

Marco Gallenga & Ruhama Santorsa

Preliminary Notes

This seminar presentation focused on the relationship between poetry and music (within an American context), including active student participation. This work allowed for the modification of the application of the documentary research and musical analysis elaborated within the academic field - mainly addressed to euro-cultivated musical practice - to the analysis of texts and music of the American culture, having chosen the letters of Calamity Jane set to music by the contemporary American composer Libby Larsen.

The work was carried out in collaboration with doctoral student Ruhama Santorsa, and the discussion was stimulating and produced a fruitful exchange of ideas. I contributed two videos, one introductory and one final, which allowed us to creatively elaborate on the ideas offered by the material provided by Dr Panizza. Furthermore, the content of the letters and the fascinating and elusive figure of Calamity Jane allowed us to investigate not only the biographical aspects of the woman, but to assess her impact on the society of the time, and the legacy she left in contemporary society.

A stimulating and multifaceted workshop seminar allowed for a comparison between doctoral students and the discovery of figures in the artistic and musical spheres that we rarely have encountered in the canonical course of our studies, allowing for a stimulating and fruitful broadening of views.

The letters which Martha Jane Cannary Hickok (alias Calamity Jane) wrote to her daughter Janey, penned between the 18th and 19th centuries, served as the primary inspiration behind the song cycle *Songs from Letters*, by the American composer Libby Larsen.

I felt attracted to this topic: by the fascination I have for the 'Wild West' (of which, admittedly, my knowledge is relatively superficial and approximate), and by a subject that remains so current: the emancipation of women and gender equality. The figure of Calamity Jane, as depicted in the opening video, has been a victim of the typical instrumentalization and distortion of the film market - show business *tout court* - whilst at the same time shaping a character, through the letters to her daughter, of which she herself has been a victim. A self-determination that within the fabric of history, between claims and shifts of ethical and social thinking, eludes an organic definition. Despite the propensity for 'marked fable', the known facts of her life are extraordinary.

She was, arguably, never involved in wars against Indians, and never assaulted Wild Bill Hickok's murderer with a meat cleaver. She may or may have not been a Pony Express driver, nurse, cook or a saloon lady. She was, perhaps for some time, a prostitute. She clearly was a scout and a famous performer in Buffalo Bill's touring show, fought alcoholism, and died at the age of fifty. She also assisted smallpox patients in Deadwood and took control of an overland stagecoach after the driver was shot. In other words, she had a rough life, in a completely different to the America of today.

Libby Larsen's song cycle elevates the lyrics to the status of true and legitimate poems: reaching for the heart of the subjects, allowing a deep, multi-faceted, emotional contours to emerge through a complex compositional style. This is precisely Calamity Jane's grand appeal: not a woman who through her actions and statements anticipated the feminist movement, nor a self-proclaimed flag bearer for gender equality ideals, but a strong fighter in a man's world. She does it for herself, for her daughter, for that atavistic survival sense which forces her to toss useless furnishings that weigh down her journey - therefore, exceeding the very same concept of equality by not imitating men, or barricading behind a marked femininity that doesn't belong to her. It is perhaps peculiar in how a letter to her daughter denotes the "shooter" (Calamity Jane) as never having killed a man, and that she would rather have killed a woman: "I still haven't killed anyone, but I'd really like to hit in the head certain Deadwood women", and further "General Allen is a friend of mine. Make sure you find him. I don't have girlfriends."

These truthful confessions, contained in the letters, are enriched with stories of events, places, characters, actions and daring adventures. But they don't conceal the heartache of a distant mother. They are mirrors of two souls. Calamity Jane: daredevil, strong, anti-conventional and Martha: mother, woman, worker, lover.

At the end of the 19th-century - across the western world - customs, morality, and rights were still united in establishing male privilege and women's minority state. Modernization continues to progressively expand citizenship rights, but women - all women - are still excluded from political participation; believed to be incapable of acting according to reason; subjected to the authority of their husband, are not free to manage their life and assets; withheld from many academic curricula and professions; and don't enjoy the same equality and treatment as men, typically within familial scenarios, and at the workplace. Many women work (e.g., factory workers, farmworkers, peasants, servants, homeworkers, small business owners, tailors, embroiderers), regularly pushed by economic necessity. However, the common social aspiration among them, as for upper class women, is that of being a bride, a mother: examples of female social modes that continue well into the 21st-century.

A symbolic date, 26 August 1920, was the day in which the XIX Amendment of the American Constitution was approved in the United States. This act introduced universal suffrage: the apex of a long struggle by symbolic women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan Anthony, and associations like the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). However, these were not the years in which Calamity Jane lived. A stranger to all stereotypes, conventions, and constrictions - free from the crushing bigotry of the time - she is an ante-litteram feminist model.

Despite her memories being distorted, often with notably strong impact, they nevertheless contain the beginnings of the most radical forces of the feminist movement: those that, with many difficulties, will nevertheless prevail in the new century - through love, pain, rage, desire for redemption, and consideration. Will of freedom: a freedom that allows the individual to be, above all, their own self.

Marco Gallenga

In addition to the video made by my colleague, Marco Gallenga, I (Ruhama Santorsa) propose a presentation that begins with an introduction to the composer Libby Larsen: an underlining of her works related to female characters, with various elements to better understand her aesthetic, particularly in relationship to vocal music. This will be followed by focus on the work object of study explaining choices reason and analysing Calamity Jane's characters between the text and the music. I will finish with some Larsen advice for performers and women in general.

I. Libby Larsen

(composer, songs composition, female characters in songs)

Libby Larsen is one of America's most performed living composers. Her compositions include the major forms and structures: from large instrumental symphonies to chamber works, from choral pieces to opera. Through these works her vocal pieces emerged because they deal with different issues often written by men but from a female point of view such as old age (*Late in the Day*, 1998)¹ but also with issues rarely approached by men such as childbirth (*The Birth Project*, 2015).²

Moreover, she often chose strong female characters (like *Eleanor Roosevelt* (1996)³, the wife of Henry VIII in *Try Me, Good King* (2000)⁴, or Michele Antonello Frisch in *Center Field Girl* (2007)⁵). Arguably, the medium of art song is where her real affinity for both American cultural reference, and strong female characters, can be fully recognized.

During an interview Larsen declared that is true that she has an affinity for setting text written by women, she is a woman and, for her, "the texts that women write to represent themselves, whether prose or poetry, tend to be authentic, honest, and direct; with women it's much more common to have a concrete, personal speaker".⁶ After that she started thinking about actively seeking texts with this kind of poetic 'authenticity': texts where the author is making a strong statement from the self.⁷ She had already unconsciously moved in that direction with *Cowboy Songs*, in which one of

¹ Music set to poems by Jeanne Shepherd, from the perspective of a septuagenarian.

² *The Birth Project*: a cycle of 12 songs related to pregnancy, birth, and related feelings.

³ A dramatic cantata based on Eleanor Roosevelt's life and words.

⁴ Featuring the last words of five wives of Henry VIII.

⁵ An ode to the female ball player. The no-girls-allowed policy of baseball re-directed Frisch's talent into music, where she became a professional flautist.

⁶ Libby Larsen, Interview by Meredith Du Bon, 27 April 2011, St- Paul MN.

⁷ Larsen: "I found I wanted to add to the repertoire for female voice by pursuing this and allowing the singer to become the speaker of the text".

the songs, 'Bucking Bronco', has this sense of poetic 'authenticity'.⁸ But *Songs from Letters* was the first composition where Larsen became fully aware of her interest in setting the voices of strong female characters.

This is the reason why I decided to choose these songs. My research, although based in a different century, is focused on women and female characters, but with this workshop we had the opportunity to study for the first-time music and text both written by women, instead of a female character described by a man's words and music. Additionally, we were able to study composition written by a living composer who explained her aesthetic and way of composing.⁹

II. Approaching Text and Thinking Musically (within vocal music)

The relationship between text and music is very important for Larsen. She said that "music comes from the languages that people use to communicate with each other. It is the text that we kept returning to as source material, for 'eventually you might hear it as music'".¹⁰

i. Speaking the Text

She is very careful with texts that she's thinking about 'musicalizing'. She is vigilant with herself to get her ego out of the way and let the text settle itself naturally. The use of prose allows Larsen the flexibility to approach the setting of the text in a much more natural and non-restrictive manner. The setting becomes more like the characteristic rhythm of conversation in the American vernacular. When Larsen chooses texts, she pays attention to the way the rhythm of the words interacts with textual meaning and try to set texts as naturally as she can because, for her, words are prevalent and "the music must be more meaningful to the words than the words are meaningful to the music".¹¹ Larsen states "if I am vigilant enough a third voice emerges, and this is what we heard as the songs [...] The third is the collaboration of the possibility of music and of text coming together".¹²

ii. About Music

Larsen defines the basic elements of music as:¹³

Pitch: a frequency, pure and un-mouldable, but subject to interpretation in the approach and execution. It is related to melody and intervallic content.¹⁴

Motion: used as definition of the concepts of meter/rhythm. She said that, on the one hand, human culture is always in motion, never in strict time; on the other, motion depends on cultural perception.

Architecture: stands for "structures". She believes the traditional forms are mostly irrelevant in today's musical society.

Emotional impact: music evolves due to culture more so than due to performance practice.

I think that two other elements should be added to those mentioned above:

Horizontal conceptions: related to line and harmony. She conceives tonality with horizontal meaning; the line comes first and the harmonies result.

Rhythm: her approach is to listen for natural rhythms in the world, she listens to people speak and takes rhythmic dictation in her head and transfer it to paper. When a person speaks, they have a pulse, each person has a pulse.

Almost all the individual aspects of the music in *Songs from Letters* arise out of the text, including the development of the melodic lines. Larsen usually sets the melodic lines syllabically to mimic the organic rise and fall of American language.

⁸ The poem is attributed to Belle Starr.

⁹ N.B. Songs for soprano and piano based on female themes. Please refer to References and Further Reading for further details.

¹⁰ Libby Larsen Website: <https://libbylarsen.com/themes/text-music>. Internet; accessed 18 July 2022.

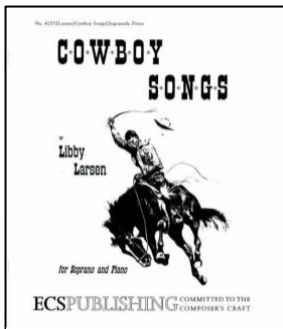
¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Strand Katherine, *A Socratic Dialogue with Libby Larsen: On Music, Musical Experience in American Culture, and Music Education*, in *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, Mar. 2011, pp. 52–66.

¹⁴ Intervals [generally] have a particular significance in her music.

III. Songs of the Old West



©Cowboy Songs' cover

Larsen's way of depicting the Old West is unique because, on the one hand, she would not romanticize the cowboy culture and American Western themes (like common tendency) and on the other, she experienced an "honest and full of characters" West and presents it from a feminine perspective. Her compositions expand our thinking of the traditional heroic male model in real and imagined events of the Old West to include strong, yet sensitive feminine figures like Calamity Jane and Belle Starr.

Larsen composed two different groups of songs with texts connected to the Old West: *Cowboy Songs*, and *Songs from Letters*.

Calamity Jane's life was a complex dance between societal expectations and her own personal vision. Larsen is curious both about Jane's position as a woman in a male driven world and in her efforts to balance her own life and interests with her role as a mother. These ideas are as prevalent today; they engage the changing of gender roles, and the topic of feminism in American history.

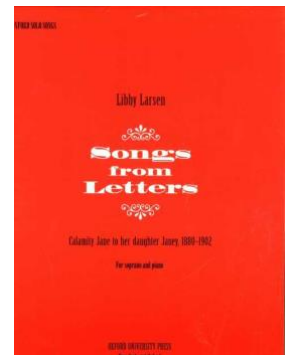
IV. Songs from Letters

(choice, "fictional" character, character from letters)

The cycle is scored for soprano voice and piano or chamber ensemble (including flute, clarinet, piano, strings, and percussion). The following serves as an analysis of the score for soprano voice and piano.

Larsen states "...the composition reveals the struggle of an individual soul, a tender soul, a woman and a pioneer on many frontiers", that she is interested in "the character and the real person, her 'rough-toughness' and struggle to explain herself honestly to her daughter, Janey".¹⁵

Jane's texts and words reveal her desire not only to express her lived experience, as a woman living within a male-centric world, but to also share these stories with her daughter as an act of love, care, and maternal responsibility.



©Songs From Letters' cover

The character of Calamity Jane is multi-faceted. Throughout her letters we can find:

- A **loving mother** who always carries with her a 'tiny picture' of the daughter, who 'call Janey for Jane', who gambles to win money so she 'can go to see you in style. I want to look like something once in my life'.¹⁶
- A **strong woman** with a horse called Satan, 'dressed in men's pants & posed as Wild Bills partner', who sad that she 'can live in this old world without love or without a home of any sort'.¹⁷
- A **nurturing woman** who looks after different boys and girls abandoned by their parents even though she knows that they won't be grateful, who 'couldn't eat a mouthful if I saw some poor little brat hungry'.¹⁸
- A **jealous woman** who 'lost everything I ever love except [Janey]'.¹⁹ for jealousy
- A **working woman** who worked in Russell's saloon and joined Bill Cody's Wild West Show.²⁰

As a song cycle, *Songs from Letters* leads the listener through various stages of Calamity Jane's life and embrace the "colorful dramatization of her character".²¹ Larsen chose some of the previous characteristics to emphasize Jane's warm and loving side in addition to her wild and rowdy personality.

¹⁵ Libby Larsen Website: <https://libbylarsen.com/works/songs-from-letters-calamity-jane-to-her-daughter-janey-1880-1902>. Internet; accessed 18 July 2022.

¹⁶ Calamity Jane, *Calamity Jane's Letters to Her Daughter*. San Lorenzo, Calif, Shameless Hussy Press, 1976.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ She also presented the way in which she thought other people see her: a **crazy woman** for the Sioux who never molest her and a **lonely woman** who "once loved & lost a Little girl like you".

²¹ Secrest Glenda Denise, 'Songs from Letters' and 'Cowboy Songs' by Libby Larsen: Two Different Approaches to Western Mythology and Western Mythological Figures, in *Journal of Singing – The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing*. 64, no. 1 (2007), p. 23.

i. Analysis

The contrasts of tender and wild, loving and rowdy are perfectly reflected in the structure of the cycle. Movements 1, 3 and 5 are introverted and contemplative, expressing the tender side of Jane:



Martha Jane Canary, MS071
Vincent Mercaldo Collection

1. ***So Like Your Father's*** (1880) *Freely, recitative*
Recalls Jane's emotions and reflections upon the past after receiving a photo of her daughter. These reflections inspired Larsen to treat the song in an introspective and contemplative musical manner
5. ***A Man Can Love Two Women*** (1880) *Calmly*
Displaying Jane's thoughts about jealousy and how these suspicions affected her life and love
6. ***All I Have*** (1902) *With flexibility throughout*
Draws upon Jane's thoughts about all she has left in her life and in the world.

Movements 2 and 4 are more exciting and thrilling, suggesting Jane's flair for adventure and action. These are two action-packed and extroverted songs.

2. ***He Never Misses*** (1880) *With abandon*
Presents Jane's father abilities as a shooter and a cowboy who never misses a shot
4. ***A Working Woman*** (1882-1893) *Slowly, freely, recitative then jaunty*
a song in which Jane describes each of her many jobs expressing some pitfalls of her 'working woman' character.



Martha Jane Canary,
Photo C.E. Finn, Livingston, Montana

These contrasting movements create a well-balanced cycle for soprano voice. Larsen crafts a musical structure that supports the intimacy of Jane's literary voice.

ii. Music Characteristics

I would like to present the distinctive features of Larsen's music through some examples in this cycle.

a. Recitative, tritone and contrary motion

The first example is about three Larsen's composing features: recitative, tritone and contrary motion. It is taken from the first song: *So like your father's*

The musical score for 'So Like Your Father's' is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line (treble clef) and piano accompaniment (grand staff). The vocal line is marked 'Freely, recitative quietly' and 'Quietly (♩=56)'. The lyrics are 'Jane-y, — a let-ter came to-day and a pic-ture of you.' The piano part features a tritone and contrary motion. The second system shows the vocal line continuing with a tritone and the piano part continuing with a tritone and contrary motion.

Example 1 "So Like Your Father's," mm. 1-3

Larsen's first example of **recitative** with silence in the accompaniment to the voice and the omission of fixed time signatures create a sense of female connection, an immediacy, a desire for communication and enhance the emotion and solitude that Jane feels. Larsen has annotated the vocal line as *quietly*, suggesting the quality of Jane's character in this moment. Vocally, the singer should utilize a quiet dynamic, symbolizing the distance that Jane is feeling from her daughter. The quiet vocal line coupled with the silence in the piano part symbolizes Jane's isolation and loneliness in her recollections.

Recitative is often without accompaniment or with a single initial chord because it is used as a compositional device to draw a focused attention to the text.²²

In these bars we can also find the first **melodic tritone** motive between the words – “a letter” combined with the very first leap the voice sings. Larsen uses tritone to add pungency to the text and using that as a vocal feature, she wants to represent the emotional contour of Jane’s life or a moment of heightened emotion or tension. In this example the tritone put emphasis on the word “letter” thus I believe that Larsen’s intention is to show to the audience Jane’s excitement for the reception of this letter.

Larsen usually utilizes the tritone compositionally in various ways, in fact one bar after, the initial piano motive in **contrary motion** of four octaves ends with another **harmonic tritone**. This one, as a pianistic device, is used by Larsen to establish a harmonic freedom; the tritone stands as “the metaphorical significance of being unsettled, being able to move in any direction”²³. The tritone in these first instances symbolizes the discord and unrest that Jane is experiencing in her life.

The following examples are about possibly the most important musical characteristic used by Larsen in this cycle: Motivic development and repetition.

b. Motivic development and repetition

Repetition in this song cycle serves dramatic, psychological, and musical significance. Dramatically, repetition and musical return serves as a metaphor for Jane’s own memory. The psychological effect felt by returning musical material remains unique to each song, depending on where the return is heard (i.e. in the vocal or piano lines).

I will now present different examples from each song of repetitions both in piano and vocal lines.

First song – *So like Your Father’s*

- In the piano line: the **bell motive**²⁴ (Example 2). This will recur throughout the cycle and particularly at the end in the final movement ‘All I Have’, creating a psychological conclusion for the ear (Examples 3 and 4). This use of similar motives by Larsen to begin and end the cycle (but also every song of the cycle) increases the psychological connection and emotional journey undertaken in the cycle.

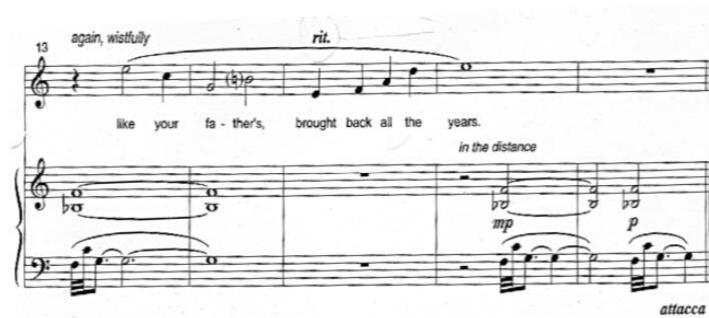


Example 2: “So Like Your Father’s,” mm. 4–12

²² Again, we can find her feeling of loneliness described with a recitative without accompaniment in the Fourth song with the words “I mind my own business but remember the one thing the world hates is a woman who minds her own business”, score m. 44.

²³ Secrest, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²⁴ Another convention features hidden meanings such as the bells in *Try Me, Good King*. There are a vast number of symbolic meanings for bells, depending on the song.



Example 3: "So Like Your Father's," mm. 13–17



Example 4: "All I Have," mm. 46–48

- In the vocal line: the repetition of "Like your father's, brought back all the years" (Example 2-3). These are Jane's personal memories, with Larsen symbolizing this reflection by the return of the musical material. In this instance, repetition serves as a symbol for Jane's memory, psychologically it is a symbol of Jane's nostalgic emotion.

Second song – He Never Misses

- There are two motives in piano line: that of **galloping horse hooves** (Example 5) and the **gunshot** (Example 6). These motives are symbolic of both the sounds that is associated with Jane's life and the specific persona of Wild Bill Hickok. The galloping hooves and the gunshot motives alternate repeatedly creating an aural connection to the action expressed in the text and a sense of suspense in relation to the longer lines of the voice. The galloping hooves' motive returns at the end of the song and is described by Larsen as the final shootout. This return creates a dramatic effect: the dramatic end of the story for Jane.



Example 5 - He Never Misses, mm. 43–48



Example 6 - He Never Misses, m. 4



Example 7 - He Never Misses, m. 1

- In the vocal line: we find the repetition of three verses:
 “I crawled to the brush to warn him” four times with higher pitch level and doubled by the piano; “The blood running down his face” at a higher pitch level (Example 8) and “Bill killed them all” also at higher pitch level that illustrate moments of suspense, heightened emotion, tension but also the hysteria and thrill Jane felt.

Example 8 - He Never Misses, mm. 25–27

Third songs – A Man Can Love Two Women

- In piano line: we hear the **rock-a-bye motive** in the first two measures (Example 9). This motive ends with linear and vertical tritones, lending more evidence to the unsettled nature of Jane in her recollections of her life. We hear it again in the final four measures, serving as a motivic frame for the song: the motive symbolizing Jane’s emotional disconnection from her feelings of jealousy that ruined her relationship with Janey’s father. The indication of *calmly* symbolizes the notion that Jane has relinquished her feelings of jealousy. However, when repeated in ‘All I Have’ the calm motive changes: utilized in a more frantic manner, slowly building an emotional climax as the vocal line rises in tessitura (Example 11). It exists as a metaphor for Jane’s growing frustration that all she has left are her memories.

Example 9: “A Man Can Love Two Women”, mm. 1-2

Example 10: “All I Have,” mm. 25–29

- In the vocal line: the most notable example of repetition is 'I lost ev'ry thing I loved': repeated three times - intentionally and with rhetorical effect. Larsen states: "When we want to make a point in advertising classes or if you take classes in emphasis, people will say 'three times.' It is just a cultural phenomenon, so I consciously use the repetition of three, with a variation in each one as a cultural tool."²⁵ For each repetition the two leaps became bigger and there is a dynamic augmentation which could symbolize both frustration and sorrow.

Example 11: "All I Have", mm. 14-23

Fourth song – A Working Woman

- In piano line: the keyboard imitates a 'tacky' piano motif (Example 12), reminiscent of an out-of-tune saloon piano.²⁶ It is also heard in the vocal line 'run me out of town' in different measures (Example 13); in 'when my back is turned' with rhythmic augmentation (Example 14), and in 'damn their soul to hell' (Example 15).

Example 11: "A Working Woman", m. 51-52

Example 10 - A Working Woman, m. 15

Example 9 - A Working Woman, m. 7

²⁵ Secrest, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

²⁶ This motif ends with a tritone.



Example 15: "A Working Woman", mm. 58–63

In vocal line: Jane repeats the text 'damn their souls to hell' again three times (Example 15).

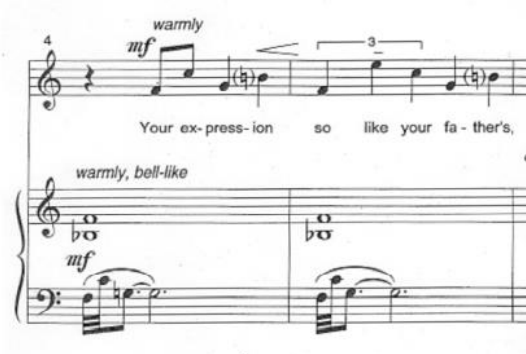
Larsen displays the more violent and aggravated nature of Jane, with each repetition and variation of pitch level and rhythm. These repetitions at increased pitch level are the perfect opportunity for the performer to show their power in the cycle.

Final song – *All I Have*

This song does not introduce any new motifs, but rather repeats former motifs that tie the whole cycle together. The motifs (as heard earlier in the cycle) adopt different connotations by its conclusion.

For example:

- The 3/4, calm motive of 'A Man Can Love Two Women' appears fragmented - with a varied bass line in the piano accompaniment. These motivic differences illustrate Jane's growing agitation as she realizes that all she has left in the world are just the pictures of Janey and Bill. The change in the piano accompaniment from calm quarter notes (crotchets) and half notes (minims) to all quarter notes (crotchets) with an accent on the third beat express exasperation and desperation. This simple piano bass line is another metaphoric 'utterance' of Jane's memories. 'A Man Can Love Two Women' symbolizes her memories of jealousy and her resignation: 'All I Have' symbolizes frustration.
- Two motives serve as the final frame and conclusion for the cycle. The first is the return of the initial memory motive, it symbolizes Jane's memories of her daughter, and her daughter's father (Example 16-17). Larsen marks this moment as if Jane is lost in the moment of that memory. In return, the second and final motif is the 'bell motif' (Example 18). This circular motivic effect brings closure, both musically and emotionally, to the cycle.



Example 12: Initial memory motive
"So Like Your Father's", mm. 4–5



Example 13: "All I Have", m. 20-21



Example 14: "All I Have", mm. 46-48

Larsen's cycle invites the listener to consider Jane, via musical syntax and gesture, as an emotionally complete woman, with a depth that her contemporary audiences may have never known.

c. Rhythm, Word Painting and Harmony

Now the last three musical characteristics.

Rhythm

Larsen's use of rhythm derives from the flow of the text: 'music springs from language of the people. [...]. This music can be derived from the rhythms and pitches of spoken American English'.²⁷

The cycle features many changes of meter.

In the third song we discover a fluctuation between two different contrasting rhythmic-metric groups: use of 3/4 at moments of calm, and 4/4 at moments of anger and frustration. When the text and music become increasingly more frustrated, the time signature switches to 4/4, with Larsen instructing the singer to 'fiercely' attack the notes (Example 19). This alteration, between calm and anger, evidence Larsen's understanding of Jane's double character, by musically evoking her conflicting emotions.



Example 15: "A Man Can Love Two Women", mm. 1-2, 7

Word painting

Larsen also **paints the text** with a measured hand. Word painting creates emotional effect in the music. Examples include:

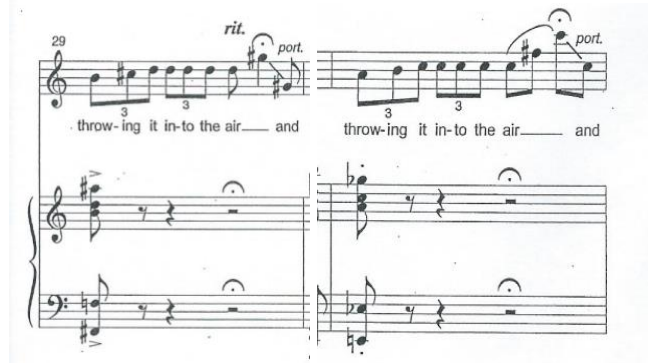
- The leap of *quarta eccedente* between the word 'father-wild' [*He Never Misses*, m. 3]
- The notes referred to the word 'Hickok' that are the same of that used for the first shoot (Example 20)
- The leap of minor sixth on the word 'wild' [*A Working Woman*, m. 24]

²⁷ Matthew Balensuela, *The Composer – Libby Larsen: Composer Emphasizes Rhythm in Her Music*, September 5, 1996, <http://mama.indstate.edu/users/swarens/larsen3.htm>

- The most immediate route to understanding the ‘leap’, through the word ‘air’ which evokes the meaning of the words “throwing it into the air” through music. (Example 21)



Example 20: "He Never Misses", m. 4



Example 21: "A Working Woman", mm 29, 33

Finally, there is **harmony**...

Larsen's style can be recognized by its rhythm more than in a consistent use of harmonic language. In this cycle we don't find conventional functional harmony: she omits key signatures and fosters harmonic freedom by removing a formal tonal centre, replacing it with musical cells that serve as metaphoric portrayals of the tensions and resolutions within Jane's life.

V. Technical Difficulties

Songs from Letters presents the singer and pianist with a range of potential challenges. The following notes, by the composer, illustrate the complex nature of these songs: individually and collectively:

- The melodic lines are structured to follow the natural rise and fall of the American vernacular; therefore, the singer must have a good command of diction.
- I think that one difficulty is in the frequent transition between the more introverted and calm movements, in which the vocalist should show more intimacy and sensitivity and the fast and rowdy movements that need more vocal flair and power. This required an excellent vocal balance for the performer.
- It is important for the performer to follow the direction of the songs and the story to convey the correct intensity during the cycle.
- In the second song the use of dissonance combined with the fast tempo make the song quite difficult to perform
- The third song requires in-depth character development from the singer, and unravelling the different emotions is very challenging
- The fourth song however requires the ability to shift from one emotion to another rapidly, from calm to violent and its extended range makes it very challenging

Larsen gives three additional pieces of advice for singers that wish to perform her repertoire:

1. Prepare your ear. Larsen is extremely considered about offering references regarding pitch, but not in an obvious way. She states that singers "need to be prepared to relate to the music, to feel secure in the pitches, to listen because she does not directly support the vocal line".²⁸
2. Practice your consonants. Be prepared to use them.
3. Practice stamina because Larsen writes for advanced performers.²⁹

Regarding the technique/s required to interpret her vocal music Larsen suggests being careful, with the idea that dynamics may rise and fall with pitch. In romantic performance practice it need only be used when required, because her music may often alter the audience's experience of the words.

Larsen supports the notion that vocal music first derives from the text, and that if the singer has thought carefully about this (from the standpoint of 'meaning'), the singer will avoid interpretation informed by standard practice. The relationship of motives between voice and piano is also central to a singer's understanding of the music, and the power and purpose of motivic development.

²⁸ Libby Larsen, *Interview by Meredith Du Bon*, 27 April 2011, St. Paul, MN.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

VI. Teaching Prompts

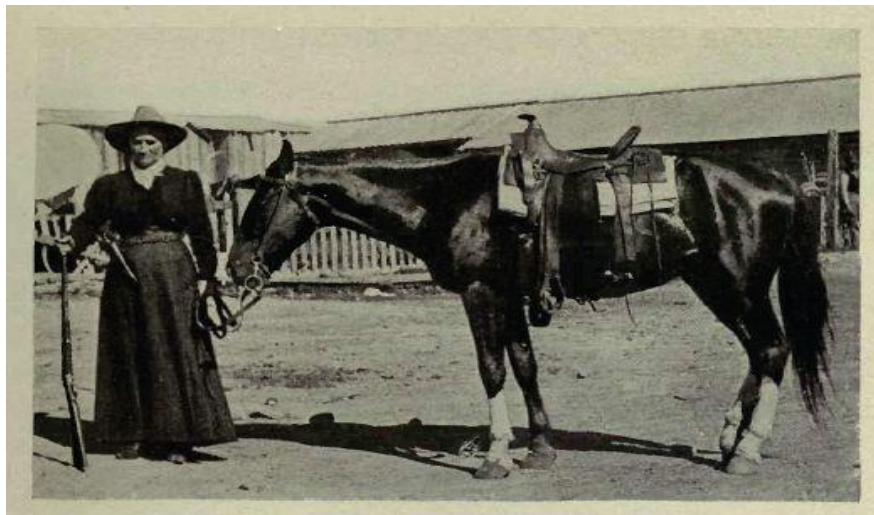
Like Larsen, Calamity Jane was a woman trying to make it in a man's world, and the tension of competing with men caused her to forge her own style. Experiences, as felt by Calamity Jane, hold many similarities to what some women composers experience. The American female composers of our past, had to conquer obstacles of lack of education, opportunity, and ideological gender roles to live the lives they wished for and to compose the music they desired.

A word of wisdom to young women in music in this time, Larsen states:

“Walk through any door as yourself. Meet every situation at the crossroads of respect. There are skills involved. Be vigilant about what you need and insist on getting it. If someone says no, go to someone else. Find people to work with you. It is about self-realisation. It is also a matter of creating your own opportunities. The key is not asking permission. Go around the gate. Gather people around you who want to sing and do what you want to do.”³⁰

One hundred years later, Calamity Jane's life sheds light on contemporary society.

Ruhama Santorsa



Calamity Jane in 1885

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³⁰ *Ibid.*

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