its orientation towards a collaborative performance model. This collaborative spirit sharply disrupts perceived notions of the creator/composer as someone whose genius is a personal, individual gift. Both Larsen and Aboulker, for example, adhere closely to this notion of the composer’s authority; collaboration is an approach that Shaw, by contrast, embraces.

The “new music system” to which Macarthur refers is a particular avant-garde scene that is rooted in and embraced by the musical academy. Many in the academy criticize Shaw’s music for what Shaw herself calls a lack of compositional “rigor.” I argue, however, that the demand for such rigor is rooted in the dominance of traditional

⁷ Sally Macarthur, *Towards a Twenty-First Century Feminist Politics of Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

hermeneutic analytical models developed since the early nineteenth century. These models valorize a particular conception of the composer and the musical work, and new compositions apparently must align with these criteria in order to garner value among academic theorists. In their inability to account for the course that Shaw and other women composers are charting, those models put those composers at a fundamental disadvantage.

Shaw's flourishing career, catapulted by her Pulitzer win, demonstrates in itself that the legal and social barriers preventing women's composition have, in some respects, been broken. Shaw is, in fact, succeeding as a classical composer in the traditional sense; she receives regular commissions and has work premiered by high-profile classical performers like Renée Fleming, Dawn Upshaw, the Dover Quartet, Anne Sofie von Otter, International Contemporary Ensemble, Philharmonia Baroque, and the Baltimore Symphony.⁸ Simultaneously, and contrastingly, Shaw composes music that resists many classical norms, and stretches the boundaries of genre. Many of her compositional predispositions resonate with popular-music trends, resulting in a long-standing collaboration with controversial hip-hop artist Kanye West, and in classical music that merges with popular styles in its embrace of particular harmonies, forms, and vocal styles. Clearly, Shaw's music is resonating with audiences and critics despite its non-compliance with dominant trends in the new-music scene. To capture the collaborative model rooted in timbre and resonance, as opposed to large-scale form, new discourses and methodologies are required.

Using Shaw's compositional technique as a case study, I argue that the logocentrism of western musical practice, as well as the persistence of the genius myth,

⁸ "Caroline Shaw" <http://carolineshaw.com>.

are major obstacles delaying gender parity in the field. Methodologies that place primary importance on musical texts and scores fail to account for Shaw's collaborative, performance-centric techniques. Shaw's approach largely draws on seventeenth and eighteenth-century string music, as she was first trained musically as a violinist; Baroque performance practices and techniques of notation predate the romantic focus on hyper-descriptive musical text, and therefore provide an avenue for new ways of thinking about her music. Shaw is actively contributing to the creation of a new path for composers to avoid the logocentric model as she creates a body of work that resists it.

Through interviews with the composer and close consideration of two of Shaw's pieces, the chamber work *This Might Also Be a Form of Dreaming* (set to text from Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*), and *By and By*, a setting of gospel and country music texts for voice and string quartet, I reveal how Shaw's adoption of baroque musical aesthetics allow her to circumvent the text-centrism dominant in academic analytical systems. In the course of these readings, I identify two primary strategies of composition with which Shaw engages: first, a collaborative compositional model and, secondly, flexible, alternate methods of notation. Finally, I problematize the notion of the collaborative model in a consideration of Shaw's work as a singer and producer for Kanye West. In her collaborative efforts with a contemporary celebrity figure who embodies many of the lingering tropes of the musical genius, gender roles figure crucially in the power structures that still develop, even in the absence of a logocentric compositional model.

This Might Also Be a Form of Dreaming

Caroline Shaw's *This Might Also Be a Form of Dreaming* (henceforth referred to as *Dreaming*) is a chamber work originally commissioned by the Ojai Festival and the Playground Ensemble. The piece received its world premiere at the Festival on June 11, 2016 and was performed by the International Contemporary Ensemble and Roomful of Teeth, the vocal octet of which Shaw herself is a performing member. Scored for eight voices, viola, cello, bass clarinet, piano, and percussion, *Dreaming* sets excerpts from poet Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* in seven movements.

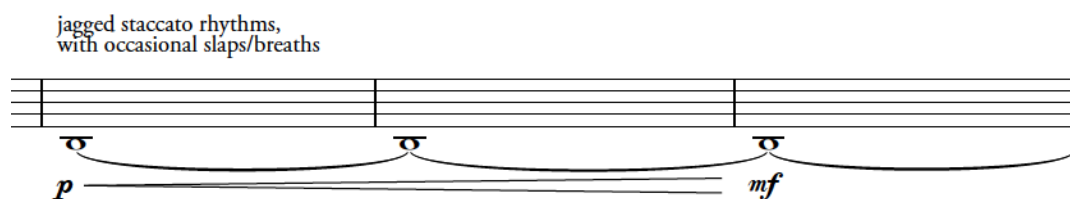
Dreaming is representative of several aspects of Shaw's compositional approach, and in some respects it reflects her engagement as a performer and admirer of eighteenth-century European chamber music. *Dreaming* is concerned with triadic progressions, development and resolution of dissonances, and an approach to vocal writing that disregards much of the bel-canto era pedagogy that has dominated classical music since the nineteenth century. Secondly, Shaw's involvement in the development of the premiere performance as both a composer and singer challenge and undermine some of the long-established hierarchies that separate composer, performer, and audience, and that are inherent in the rituals of classical-music performance. Finally, Shaw's approach to notation relies less on making thorough and specific demands on the performer, as a composer like Isabel Aboulker does, and more on the premise that many nuances of performance will be worked out in rehearsal—away from the score. In this way, too, *Dreaming* more closely resembles a thinly-notated baroque score: its notation is not thoroughly prescriptive, but requires more creative engagement and interpretive decision-making from the performer; its flexibility also emphasizes early music's connection with rhetoric.

Shaw is, above all, a practical, practicing musician. As both a violinist and singer, she has been an active performer throughout her career. This sensibility is inseparable from her compositional approach. She describes the influence of improvisatory practice on her compositions as profound. As she noted in our interview, “I was playing for dance classes, and that was a big change for me, playing for ballet and modern dance classes. Dancers think about music so differently, [which I learned while] improvising music for their classes. Suddenly, music became this thing that’s functional, for someone who’s moving in the world, and who feels things intuitively.”⁹ Improvisation is an important component of much of Shaw’s work, including *Dreaming*. She includes what she calls an “epic bass clarinet solo” in the first movement, and frequently indicates passages for all parts that suggest tempo, dynamics, and energetic direction, but rarely both pitch and rhythm. One example from earlier in that same movement is also in the bass clarinet line; Shaw notates a single pitch, B natural, lasting four measures, along with instructions for “jagged, staccato rhythms, with occasional slaps/breaths.” (See Ex. 3.1).

The lack of absolute performance instructions in the score demonstrates Shaw’s long-standing engagement with baroque performance practice, where knowledge of stylistic conventions informs the deployment of necessary elements of the music, such as tempo, ornamentation, and improvised cadenzas. It is also important to note that composers in this era also largely tended to perform their own works. Similarly, these tendencies manifest in the work of a composer who trusts and values the input of her collaborators, as well as one who frequently performs her own work.

⁹ Caroline Shaw, Interview with the author, July 7, 2018, full transcription in Appendix B.

Ex. 3.1. Caroline Shaw, excerpt from *This Might Also Be A Form of Dreaming* movement 1, Bass clarinet score



In other words, the collaborative model within the new music community is working to dissociate from the hierarchical cultural baggage associated with the cult of individuality that pervaded the arts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Shaw describes this work as akin to the work of a theater director, where performance decisions are worked out in the rehearsal room prior to a premiere by all participants in a collaborative way.¹⁰

The term “collaboration” used in this context is a relatively recent linguistic phenomenon; before the 1950s the word was used to refer only to traitorous cooperation with a foreign power. Today, the term is used ubiquitously in business environments to indicate and promote a certain egalitarian ambition. This emphasis on egalitarianism presents a challenge to the notion of individual genius, as Paul Roe explains: “as the concept of collaboration develops in Western societies, partners are required to shed some of their cultural heritage, including the beliefs in a separate independent self and the glory of individual achievement. The overwhelming focus on individual attainment and personal creativity in the psychological literature of the twentieth century is still very influential in determining how our organisations are structured and how people behave

¹⁰ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

within organisations.”¹¹ The growing trend of collaboration in new music circles is, likewise, actively challenging the glorification of the composer-hero as a solitary being.

For *Dreaming*, this collaborative attitude extends to the treatment of poetry. Setting the words of a living poet, for Shaw is, “a way of learning about someone else, finding another person’s way of thinking.”¹² This kind of orientation towards textual content certainly informs her method of text-setting. Claudia Rankine’s book, which serves as the source material, consists of prose poetry accompanied by photographs. According to Rebecca Macmillan, “Rankine’s collection attests to various models of documentation and accentuates the limits of their representational strategies.”¹³ The poems seem appropriate, then, for musical setting as an additional representational strategy. Rankine’s book employs what Macmillan labels an “archival poetics,” in which the narrative is structured against the background of historical events.¹⁴

Shaw channels this mode of presentation in her musical writing. This is particularly evident in the second movement, which begins with the voices speaking, in turn, the central premise, “the world moves through words,” and continues with fragmentary and interconnected texts taken from Rankine’s work. These texts include, according to Shaw’s program notes, “references to television advertising, pharmacological information, imagined conversations, and the work of Coetzee, Celan, Milosz, and Levinas.”

¹¹ Paul Roe “A Phenomenology of Collaboration in Contemporary Composition and Performance.” (PhD diss, University of York, 2007).

¹² Caroline Shaw, Interview with the author.

¹³ Rebecca Macmillan, “The Archival Poetics of Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*.” *Contemporary Literature* 58, no. 2 (June 2017), 174.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Ex. 3.2: Shaw, excerpt from Movement 2 of *This Might Also Be a Form of Dreaming*.¹⁵

20 88 D

1 Years ago, now I just live in the neighborhood.

2 One day I hear, as if he is standing next to me, the poet Joseph

3 I leave the television on all the time

4 I leave the television on all the time

5 a game that asks

6 the poet Joseph Brodsky saying

7 The Museum of Emotions in London has a game that asks

8 One day I hear, as if he is standing

Vla.

Vc.

B. Cl.

perc.

Pno.

¹⁵ Caroline Shaw, “This Might Also Be A Form of Dreaming” (unpublished score, June 2016), PDF file.

92 21

1 *ab*

2 Brodsky saying, What's the point of forgetting if it's followed by *m*

3 Years ago, now I just

4 *ab* *m*

5 I leave the television on all the time *m*

6 *m*

7 One day I hear, as if he is standing next to me, the poet Joseph Brodsky saying

8 One day I hear, as if he is standing next to me, the poet Joseph

Vla. *pizz dry, close to bridge*

Vc. *mf*

B. Cl. *mp*

perc

Pno.

22

95

1 I can't stop people from saying what they *ah* *oh*

2 She said take two a day. *oh*

3 Some Medicines Can Change The Effect Of This Medicine. Check With Your Doctor Or Pharmacist

4 Some Medicines Can Change The Effect Of This Medicine. Check With

5 They always do that.

6 I can't stop people from saying what they *oh*

7 They always do that.

8 She said take two a day. *oh*

Vla. *dry, close to bridge*
pizz

Vc. *warm*

B. Cl.

perc

Pno. *mf*

98 23

1 *oh* A day so happy

2 She said take two a day. *oh*

3 no - bil - it - y which is our which no -

4 Your Doctor Or Pharmacist no - bil - it - y which is our which no -

5 no - bil - it - y which is our which no -

6

7 *oh*

8 *oh* A day so happy

Worry 8. Cause mental distress or agitation to (a person, oneself); make anxious

→ warm

Vla.

Vc.

B. Cl.

perc

Pno.

24

101

1 Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.

2 A day so happy Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden

3 bil - it - y which is our which no - bil - it - y which

4 bil - it - y which is our which no - bil - it - y which

5 bil - it - y which is our which no - bil - it - y which

6 and ill at ease. 9. Give way to anxiety, unease, or disquietude: allow one's mind to dwell on difficulties or troubles.

7

8 Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden

Vla. *trille*

Vc. *trille* *mf*

B. Cl.

perc

Pno.

104 E 25

1 Your life is waiting. There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.

2 Your life is waiting. *m* 3

3 Your life is waiting. There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.

4 Your life is waiting. *m* 3
no-bil - it - y which is our

5 Your life is waiting. *m* 3
no-bil - it - y which is our

6 Your life is waiting. *m* 3

7 Your life is waiting.

8 Your life is waiting.

Vla. Your life is waiting.

Vc. *f* brittle Your life is waiting. *mf* warm

B. Cl. Your life is waiting.

perc. Your life is waiting. 3

Pno. *f* E
senza *200*

26

108

1 *oh* Yes. *oh*

2 Define loneliness? It's what we can't do for each other.

3 *oh* *oh*

4 What does a life mean?

5 Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable

6 *oh* *oh*

7 *oh* What do we mean to each other? *oh*

8 What does it mean to forgive and how does forgiveness show itself?

Vla. *breit* *f* *breit*

Vc. *breit*

B. Cl.

perc *3* *2* *3*

Pno.

111 27

1 *ob*

2 Define loneliness? What are we here if not for each other? *ob*

3 *ob*

4 What are we here if not for each other? What are we here if not for each other? *ob*

5 What does a life mean? What does a life mean? *ob*

6 *ob*

7 *ob*

8 What does a life mean? What are we here if not for each other? *ob*

Vla. *warm*

Vc. *gently arco*
p

B. Cl. *gently*
p

perc *g*

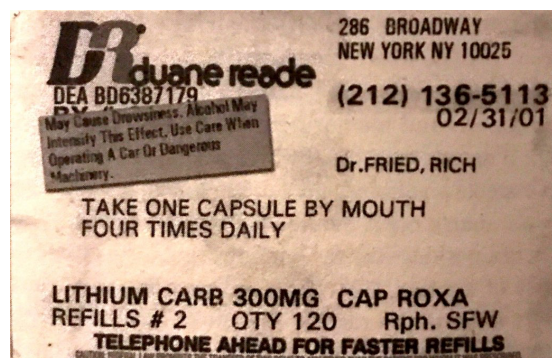
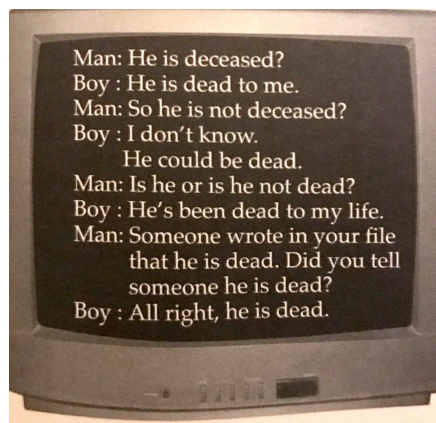
Pno. *p*

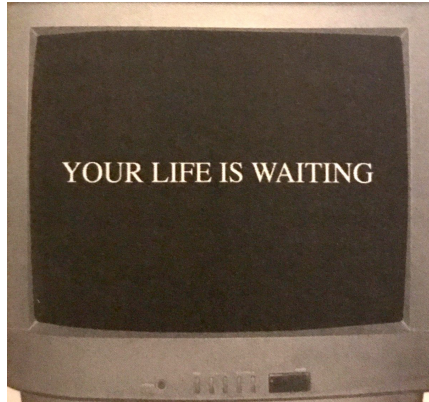
sempre con

Fig. 3.1: Images from Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*



Some Medicines Can Change The Effect
Of This Medicine. Check With Your
Doctor Or Pharmacist Before Taking Any
Other Medicines.





Shaw's compositional style is shown, then, to be flexible and adaptive to both the source material and her collaborators. Physically, her presence within the ensemble, sounding along with them, and sharing those words of Rankine's, "What are we here if not for each other?" further emphasizes the importance of collaboration with specific individuals, possessed of certain capacities. In her own words, "I use the metaphor of carving something out of wood. Imperfections, or the grain of the wood, are part of the piece itself, so I'm not going to make that piece of wood have a different grain. That's the wood I'm using."¹⁶ If she is working with a specific ensemble or musician, they are her

¹⁶ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

wood, and she crafts her work in such a way as to suit them, rather than forcing them to fit any rigid mold of her own, unwavering compositional style.

Shaw's vocal music makes use of texts in which she finds expressive potential, in terms of both linguistic meaning and sonic potential. Her focus on the musical qualities of speech echoes the close relationship between the art of musical composition and the art of rhetoric, which was theorized alongside Baroque vocal writing in numerous treatises during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁷ Persuasive text, delivered by a speaker well-versed in the methods of stirring affections in the listener, could effectively communicate universal truths. The fourth movement of *Dreaming* is, in fact, a reading, performed at the premiere by Shaw and ICE's clarinetist and former artistic director Joshua Rubin. Without musical accompaniment, the text is reconfigured as music itself, emphasizing that speech is both a musical and performative act. It is also notable that the musical aspects of speech, including the inflection, tempo, and pitch, cannot be accurately captured in any standard kind of musical notation in western practice.

¹⁷ Sources that summarize these issues include: Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. ed. Harold Friend Harding (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965); Johann Adam Hiller, *Treatise on Vocal Performance and Ornamentation*. ed. Suzanne J Beicken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Robert Toft, *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Pier Francesco Tosi *Introduction to the Art of Singing*. ed. Johnn Friedrich Agricola and Julianne Baird (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Secondary sources include: Tom Beghin and Sander M. Goldberg, *Haydn and the Performance of Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Stephanie Vial, *The Art of Musical Phrasing in the Eighteenth Century: Punctuating the Classical "Period"* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008); Laurel E. Zeiss, "How to Sing Recitative: Some Advice from the 1700s." *Journal of Singing: The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 61, no. 2 (2004): 143-153.

The fifth movement of *Dreaming* provides an example of alternative notation that results in nearly infinite harmonic possibilities. Example 3.3 shows the vocal score, which includes instructions and guidelines for a homophonic musical recitation of the text. The harmonic motion is constrained to a single mode, built around the central pitches C and G, but she includes no notation on staves or rhythmic specifications, other than simultaneous speech rhythm:

Ex. 3.3 *Dreaming* Movement 5

V.
Speech rhythm always
On C or G by default.
On bolded words move to another tone in the mode. (Stay on pitch till the next unbolded word).

Then all **life**
 is a form
 of **waiting**.
 but it is the **waiting of** loneliness.
 One waits
to
 recognize **the other, to see**
 the other as one
sees
the self.

Levinas writes,
 “The subject who **speaks is situated** in relation **to the other**,
 This privilege of the other ceases **to be incomprehensible**
 once we admit that the first
 fact of
existence
 is neither
being in itself
 nor being **for itself**
 but being for **the other**,
 in other
 words,
that human existence
 is a creature.

By offering **a word**,
 the
subject
 putting himself
forward
 lays himself **open**
 and, **in a** sense,
 prays.”

This movement uses a similar strategy to that of the fourth movement, in which recitation is the primary mode of delivery; the addition of sung vocal sounds and the forces of the entire octet, however, amplify Rankine’s words in new ways. This difference is imperceptible on the page but provides radical contrast in performance. By arranging the harmonic changes to align with particular words and phrases, Shaw does some of the interpretive work, by drawing sonic attention to those words and phrases. The nature of those harmonic changes, though, cannot be predicted by the composer, listener, or even any of the performers individually. Without pre-arranging or planning each of the eight singers’ pitch choices, there is no way to predict which chord will be the most dissonant, which will contain the highest or lowest pitches, which will be the most resonant given the arrangement of the pitches, or if, by some chance, the singers all choose the same pitch.

This kind of indeterminacy occupies a middle ground between truly Cageian aleatoric music, which has been a mainstay of contemporary and experimental scenes for at least the last fifty years, and thin notation requiring performer interpretation and stylistically-appropriate ornamentation.¹⁸ As a result, Shaw’s particular indeterminate

¹⁸ Andy Hamilton, “The Music of Chance: Musical Dice Men from John Cage to John Zorn.” In *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*. (London: Continuum, 2002); Robert Charles Clark, “Total Control and Chance in Musics. I: A Philosophical Analysis; II: Reflections on Criticism and Judgment.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 43–46.

strategies defy many traditional analytic approaches. In this case, Shaw has limited the possibilities to a single mode, synchronous changes among voices, and predetermined points of harmonic movement. The indeterminate parameters are restricted, and they most profoundly affect the aural perception of the movement. The literal sonic resonances that may occur as a result of eight different sets of musical choices within a mode are numerous and unpredictable in a given performance situation.

Ultimately, the resonating bodies of those involved in a performance situation — the musicians and listeners — are the conduits of musical and textual meaning. The performers' contributions in the moment of the performance dramatically affect timbral, melodic, and harmonic aspects of music; the effect of the spoken texts, too, can be unique, encouraging new and varied engagement with the text in each performance.

By and By

Dreaming demonstrates Shaw's interest in both a collaborative model of composition and performance and a flexible form notation. In her cycle of four songs, *By and By*, for voice and string quartet, these features are even more apparent; this is especially so since Shaw frequently performs these songs herself. The collaborative model is a long-standing feature of the contemporary music scene, in which the composer's input is available to performers in a way that is not possible with historical works, and which are necessarily interpreted primarily via a written score. Consideration of two different performances given by the composer demonstrate the methods and features of a collaborative performance that are crucial to understanding Shaw's style and approach to music-making. As I will show, the score is largely an abstraction (or in Shaw's words, a "map") rather than the music itself or an entirely prescriptive

document.¹⁹ The texts of these songs are drawn from pre-existing gospel, bluegrass, and country songs, as well as spirituals; as such they contribute to the idea of performance as a compositional act, in which the familiar is understood in a new light.

Shaw's frequent appearance in performances of her own works disrupts the norm, established in the Romantic era, of the separation between composer and performer.

While this is certainly not an unusual occurrence among contemporary composers, it nonetheless warrants attention in Shaw's work. This approach moves away from placing value the musical text as the primary object of study over performance, often perceived as more ephemeral. Shaw's participation in musical performances calls attention to the importance of that component of the musical process. Her participation in performances and recordings implies an emphasis on collaborative processes in the creation of new music.

Although many singers have performed *By and By*, I focus on two of Shaw's own performances; each performance demonstrates significant departures from the written score in terms of pacing, ornamentation, and even instrumentation. These variants, all presumably deemed appropriate by the author of the work by virtue of her collaboration in the performances, call attention to the importance of performance analysis over score analysis in the development of musicological methodologies suited to the increasingly prevalent composer-performer in the contemporary vocal scene. This performance-centered approach is especially important in feminist musicology, since the flexible, collaborative model is one in which women play a most vital role.

The titles of each of the four movements of *By and By* may be familiar to listeners of gospel and country western music; indeed, the texts of Shaw's work are taken from

¹⁹ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

well-known songs in these genres, made famous in Baptist hymnals and in recordings by artists such as the Carter Family, the Selah Jubilee Singers, Johnny Cash, the Cox Family, and, more recently, Reba McEntire and Alison Krause. While the texts are recycled, Shaw's composition completely reimagines the original versions in new, nearly unrecognizable harmonic and melodic contexts. Shaw recognizes these works as central to the dynamic and often participatory musical practices of the American South. No one score or recording of any of these songs is considered to be the definitive representation; folk songs like these are reproduced in both oral and written traditions, and re-interpretation is expected. Numerous cover versions and alternate editions exist. Many of these texts also appear in Christian hymnals, signaling their function in communal practice. For a composer-performer like Shaw, who grew up singing in church in North Carolina with her mother, these texts were likely a familiar part of her everyday life. As a result, as Shaw notes, she felt empowered to make "something totally different out of them."²⁰

In performance, Shaw rarely adheres to the letter of her own score; in addition, the score's notation is flexible, allowing for many possible manifestations of the piece in performance. *By and By*, as performed by Shaw and the Calder Quartet for Music on Main's Modulus Festival in October 2013, represents one possible interpretation of the score; here, I will address the first of the four songs, "Will there be any stars in my crown?" This song was also excerpted in a second performance by the composer at the Resonant Bodies Festival in New York City in September 2018.²¹ The differences

²⁰ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

²¹ The Kennedy Center, "Caroline Shaw and North Carolina Symphony – "By and By" *The Kennedy Center*, March 30, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biodnNdckGU>; Resonant Bodies Festival, "RBF

between these two performances demonstrate the wide range of possibilities available for the interpretation of a score. Attending to analysis in this way calls attention to the meaningful impact of a live performance experience for an audience and the capacities of physical sonic resonance to communicate meaning.

The Modulus Festival performance begins with Shaw standing at a microphone in the center of the string ensemble. The quartet plucks open strings on their instruments with picks, out of phase with one another. This musical gesture gives the impression of tuning, but the pattern continues as Shaw begins to sing, placing her voice in the center of an intensely resonant background. The entire first verse of the song, in fact, is accompanied by these open string pairs. The score indicates the following:

*Spacious, warm. A late summer night porch vibe, staring up at the sky.
Leave space between each pair and play in any order.
Pairs of same open string, with second pizz always less, like an echo.
These gestures are not in sync among the four players. Trickle in, trickle out, in your own time.*

Ex. 3.4: “Will there be any stars in my crown?” excerpt from Violin 2:



The timing is the freest aspect of this verse; the vocal part has no bar lines and minimal metrical and rhythmic indications.

Ex. 3.5: “Will there be any stars in my crown?” excerpt from vocal score:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a vocal score. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains the lyrics: "I am thinking today of that beau-ti- ful land I shall reach when the sun go- eth down When through wonderful grace by". The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics: "my Sav- ior I stand Will there be an- y stars in my crown?". The notation includes various note values, rests, and a final fermata on the word "crown?".

The refrain, which follows, calls for synchrony among the string players, although not with the singer. The score provides an approximate alignment of the vocal part with the strings. In performance, however, Shaw does not adhere to the score in this way. Instead, she completes the refrain a full six measures ahead of the notation; the harmonic impact of this change is minimal, as the accompaniment is comprised solely of alternating G major and D major triads. The accompaniment now seems to include a short postlude, although the score itself does not indicate this. Additionally, the mixed meter alternations of 9/8, 7/8, 6/8, and 3/4 in the strings become more noticeable, without the vocal line competing for the listener’s attention. The second verse and refrain proceed in a similar manner, with slight alterations in the order of strings played; this time, Shaw aligns her part with the strings and all voices end the refrain simultaneously.

In the absence of harmonic, temporal, or rhythmic contrast, it is the subtler and non-notated gestures of dynamics and ornamentation that become most salient. The final verse and refrain feature the most melodic departure from the notated score. Shaw’s ornaments significantly alter the melodic contour of the notated melody, and she often chooses to venture into the upper register—a feature that contrasts with earlier refrains. Dynamically, all performers play the final refrain more loudly. The change is less severe

in the pizzicato strings, but there is still a swelling effect, led by Shaw's vocal crescendo. Shaw's central role as the soloist obscures her role as composer of the piece, especially given the songs' association with group performance and her participation in such a performance.

The overall consistency of mood within each song, and the distinct contrast in mood between songs, nods to both baroque suite movements, and the participatory nature of hymn singing from which these texts were originally derived; both of these are central to Shaw's musical aesthetic, and contrast sharply with earlier versions of "Will There Be Any Stars In My Crown" by country artists like the Cox Family. Baroque dance suites are common points of reference in Shaw's music, even in pieces not involving strings. Most famously, her *Partita for Eight Voices* features stylistic borrowing and titles common for baroque instrumental suites. Like *By and By*, the *Partita* makes reference to the participatory musical practices of the American South, most notably in the "Allemande," which playfully includes square dancing calls derived from baroque European dances ("Cut the diamond, Allemande left"). Each movement of *By and By* includes that characteristic consistency of tempo and affect. Many of these tempos and moods, however, contrast with versions of the same songs that are widely known. The Cox Family's rendition of "Will there be any stars in my crown" races at approximately 110 beats per minute, and slows dramatically at cadence points, only to speed up again during instrumental solos.²² These contrasting tempos and alternations of refrain and solo instrumental passages are far more characteristic of Bluegrass, which is generally a very virtuosic genre. Shaw is referencing old-time dance styles and highlighting the shared

²² The Cox Family, "Will There Be Any Stars In My Crown" March 4, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v-cy1qIkbaXpy>.

heritage between folk and classical traditions among Americans of European descent. This connection becomes even more important as Shaw continues simultaneously to make inroads both in the contemporary classical scene and in the world of popular music.

Shaw also performed “Will there be any stars in my crown” in the context of a solo recital as part of the Resonant Bodies Festival in 2018, and this performance contrasts sharply to the one just discussed. Many performers in this festival chose to collaborate with other musicians on stage; the choice of repertoire was entirely at the discretion of the soloist. In her set, Shaw presented a number of solo works in new arrangements that would allow her to perform without a supporting ensemble. For “Will there be any stars in my crown,” Shaw invited cellist Andrew Yee to the stage, and picked up her own violin. Using looping pedals, she pre-recorded accompaniment for each verse, and she and Yee played with the recording as she sang.

As a composer, Shaw reserves the right to create new arrangements for her songs; her choices, however, suggest that other musicians can and should exercise that same kind of creative freedom. Using the musical forces and tools available, Shaw’s performance at the Resonant Bodies Festival adhered to the spirit, if not to the letter, of her own musical notation. Aurally, the effect was very similar to the Modulus performance, but the roles were reconfigured to fit the requirements of the space and the availability of participants. Shaw is explicit about her attitudes concerning a performer’s creative freedom:

Just because it’s on the page doesn’t mean that it is absolute, and just because it’s not on the page doesn’t mean that there isn’t intention — I feel like, mostly as a player, as a violinist, I’ve encountered this, where we have such you know, respect and awe for the music, for a Beethoven score or a Mozart score, but there’s so much in there that they didn’t put in there. You have to make it your own. It clamps down on creativity as soon as you feel like, “I will only do what’s

on the page, and that's the most important thing." You let that go, you let that be that be like a map, then you're much more creative and engaged as a performer, and you can make much more musical decisions, like going for the resonance of the chord... "how do I make that sound?"²³

These comments reveal musical priorities that are centered on performance, and not on the crafting of a musical score. As a result, the notated iteration of the work can be thin, even vague at times, encouraging active engagement and interpretation by the performer. This kind of freedom contrasts sharply with the score-oriented sensibilities of someone like Libby Larsen, who, as mentioned in Chapter One, responds to performer requests for changes to the notation by saying, "I prefer the score."²⁴ That Shaw grants and encourages creative freedom to musicians points to a performance-centric aesthetic and therefore warrants performance-centric understandings. The nuances of sonic resonance, spontaneous ornamentation, and idiosyncratic gestures of performance are crucial to understanding this music; written analogues to these parameters of performance do not exist. It is also crucially important that the specific sonic realities of the voice and instruments be addressed, such as when Shaw performs her own work; a recording featuring Shaw's voice may inspire certain notions about authenticity and authority in evaluating the performance, as opposed to another singer who treated the score with equal flexibility. Shaw's case is not unique, or even new; scores have never contained all the necessary information for the interpretation of a piece of music, and even fewer have seen no revision. In her discussion of eighteenth-century keyboard performance practice, Eva Badura-Skoda explains that, "In only a handful of cases does a musical artwork exist in a single autograph version that is notated so faultlessly that the composer found it

²³ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

²⁴ Slayton, *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music*, 206.

unnecessary to make any subsequent changes either in later manuscript copies or in a printed edition.”²⁵ Evaluation of contemporary music like Shaw’s has close ties to the tools and techniques of historical performance practice.

The Musical Work and Gendered Discourse

The idea that musical compositions have any kind of objective state, impervious to change or reinterpretation, runs counter to the process of music making. Implicit in my discussion thus far is my fundamental opposition to conceptualizing Shaw’s composition (or, indeed, any musical composition) as a musical “work” as defined by Lydia Goehr, discussing nineteenth-century canonic repertoire. As Goehr argues, “The work concept suggests to us that we should talk of each individual musical work as if it were an object, as if it were a construction that existed over and above its performances and score.”²⁶ This work-concept all but erases the act of performance and the performing bodies themselves from the creation process, and imagines a musical ideal that neither a written score nor any individual performance could ever attain. In this view, it is the composer and his genius that are solely responsible for the creation of the work. It is this belief that has led to classical music’s pervasive logocentrism. Neubauer explains that, “only the romantic cult of originality and genius led to the nineteenth-century ideal to record all instructions of the composer.”²⁷ This ideal, however, has persisted well past the nineteenth century; the works created in the midst of that ideological revolution remain at

²⁵ Eva Badura-Skoda and Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpretation of Mozart on the Piano*. Trans. Leo Black (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1962).

²⁶ Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, 106.

²⁷ John Neubauer, “Music and Literature: The Institutional Dimension” in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. Steven P. Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.

the core of the western canon, and thus maintain a high status and value within the academy.

The value of scores as the primary receptacles of the musical work emphasizes the new nineteenth-century association of music with the fine arts rather than with rhetoric and performance. Goehr explains how the emergence of the work-concept in the early nineteenth century realigned music's place among the arts. As far back as ancient Greece, musical performances had been closely associated with rhetorical speech.²⁸

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, however, “with the rise of modern aesthetics and the fine arts, music as an art took on an autonomous, musical, and ‘civilized’ meaning; it came to be understood on its own terms. The basic question, ‘what is music?’ was treated in connection less with extra-musical ideals than with what came to be regarded as ‘specifically musical’ ideals.”²⁹ Thus, instrumental and “absolute” music took a central position in cultural production, and art music became more closely aligned with the fine arts, such as painting and sculpting, and less with its performative, rhetorical, and extra-musical features. Goehr concludes that “As music began to be understood first and foremost as one of the fine arts, it began clearly to articulate its need for enduring products - artifacts comparable to other works of fine art.”³⁰ Artifacts, in this case, were textual representations of musical ideas – in other words, scores. Roland Barthes reminds us that “the text is a weapon against time, oblivion and the trickery of speech, which is so easily taken back, altered, denied. The notion of the text is historically linked to a whole world of institutions: the law, the Church, literature,

²⁸ Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, 108.

²⁹ Ibid, 122

³⁰ Ibid, 152.

education.”³¹ Cultural and social institutions became the primary repository for musical works, and it was these same institutions from which women were so often excluded.

The valorization of the text in the early nineteenth century coincides historically with the development of a new, essentialist definition of the sexes known as the “Geschlechtscharakter.” The “gender-character” myth purports that behavioral differences between men and women are rooted in nature, and therefore women’s inferiority was a biological fact rather than a culturally developed habit.³² This understanding of sexual difference has its counterpart in similar ideas about scientific racism, which also emerged at the time. According to Ruth Solie, “This development has been attributed by some scholars to governmental efforts to stem the tide of certain socially disruptive behaviors, from divorce to infanticide – women could perhaps be most efficiently controlled by persuading them to control themselves, through fear of appearing ‘unnatural’.”³³ Institutions, which historically excluded women, were becoming increasingly central to musical productions in capitalist societies.

The co-occurring emergence of the “gender-character” and the “work concept” in the nineteenth century created a nearly impermeable barrier against women who wished to compose. Music, and by extension, composers, became disassociated with nature, as women became more closely aligned with it. These powerful habits of thought successfully characterized musical composition as an overwhelmingly male act. Thus, the primacy of the musical score, and its attendant associations with the plastic arts, divorces

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

³² See Eduard Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesens*, (Tübingen 1960), 46. And Allen, M. “Geistige Mütterlichkeit” als Bildungsprinzip: Die Kindergartenbewegung 1840-1870,” *Geschichte der Mädchen- und Frauenbildung*. Eds. Elke Kleinau and Claudia Opitz. Vol.2. (Frankfurt/New York, 1996), 19-34.

³³ Solie, “Whose Life?” 225.

the musical work from the natural realm, where women were seen to reside. As performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood argues, “The hegemony of textualism needs to be exposed and undermined. Transcription is not a transparent or politically innocent model for conceptualizing or engaging the world.”³⁴ This argument also has analogues in postcolonial studies, where the hegemony of literate traditions has also resulted in dubious scientific claims for the superiority of European colonizers.³⁵

Scores are an obviously important part of the dynamic archive of any piece of music; that the score is so often understood as the primary locus of the work’s nature and meaning is a weakness of traditional hermeneutic models. However, the nuance and meaning of Shaw’s work is bound up in its sonic realities. This challenges a pervasive visual bias across all epistemological models. The perceived sensations of dissonances beating and resolving, the timbral contrasts generated through extended techniques of voices and instruments, the communicative and persuasive skill of a performer’s interpretation of text — these are the central components of compositions like *By and By* and *This might also be a form of dreaming*, and logocentric analytical models cannot adequately capture these features.

The Limits of Collaboration: Shaw’s Work with Kanye West

Shaw’s adoption of a collaborative model for composition and performance subverts notions of the traditional role of the composer, and in doing so creates a more

³⁴ Dwight Conquergood, ed. E. P. Johnson. “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.” in *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

³⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1978; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-314.

equitable space for women who write. I wish to problematize, however, any conclusion that collaboration serves as a cure-all for the structural and pervasive issue of misogyny in composition. In fact, Shaw's most high-profile collaboration, with hip-hop artist Kanye West, exposes some of the problems inherent with women traversing traditionally male spaces in music, including popular music. There are three major issues that Shaw identifies in her interviews with me about her experiences working with West that speak to these problems: first, a frequent misconception that vocal performance is Shaw's primary area of musical competence and most useful contribution; second, that the collaborative space is actually a competitive space rather than a supportive one; and lastly, that West's personal statements and behavior outside of the musical collaborative space, which critics, journalists, and even he himself often attribute to the madness of genius, affects Shaw's ability to work comfortably with him within a musical context. These problems require Shaw to navigate the potential negative impact of her association with West, and the work environment, with the benefits of female representation and visibility in the recording studio.

Shaw explains that West and his team of producers often seek out women as collaborators solely for their vocal contributions, despite the fact that many, including Shaw, have considerable skills in other areas. As Shaw notes, "they [women] can do the one thing that the guys can't. The guys cannot have a female voice. That's the one thing they can't do, so they have to find a female singer to do that part. But otherwise, they can control production."³⁶

Shaw first came into contact with Kanye West when he attended a concert of the LA Philharmonic in 2014, for the premiere of a new piece by Philip Glass. Roomful of

³⁶ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

Teeth, with whom Shaw sings, appeared on the same program, performing her *Partita for Eight Voices*. West first approached her, she said, at intermission, and eventually invited her to collaborate. The first result of their collaboration was released on SoundCloud in October of that same year: a remixed version of “Say You Will,” the opening track from West’s 2008 album, *808s and Heartbreak*.³⁷ On this track, Shaw lends primarily wordless backing vocals and echoes transformed through a vocoder; the result is remarkably similar to much of the extended (though acoustic) vocal sounds in *Partita*, the piece that originally drew West to Shaw.

Shaw has continued to work with West, and she has since been credited as a producer and featured vocalist on several tracks on his next two albums, *The Life of Pablo* (2016) and *Ye* (2018).³⁸ Despite her regular contributions, she felt as though her role was diminished in comparison to West’s other producers.

For a while, he [West] only thought of me as a singer. He’d say, oh, Caroline’s gonna do those vocals, and pretty much, what they take of my stuff is still the vocal things. But I’ve had to really prove myself — I can play this line, I can turn this track into something else, because I’m a composer. I do that. I construct things. I’m not just a singer.³⁹

Over time, she explains, her contributions in the studio began to be valued more among West and his collaborators. Many composers have identified popular music and the recording fields as being particularly male-dominated; like classical music, the recorded song, despite generally being composed without a written score, is fundamentally a concrete, disembodied work, and therefore very much still in the

³⁷ Kanye West, “Say You Will (Ft. Caroline Shaw)” October 2014, <https://soundcloud.com/kanyewest/say-you-will>.

³⁸ Kanye West, *The Life of Pablo*. GOOD Music and Def Jam Recordings, 2016; *Ye*, GOOD Music and Def Jam Recordings, 2018.

³⁹ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

purview of the same dominant ideology of the romantic composer. This is ultimately Kanye's work, and this is why Shaw's entrance into the popular music scene as a producer was accelerated by his mentorship.

Even though she is credited as a producer frequently, Shaw expresses unease about the perception of women in West's production circle. Even her own work as a vocalist has occasionally been diminished. One track, "Wolves," on which she is credited as a featured vocalist, does not actually include any of her own singing.

Ultimately, I still feel like they just want sweet angelic vocals, which cannot be produced by any of the men. Even "Wolves" actually, that's not my voice, that's a total sample, in the beginning of "Wolves." They took the one thing that could be a real female person and actually just made [it artificially]. That case is particularly interesting to me. It goes back to trying to establish your identity as a producer-generator of ideas, rather than an embodiment of someone else's idea, which is the whole idea of a singer.⁴⁰

This interaction is not truly a collaboration, then, but rather the use of a woman's voice to serve a creator's musical vision. As she explains, the other producer's understandings about women's contributions are rooted in women's perceived capacities as singers, as well as the long history of speaking through women. This assumption pervades both classical music and popular music; women were first permitted into these musical spaces and institutions as performers, most often as singers, and that has proven to be a difficult role for many women to emerge from. This is even the case for someone like Shaw, whose credentials as a composer frequently outweigh her identity as a performer in classical spaces.

Shaw emphasizes the overwhelming maleness of this collaborative space, as well as the competitive atmosphere. West consistently engages a large number of other artists

⁴⁰ Ibid.

and producers on his recordings. As a result, the recording studio is often filled with collaborators, all vying for recognition from West. Other times, collaborators will contribute remotely. In either case, they all hope that their work will be credited on the album, resulting in significant monetary gain. The resulting atmosphere often forces Shaw physically out of the room, because the situation is uncomfortable for her. She discusses this in a short excerpt from our interview, where I asked her to describe the atmosphere in the recording studio.

CS: Sometimes it's just a few of us, like three or four people in the room. I usually just don't say very much because I don't feel comfortable talking, but the last time, in Wyoming, he [West] several times asked me [my opinion] very specifically. There was another producer, Rick Rubin, who was also really good about it. I really thank both of them, for actually pushing towards this, whereas there were a couple of other producers who seemed to feel I'm a threat to their territory. It's very threatening, you feel like there's a territory situation. I don't want to be in anyone's space.

RL: It's interesting that they feel threatened.

CS: Or maybe I'm interpreting that way, but it can be very competitive actually. This is why I don't do it very much. Producers are trying to get their stuff on the record. For fame, but also money. It directly correlates to how much money you get. And I just don't think about that. So mostly what I do is, I'll come spend time, and listen to the conversation, and see what's going on, and listen to how they're listening to something, and then they'll give me stems for a bit of a basic song. I prefer to go away, to a hotel room or somewhere else, where I've set up writing space, and really just work completely alone for like 24 hours, and then send them back something that's basically done. And Kanye also now [says] "you're just going to go back to your little room" he knows that I go back to a little room and do this thing, and he's like, "I don't know what you do, but why don't you go do that." I don't know if this is related [to your question].

RL: Oh, yes it is. I'm just trying to get a picture.

CS: the picture's a little bit different every time. Sometimes it's like, the music is super loud, and people are just, everyone's feeling very positive. It's also about...I feel like it's this thing of serving the king.⁴¹

⁴¹ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

Shaw's comment that the collaborators are "serving" West is the clearest argument that what is being billed as collaboration is something markedly different from the models I've previously described. It is, instead, a different kind of symbiosis. West gains valuable input from his producers (with which he is ultimately credited), as well as validation from his colleagues. The collaborators, in turn, gain a producer credit on the album, a paycheck, royalties, and a raised profile in the industry. There seems to be a prioritizing of personal gain over a desire for a democratized compositional method or any truly collaborative spirit.

Shaw expresses trepidation at being involved in what can be a contentious work environment. Yet, this unease is at odds with her larger concerns about female representation. She says, "I just have to do this to show that women can be producers. And then I'm going to be the best. I'm going to get as good at it... I've gotten to the point where, I think they respect me as a producer. But it took just staying in the room. Even despite all this, if I'm not there, nobody is."⁴²

Most of Shaw's concern stems from West's behavior outside the recording studio, and less with the gender politics that happen within. She necessarily risks association with West's personal and political views, as he is a celebrity figure, despite her only interactions with him being in a work environment. His controversial statements are well-documented. He famously commented that, "George Bush doesn't care about black people" on NBC in 2005, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans, Louisiana.⁴³ Later, in what many in the African American community viewed as a personal attack on their station and heritage, West gave an interview in which he said,

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "A Concert for Hurricane Relief," Benefit concert, NBC Universal Television Group, New York, NY, September 2, 2005.

“When you hear about slavery for 400 years ... For 400 years? That sounds like a choice.”⁴⁴ Most recently, West’s support of Donald Trump has caused the most controversy among the hip-hop community, who largely view Trump’s rhetoric and policies to be antagonistic towards minority populations.

Despite West’s controversial persona, he remains one of the country’s most profitable and critically-lauded rap artists. The combination of West’s highly unpredictable behavior and comments and his persistent critical and popular acclaim is frequently attributed to his status as a “musical genius,” thus shielding him from any serious career ramifications. Chaplin has traced the link between genius and madness to the early nineteenth century, the same time that the work-concept and the Geschlechtscharakter emerged in intellectual circles. Paramount in this characterization is the trope of working oneself to the point of madness. “The idea of the nervous breakdown as a result of too much work is a recurrent theme in nineteenth century novels and memoirs. It was, indeed, invented in that era since we don’t see such accounts before. And interestingly no memoir is complete without a nervous breakdown — because it is a mark of accomplishment that indicates sensitivity and perhaps genius.”⁴⁵ West’s frequent discussion of his mental health in both his personal blog and in interviews, resonate strongly with these kinds of memoirs. Sensitivity, “workaholism,” and mental illness are lauded as characteristics of geniuses. What Freud would later term “schizophrenia” was, in the early nineteenth century, a condition often associated with geniuses. The same

⁴⁴ Kanye West, “Kanye West/Charlamagne Interview” April 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1175&v=zxwfDlhJlpw.

⁴⁵ Lennard J. Davis, “Genius and Obsession: Do You Have to Be Mad to Be Smart?” in *Genealogies of Genius*, ed Chaplin and McMahon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 63-75.

symptoms, which frequently included hallucinations, were often diagnosed as, “hysteria” in women, then and now a particularly female malady.

Jayson Greene, a popular music critic who recently published an admonition of West in *Pitchfork* in light of his slavery comments, points out that West himself subscribes to this same idea of genius, and frequently cites these correlations in his lyrics:

Genius is by nature troubled and unmanageable. “Name one genius who ain’t crazy,” Kanye demanded on *The Life of Pablo*’s “Feedback.” Genius is the only yardstick by which he measures himself— “I’m doing pretty good as far as geniuses go,” he insisted on *Graduation*’s “Barry Bonds.” But maybe geniuses make for bad role models.”⁴⁶

Kanye West has certainly faced some criticisms. Greene says, “There will be no Kanye album good enough to wash out the taste of the last two weeks. The circumstances are too ugly, the human stakes too high. When you have worn a MAGA hat and suggested 400 years of slavery represents ‘a choice,’ no matter your intentions, there are no clear paths back to grace.”⁴⁷

Some music critics also believe that the emphasis on West’s individual genius may not be an accurate yardstick by which to evaluate the music he releases. “this narrative of West as the advanced artist of our time that’s exactly what’s pervaded the discussion surrounding TLOP (*The Life of Pablo*). As a sonic experiment, it’s intriguing and exciting. There are some genuinely brilliant moments on the record. Yet it’s also the most fragile and shaken album of his career so far. Several of the lyrics on there are unforgivable; songs stop and start and never seem to sound finished; all the best moments

⁴⁶ Green, “Kanye West”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

on the album come from artists that are not West. In fact, given the amount of producers, it's impossible to find a contribution that's come solely from West..."⁴⁸

Despite a consensus among many press outlets that West's actions and comments warrant a re-evaluation of his musical acclaim, the net effect on his musical career and reputation has been minimal. His actions, however, do potentially have an impact on Shaw, who has expressed concern that her association with West may reflect negatively on her. Shaw articulates the issue this way:

I don't know if I can still work with him, because he has sort of provocative political statements, and I don't stand for that... People sing his lyrics out loud. And some of those lyrics are not ok — And I'm going to have to answer for a lot... later on, for working with him. I'm sure, in the classical world, I'm sure there's backlash, and there should be, I agree with them. I'm going to take responsibility for it.⁴⁹

In a later interview, Shaw clarified her position further:

My approach to it is, I still love doing it. I'm fascinated by it. If it was all I was doing, I would have a huge moral quandary about it. But I do so many things, I wrote so many pieces last year, it's just a sliver of what I did. And I don't talk about it very much. That's another way I try to combat moral quandaries. I don't tweet about it, I don't celebrate it."⁵⁰

The risk of advocating for visibility in male-dominated musical spaces, in this case, lies in perceptions of Shaw's association with West's personal actions and political views. In other words, West's "madness" could potentially have a greater negative impact on Shaw's career than it has on his own, and this is largely a gendered problem. In order

⁴⁸ Ryan Bassil, "The Advanced Genius Theory: *The Life of Pablo* and Kanye West," *Noisey* (Blog), *Vice*, March 16, 2016, https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/6vg8e3/the-advanced-genius-theory-the-life-of-pablo-and-kanye-west.

⁴⁹ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

⁵⁰ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

for women to transverse these spaces, they necessarily risk controversy. As Shaw and her music continue to garner attention from a wider base of listeners, critiques of her music and her professional persona will have more profound effects on its reception, impact, and, ultimately, legacy.

The discourse surrounding musical “genius” is not entirely negative or unproductive. Many scholars have defined its usefulness in studying creative activities as a form of embodiment, or as a way to create space for “eccentric, peculiar, or queer subject positions.”⁵¹ Caroline Shaw’s musical practice and conduct functions as a critique of the association of genius with isolated and unstable behavior, and it serves as an argument in favor of the productive exploration of subjective experience in creative acts. Shaw diverges from this historical conception of the composer in her blurring of the composer/performer distinction, which so powerfully contributes to the maintenance of a logocentric hierarchy. As I will discuss in the following chapter, the contemporary music circles in which Shaw moves are also actively dismantling the performer/audience distinction in many ways, democratizing the politics of the classical music concert even further.

My examination of Shaw’s work has shown that despite her measured success in the conventional sense, including prestigious awards, residencies, and high-profile commissions, there are still creative endeavors, such as record production, that have proved harder for her to access in part because of her gender. There are also certainly detractors within classical institutions who uphold the value of the disembodied text and the veneration of the score as the primary conduit of musical meaning.

Many issues facing women making music today, in all styles and genres, are

⁵¹ Delap, 110.

shared; these shared challenges, such as gendered critique and outsider status, resonate among women across racial, ethnic, social, and economic boundaries. This is not to say, of course, that the challenges aren't vastly different for women who lack some the privileges that a composer like Shaw enjoys by virtue of her perceived economic and racial status. My conviction, rather, echoes that of gender studies scholar Lena Gunnarsson, who writes that "multiple positioning is not the same as no positioning....Conceptualising women as those who occupy the position as woman is thus very different from reifying, homogenising and essentialising accounts of women."⁵²

Shaw expresses similar concerns, primarily that art-music institutions should be concerned with diversity on an intersectional basis, and that gender and race issues, in particular, go side by side. She is reticent, however, to shoulder the burden of the identity of the "woman composer," due to its negative, marked connotations. She says, "I want to imagine a future where it's a non-issue. Part of me feels like in order to imagine that future, I have to live that future....I feel like I try to champion it just be living it, and just by doing it."⁵³ The poet Claudia Rankine, who emphasizes in her work both her identities as a woman and as African-American, expresses her positioning similarly: "I feel it's about modelling for [my daughter] a sense of my own agency in the world. Nothing I say can equal what she sees me do in the world. In an odd way, it's more about me being vigilant around how I value myself; how she sees me interacting with other people; what I put up with, and what I don't."⁵⁴

⁵² Lena Gunnarsson, "A Defence of the Category 'Women'." *Feminist Theory* 12, no. 1 (April 2011), 36.

⁵³ Caroline Shaw, interview with the author.

⁵⁴ Paula Coccozza, "Poet Claudia Rankine: 'The Invisibility of Black Women is Astounding.'" *The Guardian*, June 29, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/jun/29/poet-claudia-rankine-invisibility-black-women-everyday-racism-citizen>.

Shaw's musical output runs the gamut in terms of collaborations; consideration of Shaw as a composer necessarily involves the myriad voices of performers, poets, and composers with whom she works. This kind of understanding requires new modes of analysis that diverge from traditional hermeneutic models. Most fundamentally, the significance of this music, and related trends in the contemporary scene, is found outside the musical score, in the embodied, sonic experience of a performance.

Chapter 4

Pamela Z: Embodied Electronics and Cyborg Politics

“The distinction between life and matter, or organic and inorganic, or human and nonhuman, or man and god, is not always the most important or salient difference to recognize.” —Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*¹

The musical output of composer/performer Pamela Z is diverse, but she is best known for solo performances incorporating voice with live electronics. Over the past three decades, Z has incorporated a variety of electronic tools in her performance, most notably digital delay, live audio sampling and processing via MAX/MSP computer software, and gesture-controlled MIDI instruments. Trained in classical voice at the University of Colorado-Boulder, Z synthesizes a variety of classical techniques and experimental approaches, participating and contributing to several genres.

Z has pioneered the use of certain electronic tools, but she uses her voice in each of her solo works almost without exception. She is acutely aware, however, of the long-standing cultural assumption that singing is the most readily available path for women in art music. As Herman Gray notes:

Certain kinds of gendered bodies are expected to produce certain sounds, performance styles/contexts, compositional competencies, and instrumental virtuosity....According to Pamela Z, this means that women are expected to be visible with the voice, their presumed area of competence. She says, “it seems that people’s expectations of the kinds of tools an artist would use are somewhat separated along gender lines...the tool that women seem to be expected to excel in using is the human voice. And when we do excel we get recognition for it... the message seems be ‘if you want recognition for what you do, you need to stick with the tools you are expected to use.’” Men, on the other hand, are associated with composition programming, and control over technology... once again, the insight on offer seems to be that the role assignments and expectations with respect to technologies, performance styles, instruments, and compositions are

¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

profoundly raced and gendered. Pamela Z's work is very much about breaking these kinds of stereotypes and unsettling the assumptions on which they are based.²

While Gray claims that Z's work challenges the boundaries of these presumed gendered or raced areas of competence, Z's statements also defy the notion that this is one of her explicit goals. In fact, she often resists those critics and analysts who would describe her as a spokesperson for feminism or racial justice. She explains in a personal interview that analyses like these often "paint me in a way that I don't think of myself."³ Even so, she is often asked to participate in concerts or album compilations that feature either only women, or only African-Americans, which she claims usually results in her feeling "lumped into a group based on these things that I don't think are...essential to who I am as an artist."⁴ As a result of "demographic programming," adopting the term from media studies to describe a carving out of a demographically specific space for musical performance or recording, the benefits of opportunity for frequently marginalized artists are often tempered by the marked, generalizing, and sometimes exclusionary labels that this kind of programming can generate. Z grapples with the problems these kinds of categorizations, which often do not correspond with any of her specific musical goals.

In this chapter, I attempt to meet Pamela Z's music on its own terms, examining its musical characteristics, compositional approaches, and the overall aesthetics that emerge from her music in performance. I attempt to determine what might more readily be deemed "essential" to her work and identity. Z does begin with her voice, the presumed area of women's musical expertise, and subverts that convention through her

² Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 179.

³ Pamela Z, interview with the author, November 19, 2018, full transcript in Appendix C.

⁴ Pamela Z, interview with the author.

composing, performing, use of technology, and, crucially, listening practices. The goal of these subversions is not, however, to prove women's competence or thwart audience expectations. Her output and performances actively complicate ideas that I have presented in previous chapters about authorship, improvisation, and the composer/performer divide in the development of a feminist toolkit for musical analysis or critique. The crux of this issue is that Z's work is largely composed specifically for her own performance. Although she collaborates often, her frequent solo performances, for which she provides all of the musical material, reinforces in a visceral, embodied way that she is the author and owner of the work.

The most pressing question is, then, how can Pamela Z's music be understood from a feminist standpoint when her approach to composition and performance take such a different tack than so many of her peers. To investigate this question, I will examine two of pieces from Z's solo repertoire, which she performs frequently: "Badagada" (1988), an early example of Z's work with digital delay, and "Quatre Couches" (2015), a more recent composition that uses a broad spectrum of Z's live electronic resources. Z's recording of "Badagada" on her studio album *A Delay is Better* (2013), a live performance at the Resonant Bodies Festival in Brooklyn, NY, on September 13, 2018 and interviews with the composer serve as my primary sites of inquiry. I examine Z's listening strategies as a means of composition, the many uses of physical gesture, and her use of different instruments and techniques as a means of discovering new expressive capabilities and communicative tools in performance.

The methods by which Z makes use of computer software, instruments, and other tools synthesize the acoustic production of her voice and the movement of her body with unique technologies. George Lewis, in his analysis of Z's methods, notes that "Z's

background in bel canto singing and the interpretation of art song, in which gestural communication constitutes a vital aspect of the communication of meaning, becomes extended to the realm of the cyborg.”⁵ “Cyborg” is a portmanteau for “cybernetic organism”; this term for human-machine hybrids was coined by Clynes and Kline in 1960.⁶ Cyborgs have long captured the human imagination, dominating science fiction since at least the publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* in 1823.⁷ Since that time, the cyborg has been adopted as a potent metaphor in postmodern philosophy, most notably by Donna Haraway, who argues that the cyborg is “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.”⁸ In this light, the cyborg presents a compelling framework for feminist studies of music, because, as Haraway writes, “the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has not ruck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.”⁹

Using Haraway’s conceptualization of the cyborg, and inspired by Lewis’s likening of Z’s embodied performance to that realm, I identify a space in which Z, though her own body, challenges and resists the totalizing and essentializing nature of demographic programming, while still acknowledging and supporting those marginalized positions. This follows Haraway’s positing that “‘women of color’ might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider

⁵ George Lewis, “The Virtual Discourses of Pamela Z,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1, no. 1 (February 2007): 59.

⁶ Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline. “Cyborgs and space.” *Astronautics* 14, no. 9 (1960): 26-27.

⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Baronet Books, 1993).

⁸ Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

⁹ *Ibid*, 150.

identities.”¹⁰ In this way, cyborg politics provide a useful frame for contextualizing Z’s career, output, and attitude toward gendered and racialized discourse.

“Badagada” (1988)

Today, live electronics are virtually synonymous with Z’s musical identity, but she did not always use them in performance. Although she has now been dubbed San Francisco’s “electro-diva,”¹¹ Z began her career playing clubs using voice and guitar.¹² It was not compositional activity, however, that guided her to the discovery of electronic tools, but rather, listening activity. She credits a single audience experience as being crucial to the development of her style, her choice of compositional tools, and her entry into the realm of live electronic performance:

I started using real-time live processing on my voice in the early 1980s. It started with a single digital delay unit that I purchased after having seen a concert. At that time, I had gotten out of music school just a few years before that, and was trained singing classical bel canto voice. In school, I had been doing art songs and opera arias, and then out of school, I had been playing in clubs as sort of a singer-songwriter. I was having a hard time finding a meeting place for those two worlds, and also, my taste had moved to a third place that was away from both of those things, that was more towards the experimental. I realized that the music I was listening to was not at all like the music that I was playing and performing. And so, I was looking for ways to find a voice as an artist through composing things that I would perform live, and I was struggling with it.

Then, this thing happened where I saw a concert; it was a Weather Report concert, actually. This would have been 1980-81, maybe. Jaco Pastorius, who was the fretless bass player of Weather Report, stayed on stage while the rest of the band left the stage, and he began playing a duet with himself, creating these layers and loops of his bass with a delay. And so, I went to a music store the next day, and I was like, “This guy had this thing, and what was that?” and the guy in the music store said, “Oh, that’s a digital delay,” and I said, “Oh, I’ll take one!” So, he sold

¹⁰ Ibid, 174.

¹¹ Kathy Kennedy, “A Few Facets of Pamela Z,” *Musicworks: Explorations in Sound* 76 (2000).

¹² Pamela Z, Interview with Lucy Dhegrae, *Resonant Bodies Podcast*, Date, <http://soundcloud.com/resonantbodies>.

performances today. In “Badagada,” Z’s various utterances of the syllables “ba-da-ga-da-ga-da-ga-da-ga” are looped in delay until they create a thick, polyphonic accompaniment. Over this, she sings a sustained, lyrical melody. All the delayed sounds are produced live first, complicating the distinction between liveness and mediatization.¹⁵

Z’s early experience with a digital delay box resonates with Rebecca Cypess and Steven Kemper’s identification in both early modern and contemporary music-technological aesthetics concerning theories of “instruments of all sorts as vehicles of discovery and the creation of knowledge.”¹⁶ As they point out, the aesthetics of contemporary instrumental music and instrument usage—both acoustic and electronic—can be understood as stemming from the long-standing link between the human body and the musical machine—what they term the “anthropomorphic analogy.” In their view, this analogy “probes the boundary between human artificer and artificial machine, encouraging listeners and viewers to humanise non-musical machines and understand the human body itself as a mechanical instrument.”¹⁷ In linking the engagement with technology in contemporary electronic music to the similar explosion of new acoustic instrument technology at the turn of the seventeenth century, Cypess and Kemper provide a means of understanding Pamela Z’s place in a clear lineage of composer–musicians whose exploration of musical instruments shapes their creative process.

Building upon this idea, I argue that Z accomplishes this exploration through her tactile engagement with instruments as well as through her aural engagement and clearly-

¹⁵ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁶ Rebecca Cypess and Steven Kemper, “The Anthropomorphic Analogy: Humanising Musical Machines in the Early Modern and Contemporary Eras,” *Organised Sound* 23, no. 2 (August 2018): 172.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 167.

developed habits of responding to what she hears. The idiosyncrasies of the Ibanez DM-1000 led Pamela Z to a very particular musical aesthetic that, in turn, became iconic of her compositions and performances. It is related to the anti-essentialist positioning of Bruno Latour's Action-Network theory, as he argues for an understanding of the collective ecology of human and non-human elements as actants, with agency, contributing to change.¹⁸

The technological capacities of this early delay box are relatively limited compared to the more sophisticated capabilities of the equipment that Z uses today. The digital delay hardware, like the Ibanez DM-1000 operates under certain premises that limit and shape how the music can sound. Once recorded, for example, any live utterance cannot be altered by the digital delay. Sounds can be layered, added, or removed, but not manipulated in any way. While her later pieces take advantage of the options afforded by more advanced technologies, "Badagada" probes the full, yet circumscribed, expressive capabilities of digital delay, which Z uncovered through experimentation and listening. Using these technologies on vocal music shapes sound through multiple parameters: timbral, vibrational, and textual. As Z explains,

When I started making sound loops I began to listen to text as music. When spoken text is repeated by a machine, you can hear the fundamental tone of something that you thought was unpitched. So I began composing based on the melodies in natural speech, which I never would have done if I hadn't discovered the digital delay.¹⁹

Digital delay hardware is not only the instrument for which "Badagada" was composed, but was built and shaped entirely around that specific technology. The

¹⁸ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Pamela Z, Interview with the author.

hardware itself exercises an agency in the compositional process that extends beyond mere sound production. On her aptly named 2013 album, *A Delay is Better*, the studio recording of “Badagada” demonstrates Z’s virtuosic engagement with delay technology. Highly idiomatic to Z’s particular type of vocal performance, in many ways her electronic tools serve as an extension of the vocal instrument rather than an external instrument. The hardware extends the capacities of the voice, enhancing the possibilities for what a voice can do. The result is a mutually influencing process in which voice and machine are in constant dialogue, rather than a tool being used for a specific purpose; the song emphasizes the role of the body within live electronic musical performance, what Hayes describes as ‘enaction’ – a musical performance that relies of reciprocal coordination and coevolution.²⁰

The track begins with Z’s voice alone, speaking the syllables [ba da ga da ga da ga da ‘ga]; this phrase is looped in delay, forming the background structure of the piece.²¹ Other vocal utterances, wordless sighs and bursts of sound, enter into the texture. At 0’17”, the sung verse begins. This simple text repeats twice in each instance:

I know you’re not in there, I know you’re not in there. Where?
I know they are out there. Out there. Where?

After this ends, at 1’25”, Z layers another utterance of [‘ba da ga da ga da ga da ga], this time sung, above the first spoken line and likewise repeated in delay. More

²⁰ Lauren Hayes, “Enacting Musical Worlds: Common Approaches to using NIMes within Performance and Person-Centred Arts Practices,” *Proceedings of the International Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression*, (Baton Rouge, LA, USA, May 31-June 3, 2015):

²¹ A note on transcription. The piece is titled, “Badagada,” and I use IPA symbols to represent the sound utterances, given that it is not a literal word.

vocalizations are layered above, creating a thick polyphonic texture. This increasingly complex layering of sound becomes an accompaniment to a second repetition of the texted verse. The sequence repeats again: another harmonization of [‘ba da ga da ga da ga da ga] placed in delay, a new sequence of vocalizations, this time with percussive breaths and phrases in Z’s lowest vocal register, and another repetition of the verse. Following this last section, the sounds are removed one by one, until the texture is thinned out to a single sustained pitch, as the other sounds fade to nothing.

Although the crux of the composition is the layering of sound through digital delay, language is, indirectly, crucial to any thorough understanding of the song; it becomes a strong musical component through the digital delay’s ability to excavate the tones of speech. While “badagada” has no discernable meaning in a strictly linguistic sense, it is comprised of syllables common to many languages. The resulting quasi-language is tied up with a deliberate strategy, as Z has noted: “I feel like there’s enough continuity in phrases that it delivers something that feels like it contains some kind of emotional or intellectual thought pattern. But at the same time, it doesn’t really give anybody any information. I kind of enjoy that, that combination of attributes. Language that draws you in, because you recognize that it’s saying something, but it doesn’t bend your mind and your will to some idea, because it doesn’t really deliver a completely understandable message.”²² Whereas the composers I’ve discussed in previous chapters choose texts with certain communicative goals and narrative functions, Z prioritizes the sonic potentials of language over the hermeneutic ones: “People think about the voice like its job is to communicate something literal...I’m always trying to make people aware that I’m not trying to communicate a message of any kind with my work. That’s not its

²² Pamela Z, interview with the author.

function. I'm trying to get across that unexplainable thing that art can communicate that language can't. I do sometimes have subject matter, but I'm just exploring that subject matter, playing with it or using it as a vehicle to hang the work on in a way, more than I am trying to say something."²³

"Badagada" does contain discernable text in English, although, like many of Z's texts, it is sparse and deliberately ambiguous. According to Z, she composed "Badagada" during a solo improvisatory session. She explains:

A lot of pieces that I perform solo are composed almost whole cloth by simply setting up my gear in my studio and improvising. Sometimes I'll be playing around and I'll do five minutes of something and I'll go, "oh, I think that's a piece." And then hopefully I had recording rolling and I can actually listen to what I did and learn it. If I didn't, I have to try really hard to quickly remember what it was I did and maybe record that, and play with it and learn it, and meld it into something.²⁴

Working with the specific instrumental tools of digital delay shaped Z's compositional process as well. Her experimentation with this tool resulted in "Badagada." Although the piece is composed, meaning that her sounds and actions are planned, her source of reference for the piece is an improvisation, rather than any written record. Improvisation as a compositional technique is a long-standing and pervasive characteristic of western art music. Countless composers improvise on acoustic instruments like the keyboard as a way of working out musical ideas. In Z's case, the challenges inherent in transcribing such improvisations are compounded by Z's chosen instrumental tools; improvisations involving electronic looping is essentially impossible to capture on paper. As a result, Z's solo compositions will likely never be transcribed

²³ Pamela Z, Interview with Lucy Dhegrae.

²⁴ Pamela Z, interview with the author.

into notation. The improvisation becomes the composition, through performative repetition and manipulation of musical gestures created during the initial improvisation.

I have argued in previous chapters that a focus on notation is one of the major obstacles to gender parity in the field of art music. In my study of Caroline Shaw, for example, I discussed the ways that the flexibility of Shaw's notation leaves ample space for interpretation by performers. Pamela Z's music also works against the hegemony of logocentrism, but through quite a different methodology. Musical scores in general function as both a communication tool and an artistic artifact. Shaw prioritizes the communicative element; Z requires neither for her solo works. Her chamber music does utilize scores for the purposes of collaboration, but her solo repertoire, with which I am primarily concerned, almost never does.

For Z, there is no need for a communicative score because there is no collaboration and no possibility of performance of the work outside of Z herself; "Badagada" is specific to Z's person. The music, however, is still *composed*, though not notated. According to Z, "Most of [my music], regardless of whether it's notated or not, I consider it to be composed. All music is improvised, and all music is composed. It's just the timing of it that's different." For Z, then, composition and improvisation are components of a single process, rather than distinct modes of music making. So although her solo repertoire lacks a notated score in virtually all cases, it is rarely improvised in live performance situations. "I often get pegged as being an improviser, but I don't do a lot of live improvisation."²⁵ The assumption that scoreless material is improvised emphasizes the centrality of written culture in art music—a written culture that carries patriarchal cultural baggage. Improvisation as a compositional method, and not a feature

²⁵ Pamela Z, interview with the author.

of performance, is a shared characteristic, aligning Z with many of her predecessors in the classical tradition. Her use of performance and recording over scores as the conduits of transmission makes her approach subversive, as it challenges the conventional conflation of composition and writing.

“Quatre Couches” (2015)

Since her early experiments with live electronic voice processing, Pamela Z has incorporated a number of tools and electronic instruments in her composition and performance. She makes use of the technique of sampling as a form of musical quotation of performances, and develops her techniques of gesture and composition as she explores the full capabilities of her instruments in improvisatory composition. “Quatre Couches” is a recent work that employs Z’s most current iteration of electronic tools; in performance, she often links this piece with “Badagada,” now performed not with digital delay, but the full suite of Max/MSP and gesture-controlled MIDI devices.

Z’s first engagement with a gesture-controlled instrument was in pioneering the BodySynth in the 1990’s. Z’s website describes this technology:

The BodySynth™, created by Chris Van Raalte and Ed Severinghaus (Copyright 1994), is MIDI controller that transforms movement, gestures, and other muscle efforts into sounds. The performer attaches electrodes to the body over various muscles. The tiny electrical signals generated by muscle contractions are measured and analyzed by a microprocessor. A variety of processing algorithms are available through the keypad on the Processor Unit. These algorithms translate effort into MIDI commands thus causing the body to become a controller for an electronic sound module such as a synthesizer or a sampler.²⁶

²⁶ “the BodySynth” Pamela Z, accessed September 14, 2018, <http://www.pamelaz.com/bodysynth.html>.

Fig. 4.2: Pamela Z performing with the BodySynth system.



Today, Z uses the BodySynth less frequently in her solo performances; she has largely replaced it with custom-designed MIDI gesture controllers. Rather than attaching to her body, Z's instruments are free standing, but they are activated by the motion of her body. These instruments are central to "Quatre Couches," a 2015 solo composition for voice with live electronics. The instruments themselves have various capacities; they can manipulate the processing on Z's voice in real time, trigger recorded samples, or manipulate images in multimedia works.²⁷

"Quatre Couches" incorporates gesture, visual components, and diverse auditory sensations, thus facilitating a profoundly multisensory listening experience. This

²⁷ Pamela Z, Interview with Lucy Dhegrae.

multimedia performance is inextricable from the music. In performance, the piece unfolds in a manner that emphasizes both the musical and the physical. I witnessed Z's performance at the Resonant Bodies Festival in New York City in September 2018; in this recital set, she employed a full range of MIDI controllers, computers, and multimedia elements. "Quatre Couches" appeared first in the program; what follows is my description of the event:

Z began quietly, by triggering a sample on her computer. Some metallic sounds emerged gradually from the speakers, like the dropping of small objects, followed by a rumbling sound like thunder. Above this eerie soundscape, Z began to sing into the microphone. One long, sustained pitch, rich with vibrato, was immediately fragmented as it was processed by the computer. That sound was processed and repeated, expanded and fragmented in turn; the command was initiated with a flick of Z's wrist in front of her gesture controller, and interpreted electronically using MAX/MSP software on her computer. Then, Z presented and recorded a second layer of vocal sound: quiet but fast-moving speech, most of it unintelligible, although I was able to discern her counting to ten in both Italian and French. This layer was simultaneously manipulated with hand gestures at her instruments. Above this, she sang a lyrical, operatic phrase, with equally indiscernible text. Next, there were short bursts of high-pitched shrieks and squeaks, followed by more emphatically spoken text (also in French). So, four layers of vocal sound were established independently, live, and then combined with digital processes. Each of these lines was triggered or manipulated via the gesture controllers.

Z describes "Quatre Couches" in her program notes as a "sonic trifle, tiramisu, or mille-feuille – juxtaposing four contrasting layers and manually toying with them – mixing them and moving them around on the plate until they all melt away." Her

gastronomic metaphor is apt and nearly literal; she is not simply mixing these sounds in an abstract sense, but in a tactile one. At this performance, “Quatre Couches” and “Badagada” were performed together a set, uninterrupted. In a live performance setting, “Badagada” differs significantly from its recorded version, and the gestural and instrumental similarities with “Quatre Couches” are made evident. I observed the ways in which gesture is a central component to both the sound production and expressive communication of this piece. As the final sounds of “Quatre Couches” faded out [4’48”], Z leaned into the microphone and utters the spoken phoneme, [‘ga]. This utterance was repeated on a regular delay, imparting a sense of pulse and tempo. The next layer, also spoken, [ba da ga da ga da ga da ga], provided another rhythmic layer. Her body, to this point, remained relatively still, her eyes focused on the computer and the microphone. Her voice continued to be heard through the delay patterns although she stood still and silent. She added to these layered sounds a rhythmic iteration of the word “badagada,” this time interspersed with a sharp inhalation of breath. These three layers served as the harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment. Next, Z turned to the gesture controllers, encased in a set of small rectangular boxes on stands at about hip height. Wanderley calls these “alternate controllers” as they do not resemble or extend existing instruments in appearance.²⁸ With a few small hand gestures, a small tap along the side of the box and a gentle flick of the wrist, Z triggered vocal samples that folded into the developing ambient sound.

²⁸ Claude Cadoz and Marcelo M. Wanderley, “Gesture – Music,” *Gestural Control of Music* (Ircam – Centre Pompidou, 2000).

Fig. 4.3: Pamela Z uses gesture controllers in performance. Photo by the author.



Next, at 5'25", she stationed herself in front of the microphone and began to sing, "I know you're not in there." The next word she sang, "where?" was marked by a specific gesture. Z held her right arm up to her right ear, then waved her fingers as she extended her arm to the side, away from her ear. Then, she looked to her hand, observing it as if it is an independent entity. As she repeated "where?" her hand stretches further away, until she finally bent her entire torso towards her hand and pulled her arm back in front of her face in a sweeping, dance-like sway. These gestures, which I take to be choreographed and deliberate, did not include any functional triggering of gesture controllers. This type of emotive gesture continued as she sings, a reiteration of the previous melody line, although increasingly higher in pitch; she moved her hands in fast, angular patterns

around her head and swept her arms, bent at a ninety-degree angle, up and down in front of her body.

Following this stanza, Z sang another iteration of [badagada] at 6'30" to loop into the delay pattern. She continued to alternate her lyrical, sung melody, replete with particular associated movement of her arms, hands, and torso, interspersed with triggers of the gesture controller, commands entered into the computer, and new delay patterns sung. In the final moments of the piece, from about 8'30", she began to remove layers of the delay, holds a sustained pitch in her live singing, and slowly triggered the last samples as the texture thins and fades.

In this brief performance – both songs together last nine minutes – I make note of several different types of gestures: selections on the computer itself, with Z striking keys on the keyboard or using a trackpad; body movements toward and away from the microphone; hand gestures related to triggering the gesture controlled electronic instruments, body movement directly related to vocal production, and emotive gestures. Francois Delande proposed a division of the notion of gesture in three levels, from purely functional to purely symbolic.²⁹ Tanaka makes a binary distinction between essential and nonessential gesture in instrumental playing, but Z's performance does not conceptualize gesture in either sense.³⁰ Gesture does not result solely from the need to interact with an instrument. As she explains, gesture entered into her vocal performances well before she began to use gesture controllers. "As soon as I stopped playing any other instrument other than voice and electronics, the gestures entered into my work. This was long before I

²⁹ Discussed in Cadoz and Wanderley, "Gesture – Music."

³⁰ Atau Tanaka, "Musical Performance Practice on Sensor-based Instruments" in *Trends in Gestural Control of Music*, M.M. Wanderley and M. Battier, eds. (Paris: Ircam – Centre Pompidou, 2000) 40.

started using the gesture controllers.”³¹ In addition, vocalists often employ emotive gestures that Tanaka would deem non-essential, although in many cases physical gesture also accompanies vocal production that may be deemed essential by definition. In other words, singing employs gesture in a way that is distinct from external instruments. Z’s approach, which uses her live voice as the sound element manipulated using electronic instruments, is essentially a synthesis that thwarts easy categorization.

Z’s gesture controllers are designed around her own performance habits and shaped to those purposes. Z calls her instruments “tools,” but Tanaka makes a distinction between a “tool” and an “instrument.” Tanaka describes a tool as a utilitarian device, accessible to any novice, in the assistance of a designated task. Instruments, on the other hand, serve to enhance the creative impulses of the player, and are not necessarily relegated to a single use. Indeed, Z’s tools serve as catalysts for musical exploration, accommodate experimental and extended techniques, and certainly require use by a virtuoso. Z’s instruments, her tools are a kind of vibrant matter, to use Bennett’s term, because they play an active role in the musical process; they generate the immediate feedback to which Z responds, and shape her compositional approach.

Gesture is as prominent as sound and words as a means of communicating the expressive components of the piece. The genesis of these elements all developed simultaneously as an improvisation.

In this performance of “Quatre Couches” and “Badagada,” gesture is a performative element as well as a musical one: while a singer with external accompaniment (for example, a piano) might gesture solely for expressive purposes—to evoke emotion—Z employs gesture both for expression and to activate an instrument. In

³¹ Pamela Z, Interview with Lucy Dhegrae.

this case, movement is music. She explains that gesture is integral to her work by virtue of the fact that she is, almost without exception, the performer. “I learned...that performance itself was a discipline, and that I was as much a performer as I was a musician.” She emphasizes that, regardless of the medium, performance requires certain skills and attributes, some of which are distinct from music-making.

Fig. 4.4: Pamela Z performs with gesture controllers at the Resonant Bodies Festival in Brooklyn, NY, September 13, 2018. Photo by the author.



This perceived separation between performance and music-making is a concept that Diana Taylor also emphasizes in her work on performance studies; Taylor identifies performance as a conduit for a variety of goals: expressive, political, and communicative. As a result, it need not be associated to a specific practice, like music: “performance is

not always about art. It's a wide-ranging and difficult practice to define and hold many, at times conflicting, meanings and possibilities"³²

Crucially linked to the centrality of gesture in Z's musicianship is her use of live electronics as a tool, rather than a passive processor of sonic information. Live electronics differ from their antecedents in fixed tape media, which resulted in disembodied utterances and ultimately separable from performance. These fixed artworks bear little resemblance to the live electronics and computer music of Pamela Z. "The computer is a tool," she writes, "and I have a very strong relationship with my tools."³³

Z's characterization of the computer as a tool is indicative of her compositional approach and aesthetic. She says, "There have always been people who believe that having a great tool will make them great artists or magically result in the creation of great art, but buying the finest violin or tennis racket does not a great musician or athlete make."³⁴ The work of composition and performance is not in the medium, but in the artist's creative will. Z has adapted, over the years, to her chosen tools. As Cypess explains with regard to seventeenth-century musicians, "The more instrumentalists developed a *habitus* at their instruments, the less they needed to contemplate every action. While not literally fused to the human body, an instrument could come to form an extension of the human body in such a way that its operation became second nature."³⁵ Likewise, Z's instruments have become second nature, making gesture, composition, and

³² Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 6.

³³ Pamela Z, "A Tool is a Tool," *Women, Art, and Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 62.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Rebecca Cypess, *Curious and Modern Inventions: Instrumental Music as Discovery in Galileo's Italy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

performance a fused web of musical activities, devoid of any explicit hierarchical ordering.

Z's performances, then, represent a kind of solo *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a comprehensive example of art encompassing music, gesture, text, visual elements, and sometimes, production. Some of her solo repertoire is even conceived as large-scale performance works or installations. When she is not in that environment, she performs excerpts in recital and presents them alongside shorter pieces like "Quatre Couches;" they retain their cohesive structure without the full staging or *mis en scène* that would be present in a full-scale work.

The musical content of "Quatre Couches" is produced both live and using pre-made digital samples on the computer, what Mark Katz defines as "a type of computer synthesis in which sound is rendered into data, data that in turn comprise instructions for reconstructing that sound." Significantly, Katz adds, "sampling is typically regarded as a type of musical quotation."³⁶ This is yet another example of the ways that Z's experimental approach co-exists with long-standing conventions of classical art music. Musical quotation, a technique used in the notated classical tradition since early medieval polyphony, takes on new properties in the realm of recorded sound. Katz explains that sampling differs from traditional conceptions of quotation in that it offers the possibility of "*performative* quotation: quotation that recreates all the details of timbre and timing that evoke and identify a unique sound event."³⁷ In other words, he argues that sampling generally quotes a performance, a sonic utterance, whereas quotation in the traditional sense references a work, or more specifically, a notated score. This understanding places

³⁶ Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 147.

³⁷ Ibid, 149.

the focus of Z's use of sampling and quotation on sound rather than text, and also on the idea of liveness, despite its heavy use of recording technologies.

Demographic Programming

The methods that Pamela Z employs in the composition and performance of these two pieces uphold many of the conventional practices of art song, yet disrupt the power structures inherent in the genre. Many of these structures rest on the cultural history of the art song as parlor entertainment, performed by well-bred women, often for the benefit of male onlookers.³⁸ Scholarly investigations into women composer/performers have already uncovered many of the ways that the materiality of women's bodies in performance work against long-held notions of the genre's patriarchal status; they also identified the some of the risk inherent in such an undertaking. One important example is Susan McClary's case study on Laurie Anderson, an important figure in contemporary performance art and electronic music. Like Z, Anderson has also made extensive use of live electronics, particularly voice filters, and magnetic tape. McClary's summarizes the issue this way:

Women's bodies in Western culture have almost always been viewed as objects of display. Women have rarely been permitted agency in art, but instead have been restricted to enacting—upon and through their bodies—the theatrical, musics, cinematic, and dance scenarios concocted by male artists. Centuries of this traditional sexual division of cultural labor bears down on Anderson (or any woman performer) when she performs, always threatening to convert her once again into yet another body set in motion for the pleasure of the masculine gaze. It may be possible for men in the music profession to forget these issues, but no woman who has ever been on a stage, or even in front of a classroom, can escape

³⁸ See Ruth A. Solie, *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993), and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

them... This raises the stakes enormously and makes much more significant Anderson's insistence on her self-representation within the performance space.³⁹

Like Anderson, Pamela Z insists on self-representation in performance spaces; the two are pioneers in the field. While the work of both women has affected the music world tremendously, the actual musical content, vocal style, and techniques differ significantly. This distinction is crucial; musical categorization based on marked demographic signifiers like "female" often impede the music's ability to achieve as balanced an evaluation and reception as its unmarked counterparts. It is an obstacle that often reinforces the sexual division of cultural labor that McClary describes; the subtext is that if women are *composing*, that is an anomaly that necessitates marking.

Z's experiences with the reception history of her own work bear out this same reasoning. In one case, specifically, a critic erroneously conflated Z's work with that of Anderson's. Z's recollection of this event merits quoting at length:

It was typical when I first started doing this that, if I was, for example, on a compilation of electro-acoustic music or something like that, I would be the only woman and the only person of color on that compilation. I do remember one time where I got very annoyed, and I think I behaved badly. I actually called the journalist in his home, because I happened to have his phone number, to complain. I was on a compilation, and it was a compilation that the label that had put out of people who were on that label. Everyone else was white men, except me. That's fine, I mean, that was par for the course at that time. But then the reviewer wrote this review about the record. He very thoughtfully, carefully went through each person, saying, "Paul Drescher performed his works that included repeating motifs..." and he described the work itself. "And then Carl Stone's composition was..." etc. etc., and described the work. He had clearly listened. Then, at the end of the article, his last thing was about me. It was one sentence, and it said, "Pamela Z contributed two songs in the Laurie Anderson mold." And I was just like, "Hang on a second! How come you didn't say, 'Paul Drescher did these repeating motifs in the Philip Glass mold'? Why did you describe what he did rather than just comparing him to somebody else, and letting that be his entire [review]. And I looked at the whole review, and I was the only woman on here, and his only sentence about me was to compare me to Laurie Anderson. Which, I

³⁹ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 38.

totally understand people making a comparison to Laurie Anderson, and I even find that a compliment.

In the case of that particular review, I don't even think that the pieces that were on the record sounded alike. I think when people compare me to Laurie Anderson, it's more when I'm doing text pieces, where I'm talking or something. But these were pieces where I was singing, full-voice, which Laurie Anderson doesn't do! The sound of the music was not texturally, or timbrally, or content-wise related to her at all. So it was almost like he identified that I was female, and using electronics, and then checked that off like, oh, that goes in the Laurie Anderson pile. Which is what was typically done to women at that time. I would typically get either compared to Laurie, or I'd get compared to Meredith [Monk]. Once in a while, Diamanda [Galás]. Which woman pile does she go in? And once we've figured that out, we're done, you know? I was so angry that I actually called him up, it was terrible.

I feel like, I wasn't held back in my work, I don't feel like I wasn't invited to the table because of my gender or my race, or any demographic thing. But I do feel like I was regarded differently, especially by members of the press, or people who would describe me, and I think that was something that a lot of women were probably plagued with.⁴⁰

As a result of these kinds of encounters with the press, Z says she has been wary of participating in projects that programmed artists on the basis of demographic considerations. The primary critique of demographic programming is that the essentializing, totalizing strategies of grouping musicians together by identity category is problematic, as it reinforces categorical identities, promotes stereotyping, and functions as a foundational principle of patriarchal hegemonic processes in music. Demographic programming makes an assumption of likeness among artists — that gender, race, or some other identity category is meaningfully embedded in a similar manner across all of the musical content. This assumption is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify, and is often met with ambivalence from the artists themselves.

⁴⁰ Pamela Z, interview with the author.

In Z's case, many analysts and critics have attempted to make claims about the significance of race or gender in her work. George Lewis, for example, claims blackness as the most crucial identity, saying "we find Pamela Z's solo voice being continually transformed, multiplied, and detuned through digital and analog processing, breaking apart into a heterophony of perspectives that seem to exemplify Gilroy's and Kobena Mercer's understanding that identity, including black identity, is plural, polyphonic, and heterogeneous."⁴¹ By contrast, Gray posits that "Gender seems far more salient to her than race alone."⁴² Despite this proposition, Gray acknowledges the composer's own opinion on the subject: "Pamela Z rejects thinking about musical production in terms of conventional assumptions about race, bodies, gender, even genre and audiences, and as such she challenges preconceived notions about identity, technology, and new music."⁴³

There is a complicating factor, however, in making the blanket assessment that demographic programming is overall detrimental, because demographic programming actually can function in the music industry in positive ways to create opportunity for otherwise marginalized artists. The practical application of these kinds of projects, namely concerts, workshops, and other musical offerings aimed at a particular population, can successfully advocate for those populations. Z, despite her trepidation, has observed these kinds of programs functioning firsthand. An excerpt from the interview that I conducted with her illuminates the opportunities afforded by isolating certain demographic populations:

PZ: When I first started getting a little bit known, and I would get invited to things, I would frequently be invited to play in festivals that would be called things like, "women composers" or "women in new music" or "women in

⁴¹ Lewis, "Virtual Discourses of Palmela Z," 66.

⁴² Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 178.

⁴³ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 177.

technology.” Or... I once got invited to be in an Afro-futurism festival.

RL: Do you consider yourself an Afro-futurist?

PZ: No? I honestly don’t even know what an Afro-futurist is, [yet] I’ve been asked to be in this thing. I was constantly being invited to be in these programs that were programmed demographically. The programmers would talk about it like it was a genre. I was resistant at first, and I was also irritated. I’d be put on a compilation of “women in new music” or whatever. Until I realized, this is what is necessary to make that equalizing happen. Hopefully, at some point, it won’t be necessary any more. But it is part of the process, of making change. And I see now, after many years of this, that these changes have happened, and they’re probably due in part to... those women who are on those ‘women in electronic music’ festivals or compilations, would not have been represented anywhere, if not for that.

RL: It’s complicated.

PZ: At one point, I had a California Arts Council Artist Residency, where you pair up with an organization and you can do something. So I had paired up with this gallery in San Francisco called The Lab. I created a workshop called SoundWORK. The director at the time was this woman named Laura Brun, and she said, ‘why don’t you make the workshop be for girls?’ I was going to have it be for youth, and I was just like, I just don’t feel comfortable going into schools, telling people I’m going to be doing a workshop at The Lab, and you can’t do it because your gender’s the wrong gender. I wanted it to be available to any kid who wanted to do it. We decided we’d do it for at-risk youth. So, I went into these schools, and I talked it up and put out the little applications. Then, we got all the applications in, and out of the ten kids that signed up for it, only two of them were girls. When we went around doing introductions on the first day of the workshop, and I asked each of them what they do and why they were interested in the workshop. When it got to the girls, they both said things like, “well, my boyfriend has a recording studio, and they always think I’m really stupid, they won’t let me touch the equipment.” And I was like, whoa! This is a serious problem, so then, okay, you’re right, I should do something.

Then, the next time did the workshop, I didn’t do it for girls, but I did it for women. And girls could do it to, but [primarily], I did it for low-income women. And so, only women were in it. Then, all the participants were women, and I got stories from all of them about how they had really wanted to do this kind of stuff but they felt pushed or edged out. One of them said she had been in school and she tried to take the recording class, the boys in the class would not let her get near the gear, they would just edge her out. They would just say, “don’t worry your pretty head about it. We’ll do it.” So, then I was like, okay, now I understand the need for these kind of segregated, targeted things. So, for a couple of years I did it for low-income women, and then I opened it up to low-income residents of the Mission district. Then, it was mixed, not just women.

It was interesting, because I had felt so rebellious against all these things that were “women”-this and “girls”-that, “person of color-that” and I don’t want to get lumped into a group based on these things that I don’t think are nearly as essential to who I am as an artist as other characteristics. But then, I sort of learned my lesson about why those things exist and why they’re kind of necessary. I feel like they have, over the years, accomplished a lot of what their mission was. Or at least, gone a long way in changing things.⁴⁴

Z’s first-hand experience as a working electronic artist and mentor speaks to the complicated issue of the practical ways that musical institutions, record labels, and the non-profit sector can work to create parity and equal opportunities across all demographic populations. The women-only spaces that Z created fostered open communication about shared challenges among participants, notwithstanding the many identities and experiences that the women involved did not share.

A number of studies confirm that these discrete spaces — all-woman spaces, or all-black spaces, for example — actually function to empower those populations.⁴⁵ They emerge as a reaction to existing power structures that favor majority identities, and which continue to pervade integrated spaces. S. Laurel Weldon posits that “the most effective way to ensure that marginalized sub-groups of ‘internal minorities’ have the opportunity to develop and voice their distinctive perspectives is to ensure that they have the opportunity for self-organization...when dominated groups form a ‘counter-public’ or separate discussion among themselves, they are better able to counter their marginalization in the broader public sphere.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Pamela Z, interview with the author.

⁴⁵ S. Laurel Weldon, “Inclusion, Solidarity, and Social Movements: The Global Movement Against Gender Violence.” *Perspectives on Politics* 4, no. 1 (2006): 55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 56.

Pamela Z's experience in her SoundWORK program supports Weldon's claims. It also aligns with what Lena Gunnarsson coins a "critical realist" feminist positioning: that the category of "woman" is not a fixed category, nor is it essentializing, but rather it is comprised of certain shared features. She claims, "The intellectual recognition of a gender-specific power structure was not based on any kind of straightforward discovery of an empirical entity called patriarchy, but on the creative development of new modes of abstracting certain invisible but pervasive features from the concrete reality that we could measure, observe and feel. No matter how different women's lives were, what feminists put their fingers on was that there was something quite disadvantageous about all women's lives and that this something had to do with their being women."⁴⁷ In the specific case of women working with electronic and recorded music, the disadvantages stem from these activities' distance from perceived norms for women's music-making behaviors, including composition and the use of technology. For many of the groups like those that Z mentored, the unsavory methodology of projects targeted towards a "counter-public" is necessarily weighed against the measurable positive impact of such projects.

Ultimately, drawing on Gunnarsson's claims about the category "woman," I argue that Z's identity as a woman is an important aspect of her musical performing self, but not one that is totalizing, essentializing, or hierarchically prioritized. The need for demographic programming is subsumed under that partial and undervalued category, and is therefore relevant until the category itself, "woman," is no longer undervalued in a patriarchal system.

⁴⁷ Lena Gunnarsson, "A Defence of Category 'Women'." *Feminist Theory* 12, no. 1 (April 2011): 32.

The critique of demographic programming as totalizing and essentializing is valid, however, and Haraway argues that essentializing strategies are contributing factors to upholding patriarchy.⁴⁸ The common usage of “woman composer,” then, seems to be inescapably problematic. Yet gender cannot be ignored without consequence, because it does meaningfully affect musical production, as evidenced by the testimonies of Z’s workshop students.⁴⁹

Cyborgs and Women

Here, I will make the case for contextualizing both Z’s identity as a composer/performer, and the efforts toward achieving a feminist musicology that can meaningfully accommodate musicians like Z, in terms of the cyborg. Gill Kirkup posits the cyborg as a useful metaphor for feminist studies because it circumvents the biological justifications for the oppression of women:

Feminist theory was originally interested in biological science as a set of theories which construct women as deficient, and other technosciences as fields of activity from which women were excluded, at least from powerful positions. The systems and artefacts produced by technoscience were seen as providing the material foundations for gender inequality. The technosciences of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are proposed as having a different impact and set of possibilities for gender relations and women. These possibilities increase the human capacities of seeing, hearing, *understanding and communicating*: they are systems for representation.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Haraway *Cyborgs, Simians and Women*.

⁴⁹ Other examples of non-profit organizations employing these strategies include the Women’s Audio Mission, the Berklee Empowerment Initiative, the Luna Composition Lab, and the Women Composer’s Festival of Hartford.

⁵⁰ Gill Kirkup, *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader* (London: Routledge, in association with The Open University, 2000).

The cyborg metaphor, in addition to freeing feminist theory from certain biological constraints, challenges the patriarchal constructions of language. According to Haraway, “Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism.” The reference to phallogocentrism, a portmanteau of phallocentrism and logocentrism taken from Derrida, addresses in a specific way the problems with a term like “female composer.”⁵¹ Derrida’s neologism emphasizes that there is a patriarchal privileging inherent in the language itself, not merely the category “Woman”, and therefore the term becomes derogatory.⁵²

Phallogocentrism, being one of the chief targets of cyborg politics, is an element that Pamela Z actively resists in her music. Her approach to language is one of the key features of her solo work; it is frequently original (or found), composed through improvisatory exploration, and often deliberately ambiguous or plural in meaning.⁵³ The lack of Haraway’s “perfect communication” in the linguistic sense, in favor of a sonically-based system for communicating meaning, upends the very structures of phallogocentrism.

The difficulty in isolating a single, hierarchically privileged identity for Z, among such options as black, female, composer, singer, improviser, or performer, is more easily accommodated with the various capacities of the cyborg metaphor in mind. Multiple positioning forms the core of the approach. Each aspect of Z’s body, its instrumental extensions, and the acoustic properties of the space in which she performs, actively shape

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ See full interview transcript in Appendix C.

the musical work. This comprehensive identity embraces rather than resists the problematic identity categories, which are critical but difficult to isolate.

The metaphor of the cyborg becomes useful to feminist musicology in light of the increasingly wide range of skill sets that composing musicians like Pamela Z possess; it can also accommodate new modes of performance, new technologies, and new conceptions of musical instruments and their connection to the musician. As noted above, while broad, homogenizing identity categories can be harmful, numerous scholars have demonstrated the ways that self-organized spaces can have positive effects, and this experience is confirmed by my findings. By extension, the category “woman composer” can, in fact, be useful in some respects. It serves to identify a common “counter-public” that can self-organize in order to develop the distinctive perspectives of those who comprise it.⁵⁴

To use Gunnarsson’s phrasing, “multiple positioning is not the same as no positioning...Conceptualising women as those who occupy the position as woman is thus very different from reifying, homogenising and essentialising accounts of women.”⁵⁵ Each aspect of Z’s identity is meaningful and, given that her presence and physicality is so central to the musical aesthetic, deeply connected to musical meaning. Gray, focusing on racial identity specifically, identifies this connection, writing, “The issue of racial identity seems meaningful to the degree that, as she perceptively notes, it gets at questions of corporeality and the power of cultural assumptions to organize, classify, and assign value and meaning of music on the basis of race and gender.”⁵⁶ This same

⁵⁴ Weldon, “Inclusion, Solidarity, and Social Movements: The Global Movement Against Gender Violence,” 56.

⁵⁵ Gunnarsson, “A Defence of the Category ‘Women.’”

⁵⁶ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 178,

understanding could reasonably apply to any identity category. Z's challenge has not been, according to her, feeling unwelcome within her field or among her peers. "I feel like I've been lucky in this way, because I feel like, against all of the odds, I do happen to be in that world. But, there was a time when I was very much alone in it. And I don't mean that it felt lonely to me, because I was just as connected to my white, male colleagues as I would have been to any other colleagues."⁵⁷ By alone, she means only that there were not as many other women participating in live electronic performance in the U.S. in the 1980s as there are today.

Z is quick, however, to defend the electronic music scene against critiques that it is a singularly exclusionary space for women in art music:

It's not like there weren't women doing electronic music from the very beginning, it's just that they were under-represented and weren't given credit for what they were doing. There were even electronic music duos that collaborated together on things, and then the man would get named...

... I would say, for those people who are trying to call electronic music out on that [assumption], I challenge them to compare the roles...in the old days, they'd be absolutely right. It would be all these white guys in ties....But now, I would challenge them to compare the current roles, if you looked over who is doing these things, who is on compilations, and whose work is being respected in the field of electronic music, compared to, in the field of, classical music in general, in the acoustic world. How many conductors? How many female conductors are there? I would argue the percentage of women doing electronic music is much higher than the percentage of women conducting orchestras.

Again, Z's comments reinforce that regardless of the diverse positioning of women in all areas of art music production, as composers, performers, or conductors, the systemic issues are, in many ways, shared. Therefore, the categorization is useful, if problematic. Cyborg politics embraces multiple positioning, acknowledges the power and

⁵⁷ Pamela Z, interview with the author.

agency of inorganic materials, including instruments and technology, and actively resists phallogocentrism.

In its original form as tape music, electronic music was a largely disembodied medium. The technological innovations resulting in live and interactive electronic processing have re-introduced bodies into these works. Embodiment is, perhaps, the most central and crucial feature of Z's works, beyond any one identity category. In fact, this feature in itself is consistent with a feminist approach. Braidotti argues,

“Feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand-in-hand with a radical rejection of essentialism. In feminist theory one speaks as a woman, although the subject ‘woman’ is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables, such as class, race, age, life-style, sexual preference and others. One speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate socio-symbolic changes in their condition; this is a radically anti-essentialist position.”⁵⁸

The material composition of bodies is necessarily, then, a primary focus in interpreting Z's music. Her work is *performance* as much as it is *electronic music* as much as it is *vocal music*; the intersections of these various elements in terms of genre are as enmeshed and inextricable as the elements of Z's personal identity. These complex webs of relations are not hierarchical, nor do they even require untangling. Making use of cyborg politics for feminist method, women need not simplify or essentialize their identity. Instead, critical reception must adapt in order to reckon with increasingly complex music and musicians.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 48.

Conclusions: Towards a New Materialist Performance Studies Model

The work of Libby Larsen, Isabelle Aboulker, Caroline Shaw, and Pamela Z features a great diversity of musical ideas and compositional approaches. The insights I have gleaned from speaking with them and studying their work only scratches the surface of the rich, developing history of contemporary music studies. The range of musical styles, aesthetic values, and approach to composing for voice constitutes the most crucial lesson from careful study of the work of women who are so often erroneously compared with one another solely on the basis of their gender.

While each of the case studies that I have presented centers on distinct musics and practices, certain broader themes emerge. Vocal music has provided a crucial pathway to career success for all these composers. Women's close association with vocal music in the classical realm is no revelation; that it serves as the foothold by which women attain compositional careers is a testament to those long-held understandings about women's areas of musical competence. Ultimately, these composers are participating in a musical present that is unlike the past, though still affected by its legacies, and charting new courses for the future by crafting new models and examples of what composition looks like.

Throughout this study, I have grappled with using the categorical term "female composer." I focused very deliberately on women who compose, attempting to understand if and how gender is inscribed in their compositions, and how it affects their work. All these composers, despite their differences, bristle at the term. It represents an essentializing characteristic, and many times this is an aspect of identity that they choose

to not address publicly. Having composed in a tradition that has for so long been dominated by men, gender remains a salient component of compositional identity. As Caroline Shaw said to me, however, “I want to envision a future where it’s a non-issue.” As I discovered through my work with Pamela Z, however, there is an important place for targeted projects, and a clear need to provide opportunity specifically to women working in art music. There is, clearly, a gender imbalance in many areas of music making, not just composing. Avoiding confrontation of this issue seems unproductive to me; I hope to continue to find a way to explore these issues of gender in music, especially composition and performance, in a way that resists placing all women into a single ontological category.

I hope that by allowing these women speak for themselves, as much as possible, this dissertation contributes to a growing body of knowledge about the new music world, its diversity, its challenges, and its relevance to the broader cultural patterns in the United States and Europe. The focus on women as creators emphasizes the bold steps that the new music scene has taken toward gender parity—a step ahead, I might argue, of the classical music scene more broadly. The tendencies in this particular field toward collaborative performance, experimentation, and alternative music notation have made it a useful place to explore new approaches to criticism and analysis. The methodologies I have developed, encompassing performance studies, new materialism, and feminist approaches rather than traditional, logocentric models, could also be beneficial to other areas of music research. Stepping back from conventional assumptions about composition as writing has allowed me to focus my analysis on aspects of new music compositions that often stymie traditional models.

There is work still to be done. My case studies opened new avenues of thought for me. I was forced to reflect on the art, music, and literature I value, and question its embedded misogyny, as Isabelle Aboulker does. I am also empowered to investigate the subjective positioning of composers' settings, such as Libby Larsen's, to gain a more comprehensive understanding about how the fictionalizing of historical texts affects performance and interpretation of songs like hers.

I was particularly intrigued by Caroline Shaw's discussion of gender politics in the world of popular music production. The traditional role of women as singers—singers who embody and project ideas created by men—in that space echoes so many conventions of classical music trends, despite vastly different histories, methodologies, and key figures. In the future, I plan to continue to investigate the roles of women in the production studio through this lens of vocality. Studios are so often closed spaces, unlike performance venues, and yet represent a core site of musical performance, replete with meaningful social interaction. This is an area where the kind of models I am developing in my approach to the live performance of art music may have further applications.

Gender studies scholar Elizabeth Grosz succinctly articulates the role of feminist efforts like this project in western society today:

The problem of feminism is not the problem of women's lack of freedom, or simply the constraints that patriarchal power relations impose on women and their identities. If women are not, in some sense, free, feminism could not be possible...The problem is not how to give women more adequate recognition (who is it that women require recognition from?), more rights, or more of a voice, but how to enable more action, more making and doing, more difference. That is, the challenge facing feminism today is no longer only to give women a more equal place within existing social networks and relations but to enable women to partake in the creation of a future unlike the present.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 73.

The women whose work I have studied are not necessarily constrained or shackled in some other sense; they are actively working in their chosen field. They are leading by example and providing models for future generations of composers. It is the approach to criticism and analysis of this music and these composers that requires a perspective that can accommodate the path these women are charting. The canonical history of western music is certainly resistant to change; following Grosz, however, we can envision and work to shape an equitable future by enabling perspectives that serve the compositions of today on their own terms.

Appendix A
Full Interview Transcript: Isabelle Aboulker

June 13, 2018, Paris, France

Isabelle Aboulker: So, what is Rachael preparing for? Does she want to be a teacher, or what?

Valentine Baron (Interpreter): She's pursuing a Doctorate in Musicology, a PhD.

IA: Ah, I see. Like at the Sorbonne.

Rachael Lansang: So, I have written much of this, but I want your input. I want to know about you, your teachers, your influences.

IA: Influenced, by whom might I have been influenced? You see, my music is fundamentally French. The style is fundamentally French. There are two influences, because I am a composer, but for quite a long time I was a pianist at the Conservatory, where I accompanied singing classes, voice lessons, workshops as a collaborative pianist. And I did this with people who really love, they adore French music, and the entire program was devoted to French music: Debussy, Ravel, Poulenc, or Lully, Rameau, *Musique française*. And I too really like French style. The French way of writing is very precise, all the musical indications are very clear in French sheet music. The writing is very clear and almost directive. If the indications in the music are very precise, you know exactly what the composer wants. This is a bit less the case with *Lieder*, Germans have fewer of those little... whereas with the French, in my music for instance, there are constantly hyphens and ellipses, things of that sort. But, you know, I inherited this focus on such detail of indication in the music from French musical writing. And they are many, including Massenet, Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc. These are individuals who know exactly what they want.

In order for the text to... well, I am a composer who is behind the text. I don't place myself ahead of or before it. Do you see what I'm saying? My music is there to give greater color to the words, more expression to the meaning and to the words. For instance, the text is what makes the La Fontaine *Fables* (not those ones there, but all those others that I set) like "La Cigale et la fourmi", which are for children. At school in France, everyone knows their "Le loup et l'agneau," "La Cigale et la fourmi." When children recite, "The cicada having sung all the summer found herself very much without necessities", *What a dumb cicada!* What I mean is that while the words do come out when spoken, the text does not. With music, and with my music in particular, because it's a bit like I'm painting, you see, and when that's the case, the phrase becomes, "All the summer, all the summer!" (sung by Aboulker). You can sense that the music is intelligent; it's clever music! But music doesn't occupy the main component of the *mélodie*. Rather it is in a secondary position. It's the text, and then it's the music afterward. This is exceedingly important. This isn't the normal approach these days, however. Previously, other composers, they did do that; now, and you've noticed it when you've sung it, composers who make you sing "La Cigale, ayant chanté, Tout l'Été..." (*Lines sung spontaneously by Aboulker in an atonal, nearly amelodic manner*). La

Fontaine is dead. That's very much the truth: If you create something that is too instrumental, too modern, if, for a singer, you are writing in a very modern style, the text has died. Is that not true?

In my case, the problem hasn't been whether my music is good or bad, it needs to be in service of the writing. I am like a servant for the music [which is the] servant of the text. My music is in service of the text, simply in service. There's absolutely nothing else aside from that.

And above all, with regard to La Fontaine, given that it is mildly challenging language, and from the 17th century; the language is old! It is clear, but old. In a musical setting, the text truly becomes clear, which I've seen to be the case with children. For example, certain texts that are a bit tricky, like "Le loup et l'agneau" for instance, is very hard. But with my music, it takes on the quality of a real drama, and that's very important for me.

And, moreover, everything that I do is like that. That's my brand, like Coca-Cola is a brand, whereas for me it's comprehension. I don't make any Coca-Cola. Everybody tells me this. Everyone recognizes this quality, children, teachers, voice teachers, and singers. This quality is something that I feel really belongs to me, because I love theater, and literature, and I love French writers. There on that shelf, you have a collection of works by Émile Zola. I really love French authors. Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, authors who are clear, and tell stories about things. In my case, I really want my music to be clear as well. That's priority number one for me. I think that is why I'm sung as much as I am now, because given that we are in an era where composers are truly disinterested in the voice... They write well, that's not the concern, but they don't write for the voice. They even write occasionally *against* the voice. And here lies the real problem, when one goes about singing contemporary music, even excellent contemporary works, it is simply not vocal to write such gigantic intervals.

RL: I have two questions: With so much in the music written and indicated, what is the role of the performer? How much freedom of expression do you envision?

IA: The question of freedom is a very good one, a very intelligent one. However, in truth, there really isn't much freedom to be honest. There really isn't a notion of liberty. While I might not be a "great" composer, nonetheless, if I compose, I want you to do what I've written. You're the interpreter, not the composer. And yet, in my life, I am not like that in any way; I am very tolerant, and accept a lot of different things. I am a flexible person, and it's not my character to impose, but the music is the music.

RL: It is so specific...

IA: Specific, yes, and if you are working with a "big" composer, you have the freedom to give your sensibility, or your personality, the color of your voice. But even in this case, I believe that the freedom you have is nonetheless not enormous, especially with music which is very precisely and meticulously written.

I wrote something rather unusual that can be found in the volume. When you were at FAVA [the Franco-American Vocal Academy, a summer program for young professional

singers], did you happen to hear (it's not quite a *mélodie*, it's called a *melodrama*) did you hear a young girl named Catherine sing *Marie Curie, la lettre*? It was fantastic. We were weeping... I don't recall her last name. In any case, *La lettre de Marie Curie*, you're familiar with it, and you're familiar with Pierre Curie as well? They had been married only a short time when... (they had children who were about four or five years old). They loved each other with a very sensual, deeply felt type of love; they truly loved each other. And then he died. One morning, he left, he was crossing the street, and a stagecoach overturned, and fell on top of him, and he was killed. It was horrible, and for a year, Marie Curie was writing love letters to a deceased man, very sensual letters that talked about how they together were in bed... So, I wrote a little thing, about eight minutes worth of music. Everybody tends to cry when they hear this piece. And also, with this work in particular, there is a certain liberty. Having heard it, you know that the music is almost not even there. I indicated that the piano be very, very soft. So, this is an example where a certain degree of freedom on the part of the performer has a place (a little freedom), because *La lettre* is not exactly music like the other *mélodies*. It's special. But otherwise, I'd say it's true that the performer doesn't have all that much freedom.

RL: *Les femmes en fables* are very different. The text is very different than the other fables. I wanted to ask you, because the other fable settings have been for children, but these four songs are very misogynistic. Why these texts? Why choose to have a woman sing texts that are so derogatory?

IA: Why did I choose these texts? Especially peculiar is the text of "La femme noyée," which is very misogynistic. Two or three years ago in Germany, a woman had organized a recital with my *mélodies*, and the young woman said, "It is simply not possible that a woman composer would set *this* text to music!" She didn't want to sing this *mélodie*, because it was too misogynistic.

RL: Yes! So why these four in particular?

IA: Because it's funny, because it's clever. I am not a militant feminist. I think the composer has no gender. Why? Why not? In this particular fable, I like the phrase which goes, "I am not among those who say it's nothing at all, a woman who drowns herself". You see, it's my philosophy: I think it's better to sing with humor, given this problem now, in France, where all the women are crazy with the problem of sexism. I don't consider myself a feminist, well, I am a feminist toward women of lower socio-economic standing, toward the girls working as cashiers who are paid less [than men]. In this case, yes. But not for individuals who can, well, we have arms to defend ourselves in the middle and upper class world. If we want to make it, we will make it.

I have a family, and my husband is not the type of husband who works in the kitchen. We were very young when we met, and he was already a star. He was very handsome, a solo pianist, *magnifique*, did concerts and everything. I, on the other hand... And I never knew how to make him [it?] change, but I had two children, I took care of my family, and I never hung a sign on my door that read: "Genius at Work!" I got up in the morning, I went to bed late at night, and I wrote my music. The fact that I had a very kind husband, who believed in me, and pushed me to work, is important obviously too. I

personally haven't really encountered misogyny, in that way of a macho mentality and so-forth.

I did encounter some misogyny, however, when I wanted to write film scores. Film music is only for men. I believe I would have written really good music for film, and I did write a bit, little things. It's something that I would have done very well, and yet there they were, the men, standing in the way, "No women in this job!" But for the job I do, no never. Yet, the music that I write, that being tonal music, yes, there I did indeed meet people who write exclusively atonal music, and who really *hate* me. It's not that they don't really like me, they detest me. The situation is essentially, if you're going to write tonal music, then fine, do it, but they will not shake my hand, or at least twenty years ago. And that is indeed true, but in the world of *mélodie* composition, no. I suppose it's possible that my music didn't get picked up, because they were works by a female composer; that is possible. Maybe I would have been better known.

A few days ago, there was a performance of an oratorio that I had written. It's a fairly substantial work; I indicated it on the list. In this work, I did something very different. It is my most important work. A few days ago, a young woman like you, having heard the performance, approached me and said, "My husband told me, 'in listening to that, if you weren't a woman, you would be better known'", which is the first time anyone has ever said that to me, interesting. And it's true, it's a work that captivates; it's strong, so-to-speak.

So, why did I set this text? It's difficult for me to explain. I don't know why. Misogyny amuses me; it makes me laugh, because it's a bit like anti-Semitism, in the sense that these are things somehow rooted in certain people. There are people who have this thing in them, and it comes out, and no one can really say why. I don't really consider a woman getting slapped on the butt, for instance, misogyny. That's someone who's a seducer perhaps, but it's not misogyny. Why are women seemingly crazy about this matter these days? I believe misogyny is when someone says, "These women are inferior; they are not capable of doing anything of importance". I don't think we hear that all that often anymore. But, in the 17th century, a bit less in the 18th, and very much so in the 19th century, there was indeed this belief about women. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, the Director of the Paris Conservatory, Gabriel Fauré, said of women composers, "The prettier they are, the worse their music gets." I mean, that was the 19th century though. A lot of really fantastic writers were completely misogynistic. But in my case, these happen to be authors that I really like. I don't know if you're familiar with Jules Renard. He wrote some absolutely extraordinary things. He was someone who wrote very little, his sentences were *like that*. And yet, aside from his wife and daughter, one could do away with all other women as far as he was concerned. He was incredibly misogynistic, but I adore Jules Renard. What can I say? I'm not going to dismiss him completely because of this one aspect of his writing. And generally, these types of men are funny, because the things they are saying are so over the top that they end up making you laugh. And that sentence, "*Ce n'est rien, c'est une femme qui se noie* - It's nothing, it's a woman drowning herself". It's terribly cruel, but above all else, it's very stupid. And so, the man who said such a thing is obviously not an intelligent man. There's simply no way. If he were speaking about his mother, about his wife, about his daughter, he would never say that; it's simply not possible. Consequently, it's not actually a very

meaningful, substantive remark. It's a sort of attitude that he puts on to appear intelligent; at least I interpret it that way. It's not intelligent. I like the ambiguity of this phrase, the ambiguity, because he says, "I'm not like the other men who *do* say this" - "*Je ne suis pas de ceux qui disent*", and yet he does say it; it's interesting. And it's not easy to decide how to go about singing that phrase. And so when I gave a master class where someone sang this *mélodie*, I explained that as the woman singing this, "Imagine you are a man, you know, like one of those men you might have found in those male-only clubs in England". *I'm not one of those men who says... Not a chance, not I!*" It's very much the macho attitude, but it's funny, because it's completely stupid. I also like the moment at the end of "*La femme noyée*," where the woman is told, "Don't go with the other man!" It's a mindset of contradiction. But I think there's some truth to an outlook that embraces contradiction. I'm not a feminist, because I like men, I like women, and children, and I know that there are faults that are very much feminine and those that are very much masculine. I don't really align with feminism, because I'm a bit different. I have female friends whose outlook on things gets increasingly narrow as they age. I really try not to be like that. I continue to like things, and remain rather indulgent in most areas. I'm not the type of person who flat out rejects men, or for that matter the type of person who is intolerant of people who *do* flat out reject men. I believe that behind everyone's personality, there's always some element of upbringing, a father or a mother, or any number of problems, which stem from how one was raised, and it can be very difficult to separate oneself from those things.

But I don't deny that it's true, that this *mélodie* in particular presents something bizarre. But you know, "*La cigale et la fourmi*" (The Cicada and the Ant) is also misogynist. It's two women; it's not actually a cicada and an ant. Women can be very cruel toward each other. The way some women treat other women who are poor is not particularly kind. And when, as a woman, you are either too charming, or too cute, and nice, you'll find women who are jealous. Even in my case, just yesterday, something like this happened to me when I was invited to present a concert to a group of adorable five and six-year-old children; it was one of one of the many, many operas I've written for young children. I was really pleased; I absolutely love young children. So, after the concert, I went to compliment the pianist for the fine performance, and this pianist was with a friend, a woman a bit younger than I. I have this kind of animal instinct. I can immediately sense if a person is caring and kind, or not. The pianist was very nice, but next to him was this woman who was looking at me up and down, from head to toe. She was sizing me up, completely jealous, because there I was with my bouquet of flowers and so forth. Stupid jealousy! We chatted a bit, and I knew there was nothing pleasant about our exchange. That kind of thing still happens, and it's a feminine behavior, not a masculine one: jealousy just because of who you are. When I meet women under these types of circumstances, truly, never, ever do I contribute to that dynamic, not in the least; I am simply not like that. But there are people who don't like to see a woman in a position of receiving accolades, and I really dislike that, because I am the total opposite. I love young women, beautiful people. My girlfriends were always prettier than I was, and even now that's the case. I'm someone who likes people for who they are. I have zero sense of jealousy. I do not know what jealousy is. I simply do not know what jealousy is, which is rare. But it's true. When I read a really positive review of another composer in the newspaper, I say to myself, "Well hey, he must be very pleased!" It's stupid to be

like that, but that's how I am; good for me, I suppose. I am happy when others are happy, but that's not true of everyone.

Occasionally women, even as very young children, women can be like that. Little girls. I have a granddaughter, Mila, and when she was five or six, the kids in her class sang some of my music. Afterward, a little boy came up to Mila and said, "I do not like your grandmother. I do not like her smile, and her music is not good!" Five years old! I mean, it was a little boy in this case, it wasn't a little girl, but I mention this to show that there are always bad feelings out there, and it's disheartening; it's very, very sad. And yet for me, things like the *Cigale* that were written such a long time ago by La Fontaine, I find it really funny; we see a man attempting to speak about female jealousy, but from such a hypocritical place.

RL: Are the fables for children, would you say?

IA: Not the ones in this set, not *Les quatre femmes* (*The four women*). *La Cigale et la fourmi*, yes, but not "La femme noyée," and not "La chatte métamorphosée" (The cat transformed). However, many of the other fables are indeed for children, and initially when I wrote the fables, they were intended for children. It was afterward that I did the others, but yes, initially they were for children. The CD I produced was for children, and kids still sing them, but there are a lot of adults that sing them as well. *Les quatre femmes* (*The four women*), that's for an adult soprano. And I do understand that these pieces can be shocking, and that some people might not care for them; I can understand. It is difficult to understand why a woman would compose music for these texts; I understand. For me, it's the humor that I find in them. I find the ambiguity of this fable amusing, but it does present challenges. And I really do think that when you're singing *La femme noyée*, you really have to put yourself in the shoes of a man. You have to imagine that you are a man, and sing with a little bit of distance, and not quite so literally.

RL: When I'm singing these four *mélodies*, I think I almost try to make it ironic, and the audience has to hear me say this, and then they know how horrible the text is. Not exactly distance, but something along those lines.

IA: Yes, but for "La femme noyée," it's really important that you become a man, at least somewhat. For "La femme noyée" specifically, that is. You can do with it what you like, but I simply can't imagine a woman saying that phrase, while the other *mélodies*, "La jeune veuve" (The young widow) for instance, a woman could definitely recount that story, and the same goes for "La Cigale," "La Chatte", women can tell those stories. But he says, "I am not among *the men*", he didn't say, "I'm not among *the women* who say..." And that's significant, because it's not feminine. It's a man's *mélodie*.

RL: There are a lot of fables out there, why did you choose these four?

IA: Why did I put these four fables together? Well, in France, La Fontaine's fables are considered almost exclusively to be children's literature. The animal fables (which I don't believe are particularly well known in the United States) but in French schools, everyone learns La Fontaine. And it's interesting to know that he wrote other texts that are much closer to... well, that are quite different in a sense, where he's talking about

human beings, and men and women. When La Fontaine was writing about animals, he utilized them to describe and explain humans, mankind. Whereas in the case of “La jeune veuve,” the subject of the fable is a young girl who has lost the man she loves, and is weeping and weeping, and then ultimately she stops crying. So here, in essence, you have another La Fontaine, and it was of interest to me to show these two personalities: the one writing about animals, the fables and stories and so forth, and the other La Fontaine who is thinking more literally about human beings as he’s writing. You could I suppose say that “La chatte” is for children, but is much more profound; it’s for an adult audience: you are what you are, and no matter what you do, you remain who you are. That’s the essence of “La chatte transformée en femme.” And that’s why it was interesting to set these for texts separately, so that they are to be sung by adults. And as far as “La Cigale et la fourmi” is concerned, it becomes very different when it is sung by a child versus when it’s sung by an adult soprano like you, because in your case, you will adopt two distinct voices as you perform it. In the voice of an adult, the voice and thus the text are different. The phrase, “Well then, how about you try dancing *now*,” becomes quite vicious. Take that! Very mean, cruel even. Here again you’ve got jealousy. She is one jealous ant.

RL: And as far as the music is concerned, when you are writing music intended for adults and music intended for children, while setting the same text, how do you write the music differently?

IA: In the case of “La Cigale et la fourmi,” I would say that, that was written for children. Adults do now sing it, but I didn’t conceive of it with adults in mind. It was for children. Even the tessitura took children into account. It’s not high, not too high for children, and it was also sung by adults.

It’s possible, although I’m not certain... I had written seven fables for children for a conservatory, and then afterward I was asked to write more of them for a recording, but I’m not entirely certain that “La Cigale et la fourmi” was a part of the initial fables. I will need to look in the album. I don’t know if I wrote it then, or if I wrote it afterward.

RL: *Les femmes en fables*, was there a commission? What was the reason for the composition?

IA: I was a professor at the Conservatoire for twenty years. I worked with singers, not as a voice teacher, but as their *solfège* (ear-training) instructor, sight-reading, improvisation, harmony, things like that. In the case of “La jeune veuve”, that was for [inaudible], a young woman who asked me to compose something for her for the end of the year vocal jury (*concours*). So I wrote “La jeune veuve” for this woman, and “La femme noyée” as well was the result of a similar request. For the other *mélodie*, “La chatte,” yes, that as well; I did that sort of thing frequently, the same impetus, where students are asked to present a contemporary *mélodie*(!), and then when they see “contemporary *mélodie*”, AAAH! What can I possibly use; what can I do? And so people will often look to Isabelle Aboulker, because my music is not too, too rough. And so these *mélodies* were often written when singers asked me, “What on earth am I going to sing?” The very pretty *mélodie*, *L’inconstante*, was also written for a student for her jury. It was for a young woman from Algeria, who is an active performer nowadays. She

had come to France having experienced the war in Algeria. It was horrible. She arrived here in a very somber state. And so for her jury then, we needed something on the happier side, and so I wrote *L'inconstante* for her.

RL: And so this [*L'inconstante*] wasn't written at the same time?

IA: No, no, quite awhile afterward, when I was a professor. I frequently composed for students, or a commission for someone. *Command* isn't the right word. I always forget the word. There's a word that you have in English that you use when you "order" something, when you pay for something: A commission! When someone pays, well it doesn't happen all that often, but occasionally, as was the case for *L'Archet*. Do you know *L'Archet*? It's in the Leduc.

RL: So I should not look in the four fables for a big tonal plan? For the four, they are not a group tonally? The keys...?

IA: Some of the fables don't necessarily even have the same tessitura, because, as you know, they were not all written for the same person. For instance, the voice that I wrote "La jeune veuve" for was very light. Are you a lyric soprano?

RL: No, I'm a mezzo-soprano, but I sing this set regardless.

IA: Ah, ok. You can transpose them. You shouldn't hesitate.

RL: I manage.

IA: In the volume that I gave you, you will see that there are several *mélodies* that suit your voice and tessitura. *Marie Curie*, for example, is written for mezzo.

RL: I will take a look.

IA: There's a really beautiful one in the volume I put together for mezzo a couple years ago. It's long and difficult. It's this one. The story itself is wonderful, but very intense. For you, let's see, this one, "Lettre d'amour" (Love letter), "Cher Pierre" (Dear Pierre), and this one here, "Le Lion devenu vieux" (The Lion grown old). That would be a good one for you, really, really beautiful. And then, it is possible to transpose. You could also possibly sing it one time in English and then one time in French...

RL: Well, to add to my research, I want to record *Femmes en fables*, because there is no...

IA: *Femmes en fables* is the set that you're writing about in your dissertation, is that correct?

RL: Hopefully the work, and a chapter of the book, if I publish. But, I also want, as a project, to record *Les femmes en fables*. I need funding for the recording.

IA: I understand how difficult it can be to get funding. Last year, a singer friend of mine, Julia Kogan, and I produced a recording, and we are still waiting on the money in order to actually make the CD, because there simply wasn't the money to release it. Nowadays, the performers themselves are asked to pay! I don't like that approach.

RL: Are you still writing? Are you writing anything now?

IA: Oh yes! Quite recently I've been writing a lot of choral music, even for specific ensembles, lots of things this year. And then I did this: an opera based upon an extraordinary woman by the name of Olympe de Gouges, who lived during the time of the French Revolution. The opera has now been produced. It's tomorrow actually, or rather the day after tomorrow, June 16th. It's for children, or for older children in any case. It's the story of this wonderful woman who wrote *The Rights of Women* during the time of the French Revolution. She was an abolitionist, and an extraordinary woman. She was ultimately guillotined, however. She died on the scaffolds. Her name is Olympe de Gouges. That's her name, the name to search for if you're looking online for information about her. It's curious, because for many, many years, no one paid much attention to her really, despite the fact that she is a very important person. And so I wrote an opera for older kids, teenagers.

RL: You aren't a feminist, and yet this...

IA: No, but in this case we are talking about an historical figure. During the time of the French Revolution, to be a woman like Olympe was an incredibly difficult thing. She wrote many, many books, and is an incredible figure in history. No, I'm not *anti*-feminist, but I'm not going around waving a flag like so. I am not militant, not political... Well, that depends I suppose. I'm not going to claim that it's because I'm a woman that things don't work out. In my case, I wanted it to work. I was stubbornly determined, very obstinate, truly. And I'm known as a composer now, but really I only became a known quantity perhaps twenty years ago or so. It was such a truly long process, but I knew that I was right, so I kept going. I've always had music in me, I've always written, but it was almost under the radar. And nowadays, people know who I am, well, people in certain musical circles I mean. I'm not widely, widely known, but in the world of music and singing, people are familiar with my work. Certain choral singers are somewhat familiar with my music, but not throughout the entirety of France, only in certain parts, which makes sense. But French solo singers, on the other hand, are quite familiar with my music, because it's sung in juries and competitions. That I can confirm. With soloists and with children. A lot for children. I wrote an opera for children that has been translated into English. Let me check and see if I have the score for it, because I'm frequently giving them out... I'll take a look before you go.

Are you fairly familiar with world of childhood? Do you work with children at all?

RL: No, but I have a two year old daughter!

IA: Oh my gosh, she's so cute. Is she back in the U.S.?

RL: Yeah, she's home. It's hard to travel without her. I used to teach kids, but now I study.

IA My husband toured a lot all over the United States. And if I hadn't been so occupied with my family... My husband was offered a position, I think it was in Texas... We kind of thought, maybe not our speed. He was not interested. And in my case, I really love France. I'm among those French people who do love France. Many French people can be very critical of their country, my husband for example... But I really like France. It's true. My husband is very harsh toward France and the French people, and one absolutely can be, but there are also really beautiful things here as well. And it's also simply a very beautiful country.

IA: (*Speaking to interpreter, a French citizen living in the United States*) I've been to the United States several times over the years, to Washington, D.C. in particular, but in my case, I never really had the desire to stay very long-term. It's odd, but I don't know... It's a magnificent country, and my half-brother is half American.

RL: How long did you stay in the U.S.?

IA: It was a long time ago, 1970.

RL: I thought I might not go back! (laughter)

VB: I'm a bit fed up with the singing world here in France.

IA: Well, there's also Germany and England, and there is definitely a sizable American population that seems quite satisfied with living in Europe, with living in Paris. But yes, as far as voice teaching in France is concerned, there are some fantastic instructors, but it's certainly not always the case. That said, it's free. If the voice teacher isn't any good, you have an array of other disciplines, like those that I used to do.

VB: In the United States, nearly all music schools offer a MMus or a DMA/PhD if you want to pursue it. Here in France, on the other hand, there are only two schools, the National Conservatories of Music, where you can obtain those degrees.

IA: There is also the *Haute École de Lausanne* which is quite good as well. I refuse to be on jury panels, always listening so critically for the tiniest little thing. I don't like the mindset, so I don't do it.

RL: I know nothing about schools in France, so this is quite interesting. Oh! Another question that I wanted to ask about your method to compose. Is it at the piano, improvised: how do you write?

IA: I compose at the piano. It's my way of composing. And this is perhaps because I didn't formally study composition. I studied orchestration, and through the experience of working as a collaborative pianist, I know vocal repertoire very, very well. I taught myself on the job, so-to-speak. I didn't do coursework in composition specifically, and as such I'm a little bit in my own category. I am, as they say, a bit of a floating electron,

a bit marginal, maverick. I'm not a traditional composer. I didn't study counterpoint or fugue. Nope. Why? Because when I was a student, it was the era of the great Pierre Boulez, and the Vienna School, a kind of doctrinal, almost political decree about composition. It was impossible to do tonal music, to do music that was somewhat harmonic, melodic. It was like an illness. And I had a lot of friends who were in this field of composition studies, people I have remained friends with even, and who have absolutely continued to compose their entire lives. However, when I was 22, 23, 24 years old, I was frequently in attendance at their composition classes, because they needed me to play the pieces they were studying. I would observe these composition professors who would take a given piece of music in their hands, and declare, "Oh, no, no, no. No harmony. No melody". And because of these professors, it was impossible to study tonal composition.

RL: Where were these classes?

IA: A friend of mine asked me to come to the composition class to play the pieces at the Paris Conservatory. I said to myself, nope, this is not for me. My plan, what I wanted to do, was to write music for film, so I said to myself, given that I was very... well, I have no difficulty with composition, I always have musical ideas. So, for me, the plan was to write music for movies. I thought I could be good at it but it was simply too difficult to break into the industry. The film composers, the men, were like this (gesture?). They ran the show. So after that I said, well, ok, fine. But, I didn't study composition, and I remained the way I am, and it's for this reason that I compose at the piano, and this isn't necessarily the best approach for everybody. In the world of serious music, people can sometimes be critical of a composer who composes at the piano. You are not a good composer if you compose at the piano, but it's my way of working, because I need the piano. The good compositional ideas come to me when I have a good text, a good fable, good literature, and a piano. I can't explain this, because it's just not possible to explain it. You just see the word or the phrase, which creates a melody. But, above all I need to have text. Without text, my music... I never write instrumental music. I've only written two pieces, one for clarinet, and one little piano concerto, and it's not particularly interesting. Really! It's just not possible for me. My strength lies in putting words to music, and that's it. For little kids, teenagers, and for adults. *Voilà*, that's what I know how to do. And I do it very quickly as well, because I had a family life, and had no time. I had to work early in the morning, and then in the evenings. But then, when I was finished parenting, I was more free. But it was not easy to manage while I was parenting.

RL: Men don't have that problem.

IA: Yes, it's a woman thing indeed. But you know, a few months back I was working with a group of teenagers, and one of the boys asked, "Are you a feminist?". What do you think of the feminine coalition?" You know, we are lucky that we are women. We have the ability to make a baby, and men simply cannot, but then you pay in other areas, there are sacrifices. You can't have everything. The joy of having a child, raising it; we don't have the same liberty as a man, but we are lucky to be able to have babies. It's wonderful. It's a miracle. I never hear women say that these days. No one says it, which simply doesn't make sense. It really is a blessing. I really don't understand why we are

constantly saying, “I don’t have this, and I don’t have that”. We do have this! And that’s not nothing!

Although I don’t put myself in this category, when women turn fifty, and menopause sets in, women end up feeling very sad. Why? Because the possibility of having a baby is no longer there. But no one is talking about this fact. If I get hold of the microphone on the radio someday, I swear to you, I’m going to be the one to say it, because frankly it’s true. My daughter-in-law is now fifty years old. She has a wonderful son. But when she turned fifty, it was a total nightmare, and she didn’t want anyone to acknowledge, or even know about her birthday. She’d decided that her life as a woman was over, but that’s simply not true. I was surprised by her; she changed. She smiled much less when she turned fifty, but it’s absurd. Don’t get me wrong, I adore her, but this behavior surprised me. And yet it also made me reflect. I thought to myself, “I never experienced this, I barely even noticed this transitional moment pass me by. I changed, it happened, and something has ended. However, something else is starting. You’re a grandmother. You’re in a different stage in life. And whereas in the past, menopause caused hot flashes and chills, those medical issues are no longer a problem, because we’ve developed treatments to combat them, and you’re in good shape. It’s important to say these things, because we are lucky to get to be mothers. I mean, obviously not everyone is a mother. A friend of mine has never had children. She devoted her life to a career in oratorio singing. But she’s remained somehow a bit like a poorly adjusted teenager. These are choices, life choices. When I was a teenager, I used to say, “Why make a child when the world is full of children?” I carried on like that when I was fifteen, with my sort of Malthusian worldview. And then after I had my first child at 22 years old, I was very happy. And then also after I had my second child at 30 years old, but then too, I was very pleased.

RL: This is a good attitude.

IA: It’s a positive attitude, because life is long. But, it’s important to say these kinds of things aloud, because there’s far too much negative discourse in our society. It’s too negative, negative despite the general good fortune that we have. Good fortune that exists, obviously, despite the terrible things that you’re familiar with, and that we’ve experienced recently in France. When you leave in the morning now, you really aren’t sure you’re going to come back in the evening, in light of the attacks, the catastrophes. That’s the time we live in. Nevertheless, we live well, or at least we can say, people like you and me live well. And even those who are in a much more desperate state, they don’t die of hunger.

VB: They are less critical of their own country in the United States.

RL: Americans love their country. French people do say bad things about theirs.

IA: The only people who ever give up their seat for me on the metro are black people, and Muslims. In France, it’s really odd, for instance, I enjoy chatting with salespeople, and it’s foreign immigrants who are more pleasant than the French. France is really frustrating in that regard. It comes in large part from television, from the presenters, and a number of different television series. That show from last Saturday evening, “We’re

not in bed”, I wanted to strangle that man. And yet you know, this Requier man, outside of the show, he’s a sophisticated individual. He likes to read, and go to the theater, etc. He plays such a sinister game. They’re so disdainful. It’s an awful show. I hate it. Saturday evenings, I turn it on, and then five or ten minutes later, I’m turning it off.

But that’s definitely not all there is. Radio in France is really excellent. The shows and people on them are interesting. It’s about conversation, and letting people actually speak.

RL: This has been so helpful in thinking about this music, to know what you are thinking about this music. So great!

IA: How long are you staying in Paris?

Lansang: Until Sunday.

IA: Would you be interested in singing for me perhaps? Maybe tomorrow morning, if you have some time. Would you like to come by and take a look at the four *mélodies*? Would you prefer tomorrow or Friday? 10am on Thursday?

RL: I’m just a tourist, so really anytime.

IA: That way we can look at *Les quatre femmes*. Before tomorrow I will figure out if I composed “La Cigale et la fourmi” at some point prior, or at the same time as the others. And if you think of other things to ask me during the night...

RL: I have only *Les fables*.

IA: You have the sheet music.

RL: Yes, thanks so much!

IA: And tomorrow we will sing with some coffee.

Appendix B

Full Interview Transcripts: Caroline Shaw

July 17, 2018, Princeton, NJ

Rachael Lansang: How do you feel about that term, “woman composer,” or “female composer,” when people bring that up, how do you feel about it?

Caroline Shaw: I never talk about this in interviews, but this is an academic thing, so we’ll really talk about it. I instantly become very aware of how hard it was for women before me, but I usually bristle at the term. There’s never been a time when I’ve thought, “Oh, I’m so glad they said that!” I’ve never once felt that way, and that says something. I feel very sensitive, I understand why people do that. I listened to this BBC broadcast from yesterday. I wasn’t going to be in London, but I had this piece premiered, and on the broadcast, every time they talked about me, they talked about how the BBC is commissioning women composers, and they have this whole thing because they’ve never done it, but it feels like, could we just have done this without talking about it? Without patting ourselves on the back? And also it’s, I want to imagine a future where it’s a nonissue. Part of me feels like to imagine that future, I have to live that future. That’s why I usually try not to acknowledge it. At the same time, it feels disrespectful to women who came before me not to.

RL: I struggle with that, too. It’s a debate that’s raging right now. Well, do we acknowledge it and deal with it and fight for representation? Do we program things? If we don’t talk about it, my fear is that it feeds this, idea that things will just keep going the way they’re going, and concert programs at major companies stay the same.

CS: If we don’t have the conversation, then no programmers will ever feel embarrassed, in the way I think they sort of should be.

RL: Right! I guess you feel like I do, like it’s a balancing act. We need to embarrass the people who are ignoring women. At the same time, you don’t want to, take up the mantle of championing the women’s movement. Do you think of yourself that way?

CS: I try to champion it just by living it, just by doing it. But I’m also aware of the parallels with the lack of racial diversity in concert programming, it’s more of a problem than gender diversity. We have to talk about that as well, whenever we talk about gender.

RL: They go side by side.

CS: Yeah.

RL: Have you ever felt like you’ve run into [gender-related] problems? Composition programs tend to be boy’s clubs, did you ever feel that way?

CS: I think it’s definitely changed since I started. I felt that way a little bit in college, and in grad school, Yale, when I was mostly a violinist, and I think part of the reason I didn’t engage in the composition program was because it didn’t look like me. I didn’t know that

I could write the music I wanted to write and have it heard the way I wanted it to be heard. I remember being very conscious of it when I was younger. If I write harmony, and chords, and something that sounds, maybe, has emotion... if you write something that's sweet and has a sentimentality to it, if you're a woman, it's heard in the wrong way. If you're a man, it's heard as very sensitive. And I think this is really the case in pop music too. In the singer-songwriter world, if a guy sings in a high falsetto about love, it's so sweet. If a girl says the same thing with a guitar, it's, oh, "girl singer-songwriter." And I'm just as guilty of hearing things that way.

RL: I think maybe we're conditioned that way. It's interesting, what you're talking about. Particularly when we hear tessitura, someone singing high. I also wanted to ask you; I've been living in your sound world for a while, and I notice you don't deal in dissonance all that much.

CS: No, I think you save it because it's such a powerful thing.

RL: Is that the kind of thing you were concerned about? That you weren't writing ultra-modernist atonal electronic music?

CS: I think in college, I was aware of that, and so I just didn't show what I was writing, whereas when I came here to Princeton, they're so free. You can be a singer-songwriter, you can work in any kind of field and it's very open. I think that in new music, I do feel sometimes, still, if I write music that is mostly consonant, I become aware of it, not necessarily because of being unsure how people will hear it because of my gender, mostly, because if you don't have any dissonance, it's flaccid.

RL: Sure, that aesthetic goes back to the Baroque, which you reference a lot. The dissonance serves as...

CS: It's the edge of the color. What you want to hear is the resonance. The Baroque and the Renaissance, they're all about the resonance of people singing together. How do you make the most resonant chord? You have wide spacing on the bottom, and you put the third on the top, and it's pretty scientifically, the most resonant version of that thing.

I love dissonance because I feel like it cuts away and then it goes to this beautiful thing. Of course, for a long time in the twentieth century in western classical music, you couldn't write a triad, which is just bonkers to me.

RL: But obviously your music is appreciated, it's being performed a lot.

CS: I think I've realized that I don't know how my music's actually, if it's liked at all by a certain part of the new music community, I think it's been very successful among younger people and classical musicians who don't do a lot of new music, like who are looking for something that we can engage with, but I think there's probably a whole range of people who really dislike what I'm doing. Find it not rigorous.

RL: As a point of accessibility into the classical music world, but it's actually what's given you a lot of popularity to a broader audience. Don't you think?

CS: Yeah.

RL: I'm glad you're talking about resonance, because it happens in *performance*. Your scores are so interesting. What I've noticed is that the line between composition and performance is a little blurry.

CS: Yeah

RL: Particularly because you perform so much of your own stuff, and you write so much for Roomful of Teeth. You say in your program notes for *Partita*, you say that no one document is ultimately prescriptive.

CS: Oh, yeah! I put that in there.

RL: Can you explain what you mean?

CS: Part of this is technical. Just because it's on the page doesn't mean that it is absolute, and just because it's not on the page doesn't mean that there isn't intention, something doesn't exist. I feel like, mostly as a player, as a violinist, I've encountered this, where we have such you know, respect and awe for the music, for a Beethoven score or a Mozart score, but there's so much in there that they didn't put in there, so you have to make it your own. It clamps down on creativity as soon as you feel like, "I will only do exactly what's on the page, and that's the most important thing." You let that go, you let that be that be like a map, then you're much more creative and engaged as a performer, and you can make much more musical decisions like going for the resonance of the chord, like 'how do I make that sound?'"

RL: You're coming at it from the perspective of the performer, when you write?

CS: Definitely. How does it feel to play, or to sing?

RL: What does composition look like for you? When you are in the act of composing, where are you? Do you usually start at the violin, at the piano? Do you sing? What do you do?

CS: I was at the piano, but I rarely have access to a piano, so I keep everything that I need, in this backpack. I travel around. It's my laptop and a keyboard and I start with improvising harmony, because that feels like, the thing that moves me. Those are the hinges, those are the pillars. And then, if I can find something like that. I've also usually thought about a piece way longer than when I actually sit down to write it, which is usually right before the deadline. But if I prepare it enough for that point, then it's really fun and easy to do. If I haven't thought about the piece and I don't know what it's about, it's excruciating. But usually, designing what do I want to hear? Is there a moment, is there a texture that I want to hear, is that all the piece is? Does it lead to that? How does it lead to that? Does it start from it? And then, when I'm actually writing, I use Sibelius, which has pretty good MIDI playback, it's actually quite helpful, and I move things around constantly, and I cut and repeat things, I use the computer as a total compositional

tool, so that I never want to get stuck so close to the page that I've fallen in love with something that doesn't feel it sounding. The more that I can cut and move, and feel like, "how does this feel? How does it sound to me?" That's how I want to make the decision.

RL: You started as a violinist. Have you always been singing, too?

CS: I sang in Episcopal church choir growing up. And, I was very shy. My mom was a soprano, loves to sing, sings by herself all the time. Violin was my mask, I could put everything into that. And singing was really, well you know, it's a little more vulnerable.

RL: It's a little more personal.

CS: So personal. I sang in an a capella group in college, but I only sang the back-up parts, I never did a solo. And then, I started singing for choirs in grad school in New York, and just got more practice and got more comfortable, and then joined Roomful of Teeth, and then started writing for them.

RL: A lot of what I'm researching is "song," I'm very concerned with vocal music. Like this piece of yours, [*Cant voi l'aube*], it's weird old French. How do you set weird old French if you don't know weird old French?

CS: Oh yeah, weird old French! Partly, I don't care, it's an old language. Nobody speaks this. I know French, so I understand some of the rhythms. I know a woman who's a medieval French professor at Columbia and she taught her how to say it. But sometimes when you set something in another language, I want it to sound natural to sing and to speak. And Sofie [Anne-Sofie von Otter] was so intent on getting the right pronunciation, but I was like, it's old French, no one's going to know. Of course you want it to be right, you want it to feel intentional. But when it's in English, I don't want to over prescribe the rhythm of it, because you, as a singer, know that better than anyone, and also that's part of how you sing something.

RL: There's plenty of contemporary music that's impossible to sing!

CS: I'm always definitely conscious of vowels and leaping. I don't want to go up to this vowel, and this place.

RL: You also do a lot of non-texted vocalizations.

CS: I just love the sound of the voice. If you take the words away, you can control the color so much more. The vowel changes the color, changes the instrument so much.

RL: Is that why you use all the different vocal style is something like *Partita*?

CS: Yeah.

RL: And when did you get into throat singing?

CS: That's totally because of Roomful of Teeth. When it formed, Brad Wells, who founded it, his whole idea was to learn techniques from around the world. So we had all these different things floating around, and I didn't want it to be like, "oh, now I'm working in Tuvan throat singing." It's just, "this is a buzzy sound you make with your voice." Also, I'm interested in all the things we do every day when we speak. Like people say, oh, I can't sing. No, you literally just did it.

RL: That sounds like my mother!

CS: My dad is tone-deaf but, I call it contour singing, he just kind of goes up and down slightly, has a range of a third. If he's singing louder, I know he thinks he's singing higher, but it's really just louder.

RL: So, kind of a musical family?

CS: My mom. Sometimes, It's great to sing something with text, because you're communicating something, but if you're singing in a language that you don't speak, and that the audience doesn't speak, I'm really not sure how communicative that is, it's a whole other thing. And we're like, oh it's totally fine, but literally no one knows what anyone is saying, and I think that's weird. Whereas, in all other music, someone sings, and you know what they're saying, or they do a long melisma and it's just all about the melodic line, the word 'you' or something. I find if you take text away, it was never meant, like, 'oh, I'm gonna take text away,' it's just like, this is a cool sound of the voice.

RL: are your texts mostly commissioned, or do you pick texts?

CS: I've only done one where the text was actually commissioned, and I'm trying to think of the next thing to do.

RL: How do you find stuff?

CS: Just reading a ton. Although this one, (*This Might Also Be A Form of Dreaming*), Claudia Rankine, she was suggested to me, and this book in particular was suggested to me.

RL: Do you have a favorite piece, or are they like children?

CS: They're all different children, you can't have favorites. But this one is one that very few people know, and it's extremely personal.

RL: It feels like it. Okay, they're not *my* children: this is my favorite. I can't come from an analytical standpoint the first time I listen to something. I heard so many things that surprised me.

CS: This one might have been, this one was probably one of the first things I ever did where I was straight up setting somebody else's text, someone who's living. And also her text in particular, and this book in particular, is so unusual and her approach to poetry, is it prose? Is it poetry?

RL: Have you talked to her?

CS: No, I never have because I'm terrified.

RL: I understand, I'm scared to reach out to people.

CS: This person of all people.

RL: She must know that this exists.

CS: She does know that it exists. But I don't know if she's heard it. Peter Sellars was the one who put this together. For a while I thought I would just bury this piece because, I don't know if it's good, I don't know what it is, I don't know if I did the right thing, but I tried to do, was approach text in a different way with each of the movements.

RL: And it's long, you live in the sounds. You don't ever seem like you're in a rush. Do you feel like that?

CS: Other pieces, I'm way more rushed, but this one it doesn't feel that way.

RL: Do you think about pacing a lot?

CS: All the time. The form hopefully comes... I say I let the music write itself, which I know seems really vague, but sometimes it's way more important to do that. With this one, I decided the text, I actually laid out the whole text and the different divisions of the piece before I wrote the music. Which, I think, you have to write with text. If I'm writing a string, quartet, it's only music, so it's a totally different vibe.

RL: How often are you involved in premieres, rehearsals, things like that? Speaking to performers? Do you ever send things off that you don't have a hand in?

CS: Ideally, we have time together in the room. It's very rare that we don't have time together. But the premiere that happened just yesterday, they were traveling, it was a string quartet. They were traveling, I was traveling. I know them, we've met, we've done things before, but I was never in the room, so it was just emailing things back and forth. Whereas, with *So Percussion*, the one with Dawn Upshaw, that one was very much, a lot of it was constructed in the room. I would bring in certain things, almost like a theater director. It's a very different way of working; other pieces are more scripted out. With Renée [Fleming], it was, we met a couple times before, but she was also traveling, I was traveling. I didn't hear it until the concert.

RL: I'd be curious to hear a recording [of the songs commissioned for Fleming, "Aurora Borealis" and "Bed of Letters"]. I couldn't play it [from the score], I'm not a very good pianist!

CS: I don't have one, either. This one, I found this poet [Mary Jo Salter], I was at an artist residency and there was a whole library of poetry, which was a dream. I was like,

“What’s here?” You can tell, from reading a few pages, if this is something I respond to. And I found this woman, and her words. She’s collaborated with Fred Hersch, the jazz pianist. She’s thinking lyrically all the time anyway.

RL: Do you find yourself leaning towards the contemporary, with the poems?

CS: It’s like really old or really new. If they’re living, it’s way more complicated, because you have to deal with copyright. But, there’s so many things, like Emily Dickenson, because they’re short, and they’re public domain. And those are great. Maybe someday I’ll do something like that. I love the really older things because you can just make a totally different world out of it. Like the old medieval stuff. Or the old, *By and By*, like the old folk lyrics, and I just made something totally different out of them. But it’s fun to just reach out to a poet. Like, I’ve just emailed someone on the plane, I’ll say, “hey, I just found this. It’s really beautiful. Can we do something together?” And they’re often really, it’s just a nice way of learning about someone else. Find another person’s way of thinking.

RL: I mean, this is an art song. What’s different about this from your other works?

CS: Well, it was commission. It’s for a very particular singer, for a very particular concert, so this is like, I feel like every time, I like to write, it’s just like a fun game to play as a composer, like write for the particular performer, and for the particular audience or room. All of those things shape the piece, and maybe it’ll be a different, maybe someone else someday like the stamp of, what is Renée Fleming like? How does her voice sound? What is she like as a person? What does she like to sing? I didn’t know the other repertoire in the concert.

RL: Did you meet her first or after?

CS: I met her first. Originally she wanted to commission Tina Fey to write some lyrics, but Tina Fey was too busy.

RL: She’s got *Mean Girls* now.

CS: She’s doing her own thing.

RL: That’s so funny. I really want to hear you write a song set to Tina Fey lyrics.

CS: That would be so fun.

RL: I don’t know where I’m going to find the money to commission this, but I’ll find a way.

CS: I was looking through *Bossypants* to see if there was anything from the book.

RL: Nothing too lyrical?

CS: Nothing.

RL: This is the best idea I've heard in a long time.

CS: So, this was very much art song for famous singer in a Carnegie Hall recital.

RL: Did you feel restricted?

CS: I don't know, I really like it, I like how it sounds, what it is. It's so wildly different from what I wrote at the same time, which is the Dawn Upshaw, So Percussion thing, and it's so wildly different from what I produced for Kanye West. They're such wildly different worlds. I don't feel like it's not me. I feel good about all the decisions. But I wasn't gonna come out and have her do throat singing. I wasn't gonna make the piano not be a piano, and Renée not be Renée. There are plenty of composers who will make the piano do something else. I'm mostly interested in...I use the metaphor of carving something out of wood, imperfections, or the grain of the wood or stone, it's part of the piece itself, so, I'm not gonna make that piece of wood have a different grain. That's what that is. That's the wood you're using.

RL: I wanted to ask you about the Kanye stuff. That's stuff you're doing in a studio, you're not working off a score. What's the process? How did that come about?

CS: He came to a concert in LA about three years ago. I was there with Roomful of Teeth and we were doing *Partita*. There was a Philip Glass premiere on the second half. So I think he [West] had come with a friend to hear the Philip Glass. We met at intermission.

I made this other version of a previous song that he had done, that was sort of my way in. I didn't know his music very well, and then I worked on a couple of his albums. I was just talking to my dissertation advisor about how I don't know if I can still work with him, because he has sort of provocative political statements.

RL: Especially lately.

CS: I don't stand for that, but at the same time, I'm the only female producer in those rooms. There are occasionally women singers. For a while, he thought of me only as a singer. He'd say, oh, Caroline's gonna do those vocals, pretty much, what they take of my stuff is still the vocal things. But I've had to really prove myself, and now, I can play this synth line piece, I can turn this track into something else, because I'm a composer. I do that. I construct things. Not just a singer.

RL: Do you have a lot of experience with being in a production studio?

CS: I do now. Learning on the job, constantly learning, figuring things out really fast. And now I use Logic, like Garage Band, basically. Lately, I've been getting a sample, some sample, and it's like, what do you make out of this? And then I'll kind of make a framework for it, introduce new materials, construct something.

RL: That's an interesting dilemma, and it's sort of at the core of the things I think about, too.

CS: People sing his lyrics out loud. And some of those lyrics are not okay.

RL: But, you make a good point. There maybe should be a woman in the room?

CS: I just gotta do this to show that women can be producers. And then I'm going to be the best. I'm gonna get as good at it. The last album, we worked in Wyoming, and I've gotten to the point where, I think they respect me as a producer. But it took just being in the room, and staying. Even despite all this, if I'm not there, nobody is. And I'm gonna have to answer for a lot later on, for working with him. I'm sure in the classical world, I'm sure there's backlash, and there should be, I agree with them. I'm going to take responsibility for it. And yes, I did, I went on tour, and I listened to these lyrics, and I worked with somebody who said they liked Trump. I can't say that I didn't do that.

RL: But do you want to do more of that? Producing?

CS: Oh yes, it's so fun! I'm just a dorky classical violinist who somehow ended up in these worlds.

RL: One thing leads to another. What was your big break?

CS: *Partita*. Winning the Pulitzer. I was only a grad student here [at Princeton University].

RL: But you were writing before that. Did you ever have a commission before that?

CS: I think I wrote a duo for a couple of friends, but no.

RL: So, you just wrote it for Teeth and then submitted it?

CS: [laughter] Yes! I mean, one of those movements, I submitted to get into grad school here.

RL: It worked.

CS: And it worked! I thought that, I know what music I like, this feels really good, I want Roomful of Teeth to do it. We weren't getting any concerts. We had a few concerts a year. Classical programmers wouldn't really take us seriously. What's that weird group that does the throat singing and has the weird name? If I could get this piece and this group into some other ears and some other hands, maybe we could do something, and that's why I sent it in.

But the Kanye stuff is related to the Renée stuff, because they're so opposite, it's all happening at the same time. It's why I feel like, if I only try to do this one style that I do, if everything sounds like that, I don't feel like that's a way for me to learn and grow and understand music differently.

RL: Are you taking composition lessons? Do you work with anybody?

CS: No, I never really did that. Dan Trueman, who teaches here, is the person I feel I can talk to, and check in with. I like his music and the way he thinks about things. I didn't want to put myself in the position of having a teacher and having rules to follow, because I want to please. As a violinist, you have lessons, you're focused on music that's not yours, it's all about, how do I make that good, following rules and technique, whereas composition feel like something else that could happen, you have a little more freedom.

I think between Yale and Princeton, I was playing for dance classes, and that was a big change for me, playing for ballet and modern dance classes. Dancers think about music so differently, improvising music for their classes. Suddenly, music became this thing that's like, lives on the page, and is studied, and is technical. Functional, for someone who's moving in the world, and who feels things intuitively, and it's so beautiful to see how they respond.

RL: Have you ever written for dancers?

CS: It comes up every so often. I'm writing my first thing now in a while that's specifically for dance.

RL: Well, thank you, you've given me a lot to think about.

CS: Oh, sure! Still thinking in the frame of gender, there's something about being on the outside. I feel so much more freedom being on the outside. I don't feel like I'm part of this club, and this is what we do, and this is what's important to us, it's more like, well, I'm gonna do whatever I want to. It's really freeing. The Pulitzer big break was amazing, I hadn't really written that much new stuff, up to that point. I didn't have many expectations for myself. So it was a very sink-or-swim moment.

RL: I know you think about performers, but do you ever think consciously... I mean, you set a lot of women poets. Are you thinking consciously about it?

CS: I think sometimes I am. If there's a voice that hasn't been heard, that I think could be heard in a good way. I'm trying now to maybe, be conscious of what people are going to say out loud.

October 4, 2018, New York, NY

Caroline Shaw: I just worry about anything that I say about gender and classical music, because I never talk about it.

Rachael Lansang: Somebody asked me... can you do a Schenkerian analysis of her music? I was like, no, of course not. Of course I can't do that, it doesn't reduce.

CS: It's already is pretty reduced.

RL: What that does is place an emphasis on the importance of a complex harmonic [structure], that's what that kind of analysis does. Your music would absolutely fail by those criteria, and that's the point.

CS: That's the point.

RL: If we continue to use those models to judge that music, then this music is totally going to fail.

CS: But his point would probably be, yes, it would fail, and that's how the world is [laughter]. But that's still a worthy thing to think about. Where are your priorities, what's your value system? Is there a concept of value? I do believe, sometimes, that that piece is not as good as this other piece. But it's just like, a harmonic sensibility, but I'm not gonna sit there and analyze it. Sometimes, you feel like they are better. And I appreciate that someone feels so strongly. But I feel like his way of looking at it is a very narrow way of looking at it. I love entertaining that, what is that thought model, where is he coming from?

RL: [I think] Some of it is the importance of being as much like Beethoven as possible.

CS: It usually goes back to Beethoven.

RL: [I know people] who are like that, who believe that that is, in fact, what defines good music

CS: That was my whole college experience, instilling that value system in everybody.

RL: Kanye, he's been on a roll

CS: Oh, yeah.

RL: How much of this is an act? Do you know, just from knowing him?

CS: Oh, it's definitely not an act. It feels much more like performance art.

RL: But it's coming from someplace...

CS: Oh yes, quite real. His whole thing is, you should be able to say... like, if you have a thought, try saying that thought out loud, see how you feel, and then you can decide, how you feel about it. But there are some thoughts that he has, that he does not talk about out loud. I'm just waiting for the day, that he goes into some of that. There's way more. And he talks about suicide a lot, and murder, and things that people do think about a lot. People do think about murder and suicide, way more than they talk about it. But he's just so, he doesn't read books, doesn't read articles, so he has no credibility for any political pronouncements. But because it's this weird celebrity culture, you'll have millions of people who latch on. And it's so irresponsible, and that's the fault. We're all trash people

sometimes, most of us are trash, but you're just trying to be responsible. And you realize your biases.

RL: At least in public you would think.

CS: You would think. It makes me so angry, and then I get angry at people who are still working with him, posting pictures, and saying, "look, I'm doing this cool thing. If I work with him, it's very quietly, and I don't talk about it, it's just because I want to learn these things, and infiltrate from the inside.

RL: I've been thinking about these things since we last spoke. Anything that he says and does, could potentially impact your reputation more than it does his.

CS: That's a power issue...I take responsibility. I put myself in that position, and that's something I have to grapple with, too. I've chosen to still do this.

RL: I get why you did, and I probably would too. There's a lot of people on the internet who have become your fans through him.

CS: I feel like that number is way smaller than people like to think it is

RL: Those people are there.

CS: Oh really?

RL: It's benefiting you, then. If getting your music out there is the goal.

CS: I really think it's, I would still keep talking about this idea, of being a woman, and trying to fight for an identity that is beyond a singer. The person who can actually, the whole point is that they can do the one thing that the guys can't. The guys cannot have a female voice. That's the one thing they can't do, so they have to find a female singer to do that part. But otherwise, they can control production. There's an amazing sort of a singer, but rapper named 070 Shake, and she's doing a lot of stuff with them, and she's now the sort of "one female" and she's probably 19 or 20. I don't know if she's doing any actual production, but she's the embodiment of this thing. I'm not sure if I really think of myself as a producer, I still do things for them, but ultimately, I still feel like they just want sweet angelic vocals, which cannot be produced by any of the men. Even "Wolves" actually, that's not my voice, that's a total sample. The beginning of "Wolves" the song. They took the one thing that could be a real female person and actually just made... That case is particularly interesting to me. It goes back to trying to establish your identity as a producer-generator of ideas, rather than an embodiment of someone else's idea, which is the whole idea of a singer.

RL: What's the conversation there?

CS: A lot of people involved, and rarely are we all in one place. Never, actually. In the work on the two albums, it's slightly different each time. Sometimes it's just a few of us, like 3 or 4 people in the room. I usually just don't say very much because I don't feel

comfortable talking, but in the last time in Wyoming, he several times asked me very specifically, and there was another producer, Rick Rubin was also really good about it. I really thank both of them, for actually pushing towards this, whereas there were a couple of other producers who seemed to feel I'm a threat to their territory. It's very threatening, you feel like there's a territory situation. I don't want to be in anyone's space.

RL: It's funny that they feel threatened"

CS: Or maybe I'm interpreting that way, but it can be very competitive actually. This is why I don't do it very much. Producers are trying to get their stuff on the record. For fame, but also money. Like, it just directly correlates to how much money you get. And I just don't think about that. So mostly what I do is, I'll come spend time, and listen to the conversation, and see what's going on, and listen to how they're listening to something, and then they'll give me stems for a bit of a basic song. I prefer to go away, to a hotel room or somewhere else, where I've set up writing space, and really just work completely alone for like 24 hours, and then send them back something that's basically done. And Kanye also now [says] "you're just going to go back to your little room" he knows that I go back to a little room and do this thing, and he's like, "I don't know what you do, but why don't you go do that." And I thought it was really sweet, because I think he knows that I don't like to be sitting there in the room with everybody. I'm just blabbing, I don't know if this is related"

RL: Oh yes, I'm just trying to get a picture

CS: And the picture's a little bit different every time. Sometimes its like, the music is super loud, and people are just, everyone's feeling very positive. It's also about like, I feel like it's this thing of serving the king. It's like making him feel...

RL: I feel like with someone of that status, that must happen

CS: I'm just not that. And I'll smile, but...

RL: How much is written [or planned] when you start? Does he ever have ideas about lyrics?

CS: Lyrics come way later.

RL: It's just musical ideas first?

CS: It's just like a rhythmic idea or one chord progression or something, that's it. I'm never quite sure what they're after. They're just after one dope moment, that's what it is. Like, what's one super dope thing that can happen, and that's all they really want.

RL: And then build around it?

CS: Yeah. Which is actually cool, it's a cool way [of conceptualizing a song]. It's original hip hop, where you find one really great beat and that's enough. If the lyrics are good. But his lyrics are pretty trashy now.

RL: I would love to be a fly on that wall.

CS: Oh, that wall. I think I'm addicted to it, because I'm like, what's gonna happen next? I think that's why people still work with him, we're just so curious. My approach to it is, I still love doing it. I'm fascinated by it. If it was all I was doing, I would have a huge moral quandary about it. But I do so many things, I wrote so many pieces last year, it's just a sliver of what I did. And I don't talk about it very much. That's another way I try to combat moral quandaries. I don't tweet about it, I don't celebrate it.

On the Resonant Bodies Festival:

RL: It seems like your set was a little flexible, a little in-the-moment. Why did you end up doing things in the order that you did?

CS: I don't do a solo set very often. Ever. I think I did about a 12-minute one, maybe a year ago. So it does have this feeling of putting things together, and also, I like having a connection with the audience that's not just, "I'm here performing"

RL: I got the sense that it was a familiar audience

CS: Yeah, there were some familiar people out there. But a lot of people I didn't know, and I feel this pressure of people who haven't seen me perform. And if I'm gonna fall on my face, I'm gonna do it with a smile. And I never want to pose as a technical wizard, because it's definitely not what I do.

RL: But you had quite the setup, though.

CS: I know! I had some stuff. I've never done, being able to carry a song with nothing else. I think I liked setting it up with that quilting piece. A, just to take the idea of just this song that's taking music as an art form down to the craft of making a blanket out of whatever patterns you have, and the fun of that, and also the gift of making a quilt for someone. Just starting the set with "this isn't high art, this is just putting things together, and thinking about patterns in music and units of music rather than something that is the greatest thing that's ever been.

RL: Sure

CS: And then also, because of the technology, it's not something. .. If I want to construct a throughcomposed piece that develops, I do that in [other situations] ... this was much more about creating things, or textures, creating patterns, and letting them live for a while. And not controlling the time so much. I wish I had controlled the time a little bit better. There was one song, where I just could not figure out...and it went on so long. I was like, 'this is a really long song now.' Okay!

RL: 45 minutes is a pretty long set

CS: They said 30-45 minutes. I tried to really keep it close to 30. I was grateful to Lucy, that she asked me to do it.

RL: How did that come around?

CS: I had been talking with my manager about doing some kind of solo set for a couple of years. Even just doing a solo album, and I've never had the guts to do it.

RL: That would be awesome.

CS: I've just never put myself out there like that. So, [Resonant Bodies] was really a push for me. It was something I would really like to do, and it was a huge challenge. And I feel like I did it, but I have not worked that hard in a long time. Preparing something. It seemed very off-the-cuff, but it was deeply 'how is this gonna go?' I was terrified. That was the hardest thing I've ever had to do

RL: You said something like, 'if you're nervous, do a round.'

CS: If you're nervous, do a round, yeah. Just to break it up. You know, take the edge off the air. But the first night, the first two [performers], Paul and Helga, had this way of diffusing tension, creating tension and then like, popping it.

RL: With participation?

CS: With participation...I didn't do anything performance art-y. I think the most performance arty thing I did was lead a round.

RL: Almost everybody got the audience involved in some capacity

CS: It was an audience that, even if you only knew 10 people, although really you probably knew 30-40 people out there, it's still not the whole audience, but that's enough to get a vibe going. This kind of festival, it wasn't presented at Lincoln Center where "ticket buyers" go. This was a venue and a great venue in Brooklyn, that's known for artist's space, so there's a kind of familiarity.

RL: By and by, you did 2? you did looping for 2 parts, you don't really need all four [string parts]?

CS: For stars in my crown, it's really just verse/chorus structure, where the bass is loose pizzicato, which I sort of looped, but I think Andrew [Yee] ended up playing most of it. And then this little refrain "bum bum bum" which, in the quartet is nice. It reads a really differently, with the quartet it's like, a string quartet, playing together, but, weirdly alighted but also folksy. So I don't know if part of the piece is the interaction, a deconstructed folk model, and classical. That one actually worked pretty well, and Andrew played the refrain.

It's a question, what am I gonna do for 45 minutes in front of people. Everything's new in that configuration. One's called "rise" it was like the first movement of this piece that I

wrote for Justin Peck, the choreographer, so it has this single chord progression that repeats, and the little melody that currently has no words. I'll eventually probably add words to it. Its a nice melody.

It shows that as casual and as off-the-cuff as it seemed, it was very planned. And I knew that if I don't plan that much... you can't be off the cuff and be casual unless you've really planned. And I was terrified.

RL: Is it because it was a solo?

CS: Yes, and just being able to carry a song, carry a recital.

RL: You must have done solo recitals before in your life

CS: Yes, but that's like, play the violin, and there's music and I play it.

RL: So it's the voice thing. You're becoming known as a singer.

CS: Yeah, that's funny.

Appendix C

Full Interview Transcript: Pamela Z

November 19, 2018, via video call

Rachael Lansang: As a composer/performer/performance artist, your path seems more independent than most. A lot of composers work within the academy or get commissions through universities. In terms of being able to exist economically as a performance artist, what was a turning point for you, where did you find that path you've taken?

Pamela Z: In terms of the path that I've taken as a performer, as an artist, a person who's making music their life and their livelihood, that line is pretty blurry, because I came right out of the gate doing that. However, there was a major shift. The moment when I actually feel like I found my voice as an artist was when I started using electronics, basically digital delay and things like that to process my voice. It was really right at that moment that I began to find my voice as an artist. I had been doing much more conventional music, but I found at some point that I was much more interested in experimental music, and I was having a hard time bridging the gap between the kind of music I was performing and the kind of music I was actually listening to. I made lots of stabs at trying to compose work that was a little bit more avant-garde or more like the people whose work I found really interesting, and I couldn't do it, because I was sticking with the same habits, by using the same tools. When I discovered this idea of doing live processing, live sampling, live layering of my voice, it just completely changed the way that I was listening, and the way I was composing and the way I was structuring work. Kind of almost overnight, I just really changed the way that I was making work. As a result of that... I was living in Boulder, Colorado, because that's where I had gone to school, and I moved to San Francisco shortly after I began playing with electronics, because I knew that there was a much more progressive, artistically progressive culture here. I came here and just dove in with both feet to the sort of experimental music and performance scene, and just went from there. I guess what I'm trying to say is, your question was more like, how did I get started doing this as a profession? I actually started being a musician as a profession pretty much even before I graduated from school, I was already playing music in coffee houses and clubs in Boulder. And when I got out of school, I actually tried to teach, for like a year. At the same time I was doing music, and teachers were paid so poorly! I realized I was making better money as a musician than I was from teaching in the public schools, even though a lot of that money, a good percentage of it was from street performing, like busking. And it was still better money than I was being paid as a teacher. I said well, I don't really want to be a teacher, so I stopped, and went right into music. But, there was a weird shift in my career when I went from doing much more conventional songs to the kind of music that I do now. That sort of almost required me to move, because I had this following there that was much more interested in me continuing to do the same thing I had been doing.

RL: I've heard the story of you going to a Weather Report concert and hearing the digital delay used. Was it really as abrupt as all that? Did it really just flip a switch for you?

PZ: It was. I literally went out to a music store the next day and said to the guy at the

store, “this guy had this thing, and he could play and then it recorded what he played, and what is that?” and he said, “it’s a digital delay” and I said “I’ll take one.” And then my neighbors had to listen to me, because I never went to bed that night. I was just like, “oh my god!” when I figured out how I could do that with my voice.

RL: I’m interested in the applied learning of this technology. Was it trial and error, or did you get some kind of training as the computer software started to evolve?

PZ: It was many, many years between when I started working with electronics and when I started doing music on computers. When I first started doing it, it was the early 80’s, and I moved to San Francisco in the mid-80’s, in 1984. I think I got my first computer in ’88 or something like that? That was a little Mac Plus, or something like that, they were little all-in-one machines with a little nine-inch screen. When I first got it, I wasn’t doing any music on it, because I didn’t have any music software. Then, from the late 80’s into the 90’s, I had a lot of friends who were using MAX, there was no MSP yet. I’m not sure how familiar with these things you are.

RL: A bit, I’ve done a bit of background research. I sort of [play] with Pro Tools, I’ve seen MAX, but I don’t actively compose on it.

PZ: Well, MAX, when it started out, didn’t have the MSP component, MSP means “Max signal processing” so, in other words, you couldn’t do signal processing in MAX, you could do things like sequencing and synthesis, and I knew a lot of people who were doing that, but I had no interest in sequencing and synthesis, or very little interest. I was much more interested in signal processing, what I was doing with the digital delays and all that. I really wasn’t that interested in using MAX to make music, but I was interested in using the digital audio workstation type situation. At first, ProTools used to be prohibitively expensive, so I couldn’t afford ProTools, but I had these poor woman’s versions of ProTools, like there was something called...God, I can’t remember what the name of that software was now. But there was a piece of software that actually, basically imitated protools, but was much cheaper. It was hundreds instead of thousands of dollars, so I was using that. Then, I was using Sound Designer II, which was just a 2-track, stereo version from the same people who made ProTools, Digidesign. I moved into using ProTools once the price came down enough that I could afford it, but that was over a long period of years. I would say that, in the 90’s, I was firmly into doing things in the studio where I was recording and creating work using digital sound recording and editing tools. But I wasn’t using those in my live performances, in my live performances I was just using hard wire. Then, over the 90’s, they started to develop this MSP, and when I found out about that, I was like, okay, now I’m interested. In ’99 I had an artist residency in Japan. And while I was there, I had a couple of gigs where I had to travel back and forth. In one case, I had a gig in New Zealand, and had a stopover in Korea. I was always getting charged exorbitant amounts of money for overweight luggage, because I was carrying this whole rack of hardware processors. When I went through that airport in Korea, they actually made us get our things that were checked, and go through customs with them, and re-check them. And they charged me again! So then, I decided, this is it, I can’t be carrying this stuff any more. So when I got back to Tokyo, I had made some friends there, they were from the United States, and they were both MAX geeks. I said, you gotta help me start learning MAX, because I’m gonna try to see if it’s possible to port the

things I'm doing in this hardware over to software. It took many years, maybe four or five years, but over that period of time from the late 90's until the early to mid-2000's, I moved everything I was doing out of hardware into software and started using a computer. By this time, we started having laptops, because we didn't have them before that.

RL: I'm always fascinated by the economics of these situations that drive our artistic decisions. We have to exist in the world and figure these things out!

PZ: Exactly! People who were doing computer music were carrying big desktop computers around to gigs. My friend actually bought this case for his Mac that he would carry it in, like a road case. (Laughter).

RL: I want to ask you about one component of my research, which is about the relationship of music with text, poetic text.

PZ: Language is pretty central to what I do, but the way that I use it is often unconventional.

RL: I'm curious about that. The older pieces like, "Badagada" - I've tried to make out all of that text. What is it, and where did it come from?

PZ: A lot of the text in my pieces is either found text, or brief phrases that came to me in a poetic way, that don't refer to something specific. Like now, I have no idea. Badagada's so old, I wrote it in the 80's, but I have no idea what I was thinking about when I wrote the words. A lot of pieces that I perform solo are composed almost whole cloth by simply setting up my gear in my studio and improvising. Sometimes I'll be playing around and I'll do five minutes of something and I'll go, "oh, I think that's a piece." And then hopefully I had recording rolling and I can actually listen to what I did and learn it. If I didn't, I have to try really hard to quickly remember what it was I did and maybe record that, and play with it and learn it, and meld it into something. But, "Badagada," I'm quite certain was one of those things where I just started making those loops. The 'badagada' part is really like a non-language, and the only words in it are, "I know you're not in there, I know you're not in there. Where? I know they are out there. Out there. Where?"

RL: And this is something that just came to you?

PZ: I do not know what I was thinking about when I sang that, but I'm sure it was automatic writing. The same thing is true of some of the other pieces of my earlier works that were like, things like, there was a piece I used to do called "In Times of Old" and again, its just whatever happened to be on my mind at that time. Those words just kind of came out. But then there's this whole other way I work with language that has to do with found text. Much of the language in many of the pieces I perform comes from language that was not originally intended to be art when the person made it. It might have been alphabetized lists of something, or this one piece I used to do, I had a poster on my wall of a performance by a local experimental opera company, and I look around, sometimes, because I find that I like singing sort of invented language or non-language. What I don't like, or what I find difficult to do well, is just singing ooh's and aah's. It's much easier to

sing when you have syllables of some kind to articulate. I often will just look for language, just to have something to hang the sound on. I'm not terribly picky about it, I'm much more interested, in a way, in language that doesn't obviously deliver some literal idea. I'm much more interested in language that might seem a little ambiguous, or language that might seem, on analysis, to be almost, not meaningless, but kind of, abstract in what it refers to. I have pieces where I'm just singing numbers, and the numbers are the dates that were on a poster that was on my wall. Things like that. So, we're talking about the language in "Badagada." I feel like there's enough continuity in phrases that it delivers something that feels like it contains some kind of emotional, or intellectual thought pattern. But at the same time, it doesn't really give anybody any information. I kind of enjoy that, that combination of attributes. Language that draws you in, because you recognize that it's saying something, but it doesn't bend your mind and your will to some idea, because it doesn't really deliver a completely understandable message.

RL: What about French? You use French a lot, sometimes I hear you speak French.

PZ: (laughter). I hadn't thought about it that I use it a lot, but I like to insert other languages into my work. I have some pieces where there's multiple languages in the same thing. But I think French probably come up the most because it's the second language, second to English, it's the language that I have the most fluency in. I am by no means fluent in French, but I can actually hold my own in a conversation with somebody in French. I feel like my French diction is good. Actually, as I singer, I feel like my French, Italian, and German diction are all good, and Japanese. But in terms of my knowledge of those languages, I can't really hold my own for more than really small talk, or ordering food or something, other than French.

RL: Because I hear it from time to time, it made me think that maybe it was family heritage, or something like that?

PZ: It's so interesting, because in the same concert that I did in Resonant Bodies, I think it was true in Chicago that I shared an evening with Nathalie [Joachim]. She definitely has a background where French is used, but it's Haitian French. I have sisters who also studied French, and we used to like to practice, speaking French to each other a little bit, but I don't think any of my sisters have as much French as I have, because I just stuck with it more. I just love language, and I love the acquisition of language, I love the idea of language. As a matter of fact, right now, I'm thinking about a piece I've been slipping the idea of this piece into a lot of the proposals I've been writing lately, for fellowships and funding and things like that, to make a piece about simultaneity. But I was particularly thinking about simultaneous language. I'm really fascinated by simultaneous translation, and super impressed that there are people who actually have the mental capacity, to be listening to something in one language, and talking, simultaneously, in another. To me, that's like, whoa, you know? Kind of amazing. And I also just aesthetically love hearing the sound of different languages layered. One time I was at a conference, and it was an international conference, and it was some kind of an arts conference. They had those little transmitter/receiver things that people can wear in the conference, and have everything that's being said translated into whatever their language is. And if you sat in the audience near people who have that, it's just like when people

have their earbuds on the bus or whatever, some just have the volume up too loud, and you can hear the bleed, and I loved hearing that! At one point, I situated myself between two people, and I could hear the person talking, and then the two different languages being translated.

RL: Interesting!

PZ: I made a piece once, I was one of the artists who was part of the American presence at the Dakar Biennale, in Dakar, Senegal, and I was commissioned to make an installation work and give a performance there. The installation work that I made combined English and French and and Wolof, the language that's native to that part of Senegal. I actually hired a guy who's a Senegalese guy to come to my studio and translate for me the text that I was writing into Wolof and record phrases of it so I could layer it in the piece. And then I also had him coach me on my French diction. So I recorded the English and the French part, and I had him record. I recorded his voice doing the Wolof part. And then the piece was a six channel sound piece that had all three of those languages being spoken, sometimes simultaneously.

RL: Turning to the [Resonant Bodies] festival performances, the programs were similar, the one you did in Chicago and the one in New York, so how typical is that set for you when you do solo things? How do you make those programming decisions?

PZ: Right now, I'm in a really, kind of a tough spot, but certainly there are much worse problems that an artist could have, so I don't want to sound complaining. I have a lot of commissions right now, and it's been going on for a little while that I've been overwhelmed with projects that are very project-specific, that I have to compose a lot of music for on deadline. As a result of that, I haven't had time in recent years, to compose very much, new solo material, that I do for my solo concerts. I have one or two things that have come up over the last couple years, so I'm gradually slipping them in to my solo repertoire. Luckily, I've been doing a lot of touring. With the touring, I'm playing in places where there are a lot of people who have never heard me before. So then I don't feel so bad about playing the same program. But I've been giving kind of the same program for quite a while, with slight variations. I make the decisions about which things to do depending on a lot of things. One is whether or not I'm using video, because some of my works are made to have projected video. Some of them simply can't be done without it. For example, there's this piece I have called "Sixteen Actions" that has sixteen little, a matrix of my face being recorded live, and that piece just doesn't exist without video, because it's really an interactive video piece (29'43"). I don't do that piece if I'm playing in a venue that doesn't have video, or that I'm not able to do video. There's a few other pieces I have that I think are better with video than without. Most of the pieces in my solo concerts that use video can also be performed without the video, but a couple of them I think are better with it. So that's part of how I make the decision. I also make the decision based partially on, if I'm playing somewhere I've played recently before, I try to change it up and not do the exact same set. The duration that they want me to play for, I make decisions based on the lengths of the pieces, how many of them I can do, and which ones fit nicely together. Unhappily for me, I've been playing a lot of the same repertoire in my solo concerts, because I've been composing, I've had commissions, I've been composing string quartets, I've been composing scores for dance companies, and then

I've had a couple of times where I've applied to get funded to make large-scale performance works. A lot of those over the years that I've made, some of those pieces in my solo repertoire are excerpts from those larger works. In the past couple years, I've composed a string quartet for Bearish string quartet, I composed music for two different dance companies, I have made two different large-scale performance works, one called *Memory Trace*, and then last year, I made one called *Pascal's Triangle*, which was a collaboration. I have, right now, currently, five different commissions I have to get done, all within the last few months. So, this has been going on for a while, so as a result of that, I've been unable to make some new pieces. I made one new piece that you've probably heard, which is called *Other Rooms*, and I don't know if you recall that one, but it had samples of a man's voice.

RL: Yes, I do

PZ: I actually took those samples from this piece, *Memory Trace*, that I made a few years ago. I recorded a lot of different interviews with people about memory. I really liked his voice, and I had a performance at the Other Minds Festival in San Francisco earlier this year, and for that concert, I just was determined to do at least one new thing. Especially when I play in San Francisco or New York, I find it particularly awkward, if I'm just playing the same things that I've been playing, because I've already played that too many times now. That's my explanation for why I'm doing the same and similar programs everywhere I'm going these days. I'm really crossing my fingers that once I get through this latest strapped-in thing I'm in, making all these commissioned works, that I'm going to devote some time to just working on my solo repertoire and creating some new work for that.

RL: So, the results of these commissions, you said some of them are string quartets, but even the dance things, to what degree are you involved in the performance of these things? Are these for acoustic instruments and you're notating, or not?

PZ: It's all different. The chamber groups, the string quartet, and right now I have a commission for Eighth Blackbird, I just made a piece for Claire Chase, the flautist, and those kinds of pieces, when I'm commissioned by a chamber ensemble, I made something for Kronos Quartet a few years back, those are notated in standard music notation but also often include other elements, like a tape part or some electronics. In some cases, they ask me to write myself into the piece, and they want it to be for their ensemble plus me, like a voice and electronics part in there as well. So, the notation for those pieces, you see the score, you see whatever the parts for the instruments are. For example I just made a piece for the San Francisco Girls' Chorus. That was another thing that I was working on recently. That piece, it was for chorus and tape. And the tape part was a text collage, which is sometimes, a lot of times, something that gets inserted into my work.

RL: But a fixed tape?

PZ: Yes, fixed media in their case. So, that just rolls in... We still like to say 'tape' but it's not tape any more! But, in those pieces, often times there's a click track, because the string quartet will need to be in perfect time with the text collage. They end up with an

extra channel of audio that just goes to the earbuds, and they play to a click so that they can keep in time. In the case of the chorus, I was able to just put the click in the conductor's ear, and then the girls didn't need to be listening. So there's those kinds of pieces, they tend to be standard notation. You'll see the staves for whichever the instrumentation is, and then usually at the top, or sometimes on the bottom, I'll put a staff that's "tape" or "electronics" or whatever, and then it's notated in whatever way makes it clear to the players what is happening, and the timing of what's happening. When, the pieces that I write for just my solo voice and electronics, when I'm just on stage and I'm performing, almost none of those are notated. The exception is, if they're excerpts from a larger work. I made a couple multimedia chamber pieces, one was *Carbon Song Cycle*, and that was for voice, electronics, bassoon, viola, cello, and percussion, and video. Then, I made another one even more recently, called *Span*, all about bridges, and that was for voice and electronics, two brass, two strings, and a percussionist who mainly played gongs. In the case of those pieces, they're all completely notated, and usually, if I'm notating for everybody else, I usually tend to notate my part as well. Although, sometimes the notation of my part might be sketchy, because I'm in such a hurry to generate the scores for the people who need them, that I know that I know what I'm doing, so I'll make my part like, so I can look at it and say, "oh yeah, here's what I'm doing here," but I don't necessarily notate as cleanly every single sound I make. Sometimes I'll just notate, say, if there's a melody I sing, I'll notate that, and I'll put another staff for electronics and just write 'layering' or 'samples triggered' or whatever it is. That's kind of a hybrid kind of notation. Then, the works that I make for dance companies, more often than not, that work is fixed. What I deliver is recorded music that is played for their piece. But there are some exceptions, where the choreographer wants me in the performance. In, those cases, it's usually hybrid, like some of the sections of the piece are fixed, and there might be one or two sections when I come out and I'm physically on stage. That happened with two pieces I made recently. I made a piece for Stephan Koplowitz, and he made a dance work on the company AXIS Dance Company. They are a Bay area dance company. They're kind of famous, because they are one of the first, now I think there's several, but they were one of the first, I'm not sure what the proper term is, but they're mixed-ability. Some of the members are disabled. Some of the dancers are in wheelchairs, some of the dancers are amputees, and some of the dancers are typical. So that was a piece for them, and that took place in Yerba Buena Gardens, in San Francisco. That was challenging because I had to compose music, mostly a recorded score, for all these different sections that happened outdoors. The music had to be played on a sound system. They really struggled to find a sound system that could play the subtleties of the music in the outdoor setting, but they managed to do it. There were two sections in the piece where he wanted me to be visible and singing, so I sort of became part of it. Then I made a piece for, I did music for Sara Shelton Mann, who's another Bay Area choreographer. That was another score where most of it was fixed, although I actually sat on stage manipulating the sound, because I was sometimes layering other samples in, and there was one section where I stood up and walked around, and I was performing with my gesture controllers and sort of a duet with one of the dancers. But the question I think you had was about the notation, and in the case of those dance works, the notation is, I tend to only notate when I have other instruments that I want in there, who I hire as studio musicians to come in and record the parts. So, for example, in the piece I made for Stephan, there's a big finale that had cello, and reed instruments, and I hired a clarinetist and a cellist, and a violinist, I think. I brought them into the studio one at a

time and I notated just their part, basically. I wrote it out so they could hear, and I think I would just give them the passage that they're in. I have a little recording booth in here that I use for doing all my recording. So, I'd put them in my isolation booth and I'd give them the little score, and then I would press 'start' on ProTools, and then I would count them in.

RL: As a communication tool, then?

PZ: Yeah. I like scores, I find scores really interesting, but also, I think really, it's a lot of work, and challenging to generate a score sometimes. So, for that reason, if nothing else, I tend to only use notation when I need to communicate what's being played to other people besides myself.

RL: I want to ask you about doing excerpts. Taking something out of a big installation piece and putting it in a different context, does it change anything for you? Does it mean differently?

PZ: Usually, the pieces that I do excerpts from, they already were solo performance works. But they are a little more theatrical, usually on a stage, with a lighting design, set design, often multiple channels of projected image. I'm often moving around, going on and off stage, and manipulating things. But within the structure of that, there are little chunks of things that are kind of song-like. I mean, it's not musical theater, and it's not really exactly opera, but it has something in common with those forms in that there are sort of songs, or arias in a way, and then there's sort of, connective tissue, the glue that holds that all together. I feel like it's not unlike a person going on stage in a recital and singing, "Vissi d'arte" when not doing the full opera, *Tosca*. It's like that. So, in the recital, they might be standing in the curve of the piano, and somebody's playing a piano accompaniment, and they're just singing this opera aria. In the opera, they're in costume, they have lighting, there are other characters on the stage, they may be on their knees singing the song, and they've got a full orchestra in the pit. And probably a big giant set, or projected things, things like that. It's similar with my work; if I'm doing the entire *Memory Trace*... there's a lot of timing that is really tight and important, there's like 200 lighting cues, there's video cues, entrances and exits, and business that I'm performing when I'm not singing, maybe walking around physically doing something. Then, when I do a concert, there are these little things that are very song-like, that exist within that structure, and it's very easy to lift one of those out and just perform it. I might have a single channel of video, which might be the main part of whatever video was being used in the actual performance, might be shown, or I could just do them without the video, and there's no special lighting design, and I'm not in costume. Usually, my performance pieces, it's not a 'costume' in the way you see it in an opera, experimental theater piece or something like that. My costumes are usually not costumes per se. In a way, it's freeing these little songs from this very structured theatrical setting, and putting them in a recital-type situation.

RL: I've spoken with a lot of composers, performers, and a lot of them will call out electronic music as being an exclusionary space. As being a man-space, like sexist, or racist, saying it's just for the old white guys in the university.

PZ: Well, welcome to the world of all of this! How about being a conductor of an orchestra, or just being a member of many orchestras? I know what they're talking about, though.

RL: It's striking to me that so many people call out this particular aspect of experimental music, or art music, and then, here you are, complicating the narrative. Have you ever, felt like that was any kind of barrier?

PZ: I feel like I've been lucky in this way, because I feel like, against all of the odds, I do happen to be in that world. But, there was a time when I was very much alone in it. And I don't mean that it felt lonely to me, because I was just as connected to my white, male colleagues as I would have been to any other colleagues. But, it was typical when I first started doing this that, if I was, for example, on a compilation of electro-acoustic music or something like that, I would be the only woman and the only person of color on that compilation. I do remember one time where I got very annoyed and I think I behaved badly. I actually called the journalist in his home, because I happened to have his phone number, to complain. I was on a compilation, and it was a compilation that the label that had put out of people who were on that label. Everyone else was white men, except me. That's fine, I mean, that was par for the course at that time. But then the reviewer wrote this review about the record. He very thoughtfully, carefully went through each person, saying, "Paul Dresher performed his works that included repeating motifs..." and he described the work itself. "And then Carl Stone's composition was..." etc. Etc, described the work. He had clearly listened. Then, at the end of the article, his last thing was about me. It was one sentence, and it said, "Pamela Z contributed two songs in the Laurie Anderson mold." And I was just like, "Hang on a second! How come you didn't say, 'Paul Dresher did these repeating motifs in the Phillip Glass mold'? Why did you describe what he did rather than just comparing him to somebody else, and letting that be his entire [review]. And I looked at the whole review, and I was the only woman on here, and his only sentence about me was to compare me to Laurie Anderson. Which, I totally understand people making a comparison to Laurie Anderson, and I even find that a compliment.

RL: Sure, but that was it.

PZ: In the case of that particular review, I don't even think that the pieces that were on the record sounded alike. I think when people compare me to Laurie Anderson, it's more when I'm doing text pieces, where I'm talking or something. But these were pieces where I was singing, full-voice, which Laurie Anderson doesn't do! The sound of the music was not texturally, or timbrally, or content-wise related to her at all. So it was almost like he identified that I was female, and using electronics, and then checked that off like, oh, that goes in the Laurie Anderson pile. Which is what was typically done to women at that time. You either had to be, I would typically get either compared to Laurie, or I'd get compared to Meredith. Once in a while Diamonda [Galás]. Which woman pile does she go in? And once we've figured that out, we're done, you know? I was so angry that I actually called him up, it was terrible [laughter]. I feel like, I wasn't held back in my work, I wasn't held back, I don't feel like I wasn't invited to the table because of my gender or my race, or any demographic thing. But I do feel like I was regarded differently, especially by members of the press, or people who would describe me, and I

think that was something that a lot of women were probably plagued with. I remember in the early days when I first started playing music, I would get this thing where, one of two things would happen: I would walk into a venue where I was going to be performing, with all my gear, and an audience member who was there in advance, already seated, would look up at me and see me, and say, “oh, are you the musician? So what do you do, blues or reggae?”

RL: Ah!

PZ: That, or, another thing that would happen is, a guy would walk up while I’m patching together my cables, and say, “this is such a cool setup. Who did this for you?” or “who showed you how to do this?” In other words, there’s this assumption that I couldn’t have figured this out myself. I have to say that has definitely changed over the years. I no longer have people making those kinds of assumptions. I no longer have people incredulous that a woman could have set up her own gear.

RL: that probably comes also with time, not just the fact that it’s 2018, but also that as an artist, you’ve had all this time to become well-established, and gain confidence.

PZ: Those times, back when I was being asked that, I had confidence then, too. They weren’t asking me that because I didn’t look confident, they were asking me that because it was a man who couldn’t believe a woman could do this. But that has changed because people have seen that, yes, women do do this. And it’s not like there weren’t women doing electronic music from the very beginning, it’s just that they were under-represented and weren’t given credit for what they were doing. There were even electronic music duos that collaborated together on things, and then the man would get named. And we’re talking like the 50’s, early days, but now I think people are a little more enlightened and the playing field has leveled out a lot. I would say it’s still, if you go to one of these electronic music conferences or festivals, you’ll see that it’s a lot of white male music nerds. But, there’s women mixed into that now, and there are people of color mixed into that now, and there used to not be any. It used to be zero. Or there’d be one, me.

RL: Well, thank God.

PZ: I would say, for those people who are trying to call electronic music out on that, I challenge them to compare the roles...in the old days, they’d be absolutely right. It would be all these white guys in ties. They all wore ties in those days, funny, they wore white shirts and ties! So they all look like the same stereotype of a nerd, in a weird way. But now, I would challenge them to compare the current roles, if you looked over who is doing these things, who is on compilations, and whose work is being respected in the field of electronic music, compared to, in the field of, classical music in general, in the acoustic world. How many conductors? How many female conductors are there? I would argue the percentage of women doing electronic music is much higher than the percentage of women conducting orchestras.

RL: I think you’re probably right. Especially with older classical music genres, they probably have a harder time reaching the kind of parity that more recent genres have. So, now for the question that I ask everyone, and it’s an annoying question so I apologize in

advance. How often do you get called a ‘woman composer’ and how much do you hate it?

PZ: When I first started getting a little bit known, and I would get invited to things, I would frequently be invited... it’s not like people are calling me that or I’m getting listed that way as a type, but I’d get invited to play in festivals that would called things like, “women composers” or “women in new music” or “women in technology.” Or, the same thing, I got invited to be in an afro-futurism festival.

RL: do you consider yourself an afro-futurist?

PZ: No? It’s like, I honestly was like, I don’t even know what an afro-futurist is, I’ve been asked to be in this thing. I was constantly being invited to be in these programs that were programmed demographically. The programmers would talk about it like it was a genre. I was resistant at first, and I was also irritated. I’d be put on a compilation of “women in new music” or whatever. Until I realized, this is what is necessary to make that equalizing happen. Hopefully, at some point, it won’t be necessary any more. But it is part of the process, of making change. And I see now, after many years of this, that these changes have happened, and they’re probably due in part to... those women who are on those ‘women in electronic music’ festivals or compilations, would not have been represented anywhere, if not for that.

RL: It’s complicated

PZ: At one point, I had a California Arts Council Artist Residency, where you pair up with an organization and you can do something. So I had paired up with this gallery in San Francisco called The Lab. I created a workshop called SoundWORK. The director at the time was this woman named Laura Brun, and she said, ‘why don’t you make the workshop be for girls’ I was going to have it be for youth, and I was just like, I just don’t feel comfortable going into schools, telling people I’m going to be doing a workshop at The Lab, and you can’t do it because your gender’s the wrong gender. I wanted it to be available to any kid who wanted to do it. We decided we’d do it for at-risk youth. So, I went into these schools, and I talked it up and put out the little applications. Then, we got all the applications in, and out of the ten kids that signed up for it, only two of them were girls. Then, when we went around doing introductions on the first day of the workshop, and I asked each of them what they do and why they were interested in the workshop, when it got to the girls, they both said things like, “well, my boyfriend has a recording studio, and they always think I’m really stupid, they won’t let me touch the equipment.” And I was like, whoa! This is a serious problem, so then, okay, you’re right, I should do something. Then, the next time I did the workshop, I didn’t do it for girls, but I did it for women. And girls could do it to, but I did it for low-income women. And so, only women were in it. Then, all the participants were women, and I got stories from all of them about how they had really wanted to do this kind of stuff but they felt pushed or edged out. One of them said she had been in school and she tried to take the recording class, the boys in the class would not let her get near the gear, they would just edge her out. They would just say, “don’t worry your pretty head about it. We’ll do it.” So, then I was like, ok, now I understand the need for these kind of segregated, targeted things. So, for a couple of years I did it for low-income women, and then I opened it up to low-income residents of

the mission district. Then, it was mixed, not just women. But, it was interesting, because I had felt so rebellious against all these things that were “women”-this and “girls”-that, “POC-that” and I don’t want to get lumped into a group based on these things that I don’t think are nearly as essential to who I am as an artist as other characteristics. But then, I sort of learned my lesson about why those things exist and why they’re kind of necessary. I feel like they have, over the years, accomplished a lot of what their mission was. Or at least, gone a long way in changing things.

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