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Cloe Gentile

April 9, 2017

Larsen as a Lens: the Male Gaze and the Female Voice

by

Cloe Gentile

Lynn Wood Bertrand, PhD  
Adviser

Department of Music

Lynn Wood Bertrand, PhD  
Adviser

Bradley Howard, MM  
Committee Member

Abigail Santos-Villalobos, DMA  
Committee Member

Elva Gonzalez  
Committee Member, MA

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Cloe Gentile

Lynn Wood Bertrand, PhD

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## Abstract

### Larsen as a Lens: the Male Gaze and the Female Voice

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This paper extends Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze to art song repertoire. A feminist film theorist, Mulvey asserts that the normalization and omnipresence of masculine perspectives places women as objects of the male's attention, and in turn creates a male/female, subject/object, active/passive binary structure that manifests in and is replicated by cinema and literature. This paper will discuss the prevalence of the male gaze in art song, and the ways in which female composers and female poets have subverted its negative effects and created agency for the female voice: it is a vocal response to the very social structure that has made an attempt to silence the female voice.

Female composers are powerful catalysts for change, and this paper will consider Libby Larsen as a prime example of the subversive strength that lies in collaboration between female composer and poet. Larsen engages in a careful selection of texts by female poets that makes her art songs unique and significant developments in the reconstruction of male-dominated representations of women in music. This paper will provide varying levels of analysis on three groundbreaking songs and song cycles that illustrate a sovereign female mind and body, and present listeners with a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional view of the female and her experience in a way art song has rarely seen. These three works are Larsen's *The Birth Project*, *Center Field Girl*, and a more in-depth discussion of *De Toda la Eternidad* with text by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose life and work is given much attention in this paper.

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# **Larsen as a Lens: the Male Gaze and the Female Voice**

by Cloe Gentile

*“A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there’s no other way.”*

*- Hélène Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa”*



## Purpose & Synopsis

This paper extends the theory of the male gaze to art song repertoire. In cinema and literature, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey has found that “the image of woman has become conventionally accepted as very often meaning something other than herself.”<sup>1</sup> Her theory thus asserts that this has been accomplished through the normalization and omnipresence of masculine perspectives that place women as objects of the male’s attention, in turn creating a male/female, active/passive, subject/object binary structure.<sup>2</sup> The psychological implications of this dichotomous structure on the female psyche are vast, and studies have shown that women experience high levels of anxiety and self-consciousness that manifest in less frequent and more hesitant speech upon anticipation of a male gaze.<sup>3</sup> Studies have also shown that these negative effects are diminished through “body positive” imagery that portrays the female body as active, and also through the representation of the female gaze that gives voice to the female mind.<sup>4</sup> This paper will discuss the prevalence of the male gaze in art song, and the ways in which female composers and female poets have subverted its negative effects and created agency for the female voice: it is a vocal response to the very social structure that has made an attempt to silence the female voice.

Visibility for the works of female composers is important not only for their own representation, but also for reconstructing the ways in which women have been portrayed throughout classical vocal repertoire. Ultimately, agency for the female voice in art song is created by the interpretive force of the female composer and the ability of the female poet to

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and curiosity: cinema and the mind's eye* (London: BFI, 2013), 68.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema* (1999): 838.

<sup>3</sup> Tamar Saguy et al., "Interacting Like a Body: Objectification Can Lead Women to Narrow Their Presence in Social Interactions," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 2 (2010): 178.

<sup>4</sup> Melissa J. Grey et al., "Contrasting Objectification and Competence," *Journal of Media Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2016): 88-93.

reclaim language and semantic meaning for women. Out of this collaboration emerges a more authentic representation and reconstruction of the female voice and perspective. Authenticity of female expression thus blurs the active/passive binary that presents women as either submissive and beautiful, or active and transgressive.

It should be noted that this research does not set out to essentialize gender in art song poetry and composition, but rather is partly motivated by the notion that in discussing the sociological importance of the works of female composers and poets, women and their perspectives may be further woven into the music's historical fabric. It is the hope that as women are further incorporated into music history, gender may in fact become less essential. That being said, elements of this analysis may resemble somewhat essentialist arguments, but only insofar as they must be discussed as a result of the larger social structure regarding sex and gender in music. Because music does, indeed, abide within the dominant culture, the female composer thus occupies a token role in her field. However, inherent in her stature as a creative musical force is potential to disrupt her assigned role in the active/passive binary. Female composers thus become powerful catalysts for change, "for they are in a position to articulate a subversive doctrine and to be heard."<sup>5</sup>

This paper will consider Libby Larsen as a prime example of the subversive strength that lies in collaboration between female composer and poet. Larsen is a 21<sup>st</sup>-century composer known among feminist musicologists for her "championing of the female's voice and mind,"<sup>6</sup> as she oftentimes sets the words of female poets from various historical eras and geographic regions. A careful selection of texts by female poets makes her art songs unique and significant developments in the reconstruction of male-dominated representations of women in music. This

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<sup>5</sup> Dale Spender, *Man made language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 192.

<sup>6</sup> Cloe Gentile, Interview with Bonnie Pomfret. Personal Interview.

paper will provide varying levels of analysis on three groundbreaking songs and song cycles that illustrate a sovereign female mind and body. These three works, *The Birth Project*, *Center Field Girl*, and *De Toda la Eternidad*, take form from the words of ten notable female writers and activists, including Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, A.E. Stallings, Akiko Yosano, Phoebe Damrosch, Laura Groff, Heidi Pitlor, Cheryl Strayed, Gina Zucker, and Michelle Antonello Frisch, gifting listeners with a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional view of female experience in a way art song has rarely seen.

### **Theoretical Framework, [His]tory vs. Her Story**

Before discussing the subversive powers of female composers and poets, the opening section of this paper will detail some key points for understanding the history of male social control in music and in music history. As the result of male hegemony, music history, while sometimes treated as a complete record of significant musical figures and works, may be more rightfully examined as an “omission of stories.”<sup>7</sup> It becomes apparent that the people and works most commonly being given attention are European males, mostly as a result of the great man approach to record keeping. Music history, not dissimilar to other histories, thus engages the question of representation that expands into all vehicles for story-telling: cinema, art, prose, poetry, and song.

The omission of women’s voices and perspectives in music history should not be underestimated, as coerced silence of the female body and mind is a “prerequisite for male supremacy,”<sup>8</sup> most powerful in its subtlety. In music history, learners in turn have placed their faith in false records since “musical realities and cultural truths are presented inaccurately when

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<sup>7</sup> Julie C. Dunbar, *Women, music, culture: an introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Spender, 101.

women's perspectives are missing."<sup>9</sup> Musical eras must thus be redefined by the activity of their marginalized composers and musicians.

In order to begin to uncover our sisters lost voices, "We need to question dominant definitions of masculinity and to remember that scripts of violence and dominance are present in our culture, history, and music."<sup>10</sup> Anticipation of a male gaze has been repeatedly traced back to negative body image and behavior, diminished self-confidence and sexual function, reduced female social presence and speaking, the origins of eating disorders, and damage to women's formation of identity and psychological well-being.<sup>11</sup> The necessary realization is that the issue is much larger than a song, since the song is a sonic representation of a larger social framework of both the underrepresentation and misrepresentation that endangers women's musical and social livelihood. It does not mean the songs formed from our most genius musical men can no longer be revered, for that too would be a tragedy. It does mean that musical and textual metaphor that reduces woman to object should never be glanced over for the sake of the male genius.

In music history, there are three levels required for the critical esteem of a composer, "publication, performance, and analysis,"<sup>12</sup> each having been greatly limited for the woman composer. In publication, should a female composer's works be published, there is typically a period of neglect thereafter. Larry Todd calls this trend "the grand caesura," and describes it as "one of the greatest injustices of music history..." using, for example, Fanny Hensel's four hundred compositions in varying classical genres that were posthumously "neglected" for nearly a century and a half.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>10</sup> Bonnie Gordon, "Gender, Sexuality, and Early Music: Gender, Sexuality, and Early Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59, no. 2 (2006): 480.

<sup>11</sup> See Works Cited in Appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg, *Women and the nineteenth-century Lied* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 7.

<sup>13</sup> R. Larry. Todd, *Fanny Hensel: the other Mendelssohn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 357.

During Hensel's life, however, she endured less of a challenge with publication than many of her fellow female composers, but only because of her close relations and alliances with male composers. Many of Hensel's works were published under her brother's name and have only recently been credited wholly to her. This depicts another pattern in the publication of women's works; oftentimes they were published under the names of their close male contemporaries.

In the realm of hearing her works performed, Hensel was able to host salons where her works were performed within the confines of her home. Others were not so lucky, and Dr. Bonnie Pomfret, who commissioned one of the main works by Larsen to be discussed, remarks that "Josephine Lang did not hear a public performance of any of her pieces during her lifetime."<sup>14</sup> The works of female composers were rarely seen on the concert stage, and female composers were most often restricted to the song genre, as large-scale works were seen as men's work.

Music analysis has also misunderstood and undervalued the works of female composers, making it easier for music history to attribute the most praise to compositions by male composers. While it is possible for male composers to create music without strengthening the negative effects of the male gaze and the issue is not directly tied to the act of composing, the methods for composition have been fashioned in a way that allows for the male gaze to predominate.

This bias in music analysis has led women's work to be analyzed within a duplicitous structure. Kenny and Wollenberg comment on this bias, stating that "The Lied, which was an expression of direct sentiment, had been gendered feminine, had no sale when it was published

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<sup>14</sup> Cloe Gentile, Interview with Bonnie Pomfret. Personal Interview.

or programmed under a woman's name."<sup>15</sup> Their work must not be too feminine, as to suggest that it was written by a female, but must not be overtly masculine so as to blur her identity as a woman. This may be seen most easily in the case of Fanny Hensel. Take, for example, Hensel's *Schwanenlied*, which was critiqued as "aurally simple"<sup>16</sup> by audiences of the day and then neglected for the one hundred years it took music theorists to notice the ingenious nature of the subdued musical representation of the subject at hand: a mute swan. The resultant dismissal of women's musical perspectives and interpretations makes it nearly impossible to tell whether or not female composers generally employ a unique compositional aesthetic separate from male composers; it is known, however, that female composers have been handling text differently from their male counterparts since their earliest compositions.

Diary entries and journals provide art song repertoire with a history of female composers' choices in text setting, and thus give us insight into the "alternative rites of passage described in the memoirs, which create a counterpoint to those expected."<sup>17</sup> However, these written statements also raise questions about the ways in which male hegemonic standards for composition and women's roles were internalized. Due to a division of labor that more firmly kept women in the home, internalization of sexist ideology in the Romantic era permeated the minds of female composers. Even though these female composers exerted agency in the repertoire, their self-worth as composers was greatly shaped by the forces they resisted. Many who composed never truly believed they could; a common side effect of occupying a token role in one's chosen field.<sup>18</sup> Some of Clara Schumann's work may be exemplary of the female composer reconstructing textual imagery through music, but Clara herself is also known to have

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<sup>15</sup> Kenny and Wollenberg, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Dunbar, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Kenny and Wollenberg, 186.

<sup>18</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and women of the corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 236.

expressed doubtful sentiments, such as “a woman must not wish to compose - there never was one able to do it.”

The theoretical discourse around gender performance, gendered differences in speech, and language as a tool of patriarchal structure help explain the ways in which women and men internalize society in their formation of self and thus present themselves linguistically and musically. Social linguists Shari Kendall and Deborah Tannen find sociologist George Herbert Mead’s theory of play and game to be foundational to the discourse surrounding sex-segregated socialization. Mead’s theory posits that childhood play tends to occur in same-sex groups, thus causing women and men to develop different conversational habits during the formative years of childhood and adolescence. Kendall and Tannen use his theory for foundational purposes, but modify it by recognizing the widespread valorization of virility, and thus claiming that a sex-separated society innately negates the universality of symbols, as Mead had initially proposed. Connected to these ideas is Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which asserts that “individuals perform gender through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, language and other communicative practices that rely on symbolic representation become tied to the body, as together they form expressions of gender and are inherently shaped by social structure.

Butler, Kendall, and Tannen’s observations may be found in the operatic musical processes of the early Baroque. Musicologist Susan McClary applies the above theories to the origins of dramatic music in her analysis of Monteverdi’s early operas.<sup>20</sup> She posits that he faced the task of representing gender both on the stage and in music, in turn creating stereotypes out of gender performance and expression so that the drama may be understood. In these operas, should

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<sup>19</sup> Shari Kendall and Deborah Tannen, "Discourse and Gender," *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, (2015): 639-60.

<sup>20</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine endings: music, gender, and sexuality; with a new introduction*, 37.

a woman or young girl be in focus, the music would become more simple and consonant, so as to suggest innocence. Meanwhile, the men were given more harmonically interesting music, with more melodic contour and oftentimes heavier instrumentation, so as to suggest complexity and generate intrigue in the character. Early operas in turn essentialized gender on the opera stage and mirrored the developments occurring simultaneously in madrigals, both musically and textually. The passing down of these musical structures surrounding the representation of gender in music are part of the process that has made female composers capable of internalizing and bearing the male gaze, which “carries with it the power of action and of possession,”<sup>21</sup> and persistently calls for female self-regulation in daily life, as it is present in society, home, and family structures. In this capability lies a question of authenticity for the female performer who is then engulfed into yet another binary, the “split between spectacle and narrative,”<sup>22</sup> which both allows her to sing and forces her to keep silent.

Now understanding more thoroughly the ways in which male hegemony has hindered the female composer, we will examine the transhistorical genocide of women’s voices across Western epochs through the ubiquitous, yet consistently transformational, nature of the male gaze. Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the male gaze was dominant insofar as it appeared in sacred texts and mythology, in which it did exist, albeit more subtly than in subsequent eras. In sacred texts, the main issue was not a question of portrayal, but of representation. Women were typically not part of the clergy or the powers that decided which of the many versions of biblical stories and texts would be used in the Bible and referred to in worship. Their spiritual relationships and interpretations were thus largely underrepresented, and in their faith, it became custom to question “where is she? Is there any such thing as woman? At worst, many women wonder

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<sup>21</sup> Susan R. Bowers, "Medusa and the Female Gaze," *NWSA Journal* 2 2 (1990): 217.

<sup>22</sup> Mulvey, *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema* (1999), 838.



whether they even exist,”<sup>23</sup> proving to be especially true in early religious institutions. This is the one of the main reasons why the work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Baroque nun and poet, is so essential to this research, as will be discussed further in later sections of this paper.

In classical mythology, we find the early foundation of the stereotypical portrayal of vocal women as sexually transgressive in the Sirens’ song. Their voices were said to lure men to their deaths, which created an image of the female body and voice as dangerous forces to be overcome and conquered. Embedded in these legends is the subliminal message that “the most transgressive feminine figures are simultaneously the most vocal.”<sup>24</sup> In these epic poems and legends, a common method for taming the beast is voyeuristic heroism, in which the male subject exerts power over the female by reducing her to either an agglomeration or reduction of her body parts. This type of hedonism became a prevalent way of handling socially disruptive women in text.

The emergent musical approach to handling women that exhibit threatening levels of sexuality was to silence them. In McClary’s studies, she finds that to this day “one of the conventions governing representations of madwomen in most media is that they are silent.”<sup>25</sup> Up until the mid-twentieth century, it was believed that the cause of female madness was sexual excess. The link between the transgressive female voice and sexual madness contributed to the silencing of the female voice from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the period in history that Sophie Drinker dubs “the Dark of the Moon.”<sup>26</sup> The hypersexualization and silencing of the female

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<sup>23</sup> Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (1981): 43.

<sup>24</sup> Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, *Embodied voices: representing female vocality in Western culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>25</sup> McClary, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Sophie Drinker, *Music and women: the story of women in their relation to music* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City Univ. of New York, 1999).

voice is connected to the larger dehumanization of their minds and bodies.

Much of the social construction of sexuality and gender in music may be linked back to the eroticism present in the texts of the early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian madrigal,<sup>27</sup> from which notions of traditional gazing began. The texts automatically assumed a male speaker, indicating that the male voice had already become normalized. The speaker often spoke of sexual desire or unrequited love, and it was assumed that the woman was being insolent and causing the man to suffer. The rules for relationship between male and female gaze were also put in place, as an unreturned woman's gaze signified cruelty, and ignited rage in the male gazer. Women who were uninterested in male sexual advances were thus viewed as frigid and, though counterintuitive, the speaker would often take this as even greater reason to engage sexually with the woman. An example is the 16<sup>th</sup>-century madrigal *Madonna il Vostro petto è tutto ghiaccio* with music by Alessandro Striggio, whose poet is unknown:

Madonna, il vostro petto è tutto ghiaccio,  
E tutto foco il mio,  
per questo sol desio  
Riscaldar col mio foco il vostro ghiaccio,  
Stando petto con petto e bracci' a braccio;

O felice quel giorno, o felice ora,  
Che stand' in bracci' a voi, madonna, i' mora!

My lady, your breast is ice, and mine fire,  
For this reason alone I desire  
To melt your ice with my fire,  
By bringing your breast close to mine  
and holding you arm in arm:

O happy day, O happy hour,  
When in your arms, my lady, I die!<sup>28</sup>

With the male point of view as normative in the reading of texts, Renaissance and Baroque secular music performance practice began to use the female singing voice as entertainment. Female singers were told to improvise on the words of male poets for crowds of male audiences. This act positioned the female body and voice as blank vessels for disseminating, at times, severe sexual scenes. The scenes commonly depicted male frustration

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<sup>27</sup> McClary, 36.

<sup>28</sup> Alessandro Striggio and David S. Butchart, *Il primo libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (Middleton, WI: A-R Ed., 2006).

over a reluctant female, the triumph over her submission, and the physical pleasure he felt during the conquest. Women were then, for the academies of musical men, forcibly made to sing tales of rape that due to florid metaphor and euphemism were received as normal and praised as art.

In the Classical era, the representation of women turned from metaphor into mere mention, often mirroring madrigal text in that it detailed rape at times. One of these severe sexual scenes is shown in Beethoven's setting of Christian Felix Weisse's poem *Der Kuss*:

Ich war bei Chloen ganz allein,  
Und küssen wollt' ich sie.  
Jedoch sie sprach, sie würde schrein,  
Es sei vergebne Müh!

Ich wagt' es doch und küßte sie,  
Trotz ihrer Gegenwehr.  
Und schrie sie nicht? Jawohl, sie schrie --  
Doch lange hinterher.

I was alone with Chloe,  
and wanted to kiss her;  
but she said  
that she would scream -  
it would be a futile attempt.

Yet I dared, and kissed her  
despite her resistance.  
And did she not scream?  
Oh yes, she did;  
but not until long afterward.<sup>29</sup>

This text has been discussed since then as a “humorous tale,” as it was most likely intended at the time. It is important to note, however, that the humor is not only directed solely toward men, but executed in spite of women. The gaze in this song moves past traditional objectification of the female body, and active molestation of both body and mind. The gaze, while it does imply perspective, also implies action and audience reception. If this song were told from a female's point of view, one can imagine that it would no longer be titled “The Kiss,” but “The Rape,” if the silence surrounding sexual assault had not first impinged on her expressivity.

Romantic-era poems that were set to music, on the other hand, tended to subdue the imminent danger posed by a woman in classical mythology. Instead, women were presented as

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<sup>29</sup> Emily Ezust, “Ich war bei Chloen ganz allein (tr. I was alone with Chloe),” *The LiederNet Archive: Texts and Translations to Lieder, mélodies, canzoni, and other classical vocal music*, [http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=17318](http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=17318).

pure and fair virgins akin to “fragments of flowers, holes, honey, and lawns.”<sup>30</sup> At first glance, this may be seen as complimentary of female beauty, but endemic metamorphosis of the female body into flower in turn only makes her passive and easier to pluck. The issue is, in fact, the same as that of the earlier eras in that flowers and lawns do not speak, and are thus at the mercy of the male acting force. Romantic tradition thus transformed the female body into metaphor and situated a woman’s worth within male notions of purity, as the flowers women were made analogous to, were often white and untouched. This placed emphasis on Euro-centric female beauty, and rid the female character of an active emotional and physical state.

Romantic tradition “did not simply objectify women, it also subjected them, portraying women as subject in order to appropriate the feminine for male subjectivity.”<sup>31</sup> A noteworthy example of this tendency is the cycle by Robert Schumann with text by Adelbert von Chamisso, *Frauenliebe und- Leben*. The focus of the cycle that is allegedly about “A Woman’s Life and Love” is not the woman, but instead the man or child, that completes her. It becomes clear in the first few songs that von Chamisso’s objective in adopting the female voice is not to give life to female experience, but rather to glorify the male focus of her life, and thus the male becomes subject. Von Chamisso’s texts exhibit such intense praise that they resemble sacred texts and words of devotion and servitude similar to that between say a nun and God, yet are intended to express a submissive female desire for servitude to her husband, as in the fourth song, “Du Ring an meinem Finger”:

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<sup>30</sup> Gordon, 480.

<sup>31</sup> Kenny and Wollenberg, 236.

Ich [werd']<sup>4</sup> ihm dienen, ihm leben,  
 Ihm angehören ganz,  
 Hin selber mich geben und finden  
 Verklärt mich in seinem Glanz.

I want to serve him, live for him,  
 belong to him entire,  
 Give myself and find myself  
 transfigured in his radiance.<sup>32</sup>

After marriage, the cycle explores motherhood, which will prove to be especially significant in contrast to the analysis of Libby Larsen's *The Birth Project* later in this paper. Von Chamisso's female character reflects in song seven, "an meinem Herzen, an meinem Brust":

Nur die da säugt, nur die da liebt  
 Das Kind, dem sie die Nahrung giebt;

Only she that suckles, only she that loves  
 the child, to whom she gives nourishment;

Nur eine Mutter weiß allein,  
 Was lieben heißt und glücklich sein.

Only a mother knows alone  
 what it is to love and be happy.

O, wie bedaur' ich doch den Mann,  
 Der Mutterglück nicht fühlen kann!

O how I pity then the man  
 who cannot feel a mother's joy!<sup>33</sup>

The speaker feels pity for men in their incapacities surrounding childbirth, disregarding their ability for heavy involvement as father figures, and further associating both motherhood and mother-child connection to childbirth. Embedded in these stanzas is the notion that women are fulfilled and made whole through motherhood and marriage, and not in their own being.

The cycle that notoriously claims to tell of a woman's life, does not in fact give sovereignty to genuine female emotion or experience, but instead details the ways in which woman is bound to her husband, who is her "source of joyfulness" until she gives birth to her child. The speaker's humility oftentimes crosses into flagrant self-degradation, and the cycle depicts a woman who is simultaneously the subject of the storyline, and yet the object of male fantasy. This cycle reveals the dominant notions of women's perceived purpose in life, and is a prime example of the ways in which male impersonation of the female voice is harmful to the

<sup>32</sup> Emily Ezust, "Du Ring an meinem Finger (tr. Thou ring on my finger)," *The LiederNet Archive: Texts and Translations to Lieder, mélodies, canzoni, and other classical vocal music*, [http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=3756](http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=3756).

<sup>33</sup> Emily Ezust, "An meinem Herzen, an meiner Brust (tr. At my heart, at my breast)," *The LiederNet Archive: Texts and Translations to Lieder, mélodies, canzoni, and other classical vocal music*, [http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=3728](http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=3728).

ways in which women may perceive their roles in society through their representation, or lack thereof, in art and culture.

Having recognized that the restrictions on female composers, as a result of the same hegemonic structure that crafted the male gaze, were vastly limiting, it is also equally, if not more, important to bring to light the various forms that female agency has taken in Western music. There is musical evidence that even during the “Dark of the Moon,”<sup>34</sup> troubairitz and geishas of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries chose to detract from the words that detailed a man’s sexual triumph over a reluctant conquest and embellish indications of warmth and love in early madrigal text. These female singers cultivated their own vocal authenticity and sovereignty through their improvisatory performances, inherently making them subversive composers in their own right.

In the Baroque era, Barbara Strozzi was a composer and singer for the predominantly-male Accademia degli Unisoni, and became the one of the most prolific composers of the secular cantata. In fact, she turned the secular cantata into a medium for revolutionizing the embodiment of the soprano voice, having written almost exclusively for the female voice, a rarity in the time of boy’s choirs and castrati. Her father, Giulio Strozzi, who was a librettist for Cavalli and Monteverdi, wrote many of the texts she employed in her earlier works. After his death, it is suspected that Barbara Strozzi wrote many of her own texts, as the themes that arose in her later texts dealt more heavily with captivity and lamentation. Since the male voice had been normalized as the speaker, we can only infer that perhaps Strozzi was reflecting on her own confinement to the academy by her father, but had to lament for herself and her female characters through the eyes of the male gaze, as in Strozzi’s *Lagrime mie* from her Opus 7:

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<sup>34</sup> Drinker, 127.

*Lagrimie mie, che vi trattenete?*

Perchè non isfogate il fier dolore  
che mi togliel' respire e opprime il core?

Lidia, che tant' adoro  
perch' un guardo pietoso, ahi mi donò,  
il paterno rigor l' imprigionò.  
Tra due mura rinchiusa  
sta la bella innocente  
dove giunger non può raggio di sole;  
e quel che più mi duole  
ed accrese al mio mal tormenti e pene,  
è che per mia cagione  
provi male il mio bene.

E voi, lumi dolenti, non piangete?  
Lagrimie mie, a che vi trattenete?

Lidia, ahimè, veggo mancarmi  
l' idol mio che tanto adoro;  
sta colei tra duri marmi,  
per cui spiro e pur non moro.

Se la morte m' è gradita,  
or che son privo di spene  
deh, toglietemi la vita  
(ve ne prego), aspre mie pene.

Ma ben m' accorgo che per  
tormentarmi maggiormente la sorte  
mi nega anco la morte.

Se dunque è vero, ò Dio,  
che sol del pianto mio  
il rio destino hà sete.  
lagrimie mie, che vi trattenete?

Text by Pietro Dolfino (?)<sup>35</sup>

*Tears of mine, why do you hold back?*

Why don't you wash away the pain  
That stops my breath and oppresses my  
heart?

Lydia, whom I adore,  
Because, alas, she gave me a pitying glance,  
Has been imprisoned by her severe father.  
The innocent girl is locked up within walls  
Which the sun's rays cannot penetrate,  
And what pains me most,  
And increases my torment,  
Is that I am the cause of my beloved's  
suffering.

And you, grieving eyes, are not weeping!  
Tears of mine, why do you hold back?

Alas, how I miss my Lidia, my idol,  
Whom I so adore!  
She remains locked within marble walls  
And I sigh and yet do not die!

If death might be granted to me  
now that I am without hope,  
oh take my life already,  
(I pray you to) my sharp pains!

But well I realise that destiny to torment me  
more denies me even death.

If therefore it I true, oh God, that only for  
my plaint evil destiny thists:  
Tears of mine, why do you hold back?

There is thus much guesswork that Strozzi attributed many of her own writings to male contemporaries, and that is why many of her texts appear with a famous poet's name and then a question mark. Even if Strozzi had been the lyricist historians speculate she was, women were still largely unable to redefine semantic meaning in language at this time, let alone use their own poetry in their songs.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Strozzi, *Lagrimie mie: a lament for soprano and continuo*, Richmond, England: Green Man Press, 2008.

There is largely a lack of information on female composers in the classical era, and there is an eerie disappearance of works by female composers for a hundred year span after the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century. Even through this historical abyss for women in music, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century arose as a significant era for female composers. A prime illustration of compositional agency in the Romantic era is the comparison between Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt's settings of the German myth of the Lorelei, an extension of Greek mythology's Siren. In Caitlin Miller's analysis of the two works, she concludes that Schumann detached the melody from the tumultuous piano part in order to give the Lorelei sovereignty from the text that portrayed her as evil.<sup>36</sup> Liszt, on the other hand, by aligning the music with the omniscient narrative voice, places the focus on the Lorelei's looks and the danger she represents for the sailor who must conquer her. It can be argued here, as in many cases, that the problem here lies more heavily with the myth itself and not with the composer, but there is power in the interpretation of the female composer to reverse the harmful images of women, and Schumann made use of it. By harnessing their creative force, "It is clear that women need no longer be subject to the effects of myths and representations created by men."<sup>37</sup>

The Romantic era was also a time of significant development for female agency in text setting: the use of song as women's alternative and self-narrative. Female involvement in art song progressed from the ability of female composers to maneuver problematic texts with improvisatory and compositional mechanisms to being able to choose the texts they would set for their relatability. For example, Ethel Smyth and Fanny Hensel are both known for using their songs as "self-narrative" or a musical form of "memoir,"<sup>38</sup> and journaling about the connections

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<sup>36</sup> Kenny and Wollenberg, 236.

<sup>37</sup> Liz Yorke, *Impertinent voices: subversive strategies in contemporary women's poetry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 205.

<sup>38</sup> Kenny and Wollenberg, 185.



between their chosen texts and significant life events. Smyth did this in her *Lieder und Balladen*, op. 3, and *Lieder*, op. 4, depicting tales of love and lost love, what it must have been like to be a tomboy in the woods and forests, and an infatuation with the night. Hensel also used her songs and chose her texts in an autobiographical manner, as in the aforementioned *Schwanenlied*, perhaps having connected with the character of the mute swan, as she faced many artistic limitation's and restriction's by the Mendelssohn patriarch.

Female composers of the Romantic era also became distinct collaborative forces in deconstructing the male/female composer binary. This deconstruction can be seen in Fanny Hensel and Felix Mendelssohn's collective efforts toward the composition of their *Op. 9*. Through both Hensel's setting of masculine lieder and Mendelssohn's adaptation to her interpretative genius, they did not erase femininity from her feminine genius or submit Mendelssohn's work to masculine necessity, but instead blurred the boundaries both of them were allowed to cross.

In Hensel's 3 songs from *Op. 9*, she sets texts by three notable Romantic poets, Johann Gustav Droysen, Heinrich Heine, and Ludwig Uhland, with each text straying away from conventional depictions of love and women in their own way. Droysen's text is told by an ambiguous speaker who hears music in the distance and feels no emotional response, pondering what it is that has filled the soul in its place. Heine's text depicts an inner dialogue after heartbreak. The speaker personifies nature and appeals to the flowers, nightingales, and stars for solace, but ultimately arrives at the conclusion that none can know the pain that has torn apart their heart. Interestingly, the gender of the speaker in Heine's setting, if not automatically assumed male, is ambiguous and allows for the female singer, for whom Hensel wrote the song, to more readily adapt a characterization from her own perspective.

Ludwig Uhland's "Die Nonne," follows a nun as she walks through the garden and tells the Mother Mary of her heartache. Mother Mary, finding her to be pure in love, grants her death so she may reside with her beloved angels. There is an element of Uhland's text that portrays a typical longing for death by a woman who has been doomed to live without her male counterpart, but Hensel may have felt compelled to set the text because of the Mother-daughter relationship it depicts, as the nun answers to Mother Mary and not God or Jesus, or some other superior male figure. Hensel adds even more depth to the initial frailty with which he paints the nun; through Hensel's setting, die nonne becomes even stronger in her femininity:

Im stillen Klostergarten  
Eine bleiche Jungfrau ging.  
Der Mond beschien sie trübe,  
An ihrer Wimper hing  
Die Träne zarter Liebe.

"O wohl mir, daß gestorben  
Der treue Buhle mein!  
Ich darf ihn wieder lieben:  
Er wird ein Engel sein,  
Und Engel darf ich lieben."

Sie trat mit zagem Schritte  
Wohl zum [Mariabild]1;  
Es stand im lichten Scheine,  
Es sah so muttermild  
Herunter auf die Reine.

Sie sank zu seinen Füßen,  
Sah auf mit Himmelsruh',  
Bis ihre Augenlider  
Im Tode fielen zu:  
Ihr Schleier wallte nieder.

In the quiet cloister-garden  
A pale maiden walked.  
The moon shone on her dully,  
On her eyelash hung the tear  
Of tender love.

"Oh good for me,  
That dead is my faithful suitor!  
I may him again love!  
He will become an angel,  
And an angel may I love."

She trod with timid steps  
Right up to the statue of Mary;  
It stood in the bright light,  
It looked so motherly-kind  
Down upon the pure one.

She sank to its feet,  
Looked up at it with heavenly peace  
Until her eyelids  
In death fell closed:  
Her veil fell away.<sup>39</sup>

Though Hensel is adapting the words of Ludwig Uhland, which have been scrutinized for presenting a pale and pathetic maiden, her music may present fragility as a purity of intention that grants the nun access to another world by the judgment of another female character. In this

<sup>39</sup> Emily Ezust, "Im stillen Klostergarten (tr. The Nun)," *The LiederNet Archive: Texts and Translations to Lieder, mélodies, canzoni, and other classical vocal music*, [http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=70375](http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=70375).

case, “The task is not whether to repeat but how to repeat or indeed, to repeat,”<sup>40</sup> which Hensel had the choice to do in collaboration with her brother and male poets. If music is language, then the female composer rewrites linguistic tools of the patriarchy simply by being.

While Hensel was autonomous in her ability to choose texts, she was largely unable to choose texts by female poets that would represent female experience from female perspective. Thus, there is power in composition, and in the ability of the female to compose, but their doing so alone cannot, and did not, rid the repertoire of archetypal falsehoods and destructive binaries found in male-dominated language and texts. Butler then asks, what must we do “...if the symbolic always reasserts its hegemony?”<sup>41</sup> The laws of language and symbolic interactionism have explained that language reproduces social differences because of its social uses.<sup>42</sup> The answer is then to rewrite language itself through its most symbolic form: poetry. A disparity in symbols and semantic meaning between gender circles calls for representation and visibility for the works of female poets. Bourdieu asserts “communication presupposes a medium; poetry not as much, it elicits emotion, and varies according to individual connotation.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, female poets can reclaim and redefine language and their own portrayals within art as a symbolic structure. The need to reclaim semantic meaning for women is foundational to the necessity for the female poet to combine with the female composer in order to allow for the sovereign embodiment of the female voice.

It has been a fairly recent undertaking of feminist scholars to “expose the depth and profundity of these images in the Western psyche and discover how to reconstruct images of

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<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and symbolic power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), 54.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

women that represent their complexity and power.”<sup>44</sup> All women do not fit the role of the pure white flower; they are much more human and much more colorful. In this way women are “learning to see clearly for themselves, thus reconstructing traditional male images of women.”<sup>45</sup> Feminist scholars have begun to do so by countering the omnipresence of the male gaze with the female gaze. In a nutshell, this is the argument for the power of the female composer. Regardless of the work left to be done on false consciousness scholarship, female composers have exerted agency in rather restrictive times, and are nonetheless using and representing an interpretative female life force that in some capacity has been more intensely shaped by her womanhood than male supervision.

The musical settings of female composers reshape women as object in art song text, and also begin to rectify the erasure of role models for budding female composers, a type of social support that is important for success of marginalized groups in various fields. It should be noted, as well, that the deconstruction of the pervasive male/female, active/passive dichotomy is ultimately intended to free both women and men from a universally harmful patriarchal binary. The silencing of women’s voices was harmful to men during the Dark of the Moon, as the lower-class Italian boy was made subject to castration in perhaps the most severe pairing of classical music, sexism, and classism. It has long been forbidden for men to portray femininity, but when man is allowed to sing the female perspective as woman has sung his, “adopting the feminine allows male to feel, think, and say things that are otherwise forbidden.”<sup>46</sup> In this way, feminist theory and music share a primary purpose: to allow all people to feel, think, and say forbidden things, so that one day we may all speak the sovereign body with the voice.

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<sup>44</sup> Bowers, 217.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>46</sup> Thaïs E. Morgan, *Men writing the feminine: literature, theory, and the question of genders* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 7.

Sophie Drinker labels the 20<sup>th</sup>-century as the “new moon” for women and music,<sup>47</sup> as it is the first era of art song to allow for the use of texts by female poets, widely and openly. Contemporary classical vocal repertoire has experienced more women actively engaging in reconstruction of linguistic symbolism than ever before. It takes both poet and composer to create agency for the female voice; “As Ruth Solie has demonstrated, the canonical song cycle features a heroic male protagonist, who then functions as a musico-poetic metaphor for the heroic male composer.”<sup>48</sup> The combined agency in the female composer’s musical interpretation and the female poet’s repossession of language creates new images and representations of women in art song that allow for the self-governing female voice and body to sing “unheard-of songs.”

### **Stories of ‘Unheard-of Songs’<sup>49</sup>**

Composer Libby Larsen’s works allow for stories to be told by active female characters that depict unique and previously unsung experiences. For example, before Larsen’s *The Birth Project*, art song had yet to fully and holistically engage with one of the most important events for all sexes: birth. This cycle, setting the texts of A.E. Stallings, Akiko Yosano, Phoebe Damrosch, Laura Groff, Heidi Pitlor, Cheryl Strayed, and Gina Zucker, has a total of eleven songs, and I will discuss important themes in songs one, three, four, five, eight, and ten. The cycle follows women through the discovery that they are pregnant, the ultrasound, and individualized experiences with birth, such as a pregnancy that extends past the due date, twins, postpartum depression and isolation, overcoming lonesomeness, and four unique stories about labor itself.

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<sup>47</sup> Drinker, 185.

<sup>48</sup> Kenny and Wollenberg, 171.

<sup>49</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 876.

In Larsen's opinion "you're not just translating text [into music], you're translating the entire experience,"<sup>50</sup> which is made evident in the text-music relationships present in *The Birth Project*. Her methods for composition entail repetition and internalization of the text in order to then place it in its most inborn musical setting. Larsen has stated that in order for this process to be meaningful, she must connect with the text deeply. She has thus proven more inclined to set texts written by women. In an interview with Christy Wisuthseriwong, Larsen states "There is a distancing 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 my texts written by women, the language is subjective and very personal."<sup>51</sup>

*The Birth Project* is revolutionary in that there has never before been a song cycle by mothers about mothers. However, the topic of motherhood has not gone untouched. Men have written of their mothers, and most frequent portrayals dichotomously depict mothers as either wicked or loving. We saw a depiction of full-fledged jubilant motherhood with Schumann's setting of *Frauenliebe und -Leben*. Meanwhile, early Madrigal texts were resplendent with examples of frustrated Oedipal relations with mothers, painting mothers as cruel and unrelenting, as in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century madrigal *Se nel bel Vostro viso* set to music by Alessandro Striggio:

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<sup>50</sup> Nancy Malitz, "Song of the Monster," *Opera News* (May 1990): 47.

<sup>51</sup> Christy Wisuthseriwong, "Libby Larsen's *De toda la eternidad*: Creating Infinity through the words of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz," DMA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (2011): 18.

Se nel bel vostro viso  
 L'alta madre d'Amor serba sua imago,  
 Ani l'istessa voi Venere siete,  
 Perché non mi porgete,  
 Et for'al mio desir contento e pago,  
 Dolce materno un bacio in un bel riso?  
 O io non son Cupido  
 Come sparget' il grido,  
 O voi madre crudel al vostro figlio.

Ahi, empia sorte e ria!  
 Con complessi, con basci in mille modi  
 Stringon le matre i figli, e me la mia  
 Con catene e con nodi stringe solo,  
 Né ancor prende consiglio  
 Volger ver me pietosa il suo bel ciglio.

If in your beautiful face  
 The lofty mother of Love keeps her image,  
 Indeed, if you yourself are Venus,  
 Why do you not offer me,  
 And it would be comfort and satisfaction for my desire,  
 A sweet maternal kiss with a lovely smile?  
 O, I am not Cupid  
 As you proclaim,  
 O, you mother cruel to your own son.

Ah, merciless and evil fate!  
 With embraces, with kisses in a thousand ways  
 Mothers bid their sons to them, and mine  
 Binds me only with chains and bonds,  
 Nor does she yet take advice  
 To turn toward me mercifully her beautiful brow.<sup>52</sup>

As was made clear in the earlier analysis of *Frauenliebe und- Leben*, Linguist Thais E. Morgan ascertains that “impersonation of a feminine voice must conform to clichés.”<sup>53</sup> Such clichés have become the dominant imagery around women’s bodies and minds, and contribute to a larger silence around motherhood. In order to resist the image of wickedness, women have endured the profound spectra of emotion surrounding child birth and motherhood largely unprepared, but “there is a completely different set of meanings when motherhood is named by women.”<sup>54</sup> In this way, when women reclaim semantic meanings, they engage in very “serious politics.”<sup>55</sup> To speak and sing the body is to regain control of the body, making *The Birth Project* important not only in revolutionizing the portrayals of women in art song, but also in effecting change in the discourse surrounding motherhood and the silence around women’s bodies.

These stories of birth are told by two sopranos and a piano, allowing dialogue between two women about a matter that is primitively female (Example 1). The cycle begins with the first soprano granting emotional recognition and validation to the second soprano, who has just found

<sup>52</sup> Luzzasco Luzzaschi, *Complete Unaccompanied Madrigals: Part 4*, ed. Anthony Newcomb (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Morgan, 91.

<sup>54</sup> Spender, 58.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

out she is pregnant. She introduces the second soprano by referencing the “full-throated aria” upon which the second soprano will enter.

**Example 1:** Libby Larsen, *The Birth Project*, “The Song Rehearsal,” mm. 20-22<sup>56</sup>

20

1 ag - ined stage in full throat - ed ar - i - a,

2 Ah

*sempre p*

The second soprano part is a vocalize on “ah,” that accompanies the narrative voice of the first soprano, who sings of and gives voice to the second soprano’s experience, set to Stallings’ lines:

The singer bearing down on her, mouth wide,  
is the angel trumpeting the news so strange,  
so ordinary, it’s difficult to believe and  
greater than anything she could conceive.

This soprano duet is innovative in that the first soprano serves to present the female voice and gaze, and this female gaze becomes the narrative voice that moves the story forward.

The subsequent two songs are then told by a single voice, at times alternating between the first and second soprano but always as solos, not as a duet. The third song revolves around an empowering realization a mother has at an ultrasound that her body is now “the room the future owns, the darkness where it grows its bones.” This expands the dominant binary view of motherhood, and presents women instead as bearers of the future, and the darkness of their bodies as a wondrous instrument of creation.

<sup>56</sup> Libby Larsen, “Works & Store,” *LibbyLarsen.com*, <https://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=241>. All examples may be found here.



Song four contrasts the sentiment of female creativity and expansiveness with an account of child birth at its most agonizing. This song also begins as the most humorous account of labor, but becomes a jarring depiction of bodily pain and discomfort. Larsen sets the lines of Laura Groff with a melodic contour that sits at the female passagio of F5, F#5, G5, and G#5 for five measures:

On the seventh day past my due date,  
I went for a three mile run,  
Which was more like a three mile waddle...

Word of caution:  
Having a full stomach during labor can contribute to heartburn,  
Nausea and vomiting and cause further complications if anesthesia is necessary.

That night was long and sweaty  
My husband's face was taut with fear.  
Pain everywhere  
I did not know how to fight something that was everywhere ...

Most singers would agree that this is apt placement of the line, as the passagio is normally where the brunt of vocal frustration, tension, and pain lies. In this way, Larsen draws a direct parallel between the female soprano voice and the text. This clever coupling is reinstated when the word “pain” recurs in song ten (Example 2), and becomes a thematic and functional use of the passagio throughout the cycle.

**Example 2:** Libby Larsen, *The Birth Project*, “Due Date,” mm. 90-92

The musical score for Example 2 shows measures 90-92. The vocal line (treble clef) begins with the lyrics "taut with fear. Pain - n eh". The word "Pain" is marked with a fermata. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a consistent triplet pattern in both the right and left hands. The right hand has a melodic line with triplets, and the left hand has a bass line with triplets. A dynamic marking of *sub.p* (subito piano) is present in the piano part.

The end of song four utilizes Lauren Groff's lines to transition from the experience of labor into an intense account of loneliness and postpartum depression in the fifth song. With text provided by Akiko Yosano, a Japanese poet and activist, song five recalls the initial dialogue between sopranos. Larsen places both voices in the middle of the staff and uses one voice as a drone on Japanese text, alternating between A4 and Ab4 throughout the piece (Example 3a). The other voice begins in unison with the first soprano, but gradually ascends throughout the song to a peak Eb5, as if she does not have the energy to go back to the painful passagio of the prior song (Example 3b). This second voice begins her lament by singing Yosano's lines:

truth  
 birth  
 child  
 labor  
 I am alone.  
 I am alone.  
 I am alone.  
 Alone is what I am.

Song five employs chant-like monotony and creates rhythmic emphasis through augmentation. For Larsen, chant serves as a mechanism for discovering the "internal rhythm of the words,"<sup>57</sup> and also for invoking the spirituality and religiosity that taught her how to "dwell in mystical communication with God."<sup>58</sup> The use of chant in this particular piece may point to Larsen's perspective on the experience: even though a new mother may feel alone and cry out, she is never without love, God or the comfort of some Higher Power. Thus, this song provides both a connection between the female body and a larger creative force, while also existing as a lament for the female body and mind as it endures the traumatic aspect of child birth. The heartbreaking dialogue between the two sopranos made up of eerie vocalisms serves to debunk the idealism surrounding birth and postpartum depression, and breaks down the emotional

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<sup>57</sup> Ken Smith, "Floating free," *Choir & Organ* 9, no. 6 (November/December 2001): 43.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

passivity and simplicity oftentimes ascribed to female foci in texts.

**Example 3:** Libby Larsen, *The Birth Project*, “Alone”

(a) Ab vs. A drones, mm. 5

(b) A vs. Eb chant, mm. 24-25

5 *mf*  
1 Me o-mi-hi-ra-i-te  
2 *mf*  
eyes wide o-pen

24  
1 Jin-tsu Jin-tsu Wa-ta-shi-wa-hi-to-ri  
2  
I am a-lone. I am a-

This cycle exposes the trauma and post-trauma that is endured by mothers throughout the experience of childbirth, but it also gives voice to the empowerment that may be gained through the childbirth process. Text by Phoebe Damrosch’s is used in song eight:

My body was made for birthing.  
My baby knew how to come out ...  
My first son was born on a Saturday night,  
and Monday morning I was feeling ecstatic  
and capable of anything ...  
I was a superhero.

Her words contrast the fear and loneliness of previous songs in order to show holistic female emotion and experience in all stages of motherhood. Women are depicted as both jubilant and anxious mothers, powerful bearers of the future, warriors enduring postpartum depression, emotionally active and deeply complex beings. Example 4 shows Damrosch’s text in action, as the voice ends the piece a cappella, whole in itself:

**Example 4:** Libby Larsen, *The Birth Project*, “Superhero (Birth One),” mm. 30-33

Another one of Larsen’s songs, *Center Field Girl*, provides art song repertoire with a display of the active female body. The text is a poem by flautist and poet Michele Antonello Frisch’s and follows her childhood memories about playing baseball with her brothers. Frisch is the daughter of a Major League Baseball player, and from an early age it was known that she possessed her father’s same skill and passion for the sport. While *The Birth Project* portrays women in active emotional states in response to the physical experience of motherhood, *Center Field Girl* presents a change in Frisch’s physical activity in response to sex-segregated socialization and its unique impact on young female athletes. In this text, she vividly remembers playing baseball with her brother and his friends before they implemented a no-girls-allowed policy. Her story is not an uncommon experience for many young girls, and in many cases, it is a girl’s first bout with discrimination based on sex.

This song is written for voice, flute, and piano with notable call and response dialogue between the voice and flute as they share the beginning nostalgia and gradual transition into excitement and exhilaration over a childhood baseball game. The flute sets the stage with soft descending lines to place the singer into her distant past, while the vocal line shifts to a more Disney-inspired, Ionian mode that paints the text “to when I was a little girl” (Example 5).

**Example 5:** Libby Larsen, *Center Field Girl*, mm. 8-11

8

still to when I was a lit-tle girl

Fl. *p*

*pp* *p*

The dreamlike music ensues as she becomes immersed in her memory. Following the first description of action, “running reaching for a long deep drive,” the flute makes its first quick, ascending line that then colors the growing excitement over the next page or so, as is shown in Example 6 below:

**Example 6:** Libby Larsen, *Center Field Girl*, mm. 20-25

20  $\text{♩} = 80-84$

run - ning — reach - ing for a long —

*murmuring*

*mf* *f*

23

deep — drive

The musical climax of this song coincides with the most active parts of the story, where

Frisch describes the way her legs would float and lunge while her gloved hand cut through the air and caught the ball! This active moment in the text is joined by a Picardy third in the vocal line, as Frisch is swept up in her passion for baseball once again.

*Center Field Girl* promotes body positive imagery in art song text:

I chased down the years month layers  
of days hours to time full and still  
to when I was a little girl nine  
years old at the baseball field near

my house with my brothers I'm  
in center field dust at noon hot  
hungry alert shouts of boys  
and the lone silent

girl running reaching for a long  
deep drive lunging ballet of limbs  
gloved hand out legs afloat slap!  
of ball to leather breaks the silence

exhilaration in the raised glove  
ball trapped inside from the cloud up  
in the blue I see feel it again  
was anything ever so pure

or true  
as that racing leaping catch  
triumphant skip home for lunch gloved hand  
at my side?

Studies have shown that images of women using their bodies actively and independently in activities such as running and singing are shown to reduce the negative effects of an objectifying male gaze.<sup>59</sup> This piece entralls us in the story of a young girl proving herself successful at something in which she had previously been told she would not succeed. Her body is active and her mind agile, and thus the male gaze is subverted.

While this song is a powerful illustration of female agency and empowerment, it also presents an intense and irrefutable sense of loss. Ultimately, the listener looks back with Frisch at what used to be, and what is no longer. The issue for Frisch was not necessarily that she did not

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<sup>59</sup> Grey et al., 88-93.

want to play with girls, but that if she did not play with boys, she could not play at all. This is the result of societal gender roles that urge men and discourage women from participating in activities that allow them to exhibit strength and take action. Females in several career paths, especially the female composer, poet, and musician, disproportionately endure this type of scenario. Ultimately, a barrier to the participation of girls in sports and composition is a ban on the encouragement girls receive to do so and the social acceptability should they engage regardless, but it does not ban a girl's will to play, write, or create; it may, however, change their perspectives on the world around them that then translate into their works. This insight allows for a better understanding of the transhistorical quality of women and their relationship with music and the reason why the words of Frisch and Sor Juana struck a chord with Larsen even though they were born centuries apart: "they write with frustration."<sup>60</sup>

### **Sor Juana's Story**

While *The Birth Project* reconstructs the representations of female emotion and motherhood in art song repertoire, and *Center Field Girl* portrays women as active physical beings, *De Toda la Eternidad* represents a female perspective on love and God, and gives the female image in art song a voice in both sacred text and love poetry. *De Toda la Eternidad* was commissioned by Dr. Bonnie Pomfret, professor of voice at Emory University at the time, due to a deep desire to have Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's voice and words made eternal through music. This cycle is composed of five songs written for soprano and piano to the text of five of Sor Juana's poems, two sacred and three secular.

Sor Juana was a nun in the Baroque era and is widely considered the mother of Mexican feminism. She was a self-taught scholar and poet and was widely active in deconstructing gender

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<sup>60</sup> Cloe Gentile. Interview with Susan Wollenberg. Personal Interview. Oxford, England, June 10, 2016.

norms and stigma surrounding sexual orientation simply through the life she led. “Sor Juana used her art and her religion to be a scholar, and her scholarship to create a piece of literary art that defends the sacredness of poetry (as well as of women).”<sup>61</sup> Her famous response to Sor Filotea, who insisted that Sor Juana’s womanhood meant she should cease to engage in learning and writing, is one of the first accounts of the fight for women’s rights to an education. The piece is a lengthy discussion of poetic structure as it originates from that which is sacred, and the importance of representation for the wellbeing of the female psyche. An important excerpt follows from her essay:

...[T]he many books that I have read have not failed to help me, both in sacred as well as secular letters. For there I see a Deborah issuing laws, military as well as political, and governing the people among whom there were so many learned men. I see the exceedingly knowledgeable Queen of Sheba, so learned she dares to test the wisdom of the wisest of all wide men with riddles, without being rebuked for it; indeed, on this very account she is to become judge of the unbelievers. I see so many and such significant women: some adorned with the gift of prophecy, like an Abigail; others, of persuasion, like Esther; others of piety, like Rahab; others, of perseverance, like Anna the mother of Samuel; and others, infinitely more, with other kinds of qualities and virtues.

The Church attracted many ambitious women of Sor Juana’s day, since it was one of the only ways for a woman to escape forced marriage and acquire an education. Just like many other frustrated female artists, Sor Juana was ultimately controlled by the male authorities of the Baroque Catholic Church. In the grouping of five of her poems, the arch of her life takes form through her intense religious devotion, her wide-eyed youthfulness, her outlook on love and sisterhood, anger and frustration, and ultimate resignation to silence through a disillusionment

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<sup>61</sup> Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell, *The answer = La respuesta* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009), 37.



with the Church, a sickness of hope, an “enfermedad de la esperanza.” The entire cycle of *De Toda la Eternidad* takes place in the mind of the lover while the lover experiences a paradoxical reality where all of eternity occurs in a single moment in time.

The first poem in the cycle, “Un instante me escuchen,” contains three verses that bring forth the concept of a single moment in which all of eternity occurs:

¡Un instante me escuchen,  
que cantar quiero  
un instante que estuvo  
fuera del tiempo!

Escúchenme mientras cante,  
que poco habrá que sufrir,  
pues lo que quiero decir  
es sola mente un instante.

Un instante es, de verdad,  
pero tan privilegiado  
que fue un instante cuidado  
de toda la eternidad.

Listen to me this moment-  
as I sing  
of a moment perceived  
outside of time!

Meanwhile, listen to me singing-  
you will only suffer a little,  
then what wants to be said  
will only be a moment.

A moment of being, really,  
yet highly prized,  
that exists as a careful moment  
in all of eternity.

The text calls to the listener to hear the lover’s story and commands the audience’s attention for the rest of the cycle. This is a sacred text and this concept of eternity taking place within a single moment is Sor Juana’s interpretation of the creation story and the beginning of the universe. The poem is from the first person point of view and the gender ambiguity of the speaker remains consistent through the five poems. This neutrality of gender of both the speaker and the subject matter mixed with Sor Juana’s commanding text that depicts quite simply, yet quite profoundly, the creation story allows for a rather subversive and unique portrayal of eternity that contrasts the normalized male perspectives on such sacred matter.

On the surface, it may seem that there is not much about this sacred poem that is textually subversive. Upon closer look, the poem is a rare depiction of the creation story told by a commanding female voice. The speaker’s words may be initially interpreted as self-effacing and apologetic in their promise not to take up too much time, but only until it is realized that this

moment for which the listener is being summoned actually encompasses all of eternity. This allows us to infer many things about the speaker. They may be some sort of Higher Power that can view all of human existence in the blink of an eye, or some sort of layperson whose life has just flashed before their eyes, or even a poet whose fascination is paradoxical realities.

There is no reference to gender in Sor Juana's creation story, and the speaker is vague and ambiguous. In Sor Juana's origin story, there is potential that God may be a Higher Power Poetess, imagined by woman and set to song. If Sor Juana presents an idea that God may have once been a Goddess, then the Son may have been a Daughter. Sor Juana does this and also puts this notion forth in such a way as to suggest that it is normal. In this way, women are not only represented through a lack of exclusionary gender restrictions, but may also be seen as powerful without any attached connotation of becoming dangerous or in need of supervision. Woman is not to be conquered for her power, and in this way is made both active and muse. The reshaping of woman as muse is one of Sor Juana's biggest accomplishments in writing and one of Larsen's biggest accomplishments in upholding through music.

Larsen's setting of the text is also rather atypical. Though the poem contains three parallel verses, Larsen's setting combines verses two and three in a peculiar way. The form of the piece is a somewhat ambiguous ABA' structure. The first verse makes up the A section, while the B section encompasses the second verse and half of the third verse, and the second half of the third verse comprises the A' section. Larsen does this by placing an introductory piano interlude before each section, except verse three, then placing one halfway through the text of verse three. Without glancing at the original formatting of the poem, it would be impossible to tell that Sor Juana had begun a third verse. While seamlessly connecting the second and third verses, Larsen also interrupts the third verse with a piano interlude that suggests a new section

that is further developed with the return of motivic ideas from the first section (Example 7).

**Example 7:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “Un instante me escuchen,” mm.16-18

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system shows a vocal line with a triplet of eighth notes on the word "priv-i-le-gia-do,". The second system shows the piano accompaniment with a triplet of eighth notes marked *mf*. The third system continues the piano accompaniment with dynamic markings *1/2 ped. ad lib.* and *1/2 ped. ad lib.* under the piano part.

By interrupting the verse in this way, Larsen places emphasis on the last two lines of Sor Juana’s text, “que fue un instante cuidado/de toda la eternidad,” meaning “that exists as a cautious moment in all of eternity.” Though perhaps placing emphasis on a sentence fragment, this is also the most straightforward manner in which Sor Juana has described the moment in which the beginning, Larsen’s A section, and the end, the return of A section motives, are one in time.

The motivic material of this song provides the basis for Larsen’s musical setting of Sor Juana’s eternity. The cycle opens with a tritone motive around which the first song, and ultimately the entire cycle, centers (Example 8).

**Example 8:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “Un instante me escuchen,” mm.1-2a

♩ = 54, as if suspended in time

*mf*

Un in - stan - te

*molto legato*

*p*

*bell-like*

*sost. ped.*

*ped.*

*sost. ped.*

The tritone splits the octave in half, and in this song her use of the tritone complements the speaker’s attempt to piece together the whole story of creation for their audience. Tritones are initially found in the Ab-D relationship between the left and right hand of the piano. Between sections, Ab-D tritone sonorities are found in the pedal bass, as in measures 6 and 8. This Ab-D tritone does not only serve as the recurring interval, but as the specific pitches that unify the entire cycle. At the return of the A section in measure 19, there is also a return of the lone Ab pedal. Throughout this resounding Ab pitch center, there is also a recurring diminished triad sonority of B-D-F, of which the tritone is a unifying cell.

In the vocal line, there are additional motives that suggest the sacred nature of this text and the circularity of eternity. For example, there is syncopation throughout that provides a sense that the piece resides “afuera del tiempo” or “outside of time” (Example 9).

**Example 9:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “Un instante me escuchen,” mm.6-7a

Melodically, the voice begins in unison with the pedal bass in both sections A and A', while beginning in unison with an inner voice in the beginning of the B section. Each melodic phrase begins with chant-like stagnation until the ascent into the recurring melodic contour of D-Eb-D-C-Bb, as in measures 3, 4, and 5 (Example 10).

**Example 10:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “Un instante me escuchen,” mm. 3-5a

In analyzing these vocal motives especially it becomes quite clear that centuries may be the only things separating Larsen from Sor Juana. Larsen was raised in the Catholic Church, but having certain freedoms that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century affords, she was able to separate herself from the Church when she grew older and began to find it “particularly repressive to creative

personalities.”<sup>62</sup> Sor Juana endured similar repression but was unable to leave the Church both due to her vows and her positioning as a woman in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Mexico. Larsen’s experience with chant is exposed in this song, and furthers Larsen’s main task in this cycle: to somehow keep the music moving with the text, while suspended in the air, denying release. Larsen places this song outside of time rhythmically yet stabilized within an aural musical infinity.

The text of movement II, “¡Afuera, afuera, afuera!” is another sacred poem depicting the Assumption, which in Catholic tradition, is the day when Mother Mary’s body was subsumed into heaven.

¡Afuera, afuera, afuera!  
 Aparta, aparta, aparta,  
 Que trinan los clarines,  
 Que suenan la dulzainas!  
     Estrellas se despeñan,  
 Auroras se levantan.  
     Bajen las luces,  
 Suban fragancias,  
 Cuadrillas de jazmines,  
 Claveles y retamas,  
 Que corren,  
     Que vuelan,  
 Que tiran,  
     Que alcanzan,  
 Con flores,  
     Con brillos,  
 Con rosas,  
     Con llamas.

Come out, come out, come out!  
 Stand aside, stand aside, stand aside,  
 The bugles are blowing,  
 The flageolets are piping!  
     Stars are shooting over cliffs,  
 Dawn is arising,  
  
     Lower the lights,  
 Fragrances rise,  
 Troops of jasmine,  
 Carnations and bushes,  
 They run,  
     They fly,  
 They throw,  
     They catch,  
 With flowers,  
     With brilliance,  
 With roses,  
     With flames.

Larsen sets this single-verse poem into two sections that each feature identifying motives in both the vocal part and piano. These motives represent a struggle between Mary’s earthly presence and her heavenly ascension. The song opens with a five octave descending scale in the piano that becomes fragmented and imitated, at times changing direction, throughout the rest of the song. The descending scale then gives way to ascending sextuplets that reinforce the Ab-D tritone sonority of the movement I (Example 11). These swirling sextuplets become the structural

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<sup>62</sup> Wisuthseriwong, 4.

foundation for both sections of this song. The sextuplets then release into shaking tremolos that are used throughout the song as a connecting motive between sections and phrases. Together, these motives form the vibrant 20<sup>th</sup>-century fanfare that parallels the electricity of Sor Juana's sacred text.

**Example 11:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “¡Afuera, afuera, afuera!” mm. 4-5

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef, and the bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The score starts at measure 4, indicated by a '4' above the first measure. The vocal line has the lyrics 'a - fue - ra, a - fue - ra' with a trill on the final note. The piano part features sextuplets in measures 4 and 5, followed by a trill in measure 5. The piano part ends with a trill that matches the vocal line's trill.

The vocal line parallels the energy in the piano with octave leaps throughout. One motive in particular, which I name the “afuera motive,” consists of an octave jump up followed by a half-step down suspended until the next octave leap. Two octave leaps are followed by a tritone leap and half-step down. By the end of the song, the sustained part of the motive is ornamented by a trill that matches the swirling tremolos and sextuplets of the piano part. The ending of the piece also serves as the climax, with a G# octave in the voice on the words “con llamas (with flames)” describing how brilliantly, warmly, and intensely the lights are glowing all around the speaker. There is a fermata on the high G#, but Larsen decides not to suspend the speaker at the climax and brings the voice back down an octave for a quarter beat.

Movement II provides a sense of finality that the other pieces do not. Right after the climax three beats of rest are given to allow the audience to finally release their breath while a

transition is made from the sacred to secular texts, and from youthful exuberance to mature adoration. The audience experiences their last release of tension until the end of the cycle, until death.

Sor Juana's text and Larsen's interpretation exhibit religious ecstasy, but they simultaneously represent "a very earthbound force: the primal nature of unbridled sexual energy."<sup>63</sup> Together, Larsen and Sor Juana have created a fantastic display of female sexuality. In movement I, there was a recoupling of God with a long-lost Goddess, and in movement II, there is a reunion of the Goddess with her sexuality. Larsen has stated that "in music, I want to give the listener not the sound of a bird as much as the feeling of flight, not footsteps on a mountain so much as the sense of climbing."<sup>64</sup> She most certainly does this with her positioning of the musical climax immediately before the release, giving us the feeling of swirling ecstasy, making us miss the sextuplets when they are over. Woman is not deemed sexually unruly in this musical manifestation of her sexuality, but sexually liberated. Her sexuality becomes akin to religious ecstasy, which many nuns are said to have experienced in their wedding to their Lord. On the day of the Assumption, when the Virgin's body is taken up to Heaven, Sor Juana celebrates her sexuality and reunites woman with her body. For the singer, Larsen's interpretation of this glorious reunion means "the woman is not mute, her voice may speak the body."<sup>65</sup>

There is something to be said of the relationship between the tritone prevalence in the two opening sacred texts of the cycle and the octave prevalence in the last two songs. As will be discussed later, song three is free of both tritone and octave motives, and represents its own

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>64</sup> Larsen, "The Nature of Music," *Pan Pipes of Sigma Alpha Iota* 77 (Winter 1985): 3.

<sup>65</sup> Yorke, 116.



relationship to the cycle as the bridge between sacred and secular. Due to the prevalence of the octave in the last two songs and the structural use of the tritone in songs one and two, the tritone may be interpreted as reference to the octave, within which the musical eternity and infinity occurs.

Though perhaps not revolving around them, both the first and second movements hint at octave motives: the first movement does so in the last measure of the vocal line, and the second song through the “afuera motive.” Meanwhile, both the fourth and fifth movements bring back the tritone sonority that is lost within movement III. In this way, the cycle itself is symmetrical in its motivic structure. Throughout the cycle, the tritone pays homage to humanity’s deep inability to fully conceptualize eternity, and although Sor Juana was calling those around her to listen as she tells them of it, there is only so much that can be grasped of the concept. Thus, Larsen gives us only half the octave when we begin to sing Sor Juana’s story. Just as our ears have gotten used to a somewhat fragmented relationship with musical space, we are granted unison with all of creation; perhaps, the tritone is the instant and the octave is eternity.

Musically, song three, “Tersa frente, oro el cabello,” is the “stand-alone” piece of the cycle. The sexually-charged spiritual energy of the second song becomes most poignant in conjunction with the tranquility of the third, and the chaos of surrounding movements is intensified through the respite that contrasts it in this movement. It is characterized by a lack of tension rhythmically, harmonically, and vocally, as the vocal line is designed to freely float upon sustained cluster chords. While the tension of movements I, II, IV, and V is created by sextuplets, tremolos, tritones, and octaves, movement III is an expansion of the release of tension that is created with the unique finality of movement II. Movement III further constructs the struggle of movement II as a winning battle, in which the female body has been recoupled with



structure. In mm. 2, the right hand of the piano introduces the descending motive around which the vocal line is created, which happens to be the first major motive in the cycle that does not make use of the tritone.

While movement III is musically free of any notions of tension, it is the most textually controversial. “Tersa frente, oro el cabello” is the first secular text of the cycle, and is a love song from Sor Juana to her patron Maria Luisa, without whom her works could not have been published. Sor Juana’s text is an elegant love poem but does not fail to be subversive through subtleties of humor. The poem describes the physique of the subject in focus, as she makes an analogy between her love and the Saint Fili, painting them both as virginal with innocent hands in which the scepter of love comes to rest. The controversy lies in the rather typical depiction of a woman deemed worthy of adoration:

Tersa frente, oro el cabello  
 Cejas arcos, zafir ojos,  
 Bruñida tez, labios rojos,  
 Nariz recta, ebúrneo cuello;  
 Talle airoso, cuerpo bello,  
 Candidas manos en que  
 El cetro de amor se ve,  
 Tiene Fili; en oro engasta  
 Pie tan breve, que no gasta  
 Ni un pie.

Smooth brow, golden hair  
 Arched eyebrows, sapphire eyes  
 Glowing skin, red lips,  
 Ivory throat, straight nose,  
 Lyric figure, beautiful countenance;  
 Innocent hands, in which the  
 Scepter of love rests,  
 Has Fili: Slipped in gold,  
 Small feet, that do not take up  
 Even a foot.

Some critics who have come in contact with this poem say that Sor Juana may have fallen victim to the subconscious internalization of dominant beauty standards and inflicted the same regulations on her poetic muses. This is highly concordant with Mulvey’s theory, as the male gaze does not simply operate as the purview of males, but due to its overall normalization, women may also be bearers of a masculinized perspective on women. Octavio Paz explains this same idea of normalization in a different light, as he claims that any allegations toward Sor Juana’s lesbian affections are simply unwarranted, but because her writing was part of a larger

system of archetypes for expressing gratitude that may have modern sexual connotations- but in the Baroque era obtained quite different semantic meaning. The reason why one may view Sor Juana's gratitude as sexually charged is because the archetypes were originally enacted by men and their displays of gratitude did often obtain an element of sexual desire.

However, it is the belief of notable Sor Juana translator and scholar, Electa Arenal, that Sor Juana was well aware of the sexual undertones of men's seemingly innocent affections, and did what many feminist scholars do today in order to reclaim the words and phrases that have been used against them. Arenal states that Sor Juana "painted portraits in words: to express love of Maria Lusía Manrique de Lara, to ridicule preposterous exaggerations used to describe women in poetry, to disparage the expectation that women never age."<sup>66</sup> In light of this, Arenal asserts that Sor Juana may have pioneered the linguistic technique of reclaiming language for marginalized groups, oftentimes through pun and mockery of the dominant structure.

A prime example of her subversive humor may be found in the poem in the line "en oro engasta pie tan breve, que no gasta ni un pie (in gold are wrapped her small feet/ that do not take up any space)." The word "pie" in Spanish means both foot as in the body part and the unit of measurement. The use of this pun signals parody of traditional ideals, and Sor Juana thus ridicules the beauty standard for women to have small feet, so that they may be precious enough to wrap in gold. With the artificial and exaggerated use of archetypal portrayals of feminine beauty throughout the poem, she makes the familiar strange and may have been one of the earliest queer theorists to make use of the sociological imagination. Further, she pairs archetypes with ambiguously gendered nouns and pronouns that would have normally been definitively assigned. This line holds in it some of the most effective strategies for regaining agency over the

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<sup>66</sup> Arenal and Powell, 15.

female body. It subverts the male gaze by showing how a female gaze may operate differently in love and attraction, without the necessity to assert heterosexuality, attach to any binary, or view her love as beautiful because she is pure and petite; to Sor Juana she is so much more.

In this situation, one must also evaluate the power of the female composer alone to diffuse or dilute the objectification of women in the text. Many of the Baroque female entertainers that sang the afore-mentioned madrigals were master improvisers that chose not to embellish certain double entendres in the music, and were such skilled analysts of text that they could accomplish this diminution of sexual violations against women at first glance. Libby Larsen's art songs take a different approach as she is able to give voice to women's words. She finds the music from the words themselves; in her eyes, words and phrases contain intrinsic rhythms, colors, and pitches. Before setting a piece of poetry to music, she repeats the words at various tempos to expose the music that is already within them and place that music with its most natural speed.<sup>67</sup> She must always resonate with her text and find an experience that is worthy of music, thus leading the text through a natural filtering process. Through her own internalization of the words and translation of the text into its most inborn musical setting, Larsen sets music to her own voice and mind; she represents the underrepresented musical interpretation of female composers. After all, the story of the female composer has long been worthy of song.

Movement IV, "Esta tarde," disrupts the use of introduction of new motivic material, and instead recycles motives from the first and second movements. The motion in the piano that contrasts the static nature of movement III is created by a return of forward-leaning movement of the "afuera motive" in the right hand and alternating eighth notes in the bass. The consonance of

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<sup>67</sup> Smith, 43.

movement III is disrupted by the use of the tritone Ab-D sonority and the “afuera motive” in the piano introduction (Example 13), while the vocal part develops the C-D-Eb-D-C-B plainchant motive from the first song.

**Example 13:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “Esta tarde,” mm. 1-2

The musical score for Example 13 consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a tempo marking of quarter note = 72. It features a melodic line with a tritone interval (Ab-D) and a dynamic marking of *mf* (yearning). The lyrics "Es - ta" are written below the vocal line. The middle staff is the piano accompaniment, marked *p* and *molto legato*. It features a complex rhythmic pattern with alternating sixteenth notes and triplets. The bottom staff is the left hand, marked *L. H. molto legato throughout*.

Movement IV sets the text “esta tarde, mi bien, cuando te hablaba/ this afternoon, my love, when we spoke” that details an afternoon conversation with one’s soon-to-be ex-lover with musical mechanisms and techniques that are characteristic of Baroque recitative. The melodic line is composed of a small range that then emphasizes the natural rhythmic elements in the text with alternating sixteenth notes and triplets. Larsen bridges Baroque opera and Sor Juana’s Baroque texts with explicit use of recitative in measures 14, 18, and 19. These measures are free from meter and contain varying amounts of quarter note beats. The piano introduces these measures and arpeggiates cluster chords (Example 14), which may be the only similarity between any of the other movements and the third song. However, the arpeggiation in movement IV is more akin to the simple harpsichord accompaniment of Baroque opera.

**Example 14:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “Esta tarde,” mm. 14

slower, freely, recit.  
(yearning)

que el co-ra-zón... me vie-ses de-se-a-ba;

Larsen sets Sor Juana’s most conversational text by placing the music back in Sor Juana’s time. This time was also marked by a notable cultural shift in music history. Opera began in the Baroque era and, in many ways, “freed the female voice”<sup>68</sup> from the bans it endured under the reign of the church. Due to the socially constructed link between the female voice and sexual transgression, women were deemed unfit for sacred worship. Young boys and castrati were used as substitution for the treble voice, but as a moral and ethical dilemma began to grow toward castration, opera became more topically secular, and the vocal demand of the soprano intensified, the female voice was more widely brought onto the stage. Though opera helped to free the female voice, it played a large part in constructing female characters as one-dimensional. Early opera composers oftentimes set the words of female characters to more simplistic music than their male counterparts, which in turn drew musical attention to the male characters as they set the action in motion. The effects of the time are still pervasive as both ‘soprano’ and ‘alto’ are gendered masculine and the female voice remains nameless.

Larsen’s setting, though employing these techniques, is in no way simple, and Sor Juana’s text is in no way passive. This text is home to the first real sense of anger, of loss, of

<sup>68</sup> Kenny and Wollenberg, 169.

heartache, as the end of the lover's journey through time is approached:

Esta tarde, mi bien, cuando te hablaba  
Como en tu rostro y tus acciones  
Vía que con palabras no te persuadía,  
Que el corazón me vieses deseaba;

This afternoon, my love, when I spoke to you,  
Through your face and actions  
I saw that my words would not convince you,  
So I desired to show you my heart.

Y amor, que mis intentos ayudaba,  
Venció lo que imposible parecía:  
Pues entre el llanto, que dolor vertía,  
El corazón deshecho destilaba.

Then Love, who helped my intentions,  
Won even the most impossible state:  
Then with swelling and tears,  
My broken heart was distilled.

Baste ya de rigores, mi bien, baste,  
No te atormenten más celos tiranos  
Ni el vil recelo tu quietud contraste

Cease this harshness, beloved, cease;  
Jealousy will cease if you command,  
And doubts will not disturb your peace of mind

Con sombras necias,  
Con indicios vanos, pues ya en liquido  
Humor viste y tocaste  
Mi corazón deshecho entre tus manos.

With nasty gloom,  
With vain shams, in tears,  
You saw and touched  
My broken heart in your hands.

The youth and “ecstasy”<sup>69</sup> of movement II have disappeared, and in its place is found a mature woman who is sticking up for herself against the foolery of the person who holds her tired heart in their hands “mi corazón deshecho entre tus manos.” She is also, in some regard, hoping for things to resolve and pained by the prospect of permanent damage to the relationship. There is a parallel in women's history as women have become infuriated by current systems that oppress them, while also having no option but to reconcile with the world that erases them in order to survive.

The ability for the speaker --ingeniously crafted by Sor Juana to be ambiguous-- to air their feelings around love that has wronged them is quite revolutionary, especially in a time that placed high levels of restriction on secular writings such as that of Sor Juana's era. The gender of the speaker is still vague, and when we think of the idea that the male voice was automatically assumed as the speaker in the Baroque era, Sor Juana's ability to do this is no small feat. Sor Juana mainly does so by keeping the gender of the person at the other end of the heartbreak

<sup>69</sup> Cloe Gentile. Interview with Electa Arenal. Personal Interview. New York City, July 5, 2016.



vague, and unpointed. She expresses that the broken heart is the cause of a dialogue in which the other person was unable to sympathize or listen to her, and thus remained unconvinced by her words, an occurrence she endured many times in her disputes with the church over her rights to learn and write. Larsen accompanies the freedom in this text with more freedom in the composition. The sincerity of emotion mixed with a historically subversive musical practice exhibit the combined potential for allowing the female voice performative agency.

Appropriately following the recitative-filled movement IV, movement V, “Diuturna enfermedad de la esperanza,” contains characteristics that present it as the aria of the cycle. It contains the largest vocal range necessary in any of the songs, the piano is characterized by a bass ostinato and new material in the right hand piano introduction. It also sets the most dramatic, tragic, and self-reflective depiction of a lover’s retreat into darkness after the loss of a relationship. The fifth movement captures the ironic swirling memories of a relationship that flood to the foreground at the exact moment when it ends:

Diuturna enfermedad de la esperanza,  
Que así entre tienes mis cansados años  
Y en el fiel de los bienes y los daños  
Tienes en equilibria la balanza

Oh, malady of hope  
That within you lies my tired years  
And in the faith of the good and the ugly  
There remains a balance

Que siempre suspendida en la tardanza  
De inclinarse, no déjan tus engaños  
Que lleguen a excederse en los tamaños  
La desesperación o confianza

That is always suspended,  
With the indolence to incline yourself  
To not take your deceptions too far  
Despair or confidence

Quien te ha quitado el nombre de homicide?  
Pues lo eres más severa si se advierte  
Que suspendes el alma entretenida;

Still, who has taken away your murderess name?  
For the severe murderess you are, when it is owned  
In your suspended soul

Y entre la infausta o la felice suerte,  
No las haces tú por conservar la vida  
La vida sino por dar más dilatada muerte.

And as the cursed or the lucky  
You do not act to prolong my life  
But rather, that in life death be prolonged.

Movement V is through-composed and held together with a slow development of past motives. The descending lines of measures 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 are all diminished octaves, and build

up to the octave in measure 12. A similar construction occurs until the same octave in measure 19. In measure 2, the octave motive is transposed up a whole step to a G, and then followed by an F# octave in measure 24 and 25, and an E octave in measures 26 and 27. This is the structure of the lead-up to the “afuera” motive in measure 29 (Example 15a). The “afuera” motive is then repeated and transposed (Example 15b) until it occurs in both the left hand of the piano and the voice in measure 33 (Example 15c). This creates the climax of the piece, which is then immediately answered with a floating, chant-like melody in measure 35 that persists until the ending resolution in Eb minor.

**Example 15:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “Diuturna enfermedad de la esperanza”  
Growing “afuera” motives

(a) mm. 28b-29

(b) mm. 30b-31

(c) mm. 32b-33

The leaping octaves of movement II are brought back but colored differently and feel intentionally displaced without their accompanying sextuplets. Thus, the piece swirls not of new love, but of dying love. The tritone in the vocal line in measure 32 seems to emerge from old ideas of youthful adoration and harkens back to the first song in an “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” foreshadowing of death. The melodic line at the end turns into a retrograde of movement I’s motivic structure, and any suspicions about the cycle of life are thus confirmed. In this text, the speaker exposes his/her darkest feelings surrounding lost love, describing Hope as an illness as it fills the spirit with false optimism. Sor Juana speaks of her tired years, and there is a sense that in

this moment, the speaker has gone through the entirety of their livelihood.

### A Story without an End

The concluding Eb minor chord occurs on the word “muerte (death)” and is the first ending in the entire cycle without dissonance (Example 16). It occurs after the psychological death of hope in the speaker that causes the cycle to end. This release of tension through death is part of a larger textual theme that may be found in Strozzi’s *Lagrima mie* and even Fanny Hensel’s *Die Nonne*. In these works, the subject eventually comes to know death in life. There is a sense in all three of these works of a resignation toward death, a knowingness of it, and even a liberation by it. The difference lies in that these characters are not experiencing death as a result of male rejection or loss of a male loved one, but because of intense male supervision that has resulted in loss of the self and the female. Sor Juana laments that her soul has been suspended in an earthly equilibrium for too long, Strozzi laments that her body has been held within marble walls for too long, and in Hensel’s interpretation of Heine’s work, the Nun laments that she must die in order to love.

**Example 16:** Libby Larsen, *De Toda la Eternidad*, “Diuturna enfermedad de la esperanza,” mm. 38-39

The musical score for Example 16 consists of two staves. The top staff is for the voice, and the bottom staff is for the piano accompaniment. The key signature is Eb minor (three flats) and the time signature is 3/4. Measure 38 shows the vocal line with a dotted quarter note followed by a half note, with the word "niente" written above. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the left hand and chords in the right hand. Measure 39 continues the piano accompaniment, ending with a final Eb minor chord and the word "niente" written below the staff.

*De Toda la Eternidad* presents those who hear it with a gradual transition from wide-eyed optimism into hopelessness, death, and silence. This process is not foreign to the female psyche as it resides within male hegemonic structure. For female composers, a similar transformation may occur when they realize that though they made up 25% of the population of composition students at the undergraduate level, they will make up 10% at the graduate, and 1.8% at the professional/concert level.<sup>70</sup> For female singers, it may begin as it did for me: the day they find themselves having to construct a characterization and deliver a text that dehumanizes the female body and mind. The female performer has had to put out the fire this may spark, but still somehow find artistry and purpose in her studies, because “the woman must perform; she is a spectacle.”<sup>71</sup> Well, now she has something to say; she is not only spectacle, but narrator, not only singer, but composer, and not only metaphor, but metaphysical. To the female performers that have ignored the fire, rekindle your flames.

The female voice may find itself truly embodied in art song through the musical interpretations of female composers and the reclaiming of language by female poets, in the infinite forms in which they may exist. In this way, the female voice breaks out of its marginalized place in the male/female, active/passive, subject/object binary, and does so loudly. It is said that when one goes out searching for women’s meanings of the world, one will find “a loud silence,”<sup>72</sup> both because there is so much of it and because at the same time women are not so quiet. In order for the male gaze to continue to shift, blur, and make peace with the female voice, we all must ask: “if music is language, then who is speaking [and who is not]?” so that women may make the full transition from object to subject... from sung about to singing.

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<sup>70</sup> Cloe Gentile. Interview with Bonnie Pomfret.

<sup>71</sup> Dunbar, 202.

<sup>72</sup> Spender, 54.

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**Appendix**  
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