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## Women in Classical Music

Caitriona Cassel

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WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

HONORS SENIOR CAPSTONE

WOMEN IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

By

CAITRIONA CASSEL

Spring Quarter 2023

## ABSTRACT

Women have been underrepresented in Western European classical music for centuries. This paper, in conjunction with my senior voice recital, sheds light on how women's voices can be shared in a variety of different contexts. I explore pieces composed by women, works with poetry written by women, and a few female characters, comparing those written by men to one penned by a woman. Besides becoming intimately familiar with the pieces through performance, in this thesis I share the stories of these musical works and those whose voices are expressed through them by providing background on composers and/or poets, examining characters, and engaging in music analysis. My multifaceted approach to exploring these pieces ultimately demonstrates the importance of women's representation through the publication, accessibility, and performance of their musical works and the sharing of their stories.

## INTRODUCTION

The voices of women have been underrepresented in the world of Western European classical and art music for as long as the genre has existed. Few women composers are part of the canon, significantly fewer texts written by women have been set, and works that express too much femininity tend to be dismissed as unimportant or unsophisticated. Because of this history, I decided to examine the role of women in classical music from the Baroque Era to the present day in my senior vocal recital. I studied pieces that use text written by women, works composed by women (some of which feature both of these elements), and female characters written by male composers versus those penned by female composers. I then researched these women and analyzed the pieces to provide context and history to these works and characters. While it is important to share women's voices, it is equally so to remember the context in which they lived and worked. It is significant to realize that some chose to publish their works while others chose not to and that some came from musical families, some made careers as authors, some were muses, some raised families, and all had complex lives that were made more complicated by working in fields that tend to be unfriendly toward women. Even modern-day women composers face challenges and assumptions, though certainly less than their predecessors.

Due to its nature as a single component of my undergraduate honors thesis project, the other of which was my senior vocal recital, this document is far from a complete. However, it explores the stories of the composers, poets, or characters that were featured in my performance, including the way we view them and some of my own thoughts and interpretations as a performer. My writing follows the order of my recital, and I dissect each set and the female voice(s) that are expressed in each. The first four sets are comprised of art song, with a focus on the composer and/or poet, and the three following sets explore characters, with the final of these three examining both composer and character. The writing about each varies. Some sections include brief composer biographies, some feature character analysis, some highlight musical analysis, and others inspect more sociocultural context. Each section begins by listing the pieces in the set along with a brief introduction, which is followed by a deeper dive into one or more of the aforementioned topics. Additionally, my program with program notes, translations of the pieces, and a

recording of my recital are included as additional components to the written thesis. Overall, the goal of this project is to create a more complete picture of these pieces, the women who forged paths in a world that was not always welcoming, and the legacy that they left, which is worth sharing.

Link to recital recording: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MaGSvz74huCazN-E7kY1TnsxWfWGQXoz/view?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MaGSvz74huCazN-E7kY1TnsxWfWGQXoz/view?usp=drive_link)

**From *Song and Silence* by Dawn Lenore Sonntag with text by Sara Teasdale**  
**“Joy”**  
**“Night Song at Amalfi”**  
**“The Tree of Song”**  
**“Refuge”**

This selection of four songs from a cycle of seven focus on the titular themes of song and silence. This set is special in a couple of ways; not only does it represent the voices of two women, but I also had the chance to speak with the composer. This opportunity allowed for a more in-depth case study on these pieces than the other sets, in which in all but one case the composers are no longer living and either the composer or poet is a woman but not both. What follows is a brief synopsis of the life of Sara Teasdale, an analysis of my recital pieces, and a brief account of my discussion with Dawn Sonntag.

**SARA TEASDALE**

The poetry of Sara Teasdale has been set to music by many composers, and her wide amount of published materials and lyrical style makes it easy to do so. She would even refer to her poems as “songs” and clearly thought of them in a lyrical and musical manner.<sup>1</sup> However, while her poetry has frequently been set to music, she has not often been recognized as a poet since her lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

Sara Teasdale was born as the youngest child to a middle-class family. When she was born, her closest sibling was already fourteen years old.<sup>3</sup> This gave her a very isolated childhood but also allowed her parents to spoil her much more than they may otherwise have been able. Because of this she received many luxuries other children of her social class rarely received and continued to be able to turn to her parents for support and funds during their lifetimes, most notably to fund her first book of poetry in which the publication company said she would have to cover the printing costs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carol B. Schoen, *Sara Teasdale*, Twayne's United States Authors Series 509 (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Nava Atlas, “Sara Teasdale, American Lyric Poet,” *Literary Ladies Guide: An Archive Dedicated to Classic Women Authors and Their Work* (May 27, 2019) accessed Nov. 22, 2022, <https://www.literaryladiesguide.com/author-biography/sara-teasdale/>.

<sup>3</sup> Schoen, *Sara Teasdale*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Living most of her life during the late Victorian era, Sara Teasdale was faced with many expectations for what women should and should not do. While some of these started to become less strict during her lifetime, they were still something she struggled with both in life and in her poetry. Acceptable women's roles at the time were primarily as wives and mothers, focused within the domestic sphere. While it became less frowned upon and more common for women to have careers, it was still not common and many believed it was unsuitable. It was also more common for women to be well-read and receive an education, though only to a certain level, and women who did read and discuss literature and the arts did not do so as experts but much more as a hobby.<sup>5</sup> Teasdale was never loudly outspoken against such expectations (this is one reason why her works have not been revisited as much as some other women from her era), but nonetheless she did not fully conform to them either. In her early life she was part of women's writing group who called themselves "The Potters" and produced a monthly magazine entitled *The Potters Wheel* as an amateur outlet for their writing. Their meetings defied the expectations of the day, allowing them to speak freely and dress as characters from the books they read, even while the amateur scale of what they published did not push boundaries.<sup>6</sup> However, it was this group that led to Teasdale being published in a larger work. This eventually gave her the confidence and drive to publish her own collection of works which ended up being the first of many.

Another example of Teasdale being caught between Victorian expectations and her own independence was her marriage. While she married a well-off businessman, Ernst Filsinger—who supported her work as a published poet and respected her independence<sup>7</sup>—Sara ultimately ended up divorcing him. She never supplied a clear reason that we are aware of, but it was likely due to her complex need for independence and emotional support, which he may not have been able to give with his frequent business trips. Some of her poems also seem to indicate she never fully loved him, which may

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<sup>5</sup> Carol B. Schoen, *Sara Teasdale*, Twayne's United States Authors Series 509 (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 78.

have contributed to feeling emotionally unfulfilled by the relationship. Without telling anyone, she traveled to Reno, Nevada where she stayed for three months to fulfill the legal obligations for divorce.<sup>8</sup>

Teasdale's poetry was well read and acclaimed during her lifetime. In 1917 she published her fourth collection of poetry, *Love Songs*, which was her best-selling collection and also won her the Columbia Poetry Prize, which is now called the Pulitzer Prize.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting then, that since her death her works have largely been overlooked within the literary community. However, there are a handful of reasons that explain this. One is that her style of poetry quickly fell out of favor after her death and therefore her poetry, and others of the same style, were not considered worth much examination. Later, this fact compounded with women still being viewed as inferior, particularly at any intellectual feat, continued to cause her works to be overlooked. In the late 1900's as more women started to be rediscovered, there was largely a focus on women who were loudly outspoken and more openly rebellious to the standards women faced. While Teasdale did not completely conform to the expectations of her day, her resistance was much subtler and within the confines of what was considered acceptable even as it pushed up against the boundaries.<sup>10</sup> However, her works are powerful, lyrical, and still relevant today. They certainly deserve to be revisited and continued to be set to music, as she so clearly strove to make them musical.

## PIECE ANALYSES

Teasdale's poetry is full of lyrical lines and vivid imagery, which naturally lends itself to musicality. Sonntag's setting of Teasdale's poems embodies the text in a variety of ways, and even elaborates upon it, allowing for deeper expression that enriches the text. Looking at the four pieces out of the set of seven that I am performing in my recital we see poetry that covers the range of themes in the set of *Song and Silence*.

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<sup>8</sup> Carol B. Schoen, *Sara Teasdale*, Twayne's United States Authors Series 509 (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 155-156.

<sup>9</sup> "Sara Teasdale," Poetry Foundation, accessed Nov. 22, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sara-teasdale>.

<sup>10</sup> Schoen, *Sara Teasdale*, 175-176.



In the first piece of the set, “Joy,” the first striking element is the exuberant sextuplets in the piano that continue almost nonstop throughout the entire piece. When examining the text of the poem the high energy piano part makes sense—the opening line is “I am wild” and the piano line certainly has a wild feel with the sheer number of notes happening in the right hand that don’t stop arpeggiating. The left hand of the piano also echoes the melody lines in a sort of call-and-response that evokes a shout or a song echoing off a canyon or a mountain perhaps. The whole piece emulates a feeling of freedom and wild abandon. The only moment where the sextuplet arpeggiation pauses (besides the last chord that rings) is the last beat of mm. 20 through the end of 21 where the piano has one held quarter note followed by a measure of sixteenths and eight notes respectively. This is accompanied by the text “I can tread on the grass or the stars,” which is the first reference to physical action other than singing which gives gravity to the idea of walking on either the grass or the stars.

The second song in my recital and the third song in Sonntag’s set is “Night Song at Amalfi,” which focuses on the theme of “silence” instead of “song” unlike the previous example of “Joy.” In “Night Song at Amalfi,” the singer asks “the heaven of stars” and “the darkened seas” “what [they] should give [their] love” and say they are answered with silence, though we never actually hear full silence in the piece. This seems to reflect the sounds that would be heard in the natural world that is being asked these questions. The sea is always making sound. On the coast, winds are almost always blowing and, while it may seem that the singer is only answered with silence, there is not truly silence there. This musical choice may be interpreted as providing the singer with a bit of hope even as the singer laments, wondering “how can I give silence my whole life long?” The answer to their question is right before them; silence can still speak if you know how to listen.

The sixth song of the set is the next in my recital and is titled, “The Tree of Song.” The piece starts with a grounded, repetitive pattern in the piano as the text refers to the singer’s “tree of song.” This elicits the feeling of rootedness and a steady presence akin to that of trees. The music then changes at “you came like a lordly wind” and the piano mimics the blowing of a wind and the whirling of leaves that

is mentioned in the next line. Finally, we return to a steadier pattern but it has been disturbed by the wind and is not the same as before, or as consistent, as the text returns to the tree of song.

The seventh and final song in the set, “Refuge,” represents the sanctuary of singing that gets the singer through hardship, perhaps hardship that connects to the silence mentioned throughout the cycle previously. The piece begins and ends with the same refrain and is in an ABA’ form. In the first A section, the text is about the hardship (“From my spirit’s gray defeat/from my pulses flagging beat/from my hopes that turned to sand” etc.) and we see almost all descending lines in the piano, as if it too is weighed down and feeling defeated. We see a bit of text painting on the word “shifting” in “shifting through my close clenched hand,” as it has a syncopated rhythm alluding to the feel of shifting grains of sand. We don’t see an ascending line until the word “sing,” which ends our first line as we change to a more positive, hopeful outlook, and the ascending line takes course over the whole measure followed by the text “I still am free.” As the text discusses singing as a refuge, the piano plays many high-range melodic lines and there is more ascending and descending arpeggiation. We then get a return of the first stanza of text, the one discussing hardship, but this time the material in the right hand remains in a higher range and the left hand has consistent ascending lines. The word “shifting” is no longer syncopated as though the singer has a much better grasp, and the sand is perhaps not slipping through their fingers quite so dramatically, if at all. There is an acknowledgement of the hardship, but this time there is hope and optimism because there is knowledge that “if I can sing/I still am free.”

#### DAWN LENORE SONNTAG

In my interview with Dawn Sonntag<sup>11</sup> we discussed a variety of interrelated topics ranging from her song cycle *Song and Silence* and her compositional process to community work outside of composing.

Everything we discussed emphasized Sonntag’s tendency to make bold choices, such as leaving an area with a high nativity rate to forge her own path in a difficult field and her choice to use Sara Teasdale’s poetry, to which she was drawn.

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<sup>11</sup> Dawn Lenore Sonntag, interview with the composer (Jan. 20, 2023) Zoom.

We began by discussing the song cycle *Song and Silence* and the poetry of Sara Teasdale. We agreed that part of what is so compelling about Teasdale's work is that there is more to the text than what is written. While Teasdale conformed to the social convention of the day, she did not hide the fact that there was more to what was written, even though these conventions did not allow her to write it. Sonntag related to these messages on a deep level because she, herself, "grew up in a culture that said women were supposed to be silent" and was one of the few people who moved away. Another connection Sonntag shares with the themes Teasdale set forth was her desire to compose something other than what was considered the standard at the time. While she was getting her degree in composition, "serious composers" were composing atonal music but Sonntag said "I'm not going to do this. I don't believe it—that tonality is dead" and chose to compose what she wanted. While western art music, in a sense, wanted to silence tonal music, Sonntag refused to do what was expected. For someone to whom music is so deeply ingrained it makes sense that the "song" aspect of Teasdale's work would also resound. Sonntag described herself as an intuitive composer, explaining that she would put the text in front of her and start improvising with harmonies and melodies coming simultaneously, which frequently made her wonder, "How did I do that? How can I compose again?" This improvisational form of composing is apparent in some of the pieces in the style through runs in the piano and the frequently complex way the vocal and piano lines fit together.

Besides composing, Sonntag also has a strong background in performing in piano, trumpet, and voice. Sonntag played trumpet for ten years in orchestra and chamber ensembles and taught herself piano as a child, later entering her undergraduate program as a piano major. She was drawn to vocal studies last through her love of languages. She would also frequently engage in collaborative piano. Because of this, she was exposed to a multitude of repertoire and considers studying performance, "...the best training [she] could have [for composing]". Sonntag also discussed the role gender has played in her experience as a composer, saying that growing up playing trumpet shaped her mindset of not worrying about encountering problems in the field due to being a woman. However, she did mention that particularly early in her composing career people would assume she composed children's music, "...because I'm a

female, right? And I'm a singer so I must be composing songs for kids." Sonntag has not composed music for kids and has instead focused on larger works precisely for this reason.

In addition to discussing some of the specifics of the Teasdale song cycle, Sonntag also shared some of her broader influences. Sonntag said about her works, "I have found when I look back at my pieces...very often my music is reflecting a message, or educating, or it's about advocacy or raising awareness about really contemporary issues." This can certainly be seen in *Song and Silence*, as many communities and individuals can relate to having their voices silenced and finding their voices through music. The importance Sonntag places on contemporary issues was also apparent in her response to my question, "What is the number one thing you would like to see change and/or evolve in the music world?" Her response was, "More conscious awareness among composers of the impacts of flying airplanes on...climate change and also on people." She elaborated by talking about the many conferences that composers fly to every year and went on to discuss how a proposed new airport is threatening her own home and the work she has done to try and stop its construction and save natural spaces and local homes. In sharing this, Sonntag made it clear that while this may influence her work in the future, this work is not *for* her music. I think her thoughts on the matter are summed up quite nicely in this quote: "It's easy to use music as an escape from hardship...but I think that as musicians we should also be really engaged, active citizens aware of what's going on around us and use the voices that we have to help others and create change." In this way I think Sonntag and Teasdale would have agreed, even if Teasdale had to be subtler in her words due to the period in which she lived. Sonntag's words serve as a reminder and inspiration for all musicians of the power of our voices in everything we do.

## ***Trois poème de Louise de Vilmorin by Francis Poulenc***

**“Le garçon de Liège”**

**“Au-delà”**

**“Aux officiers de la garde blanche”**

As one of two song cycles composed by Francis Poulenc that are set to texts by Louise de Vilmorin, this short cycle is frequently overlooked. Vilmorin became a muse to Poulenc even though few other composers ever set her works. For this set, I examine the collaboration between Poulenc and Vilmorin, including why his settings of her text have been underrepresented when it comes to Poulenc’s expansive library of repertoire, and I briefly dissect each piece.

### POULENC AND VILMORIN

Louise de Vilmorin and Francis Poulenc are very interesting people to examine, both in their lives and within their art. Louise de Vilmorin was unabashedly feminine in her writing style and in how she presented herself to the world in a time where women were facing restrictions on their rights following World War I and the Great Depression. Poulenc had the privilege of being a well-off white man but did face criticism and biases from openly identifying as gay.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps because of these compounding discriminations, Poulenc’s settings of Vilmorin’s works have not received as much attention as many of his others despite his own consideration of them as important compositions.<sup>13</sup>

Vilmorin came from a family of famous French horticulturalists, specifically seed-producers.<sup>14</sup> She was well educated and encouraged to write by her tutor and later in life by friends and lovers.<sup>15</sup> She had a rather dramatic love life with one broken engagement, two rather short-lived marriages, and a variety of other lovers including one of her brothers.<sup>16</sup> These tumultuous relationships are reflected in many of her poems which tend to focus on love, seduction, and the grief and pleasure that tend to

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<sup>12</sup> Allison Abbott, “The So-Called ‘Feminine’ in Fiançailles,” *Proceedings of GREAT Day* vol. 2014, no. 3 (2015): 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Néron, “Francis Poulenc and Louise De Vilmorin, a Surrealism ‘à Fleur De Peau’,” *Journal of Singing - the Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* vol. 69, no. 3 (Jan. 2013).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Abbott, “The So-Called ‘Feminine’ in Fiançailles,” 14.

accompany romantic relationships. Her beauty and seduction also are contributing factors of her being a wholly feminine figure both in day to day life as well as in her writing.

It is important to note this expression of gender while discussing Poulenc's settings because it is a prominent component of how her works are received. In French, the word *genre* means not only "genre," as we may think of it in English, but also "gender."<sup>17</sup> Because of this, the character of works has an inherent connection to gender in French, regardless of the composer. However, with this tends to come a certain bias, as "feminine" writing has traditionally been less structured and less tied to rules that have been and continue to be taught, particularly in western art music. However, this style is frequently interpreted as being too sentimental and driven by emotion to be considered intellectual writing. This is interesting to note because part of what defines Poulenc's compositional style is more freeness of form and stylistic choices that have also generally been characterized as more "feminine."<sup>18</sup> It is perhaps due to this infusion of so-called feminine styles that Poulenc's settings of Vilmorin's poems are generally less recognized, less analyzed, and less performed than many of his other settings.

Many attribute Poulenc's traditionally more feminine composition style and his blending of "masculine" and "feminine" approaches as an expression of his homosexuality. While gender and sexuality are two distinct forms of identity, this likely has an element of truth to it and Poulenc's appreciation and recognition of Louise de Vilmorin also shows an appreciation for feminine styles that we tend to see lacking in many other men of the era. Poulenc was quoted as appreciating Vilmorin's unabashed feminine qualities, and crediting these qualities as part of why he was drawn to her work.<sup>19</sup> While many looked down upon such things, Poulenc shows an appreciation for them, using them as inspiration and muse instead of viewing them as "lesser" as many other men both at the time and since.

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<sup>17</sup> Allison Abbott, "The So-Called 'Feminine' in Fiançailles," *Proceedings of GREAT Day* vol. 2014, no. 3 (2015): 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

## VILMORIN'S POETRY

Despite Louise de Vilmorin's only real claim to fame being Poulenc's settings of her pieces,<sup>20</sup> she was a clever poet who wrote a wide range of works. We can hear this clearly in Poulenc's setting of *Trois poème de Louise de Vilmorin* (*Three Poems of Louise de Vilmorin*) which expresses a variety of moods. While all three relate to one of her most written about topics, love and relationships, they each explore different aspects of the concept and different kinds of romantic relationships.

The first piece "Le garçon de Liège" has multiple examples of wordplay. The most notable (and somewhat overarching theme given the title of the poem) is the play on words that happens with Liège. Liège is both a town in Belgium as well as a type of cork.<sup>21</sup> Therefore the line "a boy from Liège" (which is also the title) can be interpreted both literally and figuratively. The figurate sense is reinforced by the lines that follow; "light, light like the wind who does not take to any trap" just as cork is very light and floats, so too is this boy lighthearted and flighty. This idea of the boy not being able to be pinned down is echoed in Poulenc's piano part which is very spirited and light and moves very quickly, almost as if it is afraid to stop for fear that it might end up getting "trapped."

The second piece "Au-delà" is the most flirtatious and joyful of the three. While the first is perhaps more lighthearted, it focuses on the flightiness of the boy more than the pleasure from the relationship between the boy and the poet (and with a boy that resistant to being tied down, how much of a relationship could it really be?). "Au-delà" focuses on the pleasure of the relationship between two lovers. Upon first read, the poem can seem quite innocent, but a deeper examination reveals many phrases that can be interpreted as innuendos or otherwise more explicit lines. Vilmorin did not seem to fully intend the poem to be so scandalous and was quoted saying, "This poem...I wrote without putting any second thoughts, any improper thoughts." However, when someone directly critiqued its "indecent" nature, she actually changed one of the lines in the published version. "A finger here and there" became

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Néron, "Francis Poulenc and Louise De Vilmorin, a Surrealism 'à Fleur De Peau'," *Journal of Singing - the Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* vol. 69, no. 3 (Jan. 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

“a word here and there.” Nonetheless, Vilmorin sent the original version to be set by Poulenc stating, “I knew your music would have the power to exonerate it in its original form.”<sup>22</sup> Poulenc focused strongly on the narrative of the poem by avoiding musical repetition, even though the last line of each stanza is the first line of the next. By doing so, he gave the lines that repeat a new color upon their second appearance. This is placed over a steady pulse of a repetitive rhythmic pattern in the piano that is only occasionally altered on certain lines.

The third poem in the set is in many ways the most disparate of the collection. “Aux officiers de la garde blanche” is more solemn than its preceding pieces and focuses on the struggles and pain of love than the pleasure. Vilmorin wrote to Poulenc about this piece, “For me, it is less a poem than a prayer and a confession.”<sup>23</sup> She also shared that she wrote it about one of her loves in particular, Jean Hugo.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the other two pieces that have a much more independent and lively piano part, in this piece the voice is almost always doubled by the piano alongside persistent sixteenth notes for which Poulenc cites Vilmorin’s guitar as the inspiration.<sup>25</sup> These sixteenth notes give a sort of urgency to the prayer and the emotions the poet is working through even while the piece itself feels more solemn and ethereal. The places where the piano breaks from doubling the vocal line are very intentional. The first is “keep me above all from him” immediately after which the same line returns, showing the almost desperate call to keep herself from this love but exemplifying her failure to do so. The next time the separation occurs is on the lines “On earth, I wish to weep as rain/Upon his earth, upon his star adorned with boxwood,” which can be interpreted as wanting to transcend her physical body and be the rain upon the earth, in which the piano separation personifies the separation from her physical form. This section also feels like a moment of the text where the poet becomes lost in thought about what she wishes. It’s akin to a daydream within the prayer, in which case the piano separation demonstrates her wandering mind. The next line feels like a

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Néron, “Francis Poulenc and Louise De Vilmorin, a Surrealism ‘à Fleur De Peau’,” *Journal of Singing - the Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* vol. 69, no. 3 (Jan. 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



gradual return as the vocal part stays a fourth above the piano on the line “When later on I shall hover, transparent.” This represents either a gradual return to her physical form or a gradual return to her prayer after a moment of daydreaming.

Overall, the set shows the dynamic range of Louise de Vilmorin as a poet, and the settings by Poulenc emphasize their lyrical and complex nature. The poetry is a testament to feminine writing as it is emotionally complex and worthy of study, be it standalone or set as song. Vilmorin herself shows that not every worthy writer was or has been made famous. She is, unfortunately, also an example of someone that was dismissed because they were not afraid to flaunt their femininity instead of rebelling against feminine expectations or acting in a more masculine manner. However, Poulenc’s settings provide an opportunity to celebrate her writing and share it through song.

## **Lieder from op. 10 by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel**

**“Nach Süden”**

**“Im Herbst”**

**“Bergeslust”**

While Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel is becoming more widely known, she is still frequently overshadowed by her brother. It is important to examine her life beyond her interactions with Felix Mendelssohn, as well as her own thoughts on how she regarded her compositions and their publication. In this section I elaborate on these topics and provide a short analysis of her final composition “Bergeslust.”

### FANNY MENDELSSOHN HENSEL

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel is recognized today as an accomplished composer. Anyone who examines her work today can clearly see and hear this in her music. While there are many narratives out there that focus on how she tragically lived in the shadow of her brother, repressed and discouraged by him, she likely lived a life that was, in many ways, mundane for someone of her social stature and means. Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel was known to be a composer during her lifetime, but she was also a wife and a mother, as was befitting for someone of her station in the era during which she lived. While she certainly could have been more widely known as a composer during her lifetime if she had published sooner, there are many reasons that can be attributed to why she did not. Likely none of these reasons included active protestation or suppression on the part of her brother, father, or husband. In fact, her husband encouraged both her composing and her publishing.<sup>26</sup>

When Mendelssohn Hensel did eventually publish it was not because she had finally broken free, but instead because she was made multiple strong offers by companies who wished to publish her works, and she considered it an experiment to see if it was successful.<sup>27</sup> In full transparency, her brother did write to their mother about his concerns on this topic and it seems he conveyed at least some of these concerns to Mendelssohn Hensel herself, at least by the time that she had been made offers. Ultimately, however,

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<sup>26</sup> Marian Wilson Kimber, “The ‘Suppression’ of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography,” *19th-Century Music* vol. 26, no. 2 (Nov. 2002), 116.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

he supported her decision and wished her the best.<sup>28</sup> The concerns that he and others raised about her publishing (and the reason that she was lauded by at least one source for not publishing more) was because of her social status.<sup>29</sup> She was from a well-off German family that, besides simply maintaining their family name, was under further pressure to be a paradigm of the perfect family due to their Jewish heritage and recent conversion to Christianity.<sup>30</sup> While it is unlikely Mendelssohn Hensel could have openly written about any such frustrations over not being able to pursue composition on the same level as her brother, nothing in her letters or diary entries seems to express discontent with her social allowance to compose and publish. In fact, about some of the works she composed in Italy, she wrote that they were simply for private use, a sort of second diary to chronicle her time spent there and the memories she made. It seems likely then that she viewed her compositions more as a personal creative outlet than a means for fame.<sup>31</sup>

This writing for personal enjoyment may also be one of the reasons she was one of the most prolific composers of lied during her time, with an output similar to Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms, though most of these works went unpublished.<sup>32</sup> The handful of pieces she did publish during her lifetime were produced in the last few years of her life. In the years since her death, particularly the last fifty or so years, many more of her works have been published. These allow a deeper look at Mendelssohn Hensel as a composer. However, this posthumous publishing practice also raises questions of if she would have wanted her works shared in this way and whether she would have considered them complete.<sup>33</sup> While these reasons should not deter from sharing her works today, this conundrum is an

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<sup>28</sup> Marian Wilson Kimber, "The 'Suppression' of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography," *19th-Century Music* vol. 26, no. 2 (Nov. 2002), 116-117.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>31</sup> Marian Wilson Kimber, "From the Concert Hall to the Salon: The Piano Music of Clara Wieck Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel," In *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, edited by R. Larry Todd (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 337.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Rodgers, ed., *The Songs of Fanny Hensel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), "Introduction."

<sup>33</sup> Kimber, *19th-Century Music*, 333.

interesting and important aspect to consider when examining the many pieces that went unpublished during her lifetime.

Throughout Mendelssohn Hensel's personal writings of letters and diaries and in her lieder, there is an immense appreciation for beauty, travel, and the natural world.<sup>34</sup> This classifies many of her works as prime examples of *Waldromantik*, literally "forest romance," a term used for pieces that romanticize and appreciate the natural world, a common style in Romantic era Germany.<sup>35</sup> On her first trip south, near to the border of Italy, she wrote about the beauty of the mountains and valleys<sup>36</sup>, a love that carries through her life all the way to her last composition "Bergeslust." This also created in her a desire to see Italy that went unanswered for many years until she was finally able to go later in life with her husband. She wrote extensively of all the places to which they traveled and all they saw and did while in Italy along with composing multiple pieces that went unpublished during her life.<sup>37</sup>

Even today while most of Mendelssohn Hensel's works have been published and are not difficult to find, there is surprisingly little literature that analyzes her work, especially when compared to the amount of writing that exists about her life and family.<sup>38</sup> This feels like an outdated hold-over from the past in which her works were discussed in writing but not seen fit to analyze due to the fact she was a woman and the assumption was that her pieces would not hold up under scrutiny. While we know better than that today, why are there still so few analyses? Her pieces were in many ways advanced even for the Romantic period, with frequent dramatic modulations to distant keys and back. They maintained touches of past keys that were visited upon returns to the home key and liberally used chromaticism that, while present in compositions at the time, was not yet common to the degree of which she would frequently employ such tools.

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<sup>34</sup> Stephen Rodgers, ed., *The Songs of Fanny Hensel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), "Hensel's Travels."

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., "The Wilderness at Home: Woods-Romanticism in Fanny Hensel's Eichendorff Songs."

<sup>36</sup> Sebastian Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family (1729-1847) from Letters and Journals*, Translated by Carl Klingemann, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1882) v.1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., v.2 103.

<sup>38</sup> Rodgers, *The Songs of Fanny Hensel*, "Introduction."

“Bergeslust,” for example, has a modified strophic form (ABA, or more accurately AA’A’),<sup>39</sup> where the shift to each section is accompanied by a tonal shift. While we start solidly in A major, this quickly changes to the parallel minor in the second section and, within a few bars, shifts yet again to the relative major of C. The end of the second section is marked by a transition back into A major, which we stay in for the final section though it is more varied in the melody to emphasize the end of the song and freedom in the voice and text. Structures like this are not uncommon in Mendelssohn Hensel’s lied. She executes the tonal transitions deftly and in a way that is pleasing to the ear, which can be a difficult feat when it comes to more dramatic tonal shifts.

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<sup>39</sup>Stephen Rodgers, ed., *The Songs of Fanny Hensel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021) “‘Bergeslust.’ Op. 10, No. 5 (1841): Hensel’s ‘letztes Lied’ and its Echoes.”

## Two selected pieces by Barbara Strozzi

“Risolvetevi pensieri”

“Cuore che reprime alla lingua di manifestare il nome della sua cara”

Barbara Strozzi occupies a unique place in the world of Baroque music as the only woman to participate in the circle of Venetian intellectuals to which her father belonged, even if only as a performer of song. This look at her history and compositions provides context to her life and works, including a closer examination of her compositional practices in “Cuore che reprime”.

### STROZZI

Barbara Strozzi was born in Venice in 1619 to Isabella Garzoni, a longtime servant of Giulio Strozzi, who adopted her and to whom she was likely an illegitimate child.<sup>40</sup> Giulio Strozzi was a well-known Venetian intellectual, a member of the Accademia degli Incogniti (Society of the Unknown), and also founded the subgroup Accademia degli Unisoni (Society of the Harmonious)<sup>41</sup> as a platform for Barbara Strozzi’s performances, which were largely of her own compositions.<sup>42</sup> Strozzi studied with the renowned opera composer Francesco Cavalli, who was a student of Monteverdi. This was an opportunity that stemmed from her father’s connections as well as his desire to improve her musical accomplishments and skill.<sup>43</sup> It is also interesting to note that while she performed and studied with a composer known for his operas, she never performed on the public stage.<sup>44</sup> Despite this, her concerts within the Accademia degli Unisoni, combined with the publication of her works, was enough to lead to her public recognition as a woman musician and composer in a male-dominated society. In fact, Strozzi was not only recognized but she, “...also become the most prolific composer of secular vocal music in the mid-seventeenth century,”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Wendy Heller, “Usurping the Place of the Muses: Barbara Strozzi and the Female Composer in Seventeenth-Century Italy,” in *The World of Baroque Music: New Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Strozzi and Gail Archer, *Cantate, Ariete a Una, Due, e Tre Voci, Opus 3* (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1997), vii.

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

<sup>44</sup> Diane Peacock Jezic, *Women Composers: The Lost Tradition Found* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press, 1988), 26.

<sup>45</sup> Heller, *The World of Baroque Music*, 149.

which included a vast number of published works. Throughout her life she published eight volumes of work, all but one of which survive today.<sup>46</sup>

Strozzi's rise to relative prominence is especially interesting when examining common thoughts on gender and music in Italy during this time. While a certain amount of musical training was considered desirable, even necessary for young women, there were also moral issues raised by women making music because of its associations with courtesans and seduction. This connection between music-making and sexual availability was especially strong in Venice, even while in other Northern-Italian courts the demand for professional female singers grew.<sup>47</sup> There was also more exception given to women who were born into musical families, however, and despite the intellectual atmosphere Strozzi was born into, hers was not a musical family. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that there were writings from the Incogniti that called her virtue into question, although it is unclear if this stemmed from her actually being a courtesan or simply because she was an unmarried woman and musician<sup>48</sup>. These complex gender politics are also reflected in her pieces. All of her pieces are vocal works, meaning they all have texts, and most of them feature poetry focused on love, although this is often through a male perspective. This juxtaposition of male, and sometimes even misogynistic voice combines with the female perspective of Strozzi's composition and adds an extra layer of interest to Strozzi's pieces. She is also very text oriented in her compositions. Following the *seconda prattica* tradition in which she was taught, her pieces are full of expressive text painting that aims to clearly convey both the text itself and the emotions behind it.<sup>49</sup> Many of her pieces are strophic and have a clear meter change between the A and B sections that helps

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<sup>46</sup> Ellen Rosand and Beth L. Glixon, "Strozzi, Barbara," *Grove Music Online* (Jan 2001), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.wvu.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.26987>

<sup>47</sup> Wendy Heller, "Usurping the Place of the Muses: Barbara Strozzi and the Female Composer in Seventeenth-Century Italy," in *The World of Baroque Music: New Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 145-146.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>49</sup> Rosand and Glixon, *Grove Music Online* (Jan 2001).

emphasize the melodies and provide contrast.<sup>50</sup> It is clear throughout all her pieces that she has “a strong sense of...compositional control and skill” along with her sensitivity and dedication to the poetic line.<sup>51</sup>

Strozzi’s use of text painting is particularly noticeable in her non-strophic pieces where each line of text can be given its own tempo, decoration, and feeling. We see this throughout “Cuore che reprime alla lingua di manifestare il nome della sua cara” where there are many instances where the tempo and key change line to line. While it is a three-stanza poem and the piece is broken into three main sections, when looking at all the musical shifts that occur it is really more along the lines of nine or ten different sections and arguments could certainly be made for even more. The overall text of the poem deals with feelings of forbidden love for whom the subject of affection cannot be revealed or it will be the poet’s downfall or even death. We see the torment and anguish of these feelings reflected in the key center, which oscillates back and forth between D and F and frequently feels unrooted in a major or minor tonality and instead merely suggests one or the other depending largely upon the text. The piece does not end in a clear key but only a series of chromatic descending lines that progress from V-I in the key of D, the starting key for the entire piece. Besides each section being tailored to the line or lines of text it represents, we hear many instances of text painting. In the opening, “foco” or “fire” occurs on a run that seems to rise and dance around like a flame before coming back down. In the first section of the second verse we hear “pianto” (“tears”) occurring on a descending chromatic line that falls like tears. These instances are throughout the entire piece in addition to musical statements that exemplify an entire line of text. In one such example, the text is the only line that is 100% in one key, F Major: “but in the prison of the heart—its own guardian—keeps the passion enclosed.” This musical setting illustrates that the passion is enclosed in only one key, unlike the rest of the song where the passion drives the key to shift and sometimes be unsettled or unclear.

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<sup>50</sup> Barbara Strozzi and Gail Archer, *Cantate, Ariete a Una, Due, e Tre Voci, Opus 3* (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1997), ix.

<sup>51</sup> Wendy Heller, “Usurping the Place of the Muses: Barbara Strozzi and the Female Composer in Seventeenth-Century Italy,” in *The World of Baroque Music: New Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 166.



## Despina's arias from *Così fan tutte* by W. A. Mozart

“In uomini, in soldati”

“Una donna a quindici anni”

Despina is a character that can be interpreted as flirtatious comic relief but, in reality, she holds a lot of power over the plot. Both of her arias show her clear opinions on love, which she considers to be a game to enjoy more than a romantic venture, but her cleverness demonstrates that she is more than just a seductress. In this set, I examine how *Così* shows hidden depths to her character and how portrayal can affect the autonomy that Despina has throughout the opera.

### DESPINA

*Così fan tutte* is likely the most controversial opera Mozart composed. Many sources say it was not well received at the time it was produced (though this is now contested) and it is still highly debated today.<sup>52</sup> When it was first performed in 1790 the controversy was largely based around some of the more risqué content and philosophy (such as that of Despina). In the present, it is criticized for its portrayal of gender roles and particularly of women. However, even in the century following its production many criticized the content of the opera as being below what they considered Mozart's standard. This inspired some wild tales of how he came to write the opera though, in spite of these criticism and accusations, almost all praise the actual music of *Così fan tutte*. While until the last few decades most of the narrative-based critiques focused on the relationships and morals as opposed to the gender roles, it is certain that the story of *Così* has long been under scrutiny.

Within this tale of straying morals and gender stereotypes is the role of Despina. In many ways Despina defies typical gender roles in comparison to most other characters in the opera. While it can be easy to dismiss her as a temptress who is a pawn in Don Alfonso's scheme, his whole plan (and point of the opera) would be moot without Despina's integral role.<sup>53</sup> We not only see Despina's influence in how

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<sup>52</sup> Bruce Alan Brown, *W. A. Mozart: Così fan tutte*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 24.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Ford, “Two Maids’ and a Peasant Girl’s Music,” Chapter 14 in *Music, Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart's Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così Fan Tutte* (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012) 142.

the opera plays out, with Dorabella and Fiordiligi deciding to pursue romances with these enticing “strangers” while their fiancées are “at war,” we also hear her influence in the music, particularly Dorabella’s pieces.<sup>54</sup> In both of Despina’s arias there is a distinctly pastoral sound which reflects her views on life, or her “doctrine” as she calls them in “Una donna quindici anni.”<sup>55</sup> We see the influence of this sound in Dorabella’s music after “Una donna” when she has taken Despina’s doctrine to heart and allows a romance to begin between her and one of the “Albanians.”<sup>56</sup> Despina’s musical control extends beyond this too with her first aria “In uomini, in soldati,” which is “the most motivically integrated, and transparently and concisely structured aria in [the opera]” according to Charles Ford in *Music, Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart’s Figaro, Don Giovanni, and Così Fan Tutte*.<sup>57</sup> This structure and integration of musical motifs extends to whenever she is present in the music and even plays a role in controlling the tonal center when she is singing in larger numbers.<sup>58</sup>

This musical control not only mirrors Despina’s considerable influence in the plot of the opera, but it also hints at a deeper sense of control and knowing within her character. While the text and ending of the opera indicate that Despina was never in on the deception aspect of Don Alfonso’s scheme (that the so-called Albanians are their fiancées in disguise), one cannot help but wonder if that is really the case. The biggest plot-point from her character that comes from this lack of knowledge is her reaction to all being revealed in the finale “I don’t know if this is a dream, I’m confused and ashamed. So much the better if they’ve done this to me, for I’ve done the same to many others.”<sup>59</sup> This piece could be analyzed as expressing shame at being deceived in such a manner and for having deceived others due to what is largely presented as her lascivious manner. However, it reads to me like a necessary ending for Despina’s character at the time it was written because, during this period, a woman who pursued her own desires

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<sup>54</sup> Edmund J. Goehring, “Despina, Cupid and the Pastoral Mode of *Così fan tutte*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* vol. 7, no. 2 (Jul. 1995): 129.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Ford, “Two Maids’ and a Peasant Girl’s Music,” Chapter 14 in *Music, Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart’s Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così Fan Tutte* (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012) 142.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Ford, “*Così fan tutte*, Act II Finale,” Chapter 20 in *Music, Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart’s Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così Fan Tutte* (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Edmund J. Goehring, “Despina, Cupid and the Pastoral Mode of *Così fan tutte*,” 133.

and was given any merit for it would be unacceptable, offensive, and downright ridiculous, even for opera buffa. Mozart and Da Ponte wouldn't want to give women any ideas, right? However, I have a hard time imagining that a character such as Despina would take the information that she learns at the end of the opera and feel ashamed about her role. If anything, I think she would feel reaffirmed in her beliefs and roll her eyes at Dorabella and Fiordiligi for apologizing so profusely and still wanting to marry their original fiancées after everything she had taught them. And this is only if she did not see through the entire plot, deception and all from the beginning! She is suspicious of Ferrando and Guglielmo when they first appear in disguise, and while the text never indicates that she realizes the deception, it seems unlikely with the cleverness that she exhibits throughout the opera that she would not realize that something was afoot and pay attention to her initial suspicions. While she may be more easy-going and pleasure driven, she is still no fool. If the opera is then examined with the idea that she knew the deception all along, it alters Despina's character arc considerably and particularly in her final lines, because they would be said in jest, or simply as a sort of supplication to Don Alfonso, with Despina coyly playing into his perception of the world.

It is also interesting to note that, while *Così* is often staged with the couples returning to their original fiancées at the end of the opera, this is never explicitly stated in the text. This lack of text and stage direction in the original opera leaves room for alternative interpretations in modern productions that could further change the misogynistic narrative to be more empowering for the female characters in the show. If the couples do not return to how they were at the start but instead remain switched as they were during the deception, Despina's doctrine suddenly garners even more credit. This decision would also likely grant more agency to Dorabella and Fiordiligi, as they would choose to stay with a new man (at least to them) instead of begging for forgiveness for their original man to take them back. Certainly the character of Don Alfonso and the line from which the title of the opera is derived still have their own set of problems, but there are many possibilities that could be explored in modern staging that do not play into the original morals behind the story.

## **Solveig's songs from *Peer Gynt* by Edvard Grieg**

**“Solveig's Sang”**

**“Solveig's Vuggesang”**

Solveig is a complex character who is given very little explanation in the epic work that is *Peer Gynt*. Integral to the plot, but underrepresented in analysis, I explore her possible motivations based on what Henrik Ibsen's text provides but beyond what is written on the page.

### **SOLVEIG**

In Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite* and the play *Peer Gynt* by Henrik Ibsen, Solveig's character takes a back seat to the titular role of Peer Gynt. Peer is an interesting and complex character, which makes Solveig's role in his life that much more interesting. While it is easy to look at the work on a surface level and see Solveig simply as the devoted love interest willing to wait an entire lifetime for her love to return to her and focus on Peer's journey, Solveig has far more complexity, some of which is apparent in her character's actions and some of which is subtler. There are loads of psychological analyses of Peer and the relationship between him and Solveig. On the other hand, there is a surprising lack of works that focus on Solveig, probably due to the story being focused on Peer Gynt's journey (it is named after him after all). However, much can be learned from their interactions and their analysis, and Grieg's music and interpretation of her character adds another layer of depth to be explored.

While there are various schools of thought that have been applied to Peer and his relationship with Solveig, there are some elements that remain true no matter which lens it is examined through. Peer first meets Solveig at a wedding in the beginning of the play and this is what sparks his pursuit of her. While there are varying thoughts on the details of Solveig's feelings and reaction, she seems to also be interested in Peer but is afraid of him as well and, therefore, reticent to act on such feelings.<sup>60</sup> In the end of the play Solveig is all Peer has left in the world, and in many ways she is his salvation, saving him

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<sup>60</sup> Marit Aalen and Anders Zachrisen, “The Structure of desire in Peer Gynt's relationship to Solveig,” *Ibsen Studies* vol. 13, no. 2 (Nov. 2013): 138.

from the Button-moulder.<sup>61</sup> What is most unclear in Solveig's actions is why she goes to live with Peer in the woods. How does she reach a point where her romantic and caring feelings for Peer outweigh her fear of him and his womanizing and mental instability? However, once a reason for Solveig to make this bold choice is found, it does not feel like much of a stretch for her to decide to stay and wait for him while he is away on his journey, since there was such an impetus for her to go to him in the first place.

In exploring Solveig's character and thinking about the text of her songs ("Solveig's Song" and "Solveig's Cradle Song") I have come up with two possible explanations that make sense to me. One focuses on the more motherly aspect of Solveig's character and the other on the romantic feelings between Solveig and Peer. In both of Solveig's songs there are many lines that refer to Peer in a motherly or friendly way—particularly in the Cradle Song when Peer is at the end of his life and she is comforting him. Because of this matronly concern Solveig consistently expresses, it does not feel like a stretch to propose she went into the woods looking for Peer out of concern since this encounter comes after he has been in the mountain, which could certainly spark concern in a caring individual like Solveig. In this approach Solveig has feelings for Peer, but they are not specifically romantic. She loves him but more in the way of a best friend or a child that you worry about going into the world on their own when you can no longer protect them. These feelings would certainly be strong enough to make her stay and wait for him and worry about him as we see and hear happen in "Solveig's Song" and this would also make perfect sense for her words in "Solveig's Cradle Song." The other interpretation focuses more on the interest Solveig expresses but is afraid to act on earlier on in the play, in the wedding scene. For this interpretation Solveig's feelings for Peer and her curiosity about him outweigh her fear of him and ultimately become strong enough that she cannot sit idly by and must go in search of him, which results in her finding him in the woods where they build a cabin. While much of her reference to Peer is not in a specifically romantic manner, she does refer to him as "my desire" in the "Cradle Song," and there is nothing that makes the love she expresses clearly un-romantic. Some might even argue this kind of

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<sup>61</sup> Marit Aalen, "Stray thoughts – seeking home: Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* read in light of Wilfred Bion's ideas," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* vol. 98 no. 2 (Apr. 2017): 429.

longing and waiting is more characteristic of pining after someone you are in love with than of a more platonic love.

As a performer, I find stronger emotions to draw from in the second interpretation of Solveig's motive, but both make sense and can provide strong foundations for a performance and both can be further contextualized by Grieg's music. Regardless of how Solveig is motivated, it does not change the fact that in the "Cradle Song" at the end of the whole production, Solveig represents Peer's "real self" with her love.<sup>62</sup> While Solveig is a complex character in her own right, in the context of the story she is ultimately there to save Peer with her love, regardless of what kind of love it represents. This end is an interesting juxtaposition of having a complex female character, but still having her serve the ends of the male protagonist. It is interesting though that it is the male protagonist who dies at the end of this story, leaving Solveig to continue living her life. While this is certainly not a strong feminist ending, it is not the most dramatically masculine ending either as there is power in Solveig saving Peer and continuing to live.

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<sup>62</sup> Sandra Jarrett, *Edvard Grieg and his Songs* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003) 24.

## From *Clara* by Victoria Bond “I Was Five”

In contrast to the last two characters, the role of Clara is composed by a woman, Victoria Bond, and features a libretto that was also written by a woman, Barbara Zinn Krieger. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the role of Clara feels more natural to step into as a performer. What follows is a brief background of the composer, an analysis of how it feels to step into the role of Clara in comparison to the roles of Despina and Solveig, and some thoughts on how Bond was able to empower the role through her narrative and compositional choices.

### VICTORIA BOND

Victoria Bond (b. 1945) is more traditional in her compositional style than many contemporary composers but still defies traditional narratives. Bond received her undergraduate degree from the University of Southern California, attended Juilliard for both her Masters and PhD, and was the first woman to be awarded a doctorate in conducting from Juilliard.<sup>63</sup> As Denise Von Glahn writes, “If pursuing a career in composition was considered a risky undertaking for women until quite recently, pursuing graduate work in orchestral conducting must have seemed an act of mad insubordination in the 1970s.”<sup>64</sup> It is obvious from this choice that Bond was not someone to let “traditional” women’s roles dictate any part of her life. In fact, she does not like to look at her life in terms of woman or man, masculine or feminine. She instead thinks of creativity as “ambi-sextrist,” a word of her own making, and prefers to think of the concepts of yin and yang, or complementary opposites instead of a fixed binary.<sup>65</sup> It is unsurprising then that Bond rejects the idea that as a woman she can write for the collective women. However, when asked if she felt her music helped to give women who were not satisfied in their womanhood a voice, she said, “I hope so. One hopes that in the personal lies the universal. I can’t speak for the world at large, but I can be [as]

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<sup>63</sup> Sam Di Bonaventura, Barbara Jepson, and Adrienne Fried Block, “Bond, Victoria,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed February 1, 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Denise Von Glahn, “Victoria Bond,” in *Music and the Skillful Listener* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 213.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

honest and clear in terms of letting the ideas filter through me as I possibly can.”<sup>66</sup> In this there is the desire to help connect with and uplift fellow women without speaking *for* them.

As a powerful woman who hopes to empower her fellow women through her work, it is unsurprising that multiple of her operatic works focus on strong female protagonists. Two of these works are *Mrs. President* and *Clara*, which are both based on historical figures. *Mrs. President* tells the story of Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president—even before women were allowed to vote—with the opera concentrated on year Woodhull’s running year, 1972.<sup>67</sup> During her campaign for presidency, Woodhull exposed a sex-scandal involving a well-respected preacher. This led to the cartoonist Thomas Nast to give her the name “Mrs. Satan,” which was initially going to be the name of the opera.<sup>68</sup> While the story ends in something akin to tragedy and Woodhull being disgraced, it is nonetheless a tale of a powerful and ambitious woman. It may be a tragic ending, but it is not one that ends in the death of the heroine. Another of Bond’s operas *Clara*, which I chose to highlight in my recital, tells the story of Clara Schumann, who was a composer, accomplished pianist, and famously known as the wife of Robert Schumann. By focusing on Clara and her closest relationships (not just with Robert but also with her father, her mother, and her step-mother), Clara is shown not only as an accomplished composer but as a human who was faced with many struggles throughout her life.<sup>69</sup> The story is dramatized for the sake of opera, but it is based on real accounts of her life and correspondences. By placing Clara as the central character and seeing and hearing her work through her feelings on stage, she is given the complexity and space that has traditionally been reserved for male roles.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>67</sup> Victoria Bond, “Mrs. Satan, the Woman Who Dreamed of Becoming President,” *Women & Music* 7, no. 3 (Jun 30, 2001): 13.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Victoria Bond, *Clara* (Malvern, PA: Theodore Presser Company, 2019).



## CLARA

The difference between the way in which the role of Clara is written, versus roles such as Despina and Solveig, is particularly apparent when performing the pieces and thinking about the reasons that the character sings. While Despina has her reasons, they are relatively shallow and fleshing them out requires constructing more character and background than she is given within the narrative of *Così*. Solveig is given almost no background or reason for anything. However, Clara is given a rich background, clear emotional stakes in multiple relationships, and a drive to do something with her life beyond being someone's romantic interest. The performer does not have to create their own story to step into the role, and the feelings and issues that Clara works through are relatable. Clara's narrative and character were undoubtedly aided by the fact she was a real person—her character has complexities because she, as a person, had complexities. However, it would be easy to simplify her character for the sake of the opera and it would also be simple to exclude the mother-figures in her life and only focus on the men. It would be easy to villainize her father, to make her not like him, and to focus on the romance between her and Robert. There are so many ways that the complexity that Bond and Krieger, the librettist, put into Clara's character could have been lost, or at least limited, and so it is an accomplishment that it was written so beautifully and in a way that is so relatable while still telling her extraordinary story.

## CONCLUSION

As I spent this last year learning the music for my recital and researching each piece, the question that returns to my mind time and time again is, “Why are these pieces not more widely known?” (Excepting, of course, the Mozart and Grieg). While frustrating, knowing the background of the Western European musical canon sheds light on why these women composers are excluded.<sup>70</sup> However, while the lesser known white male composers seem to hold a position secondary to the canon, most women composers (along with those of any marginalized identity) seem to fall into a tertiary position in relation to the canon. A handful of women composers such as Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, and Francesca Caccini have become more common names, but their stories are not always shared and they are frequently discussed in relation to the men in their life. This is why I wanted to do more than sing pieces composed by women and chose to also write about them and to explore works that share their voices in other ways as well by using their poetry or by portraying female characters.

There are many pieces composed by men with poetry written by men, but it took quite a bit of searching to find music and text written by women. These pieces do exist, and from many periods throughout time, but they can be hard to find. I stumbled upon the Sonntag/Teasdale set almost by accident while searching through databases. I looked at many operas composed by women before finding one for which I could access the music without needing to spend a couple hundred dollars to buy an entire opera score, if I could find a score at all. Access is one of the biggest barriers when looking for these pieces that are tertiary to the canon. When searching for Barbara Strozzi’s works, I found a decent number of pieces but all except maybe two only had unfigured basslines as accompaniment. Because of this, at my recital one piece was performed with the bassline as accompaniment played on cello, and the other I had to pay to have realized in order to have a performance closer to the composer’s intended sound. While access is increasing, it is the exposure and demand of performing pieces that drives them to

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<sup>70</sup> Sara Haefeli, “If History Is Written by the Victors,” *TheAvidListener*, <https://theavidlistenerblogcom.wordpress.com/2020/07/23/if-history-is-written-by-the-victors/>

be readily available. This limited access creates an illusion of limiting demand, which slows the increase of availability, even while more efforts to create anthologies of works by or including women composers seems to be on the rise. This representation is important. It is important to music history, important for performers, and important to show young composers they have role models that aren't just dead white cis men. It is my hope that my recital and accompanying research demonstrate a variety of ways in which women can be represented and that this work also shows the need for increased access and representation, not just of women, but of any group which is underrepresented in western classical art music.

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