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The Elements of American Vernacular in Three Selected Chamber Works of Libby Larsen: Holy Roller; Barn Dances; and Trio for Piano and Strings

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THE ELEMENTS OF AMERICAN VERNACULAR IN THREE SELECTED CHAMBER WORKS OF LIBBY LARSEN: HOLY ROLLER; BARN DANCES; AND TRIO FOR PIANO AND STRINGS

By

Mary Alice Domenica

A DOCTORAL ESSAY

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2010
UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A doctoral essay submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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THE ELEMENTS OF AMERICAN VERNACULAR IN THREE SELECTED
CHAMBER WORKS OF LIBBY LARSEN: HOLY ROLLER; BARN DANCES; AND
TRIO FOR PIANO AND STRINGS

Mary Alice Domenica

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The Elements of American Vernacular in Three Selected Chamber Works of Libby Larsen: Holy Roller; Barn Dances; and Trio for Piano and Strings  

Abstract of a doctoral essay at the University of Miami.  

Doctoral essay supervised by Dr. Paul Posnak.  
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The focus of this essay is a discussion of Libby Larsen’s relationship with American vernacular musical expression in her piano chamber music works. This essay examines three works that are representative of the wide range of influences in her piano chamber music: Holy Roller for Alto Saxophone and Piano; Barn Dances for Flute, Clarinet, and Piano; and Trio for Piano and Strings for Violin, Cello, and Piano. They are inspired, respectively, by three different genres of American music: gospel, Western square dance, and jazz. In so doing, this essay discusses Larsen’s use of musical quotations, idiomatic harmonic elements, and patterns of rhythm and melody drawn from these varied aspects of American culture. It is essential for musicians to understand how to play varying genres, and this essay offers suggestions on how to play the three different genres of gospel, Western square dance, and jazz within the context of Larsen’s music. This essay will hopefully bring these works, and Larsen’s larger body of works, to the greater attention of the musical community and introduce them to a wider audience.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Libby Larsen is one of America’s premier contemporary composers. USA Today describes her as being “the only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively.”¹ The Grammy-award winning artist was the first woman to be named Resident Composer of a major orchestra, collaborating with the Minnesota Orchestra in 1983. Her opera, Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus, was lauded by USA Today as one of the eight best classical music events of 1990.² She co-founded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composers Forum, which has served as an “invaluable advocate for composers in a difficult, transitional time for American arts.”³ Larsen is the winner of the Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She was the Harissios Chair of Education at the Library of Congress from 2003


to 2004, and is a highly sought-after lecturer at universities and conferences. A picture of Libby Larsen is shown in figure 1.

![Figure 1. Picture of Libby Larsen.](image)

Larsen has collaborated in commissions and recordings with numerous acclaimed ensembles and musicians, including the King’s Singers, sopranos Benita Valente and Frederica von Stade, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and the Colorado Symphony Orchestra. She is now widely recorded, with nine recordings featuring her music on labels including Angel/EMI, Nonesuch, Decca, and Koch International, and at least thirty-four other recordings that include her works.5

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The majority of literature written about Larsen places a strong emphasis on her genius in the realm of vocal music. Larsen’s works for choir, chamber singers, and the opera are attracting increasing world-wide attention. She has a unique gift for dissecting the English language and vernacular dialect. Almost all scholarly research and critical commentary emphasizes her vocal music. She has written nearly thirty published piano chamber works. Apart from concert reviews and brief descriptions in music journals, only a handful of these works have been discussed in depth by musical scholars.

Larsen believes that her chamber music is less known than her other works because the chamber music world is hesitant to move beyond the canon of eighteenth and nineteenth century music. Larsen explains, “the chamber music world is not necessarily looking for new repertoire, whereas [in] the vocal world, the wind world, there are so many ensembles and instruments that are, that want to speak vitally through new repertoire. But the chamber music world doesn’t necessarily want to do that. It’s not really looking to build the repertoire.”

Larsen is turning to uniquely American elements

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8 Libby Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
to renovate the chamber music world. She approaches vocal writing and instrumental writing differently, explaining:

[In my vocal writing] the line comes from the words. That’s the way you can build characters. . . . And of course, if you really work on the words, work from the words to build the vocal line, you know, then the two really belong together . . . You don’t have words when you’re working with instruments. You’ve got physics, and you have mechanics, and you have muscle training because we all play etudes over and over again. . . we’re training our muscles in certain ways.9

Larsen’s musical inspiration and style derive from her identity as an American composer. She was born and raised in Minnesota by a music-loving family who listened to an eclectic mix of music, from boogie-woogie to country Western music. It is no accident that she is heavily influenced by American styles such as boogie-woogie, jazz, gospel music, and Western square dances. Larsen states, “I want people to look at my music through the American cultural tradition as opposed to the European Art Music [tradition].”10 Nick Rissman, Associate Professor of Music at Lamar University, notes that Larsen is an excellent example of an American postmodern composer, stating, “under the dictionary entry ‘American Post-Modern Music,’ it probably says, ‘See Libby Larsen.’”11 Many American composers can be tied to one region of the United States, such as Aaron Copland with the West, Charles Ives with New England, or Gershwin and Bernstein with the fast pace of New York City, yet Larsen is a multilingual Americanist. Larsen explains her viewpoint:

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9 Ibid.


I was born in 1950, and so I had a record player. The generations before me did not have access to various musics the way the generations from 1950 on did. It is profound. . . . if you understand that music is infinite, and really can be shaped any way you want, then the listening to music from that point of view gives you catholic ears – meaning all music is interesting, because it is all various systems of organization and perception. And so I have decided for myself that this is the new frontier.12

Larsen is searching to reflect the full range of American culture – a culture that is as multifaceted and complex as her music. Her music has been praised for “its dynamic, deeply inspired and vigorous contemporary American spirit.”13 Her eclectic style relies on this foundation of American vernacular musical elements, but relatively little has been written about these defining influences in her instrumental chamber music.14 Larsen stressed the importance of American music to her works in a conversation with me, stating that her search for the source of truly American music meant to her “a search for the source of music itself.”15 Larsen notes what specifically colors her music:

Whatever it is about music that is American is usually defined by the rhythm of the language. American English is not a pitch-centered language; it’s really a rhythmic-centered language. Our tessitura tends to ride somewhere between a fourth and a fifth, and we patter along in that tessitura in a quite rhythmically complex way. Then we use inflections outside of the fourth and fifth to express emotion. . . . In my work, I find the rhythmic aspects of our culture to be infinitely interesting and always changing. . . . So, the rhythmic vitality that really defines us is really one of the central ways that we define ourselves as a group of people.16

12 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.


16 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
Larsen’s music draws its source from the rhythmic structure of the American dialect.

**Purpose of the Study**

The focus of this essay is a discussion of Libby Larsen’s relationship with American vernacular musical expression in her piano chamber music works. This essay examines three works that are representative of the wide range of influences in her piano chamber music: *Holy Roller* for Alto Saxophone and Piano; *Barn Dances* for Flute, Clarinet, and Piano; and *Trio for Piano and Strings* for Violin, Cello, and Piano. They are inspired, respectively, by three different genres of American music: gospel, Western square dance, and jazz. In so doing, this essay discusses Larsen’s use of musical quotations, idiomatic harmonic elements, and patterns of rhythm and melody drawn from these varied aspects of American culture. It is essential for musicians to understand how to play varying genres, and this essay offers suggestions on how to play the three different genres of gospel, Western square dance, and jazz within the context of Larsen’s music. Larsen notes the importance of musicians’ understanding of different styles: “What is the music in the culture? . . . The best musicians are fluent in many different styles. The instruments are vehicles.”\(^\text{17}\) This essay will hopefully bring these works, and Larsen’s larger body of works, to the greater attention of the musical community and introduce them to a wider audience.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
Research Questions

This essay is framed by the following questions:

1. What is Larsen’s significance as a composer?

2. What are the influences of American vernacular music that she uses in these three selected chamber works, and how does she incorporate them into her music?

3. How does an understanding of these genres affect the performance of these works?

The above questions are answered through an examination of material written about Larsen, and from an analysis of her use of American musical styles, including musical quotations, melodic patterns and rhythmic elements in the selected chamber music works. My conversations with Larsen shed light on her compositional process and her use of American vernacular musical elements in her works.

Presentation of the Study

The essay is organized as follows: the second chapter of the essay discusses literature related to the topic. Information about Larsen’s background and musical training is included in this section, and a discussion about the ways in which her upbringing has influenced her music. This chapter also addresses Larsen’s compositional techniques and the insights she has provided about her works. Larsen’s vocal and choral music, instrumental music, and the three selected piano chamber music works are
discussed. The third chapter of the essay outlines the methodology for this work, including delimitations, source materials, the interview process, and analysis methods.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of this essay look respectively at the three selected chamber works by Larsen: *Holy Roller*, *Barn Dances*; and *Trio for Piano and Strings*. These chapters briefly describe and discuss elements of gospel music, Western square dance, and jazz as they specifically relate to these works and pertain to the performance of Larsen’s music. The examination of *Holy Roller* for Alto Saxophone and Piano includes a brief history of gospel music and revival meetings, with particular emphasis on the dialect of gospel preachers. This chapter analyzes Larsen’s use of gospel elements in *Holy Roller*. The examination of *Barn Dances* for Flute, Clarinet, and Piano entails a cursory history of square dances and cowboy songs, including a brief discussion about Gene Autry and details about specific square dances related to the movements. This chapter analyzes *Barn Dances* with an emphasis on elements of Western square dances in the work. Finally, the discussion of *Trio for Piano and Strings* includes a brief history of jazz, particularly emphasizing the styles of Miles Davis. The analysis of *Trio for Piano and Strings* primarily focuses on the elements of jazz in the work. All three of these works include literal quotations and rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic elements of American music. The goal of this essay is to shed light on the idiomatic inclusion of diverse characteristics of American music in Larsen’s works.
Importance of the Study

Relatively little has been written in scholarly literature about the elements of American music in Larsen’s instrumental piano chamber music. All relevant pieces of literature discussed in this section of the essay will be examined in further detail in the following chapter. A number of dissertations and articles have been written about Larsen’s choral and vocal music which shed light on Larsen’s compositional techniques, particularly because the majority of these writings include interviews with the composer. These pieces of literature include papers and/or articles by Douglas Boyer, Associate Choral Professor at Texas Lutheran University, Harriet McCleary, Associate Vocal Professor at St. Olaf College, Jennifer Kelly, Assistant Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at Lafayette College, and Cynthia Green, oboe professor at Missouri State University.

Larsen has written numerous articles about composing, including “Reaching the Audience,” “The Concert Hall That Fell Asleep and Woke Up as a Car Radio,” “A Composer and Her Public: A Mutual Seeking,” “The Role of the Musician in the 21st Century: Rethinking the Core,” and “Double Joy.” She often discusses the role of the composer in today’s culture and describes her vocal compositional techniques. But she rarely discusses specific details about her instrumental chamber music.

Several graduate papers have been written about Larsen’s piano chamber music, including a doctoral paper by Hyunjung Lee at Boston University, entitled “Libby Larsen’s *Four on the Floor* (1983) and *Slang* (1994),” and a master’s thesis by Alicia Cook, entitled “The Evolving Style of Libby Larsen.”19 Neither of these papers sheds significant light on Larsen’s chamber music. A master’s thesis written by Julie Auman, entitled “An Analysis of *Holy Roller* for Saxophone and Piano Composed by Libby Larsen,” has been lost somewhere in the vaults of Missouri State University. A search of nearby universities in Missouri yielded no results, and contact with Auman herself has proven to be unfruitful.

The small amount of material discussing Larsen’s instrumental music includes papers and/or articles written by Kathy Romey, Director of Choral Activities at the University of Minnesota, Susan Barbieri, violinist and editor for the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, and Linda Moorhouse, Associate Director of Bands at Louisiana State University. These studies and commentaries give insight into Larsen’s instrumental compositional techniques, particularly through extended interviews with the composer.

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CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Nearly every piece of literature concerning Larsen includes interviews with the composer. Larsen is incredibly generous with her time and she feels strongly that composers need to communicate with the world. She has written numerous articles, book chapters, and speeches which help make clear to us her thoughts as a composer. I have catalogued literature related to my topic in the following organizational manner: biographical sources; sources detailing Larsen’s views of her musical influences, audience, and culture; sources discussing Larsen’s vocal and choral music; literature written about Larsen’s instrumental music; and a brief discussion of Larsen’s introductions to my three selected piano chamber music works.

Biographical Sources

Several books generally discuss Larsen’s life and importance. In the book *Women and Music: A History*, the history of women in music is chronicled from medieval times to the present. J. Michele Edwards briefly describes important American women composers since 1920, hailing Larsen as “one of the most important and successful
composers in the United States.” She goes on to describe Larsen: “Larsen, who claims Gregorian chant, rock ‘n’ roll, stride boogie piano, and music from radio and television are all among her musical influences, has frequently sought to update the traditions and sounds of the concert hall through the inclusion of vernacular music.” Charles Fowler served as an editor and author in the textbook *Music! Its Role and Importance in Our Lives*. This book educates high-school students about the American musical heritage. One chapter of the book discusses three American composers: Aaron Copland, Duke Ellington, and Libby Larsen. Sophie Fuller gives a brief synopsis of important women composers in her book, *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers*. These books serve as an important foundation to understanding Larsen’s significance as a culturally relevant composer. In this essay, I specifically discuss the relevance of Larsen’s chamber music.

**Musical Influences, Audience, and Culture**

Several sources describe Larsen’s musical influences. Larsen’s website includes bibliographical information, speeches and articles, her discography, and question-and-answers. In the section titled “Frequently Asked Questions,” Larsen describes her early piano lessons, stating, “I played very unusual repertoire – Mozart, Bartok, Stravinsky,

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21 Ibid.


Japanese music, and ‘boogie’ right away. That variety was very important in introducing so many different musical sounds and colors to me.”

Other useful sources describing Larsen’s musical influences include articles by Cynthia Green and Douglas Boyer in which Larsen discusses her favorite music and composers, including Debussy, James Brown, and Hank Williams. She explains that she is drawn to music with distinct colors and rhythm. It is important to understand Larsen’s eclectic listening “palate” as described in these sources, because this knowledge serves as a guide to understanding one important aspect of Larsen’s interest in American music: she wants to write music influenced by distinctive colors and rhythms.

Larsen discusses the significance of her music in relation to the audience in several articles, including her Symphony articles “A Composer and Her Public: A Mutual Seeking,” and “Reaching the Audience.” She also discusses her views on the audience in an interview with classical radio broadcaster Bruce Duffie. In one of her Symphony articles she explains her mission as a composer, stating, “. . . if the music works, it communicates. And if it communicates, it reaches people. And if it reaches people, it becomes part of the community.” These sources demonstrate why Larsen writes

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28 Larsen, “Reaching the Audience,” 41.
American vernacular-influenced music: she wants her music to emotionally connect with the American audience.

Larsen frequently discusses her use of American musical styles. The numerous sources which describe her thoughts on music and culture include the following: a lecture given by Larsen at the University of Minnesota, entitled “Eurocentric Academic Teaching Systems & American Music;” Larsen’s speech at the weekly Colloquium meeting, entitled “The Concert Hall That Fell Asleep and Woke Up as a Car Radio;” Larsen’s speech at the Music National Convention, entitled “The Role of the Musician in the 21st Century: Rethinking the Core;” an interview with Alicia Cook in Cook’s master’s thesis “The Evolving Style of Libby Larsen;” an interview with Raymond Tuttle in an article written for Fanfare – The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors; an interview with Susan Chastain in the International Alliance of Women Composers Journal; an interview with J. Heywood Alexander in the book To Stretch Our Ears: A Documentary History of America’s Music; and an interview with Thomas Erdmann in his Women of Note Quarterly article, entitled “Profile.”

All of these sources can be summarized by a comment in Larsen’s lecture at the University of Minnesota, where she states that “a composer speaks musically in the colors, rhythms, textures, and materials of the culture.

in which he or she resides.” She uses cultural references in her music to accomplish this goal.

**Vocal and Choral Music**

As stated earlier, the bulk of the scholarly material written about Libby Larsen is devoted to her vocal and choral music. These sources discuss how Larsen translates American vernacular expression into music. Larsen’s use of rhythm in her vocal music reflects her love of the nuances of the English language. Jeanenne Bezerra examines Larsen’s vocal music in her master’s thesis, “The Relationship Between Text and Music in the Works of Libby Larsen.” Bezerra discusses how Larsen uses text in all mediums of her music, stating:

> Rhythm is a primary consideration in Larsen’s technique, and she gives careful consideration to the rhythm of the spoken language when she composes for all mediums of music. Language naturally contains rhythm, and rhythm is one of Larsen’s references for listening. When composing she thinks of words and creates rhythmic cells associated with the words. Through this process she has come to relate instrumental music to text because she considers all music to be language. She believes that instrumental music allows a great range of rhythmic exploration. The activity of words generating rhythmic cells occurs in all mediums of composition, but Larsen acknowledges that instrumental music allows for more complex rhythmic cells and structures.

Building upon Bezerra’s analysis of Larsen’s translation of vernacular speech into instrumental music, this essay describes how Larsen translates elements of vernacular speech into the three selected chamber works, exemplified particularly by *Holy Roller*.

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Other useful sources discussing Larsen’s vocal and choral music include Larsen’s own article in The American Organist, entitled “Double Joy”; Douglas Boyer’s dissertation “The Choral Music of Libby Larsen: An Analytical Study of Style;” Jennifer Kelly’s dissertation “Libby Larsen Composes Love Songs: Five Songs on Texts by Women Poets: An Artist’s Identity Informs her Work;” Dr. Harriet McCleary’s article in the National Association of Teachers of Singing Journal, entitled “A Song Cycle by Libby Larsen: ME (Brenda Ueland);” and Tina Milhorn’s DMA dissertation “Music and Memoir: Libby Larsen’s Settings of First-Person Texts by Women: ME (Brenda Ueland); Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to her Daughter Janey; Try Me, Good King: Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII.” These sources all discuss Larsen’s compositional techniques in regard to her vocal and choral music, particularly her use of musical quotations and American musical idioms. I build upon these discussions of Larsen’s compositional techniques by detailing how Larsen uses these techniques in her chamber music.

**Instrumental Music**

In order to understand why Larsen is writing instrumental music influenced by vocal, jazz and popular American styles, an understanding of her view of instrumental

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music today is essential. In her interview with Richard Kessler, Executive Director of the American Music Center, Larsen discusses her view of the orchestral world:

I believe that the music that grows over time in a culture grows out of the language those people speak. Instruments evolve out of a culture in order to express the culture through sound. With the exception of the violin becoming a fiddle and the contrabass becoming a plucked bass, I see that the core of the orchestra (the strings) are instruments which have not naturally found their way into the ensembles that have developed American Musics (...ragtime, gospel, big-band, country-western, rock-and-roll...).³³

This interview contains valuable information regarding Larsen’s view of instrumental music: she believes that classical instrumental music has failed to evolve culturally. This essay examines how Larsen is rejuvenating instrumental music through her use of American-infused idioms in her chamber music.

Larsen notes in interviews with both Daniel James Jacobi and Michele Shoemaker in their respective graduate papers, “Performance Considerations of Libby Larsen’s Corker for Clarinet and Percussion,” and “Language, Imagery and Reference: The Clarinet as a Cultural Vehicle in Libby Larsen’s Instrumental Music,” that the clarinet and the saxophone are instruments uniquely capable of reflecting the American culture.³⁴ Larsen uses these two instruments in Holy Roller and Trio for Piano and Strings. This essay discusses how her instrumentation in these three selected chamber works adds to the specific cultural relevancy of her music.


The majority of the sources written about Larsen’s instrumental music illustrate her compositional techniques. Larsen states that she approaches vocal and instrumental music differently.35 Useful sources related to this topic include Larsen’s chapter in the book *Composers on Composing for Choir*; Kathy Romey’s interview with Larsen in an *International Choral Bulletin* article; Susan M. Barbieri’s article in the *Strings* publication, entitled “The Language of Strings: Composer Libby Larsen’s Music Speaks in American Vernacular;” Janet Robbins’ interview with Larsen in her *Orff Echo* article, entitled “The Mysteries of Creation: A Conversation with Libby Larsen;” a dissertation written by Linda Moorhouse, entitled “A Study of the Wind Band Writing of Two Contemporary Composers: Libby Larsen and Frank Ticheli;” and Andrea Mitternight’s dissertation, “An Original Work: ‘Brothers and Sisters’ and *Songs from Letters* by Libby Larsen: An Analysis.”36 These sources discuss how Larsen focuses on color, timbre, and sound effects instead of melody in her instrumental music. This essay builds upon these observations to analyze how Larsen uses the colors, and unique sounds and inflections of American music in her chamber music.

Linda Moorhouse’s dissertation, “A Study of the Wind Band Writing of Two Contemporary Composers: Libby Larsen and Frank Ticheli,” discusses an interesting aspect of Larsen’s instrumental music: her use of fragments of American vernacular

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musical styles. Larsen tells Moorhouse that she loves the music of Carl Stalling, the noted American composer and arranger of music for animated cartoons. Stalling incorporated multiple fragments (“sound bites”) of American vernacular musical styles into his music. Larsen states that she considers Stalling to be one of her greatest inspirations in regards to harmonic and melodic language.\(^\text{37}\) This essay examines how Larsen uses American vernacular musical styles and musical quotations in her chamber music.

Larsen discusses her chamber music in her interview with Ann McCutchan in the book *The Muse That Sings: Composers Speak about the Creative Process*. Larsen describes working with chamber musicians:

Preparation and communication with performers is very different in chamber music – discussion is part of the process from the beginning. . . . For instance, I wrote a piece for the Cleveland Quartet and then went to work with them. We spent the entire time as if we were in a painting studio, coloring the phrases this way and that. We all got to explore a lot – it was marvelous! In a sense we were all composing. The quartet members were part of the process, as they should have been. The piece itself was still being made, even though it was fully realized on paper. It’s like rehearsing a play: how many ways can you say a particular line? Chamber music gives everyone the opportunity to explore what they know how to do and apply it to a piece of music. It also allows a piece of music to show players what they can do.\(^\text{38}\)

This interview demonstrates Larsen’s fascination with chamber music: she believes that ensemble playing gives musicians the opportunity to speak individually and apply their voices to a cohesive chamber music work. Larsen’s enthusiasm for chamber music demonstrates why this genre is an important aspect of her musical output.


Three Selected Piano Chamber Music Works

In the introduction to *Holy Roller*, Larsen explains that the piece stemmed from her research on the Azusa Street Revival – the longest-running revival meeting in America. She goes on to explain:

*Holy Roller* is inspired by classical revival preaching. To me, revival sermons are stunning musical masterpieces of rhythm, tempo, and extraordinary tension and release. The music flows directly from the language, cajoling, and incanting, at the same time magnetizing and mesmerizing the listener with its irresistible invocations. The music is the language, the language is the music and the result transports the spirit to other states of being.39

Larsen also states that she included quotations of three gospel hymns in this work. *Holy Roller* is a clear example of her ability to translate vernacular language into instrumental music, by taking elements of gospel music and speech and translating them into art music.

Larsen’s introduction to *Barn Dances* describes her inspiration for the work:

“Forward Six and Fall Back Eight” uses fiddle fifths, or the tuning gesture of country fiddling, to propel the idea of six notes rising followed by eight notes descending. The movement is a hoedown jig. The second movement, “Divide the Ring,” is a homage to Gene Autry, one of the great cowboy singers, and one of my childhood heroes. In this movement, I composed a phrase in a cowboy swing style, which is a paraphrase of a typical instrumental introduction to a Gene Autry song. It is first heard as the introduction to the movement and returns throughout the piece. “Varsouvianna” is a slow, simple, and dreamlike waltz. Percussive, unpredictable in its accents, and virtuosic in its ensemble, “Rattlesnake Twist” can be thought of as a jazz-driven equivalent of a *tarantella*.40

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Larsen’s *Barn Dances* is an excellent example of a Larsen work containing elements of Western square dances and cowboy songs, including the specific use of Gene Autry’s musical style.

In Larsen’s introduction to *Trio for Piano and Strings*, she states,

> The piece is a fairly athletic work in three movements. Movements I and III are very rhythmic, fast, and hauntingly jazz-like – in a Miles Davis kind of way. The third movement is influenced by jazz and has a quote from Zez Confrey’s *Kitten on the Keys*. The second movement is quite placid, exploiting the rising – and falling – third motif of the first movement, and is free flowing and very quiet.41

Larsen uses elements of jazz music to create this work, particularly the music of Miles Davis.

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CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Delimitations

The scope of this essay is limited to three selected piano chamber works: *Holy Roller*, *Barn Dances*, and *Trio for Piano and Strings*. I have selected them because they clearly demonstrate Larsen’s use of American musical expression in her piano chamber music. Exploration of these three pieces will lead to a succinct examination of three genres of American musical styles: gospel, Western square dance, and jazz.

Source Materials

The majority of the material written about Larsen is available through interlibrary loan. The University of Miami’s Weeks Music Library has purchased twelve of Larsen’s chamber music works, available through purchase at Libby Larsen Publishing. Although I communicated frequently with Larsen by email, I also interviewed her by phone for the purposes of this essay.
Interview Process

There is surprisingly little published discussion of Larsen’s piano chamber music. Larsen has been extensively interviewed over the course of her career, but she has rarely discussed her instrumental music in any detail. This being the case, it is important to the relevance and veracity of this essay to obtain first-hand knowledge and accounts from Dr. Larsen about her piano chamber works.

Larsen’s explanation of her compositional process in regards to these three selected works will ensure accurate analysis of these compositions. It is important to discover more about how Larsen differentiates between vocal music and instrumental music in her compositional process. A dialogue with her about her musical inspirations for these selected works has lead to a more thorough understanding of her use of American vernacular musical elements. Her insights have provided credibility and interest to this doctoral project.

Analysis

A traditional harmonic analysis of the three works will not be effective, particularly because Larsen herself describes her harmonic language as “pools of tonality” rather than traditional harmony.\textsuperscript{42} I have analyzed aspects of stylistic American elements in the selected chamber works and how these elements help to create a cohesive

structure. For example, I compare a cowboy song by Gene Autry with the second movement of *Barn Dances*, examining how Larsen invokes the cowboy song style in her music.

In a 1959 article, “Musical Style and Social Context,” by famed collector and recorder of American folk music Alan Lomax, he indicates what is entailed in a study of a culture’s music. Lomax discusses the importance of understanding the scales, the interval systems, the rhythmic patterns, the melodic patterns, the melodic contours, the techniques of harmony used as well as the instruments and instrumental techniques used in that type of cultural expression. But he stresses that the people who make this music, the relationship between the music makers and the audience, the physical behavior of the musical makers, the vocal timbres and pitch favored by the culture, the social function of the music and the occasion of its production, its psychological and emotional content as expressed in the song text, and how the songs are learned and transmitted are all behavioral patterns which must be understood before a formal analysis of the music can truly take place. As Lomax states, “A musical style is learned as a whole and responded to as a whole by a member of any culture. If some familiar element is absent in a performance, the music gives far less satisfaction.”

Larsen’s work is informed by her in-depth knowledge of musical styles. She studies the behavioral and formal aspect of American musical styles in order to create her American vernacular-influenced music. In my analysis, I briefly outline the varying characteristics of the three different genres seen in these three works, and show how Larsen uses the elements of these American styles in her music. The analysis was

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conducted in consultation with the composer to ensure a well-documented, scholarly
discussion of Libby Larsen’s unique and vibrant piano chamber music.
American gospel music resulted from the cohesion of spirituals, which are an integration of African songs, New England psalmody and hymnody, and blues and jazz.\textsuperscript{44} Elements of African music can be seen in many different American genres. Larsen notes that African music “defines rock-and-roll and clearly in that perspective defines so much of American music . . . the off-beat, back-beat, the fact that almost all the music-making in funk is done in the second half of the second beat.”\textsuperscript{45} Gospel music evolved in the mass revival meetings of the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{46} Larsen notes that the revival sermon is “one of the musical forms that our culture has evolved. We just invented it.”\textsuperscript{47}

The Pentecostal movement in America gained national attention during the revival meetings on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California from 1906 to 1909. Reverend William Seymour preached that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit signified

\textsuperscript{44} Adam Woog, \textit{The History of Gospel Music} (Farmington Hills, MI: Lucent Books, 2006), 9-10.
\textsuperscript{45} Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
\textsuperscript{47} Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
salvation, and people flocked to his revival meetings to experience emotionally charged worship characterized by speaking in tongues, healing, and spontaneous physical movement.48 Gary B. McGee, Professor of Church History at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary in Springfield, Missouri, notes that the Los Angeles Times believed that a new religious sect was forming.49 One article reported that Seymour’s congregation was “breathing strange utterances and mouthing a creed which it would seem no sane mortal could understand.”50 The members of the congregation were nicknamed “holy rollers” because of their wild rolling about on the floor during meetings. Figure 2 shows a picture of the founders of the Asuza Street revival, and figure 3 shows the meeting house where the congregation gathered to hear Seymour preach. Seymour’s church became one of the founding churches of the Pentecostal Church in America, as the Pentecostal movement in Los Angeles spread to other parts of the country.


49 Ibid.

Figure 2. Picture of the leaders of the Azusa Street Mission.\textsuperscript{51}

Figure 3. Picture of the Azusa Street meeting house.\textsuperscript{52}


Gospel Music and Hymns: Style

Gospel music focuses primarily on the religious text, and consequently the vocal line dominates the music. The core of gospel music resides in its feeling. As the well-known gospel singer and composer Ira Sankey puts it: “Before I sing I must feel.”

Charles Gold, the author of the *Hymn* article “The Gospel Song: Contemporary Opinion,” outlines the purpose of gospel music, stating, “Essentially the gospel songs are songs of testimony, persuasion, religious exhortation, or warning.”

Gospel songs usually have a refrain and employ syncopated rhythm. The harmonic structure of the congregation’s gospel songs are fairly rudimentary, meant to be used as a form of worship for musically uneducated congregations, while the soloists enjoy the freedom to improvise and vary their vocal tones. A transcription of gospel singer Aretha Franklin’s rendition of John Newton’s “Amazing Grace” is shown in example 1, demonstrating the improvisational freedom of gospel music.

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Pearl Williams-Jones, a singer, pianist, educator, daughter of a gospel preacher, and “one of the major authorities on Afro-American gospel music,”\textsuperscript{56} wrote an article in the journal of \textit{Ethnomusicology} entitled “Afro-American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic.” She lists the specific characteristics of American gospel music: the use of antiphonal response, varying vocal tones, endless variation on the part of the lead singer, use of falsetto, religious dancing or “shouting,” percussive-style playing techniques, handclapping and foot patting, emphasis on dynamic rhythms, a dramatic concept of the music, repetition, improvisation, and communal participation.\textsuperscript{57} Williams-Jones expounds upon these points throughout her article, and I draw upon her insights in my analysis of \textit{Holy Roller}.

\textsuperscript{55} John Newton, “Amazing Grace” (1779), arrangement by Aretha Franklin, transcription by author (Luther Vandross Funeral, December 1, 2008).


Holy Roller: Analysis

Larsen explains that *Holy Roller* stemmed from her research on the Azusa Street Revival. She further describes her inspiration for writing *Holy Roller* on her website, stating:

. . . my belief is that a culture’s music springs from that culture’s language(s), including verbal, body and industrial/technological languages. The saxophone was conceived to encompass the full range and nuance of the human voice . . . I was immediately seized with the idea, an inspiration I think, to directly explore my belief by composing an instrumental work from a vocal perspective. . . . Rock and roll, gospel, bellmen’s patter, auctioneering chant, cattle herding cooing, chamming— all of these are vocal forms which we’ve evolved in the good ol’ USA.58

Larsen has been fascinated with revival preaching and gospel music for many years. She discusses her interest:

It has to do with our land mass, which is huge, and the notion that we have had working in the culture since about the 1840s or 50s that we can standardize our behavior and call ourselves one . . . And so I have been fascinated with fundamentalist preaching, revivalist preaching, really for decades and decades and decades, as a way to transcend language—the various languages of all the immigrant populations—and religious ritual, as a way of transcending cultural ritual in order to reach abstract, essential human emotions, which is what fundamentalist, really great revivalist preachers, can do. And since we’ve evolved this whole phenomenon of revivalist and fundamental preaching, it seems to me that we’ve been practicing virtual reality [laughs] really since the 1840s or 50s. And so philosophically I look for icons, evolved cultural icons, that can help us reflect upon our notion that we are one, when in fact we are not.59

Larsen’s fascination with the philosophical beliefs of gospel music have led her to attend multiple revival sermons, and she notes that she has studied revival sermons and

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When asked if she has any favorite gospel singers and groups, she stated:

Yes, many over the years. Mahalia Jackson, The Five Blind Boys of Alabama, most definitely Ray Charles, whose work I’m much more interested in these days than Mahalia Jackson because Ray Charles was using gospel to fuse with rock and roll. James Brown. Many. Buddy Guy, The Soul Singers, The Blues Singers. It’s all out of the same church.

Larsen’s extensive gospel “musical library” has allowed her to absorb the gospel idiom and reflect it in *Holy Roller*.

Larsen’s fascination with the gospel genre is coupled with a keen interest in instruments that reflect our culture. In this work, the saxophone represents the gospel preacher and the piano represents the congregation. Larsen explains to Linda Moorhouse, a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington, her view of the saxophone’s abilities:

I love the timbre and color of the saxophone and the saxophone/clarinet mix. I also love really fine clarinet choir playing alone, without saxophones. Clarinet is one of my favorite instruments and I’ve written a great deal of solo clarinet music. I find it speaks the language, American English, really well, as does the saxophone.

Larsen notes, in another interview, that she also believes that the piano is a cultural vehicle, as it has “somehow been able to contain most western European and other kinds of music. . . . It goes back to the big band and boogie records that I’ve listened to.”

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60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.


63 Libby Larsen, interview with Daniel James Jacob, “Performance Considerations of Libby Larsen’s *Corker for Clarinet and Percussion*” (master’s thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2001), 39.
Holy Roller: Gospel Solo Singing and Speech Characteristics

Pearl Williams-Jones notes that “black speech is a significant aspect of the gospel performance idiom,” as the rhythmically “rhetorical solo style of the preacher” finds its equivalent in the gospel music singer.\textsuperscript{64} She discusses the importance of the soloist in the gospel idiom, noting that the soloist is significant because “the projection of the individuality of the performer, his feelings, beliefs, and desires becomes known.” The preacher often leads the congregation in song: “the foremost singers also served as ministers.”\textsuperscript{65}

Larsen was concerned with the energy and vocal nuances in this work, noting that she is “really more after vocal inflection and then the emotional crescendo” in \textit{Holy Roller}.\textsuperscript{66} She conveys a speech-like style in \textit{Holy Roller} by using specific articulations, dynamics, variations, and timbral ranges to emphasize the importance of speech-influenced gospel music.

A varying vocal timbre is an essential element of the gospel preacher and soloist, as tonal contours build excitement and enable verbal expressiveness. Larsen uses specific articulation markings such as accents and staccatos to change the timbre of the saxophone (example 2). The saxophone player must \textit{feel} the articulation markings, not merely play them. This is achieved by playing the articulations with freedom and a flexible balance of time and movement.

\textsuperscript{64} Williams-Jones, “Afro-American Gospel Music,” 381.

\textsuperscript{65} Adam Woog, \textit{The History of Gospel Music}, 10.

\textsuperscript{66} Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
Example 2. *Holy Roller*, mm. 15-18.\(^{67}\)

Larsen’s use of the saxophone in *Holy Roller* is fitting particularly because gospel singing relies heavily on breathing. Williams-Jones states,

“Breathiness in tone production adds a certain emotional intensity to the performance. Breathing between words and short phrases is not considered improper to the idiom. The audible breath intake and expulsion of air acts as a rhythmic factor and is an essential part of black timing and rhythmic pacing.”\(^{68}\)

The saxophonist’s breathing patterns are able to emulate the vocal qualities of a gospel singer; Larsen uses breath marks and rests to create breathable music. The saxophone player must be careful to not rush through the rests, but rather to consider the rests an essential aspect of the idiom and fully observe them. Larsen uses rests in the saxophone part to evoke a breath-like quality (example 3). Larsen also places breath marks in the piano part which imitates the breaths of the congregation. The pianist should resist the urge to plow through the phrases and instead capture the breaths of the congregation, perhaps even breathing with the rests to emulate their vocal quality. Larsen uses rests in the piano part to achieve this gospel quality (example 4).


The charismatic energy of the gospel preacher and soloist builds emotional excitement in the congregation. This dynamic liveliness is achieved through an ebb and flow of phrases utilizing contrasting dynamics and tempos. Larsen specifies certain dynamics to emulate and evoke charismatic energy. Larsen couples big dynamic contrasts with variances of the rhythm in the melodic line to create energy; she frequently moves from slow, long-phrased melodies to fast, syncopated melodies (example 5). The instrumentalists should play these dynamic and melodic changes with unrestricted vigor, relishing the contrasts and allowing excitement to build and fall as Larsen has precisely indicated.

Example 3. *Holy Roller*, mm. 37-38.\(^{69}\)

![Example 3](image)

Example 4. *Holy Roller*, mm. 84-85.\(^{70}\)

![Example 4](image)


\(^{70}\) Ibid., 11; William G. Tomer and Jeremiah E. Rankin, “God Be With You” (1880).
Example 5. *Holy Roller*, mm. 10-11.\(^{71}\)

Repetition is an essential element of gospel singing and preaching because it lays emphasis on particular words. Gospel singers and preachers use endless variations in their vocal lines, frequently altering and ornamenting pitches, in order to escape from the monotony of reiteration. Larsen achieves melisma-like embellishments through a careful use of chromaticism and ornamentation (example 6). These decorations can sometimes be quickly played or sometimes slowly relished, but a balance of tempo is important to maintain direction and energy. As an ensemble, the musicians should listen to each other closely to stay together through various ornamentations.

Example 6. *Holy Roller*, mm. 88-90.\(^{72}\)

Gospel singers and preachers can often exercise an exceptionally wide vocal range, frequently singing in falsetto and shouting in addition to singing lower notes. Larsen writes a wide tonal range for the saxophone part, often moving quickly from low

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 11.
registers to the top of the alto saxophone register (example 7). Good breath support and agility are essential for the successful saxophone player in long phrases containing a wide vocal range. The pianist should be attentive to the breathing spots of the saxophone, and even at times breathe with the saxophonist to achieve a closely knit ensemble.


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Communal participation is a significant element of gospel preaching and music. The audience involvement through vocal responses to the preacher or soloist is vital to the gospel experience. Larsen relies heavily upon this element of gospel music in *Holy Roller*, as demonstrated in the relationship between the saxophone and the piano. The piano part frequently responds melodically and rhythmically to the saxophone part. The communal responsorial aspect of the music grows to a crescendo as the congregation becomes more and more enraptured by the preacher’s cajoling. Larsen notes,

“The one spot that I’d say you guys [the saxophonist and pianist] can have some real fun, is really [measures 118 and 119] where you’re doing the back and forth . . . Just really play off each other, don’t wait. . . . Because

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73 Ibid., 10.
really the piano should be literally rocking by the time you get to [measure 138].”

The instrumentalists must “play off each other” with an energy and timing that parallels the relationship between the preacher and his congregation. This requires the performers to make eye contact, listen to each other intently, and respond musically to each other. An illustration of this close dialogue can be seen beginning at measure 118 (example 8).

Example 8. *Holy Roller*, mm. 118-120.  

*Holy Roller*: Rhythm

Rhythm is an essential aspect of gospel music. Pearl Williams-Jones notes, “In black gospel, the special use of rhythms which are distinctly gospel, and which swing,
were derived out of the holiness shout music of the early 1900s revival movements."\textsuperscript{76}

The swinging rhythms used in gospel music emphasize the off-beat in a syncopated way, and anticipated beats and cross-rhythms are common. Larsen uses rhythmic characteristics of gospel music in \textit{Holy Roller} to work within the gospel idiom (example 9).

![Example 9. Holy Roller, ms. 46.\textsuperscript{77}]

Larsen also uses accents and staccatos to rhythmically color the music. Larsen notes, “Look at measure [125] – the staccatos – or even [124] - all the accents. If you attack them with classical accents, you’ll get a Prokofiev-like sound out of them. But we’re really going more for a Jimmy Johnson sound. So it’s a little flatter attack.”\textsuperscript{78}

Larsen suggests that the pianist use what she calls “ham hands” to achieve a blues “crush” sound reminiscent of the style of the blues musician Jimmy Johnson when


\textsuperscript{77} Larsen, \textit{Holy Roller}, 8; Robert Lowry, “Shall We Gather at the River?” (1864).

\textsuperscript{78} Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
playing the rhythmic articulations.79 This requires the pianist to play the music rhythmically and bluntly. Measures 124 and 125 are shown in example 10.

Example 10. *Holy Roller*, mm. 124-125.80

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**Holy Roller: Movement**

Movement is another important element of gospel preaching and singing. Dancing, clapping, and foot stomping are all common characteristics of worshippers at a revival meeting.81 Movement is a way to express emotions in gospel music, and Larsen uses rhythmic devices as well as literal directions to evoke movement. She uses what she calls a “modified boogie bass” in the piano part to create a dance-like quality to the music (example 11).82 These bass lines are to be played *secco* with little or no pedal to emphasize their rhythmic qualities, and the accents should be played heavily.

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79 The term “ham hands” as coined by Larsen refers to the pianist’s hands temporarily “flattening” while moving to grab notes, although the pianist’s hands should return to a rounded position following contact with the keys. This motion results in a blunt sound on the piano reminiscent of Jimmy Johnson’s blues style.


82 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
Example 11. *Holy Roller*, mm. 138-139.\(^{83}\)

Larsen directs the piano to play in a syncopated “ghost ragtime swing” style beginning in measure 33 (example 12), complete with a pattern of bass notes on odd-numbered beats of the measure and chords on even-numbered beats in the left hand accompanying a syncopated melody in the right hand. The right hand should move lazily as the treble clef chords move chromatically, while the left hand bass pattern should play relatively straight in the ragtime style. Larsen also directly references dancing when she instructs the piano to play in a “softshoe” style, which is a slow type of tap dance.\(^{84}\) The moving sixteenth-notes should be played lightly, emulating a tap dancer, while the melodic line can be brought out with more weight. The “softshoe” style begins in measure 37 (example 13).

\(^{83}\) Larsen, *Holy Roller*, 17.

The harmonic language of gospel music includes a mixture of blues and traditional tonality. The blues scales often include a lowered fifth scale degree as well as lowered third and seventh degrees. Larsen frequently uses a chromatic harmonic language within each “pool of tonality” to evoke the blues tonality. Larsen creates a harmonically open sound with chords that she terms “tritonal chordal chords.”

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chords are a common method of creating full, lush chords in gospel music. They often move chromatically and they are usually coupled with a walking bass line (example 14).

Example 14. *Holy Roller*, mm. 187-189.\(^{89}\)

Larsen explains how she wants these jazzy chords to be played: “The thing to do with this piece is to balance the chords equally. For instance, in measures like [158, 159, and 160] all those tritone chordal chords, those are all to be equally balanced so that when there is an inner melody, it really comes across as the melody. But if you balance the chords, even the chords in [measure 151], they’re meant to be balanced in a jazz balance.”\(^{90}\) Playing these chords with a jazz balance requires an equal distribution of weight among the notes of the chords, with extra weight given to inner melodic lines. These occasionally accented chords are coupled with a *secco* bass line. Larsen often incorporates these tritonal chords with musical quotations of gospel hymns (quotations will be discussed later in this chapter). Examples 15 and 16 show the musical examples referenced by Larsen.

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\(^{90}\) Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
Improvisation is an extremely important element of gospel music, as “the same song is rarely ever sung the same way twice, with an emphasis on improvisation within the song causing each performance to be a wholly different experience for both singer and audience.”\textsuperscript{93} Pearl-Williams states, “Form occurred in America with hymns, but it was merely the framework around which improvisation could take place. Gospel songs

\textsuperscript{91} Larsen, \textit{Holy Roller}, 20; Lowry, “Shall We Gather at the River?” (1864).

\textsuperscript{92} Larsen, \textit{Holy Roller}, 19; Lowry, “Shall We Gather at the River?” (1864).

are composed songs but within the clearly discernible gospel performance tradition which is often more reflective of general folk stylistic traits than distinct compositional techniques of the individual composer."⁹⁴ Usually the piano or choir plays or sings basic repetitive rhythmic and melodic phrases while the soloist improvises with dramatic riffs. Larsen creates an improvisatory nature by adding new and complex rhythmic and melodic riffs to the basic structure of the music. The improvisatory passages illustrated in examples 17 and 18 should be played freely.

Example 17. *Holy Roller*, mm. 106-109.⁹⁵

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Example 18. *Holy Roller*, mm. 96-98.96

Larsen wants these quasi-improvisatory passages to be played dryly. She states, "You can be very *secco*, on measure [117], in the left hand. What that is, if you were to say what is that when those kinds of gestures are happening, it’s really cultural noise, if that makes sense."97 Larsen wants her “cultural noise” improvisational sections of this work to be played with little or no pedal, as demonstrated in the left hand of the piano part in example 19.

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Example 19. *Holy Roller*, ms. 117.98

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97 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.

Holy Roller: Quotations

Larsen has included quotations of three gospel hymns in this work: “When the Saints Go Marching In” (examples 20 and 21), “Shall We Gather at the River?” (examples 22 and 23), and “God Be With You” (examples 24 and 25). Larsen uses musical quotations to capture a certain essence that embodies the gesture of a musical style, but she also testifies, “Often times a quote will present itself while I’m working on a piece . . . In Holy Roller, that’s a wonderful piece in talking about this, because I didn’t really say I’m going to use these three hymns. They just all showed up, you know?”99 Larsen used these three hymns together because they employ similar harmonic manipulation of the third degree of the scale.100 She quotes these hymns while adding new harmonic material to them. Larsen is quick to note that her use of quotations goes deeper than just a borrowing of material. In a conversation with me, Larsen noted that she is not merely quoting music: she wants her music to be a part of the culture.101 She connects to the audience by incorporating familiar quotes that are a part of the vocabulary of that idiom. The performer should take care to bring out these melody lines to capture the attention of the audience. A thorough knowledge of the hymns, by listening to and singing them, is essential to properly quoting them in Larsen’s music.


Example 20. “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

O, when the saints go marching in, O, when the saints go marching in;
O, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.


102 “When the Saints Go Marching In,” transcription by author (1800s).

103 Larsen, Holy Roller, 4; “When the Saints Go Marching In” (1800s).
Example 22. Lowry, “Shall We Gather at the River?”

Example 23. *Holy Roller*, mm. 43-45.

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104 Robert Lowry, “Shall We Gather at the River?,” transcription by author (1864).

Example 24. Tomer/Rankin, “God Be With You.”

God be with you till we meet again; By his counsel guide, uphold you;

With his sheep securely fold you; God be with you till we meet again. Till we meet, till we meet,

Till we meet, at Jesus' feet; Till we meet, till we meet, God be with you till we meet again.

Example 25. Holy Roller, mm. 84-85.

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107 Larsen, Holy Roller, 11; Tomer and Rankin, “God Be With You” (1880).
CHAPTER V

BARN DANCES FOR FLUTE, CLARINET, AND PIANO

SQUARE DANCES: HISTORY

The origins of the American square dance can be traced back to Europe, particularly in English, German, Austrian, French, and Scottish rural folk dances.108 Square dances are a series of folk dances that evolved from multiple roots. They were frequently danced when neighbors gathered together for various events such as revival meetings, weddings, and barn raisings.109 These European folk dances made their way to America, where the dance forms and music evolved to become uniquely American. In the great melting pot of America, these Americanized European folk dances developed different regional expressions: “Along with these old-world traditions there came and flourished a restless desire for innovation, a willingness to discard the old and devise the new which would seem to be the real source of the picturesque calls and vigorous movements of the square dance.”110


109 Kraus, *Square Dances of Today and How to Teach and Call Them*, 1.

In the American West, participation in square dancing necessitated travelling long
distances across wide expanses of frontier territory. The dances were often taught at
home or at the dance, and the music had to be simple enough to allow the dancing to be
taught and understood quickly. A caller announced the steps to the dancers to guide them
through the dance steps.\textsuperscript{111} Two frequently played tunes include Colonel Sanford
Faulkner’s “Arkansas Traveler,” originally written as a fiddle tune (example 26), and the
song “Turkey in the Straw” by an anonymous composer (example 27).

Square dance music is simple, rhythmic music, often written in 2/4 or 6/8 time.
Viola Ruth, an Arizona fiddling champion and square dance transcriber and enthusiast,
notes that the musicians are “playing for a caller and for feet; keep good rhythm . . . do
not put any popular or modern chord in Square Dance tunes; the simpler the chords, the
prettier your tunes.”\textsuperscript{112} A fast tempo is typically maintained as the music repeats over and
over throughout the course of the dance. In the book \textit{Cowboy Dances: A Collection of
Traditional Western Square Dances} by experienced square dance caller Lloyd Shaw, he
discusses the importance of the instrumentalists mastering variation, stating:

One simple old tune of eight or sixteen bars will have to be repeated
through all the seven or eight minutes it takes to dance a square, with
whatever variation that [the instrumentalists] can invent. . . . with the old-
time musicians . . . they want to be prepared to give that call the old tune
which their experience has taught them is best for it. And they hold that
tune through to the bitter end of the call.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{111} Shaw, \textit{Cowboy Dances: A Collection of Traditional Western Square Dances}, 38-42; Ralph
McNair, \textit{Square Dance!}, 21-23; Lee Owens, \textit{American Square Dances of the West and Southwest}, (Palo

\textsuperscript{112} Viola Ruth in Lee Owens, \textit{American Square Dances of the West and Southwest}, 29-30.

\textsuperscript{113} Shaw, \textit{Cowboy Dances}, 37.
The instrumentation for square dances relies on fiddling, the honky tonk piano (when one is available), and various combinations of banjo, guitar, accordion, or upright bass. Shaw discusses the unique art of fiddling, a distinct element of square dance music:

Most carefully schooled violinists simply cannot produce the authentic flavor. “Fiddlers” have mastered a proud craft all their own. They consider it a disgrace to be a “note-reader.” They have learned to fiddle by ear from some other old-time fiddler . . . What they lack in concert technique, they more than make up in dexterity and endurance and inviolable rhythm. Fiddlers commonly play open fifths coupled with the melodic line of the music to create an open and distinct sound. Shaw notes that a pianist plays without printed music; instead, he or she plays along with the fiddler, playing chords to the fiddler’s melodies or elaborating with a second-line melody along with chords. Shaw states that the fiddler and

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114 Sanford Faulkner, “Arkansas Traveler,” transcription for piano by author (ca.1850).


116 Shaw, Cowboy Dances, 36.
the pianist “must be teamed and used to each other or the fiddler cannot play at all.”\textsuperscript{117} A guitarist or banjo player can strum along rhythmically to the music, and an accordion and a big “bass fiddle” can also be added to the ensemble to create a fuller sound. It is helpful ideally for the instrumentalists to learn the actual dances, as it will enable the musicians to “inject into the playing the un-explainable rhythmic impulse that makes dancers want to dance.”\textsuperscript{118}

The caller controls the flow of the dancers and instrumentalists. Shaw sheds light upon the necessary techniques of the caller:

A good amateur caller then should first have the voice loud, clear, and distinct . . . At times he may prefer to sing his call and this is very effective. But he must remember that singing is never as clear, as easily understood, as the spoken word, and his first duty is to be understood. Thus he usually compromises by using a sort of singing chant, speaking his words distinctly but pitching them on a musical tone and giving them a chanting or singing quality. This note or tone must be in key with his orchestra, that is it must be on one of the elements of the chord of the key in which the orchestra is playing. . . . [He] must have an infallible sense of rhythm.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 36.


Cowboy Songs: History

Cowboy songs were sung by cowboys on the open plains of the West. The great travelling documenter of American music, John Lomax, in his collection of cowboy songs in 1922, describes these songs: “Indeed the songs here were utilized for very practical ends. Not only were sharp, rhythmic yells – sometimes beaten into verse – employed to stir up lagging cattle, but also during the long watches the night-guards, as

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they rode round and round the herd, improvised cattle lullabies which quieted the animals
and soothed them to sleep.”\textsuperscript{121} The cowboy song was a reflection of the heart of the
cowboy as he roamed the wide open range of the West (example 28). In John I. White’s
book, \textit{Git Along, Little Dogies: Songs and Songmakers of the American West}, Austin E.
Fife writes in the forward to the book:

> Cowboy songs made their appearance in the early 1870s, sung first on
> ranches and in settlements on the Great Plains where cattle trail and
> railroad met. In the \textit{[1880s and 1890s]} . . . texts began to appear in
> Western newspapers, in farm and cattlemen’s magazines, and . . . [in]
> periodicals . . . Songs like “Home on the Range,” “The Streets of Laredo,”
or “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” were planted in the minds of people
> as . . . companions to the national anthem and popular hymns.\textsuperscript{122}

With the advent of technological advances in radio and recordings, great cowboy
singers gained acclaim throughout the country. Gene Autry was one of the prominent
cowboy singers to emerge. He was born in Texas in 1907 as Orvon Gene Autry and
raised in Texas and Oklahoma. In 1929 he was discovered for his musical talent, gaining
notice as “Oklahoma’s Yodeling Cowboy” on an Oklahoma radio station. He earned a
big following and a recording contract with Columbia Records in 1929. His performance
on the hit Chicago radio show, “National Barn Dance,” led to his further recognition. In
1934 he began his career as an actor, starring in a total of ninety-three musical Western
films. He went on to produce and star in numerous popular television shows. He won
multiple awards throughout his lifetime, including five stars on the Hollywood Walk of
Fame, the Songwriters Guild Life Achievement Award, and the Board of Directors

\textsuperscript{121} John A. Lomax, \textit{Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads} (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922),
xxi.

\textsuperscript{122} Austin E. Fife, “Forward,” in \textit{Git Along, Little Dogies: Songs and Songmakers of the American
Lifetime Achievement Award. He was inducted into numerous prestigious halls of fame, including the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame and the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. Autry died in 1998 at the age of ninety-one. A picture of Gene Autry with his guitar is shown in figure 4.


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Cowboy songs are harmonically simple, laying their primary emphasis on the text. A verse and chorus form is standard. The melodic lines often include scooping, chromatic steps, yodeling, speak-singing, and a variation between simple quarter notes and dotted sixteenth-note rhythms. The music swings forward in a rhythmically lazy way through a languid melodic line and slow harmonic progression. The guitar is the primary instrumentation of cowboy songs, although a larger ensemble with the same instrumentation as square dances is also used. The following is a portion of a well-known cowboy song co-written by Ray Whitley and Gene Autry, sung by Gene Autry, titled “Back in the Saddle Again” (example 29).

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Libby Larsen has done a good amount of square dancing, beginning with her early years as a Girl Scout. She describes her interest in square dancing as a compositional inspiration:

Because I’m so interested in how we evolved musical forms, and I’m interested in American English, I got very interested in square dance calling. It is just so interesting. It’s got a lot of [talking in square dance calling rhythm] which is almost like fiddling. The question is, did fiddling come from the language, or did the language come from fiddling, or what? Anyway, so I got very interested in square dance calling for the rhythm of it, not necessarily for the words, and that’s what led me to this. Again, lots of research.127

Larsen used Lloyd Shaw’s book as the source for the four movements of Barn Dances, inspired by the pictures and calls in his square dancing book.

Movement I: “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight”

The first movement of Larsen’s Barn Dances is “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight.” In this movement Larsen creates music which reflects the action of the dance form and exemplifies the nature of square dance music. Lloyd Shaw outlines the call for this particular dance:

Swing your partners, don’t be late.
Swing on the corner like [swing’m] on the gate.
Now your own and promenade eight.
The lady goes right and the gent goes left,
First couple balance-swing,
Down the center and split the ring,
The lady goes right and the gent goes left,

And four in line you stand. . . .
Forward six, fall back eight.
Forward eight, fall back six. . . .

Within the dance two lines are formed – one line of six people and one line of two people - who face each other. At one point the group of six advance four steps toward the group of two (forward six), and as the group of six move backwards four steps towards their starting position, the group of two people move in the same direction as the group of six for four steps (fall back eight) (figure 5).

Figure 5. Picture of square dancers dancing Forward Six and Fall Back Eight.

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128 Shaw, *Cowboy Dances*, 261.

“Forward Six and Fall Back Eight”: Rhythm

The caller maintains a quick and rhythmic patter in order to direct the dancers and the musicians, and the continuous motion of this movement exemplifies the break-neck nature of a hoedown jig. The music must maintain a steady rhythmic beat, and the people taking a break from dancing to watch the dancers will often clap along with the music. Larsen employs specific compositional techniques in this movement in order to maintain the energy and rhythmic spirit of square dances. She emphasizes the downbeat of the measure, often with accents or staccatos, in order to emulate the strong first beat of hoedown jigs. Larsen carefully notates articulations such as accents and staccatos, pointing out that “in measure 22 and like places [in movement 1], the staccato should be very dry – very little and almost no pedaling” (example 30).130 She maintains clear, strong beats in each measure to emphasize the danceable pulses of square dance music, and the instrumentalists need to emphasize the downbeats and articulations to propel the music forward, dry with little or no legato phrasing, to create sharp, rhythmic dance music (example 31).

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130 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
Example 30. *Barn Dances*, “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight,” mm. 22-23.\(^\text{131}\)

Example 31. *Barn Dances*, “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight,” mm. 117-118.\(^\text{132}\)

The tempo is maintained throughout this movement (although the time signatures change throughout) in order to sustain the perpetual motion of a hoedown jig. Time signatures of 2/4 and 6/8 are the most common meters with square dances, and Larsen writes the majority of this movement in either 6/8 or 4/4. Larsen notes that in the opening


\(^{132}\) Ibid., 9.
measures and similar measures, the music should “really blast forward, it should really explode” (example 32).  

Example 32. Barn Dances, “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight,” mm. 48-50.

Larsen also rhythmically emulates square dances’ characteristic upward guitar strums on off-beats. Larsen mimics this characteristic by placing chords on the weak beats of the measure, as seen in example 33. The performers should play the downbeats heavier than the off-beats, thinking of the off-beats as being more playful.

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133 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
134 Larsen, Barn Dances, “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight,” 5.
The frequent repetition of four or eight bar-based tunes in square dances requires the instrumentalists to create variation and improvisation within the framework of the music. Larsen attains rhythmic variety by adding different rhythms and articulations to previously stated patterns (examples 34 and 35). The instrumentalists should playfully execute these rhythmic changes.

Example 34. *Barn Dances*, “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight,” mm. 45-48.¹³⁶
Example 35. *Barn Dances*, “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight,” mm. 67-70.\(^{137}\)

The most prominent harmonic element of this movement is Larsen’s imitation of the fiddler’s open-strings fifths in the piano part. These fifths propel the music forward and create an open, light feel to the music that anchors the dancing. Larsen uses open fifths as the motivic foundation of this movement, as seen in the piano part in examples 31, 32, 34, 35, and 36. The fifths should be voiced evenly when accents are written in both notes, but the top or lower voice can be brought out at times for melodic direction.

Example 36. *Barn Dances*, “Forward Six and Fall Back Eight,” mm. 1-3.\(^{138}\)

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\(^{137}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{138}\) Ibid., 3.
“Forward Six and Fall Back Eight”

Larsen uses six notes rising followed by eight notes descending to represent the title and steps of this dance. In example 37, six notes rise in the clarinet part followed by eight notes descending in the flute part.


Movement II: “Divide the Ring”

The second movement of Larsen’s *Barn Dances* is titled “Divide the Ring,” and it pays homage to cowboy singer Gene Autry. Larsen conjures up the sound and style of Gene Autry’s Western cowboy songs while drawing inspiration from the dance, Divide the Ring. Larsen listened to Gene Autry and Burl Ives while working on this movement, noting her favorite cowboy songs and their characteristics that influenced the music:

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139 Ibid., 4.
“Blueberry Hill,” which was a Gene Autry song. And then, “Don’t Fence Me In.” Those really exemplify the cowboy swing, which is much more of a lope than it is the jazz swing. The cowboy swing, I guess it lopes, I guess that’s the best word. And it doesn’t mean the horse loping off into the sunset, but it does have that kind of back and forth [sings – “Back in the Saddle Again”] . . . just a little lazier.140

Lloyd Shaw outlines the call for Divide the Ring:

Honors right and honors left,
All join hands and circle to the left,
Break and swing and promenade back.
First couple balance, first couple swing,
Down the center and divide the ring.
The lady goes right and the gent goes left,
Swing when you meet at the head and the feet.
Down the center and cut away four,
The lady goes right and the gent goes wrong.
Swing when you meet,
At the head and the feet. . . .141

Shaw defines this type of dance as a dance in which “the characteristic is for one couple to advance through the center of the set and between the opposite couple, thus dividing the ring. Usually the lady circles to the right and the gentleman to the left and all do some symmetrical figure.”142 An illustration of dancers dancing Divide the Ring is shown in figure 6.

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140 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
141 Shaw, Cowboy Dances, 286.
142 Ibid.
Larsen exemplifies the musical style of Gene Autry while also drawing inspiration from the square dance, Divide the Ring. Autry’s vocal style includes a bright sound, yodeling, scooping to notes, and speak-singing. Autry was a skilled story-teller and he maintained simplicity in his music to emphasize the words.

Larsen uses specific references to scooping, as seen in example 38 in the clarinet part. The instrumentalists should make the most out of these scoops by taking time while chromatically sliding up to the note.

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Autry often yodels up a third or a sixth, and Larsen imitates yodeling with skips upwards, often seen in the clarinet and flute parts (example 39). Larsen notes that she emulated Autry’s “yodeling sixths” to capture that distinctive aspect of his music.145

**“Divide the Ring”: Harmony**

Gene Autry songs are simple harmonically, often relying primarily upon tonic, subdominant, and dominant chords. Larsen adds chromatic passing tones to build upon the simple harmonic progressions of Autry’s music. Larsen states in the introduction to this work that she paraphrases a typical instrumental introduction to a Gene Autry song in the opening of this movement, and this material reoccurs throughout the piece in a verse.

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and chorus form that is typical of Gene Autry’s songs, as exemplified in the introduction, verses, and chorus of his hit, “Ridin’ Down the Canyon” (examples 40, 41, and 42).

Example 40. Autry/Burnette, “Ridin’ Down the Canyon,” mm. 1-4.147

Example 41. Autry/Burnette, “Ridin’ Down the Canyon,” mm. 4-12.148

147 Gene Autry and Smiley Burnette, “Ridin’ Down the Canyon” (Hal Leonard Corporation, 1936).
Larsen briefly quotes Zez Confrey’s popular novelty piano piece, “Kitten on the Keys” in the opening material that returns throughout the movement (example 43).

Larsen loves quoting it for more reasons than the fact that she grew up playing it on the piano:

Actually, it’s because of that very gesture in the second measure [sings the sixteenth-notes found in the right hand of the piano part in measure two of Barn Dances]. That you don’t find in European music, you know, because you have to . . . sort of flat-knuckle “ham hand” to get it honky tonk and get it right, so it’s a gesture born of the fingers, but based in equal
temperament, except that it doesn’t belong to functional harmony. That’s why I love it.¹⁵⁰

Larsen uses a specific motivic pattern in this movement to represent the idea of dividing a ring: she begins with a diminished fifth and then immediately follows the fifth with an inward minor third. She uses Confrey’s “Kitten on the Keys” as the basis for this motivic pattern, and plays with the visual appearance of the music to match the dance title.

Larsen captures the essence of Gene Autry, while quoting Zez Confrey in this movement (example 44). She wants the opening material and its reoccurrences to lope lazily, requiring a relaxed forward motion with slightly late off-beats.

Example 43. Confrey, “Kitten on the Keys,” mm. 7-10.¹⁵¹

Example 44. Barn Dances, “Divide the Ring,” mm. 1-3.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.

“Divide the Ring”: Rhythm

Cowboy songs lope lazily, and they are fairly simple rhythmically, often written in 4/4 or 2/4. They frequently combine simple quarter note phrases with dotted eighth-note and sixteenth-note phrases. Larsen uses Autry’s characteristic cowboy song rhythmic elements throughout this movement to evoke his style. She also plays upon the rhythms of a Western honky tonk piano part full of sixteenth-note runs and triplets over a walking bass line. The honky tonk piano has a distinctive sound closely related to ragtime, with tinny, off-key notes, piano tremulos and a ragged left hand pattern. The pianist should bring out the rhythmic vitality of the music through energetic and flexible right hand figures and a lively bass line (example 45).

Example 45. *Barn Dances*, “Divide the Ring,” ms. 41.153

[Musical notation]

Larsen writes running sixteenth-notes in sections of the movement, and she wants these simple passages to be played fairly straight, noting that the instrumentalists should “try to make those very Baroque” (example 46).154

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152 Larsen, *Barn Dances*, “Divide the Ring,” 10; Confrey, “Kitten on the Keys.”

153 Ibid., 13.
Example 46. *Barn Dances*, “Divide the Ring,” mm. 51-52.155

Movement III: “Varsouvianna”

The Varsouvianna is categorized as a round dance, which allows couples to move freely about the floor in pairs. The round dance happens after the first two group square dances, and it is followed by two more group square dances.156 The Varsouvianna includes one phrase of stepping, heel, and toe movements, and one phrase of waltzing. It is a graceful waltz with uncertain origins dating back to the mid-1800s.157 Some researchers believe that it originated in Poland, while others state that it originated in

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156 Shaw, *Cowboy Dances*, 70.
France but that it was written in a “Warsaw style.” The dance spread throughout Europe and ultimately made its way to America. The dance is accompanied by moderately fast waltz music typically written in 3/4 time. Shaw notes that a particular song is associated with the dance in America, known as “Ford’s Varsovienne,” although it is known by other names such as “Put Your Little Foot Right Here” and “Shoe the Donkey” (see example 47 for an excerpt for piano). The evolution of this song is a testament to the oral tradition of country square dances, as names and music evolve over time. The version of the song that Shaw cites can be found in the Pioneer Collection of Old-Time Dances.

The calling to teach the steps goes as follows:

Sweep, point, step,
Sweep, point, step,
Sweep, point, step, cross, point . . .

Shaw explains that the couple stands side by side, the man a little behind the woman. With hands locked they keep step with each other, sometimes using opposite feet. On the introductory third beat of the bar they sweep their right feet back over the left, and on the first beat of the new bar they point their right feet out to the right front, touching the floor with the toe. On the next count they step in behind the right with the left foot. This sweep, point, and step pattern continues throughout the dance (figures 7 and 8).

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158 Ibid.
160 Shaw, Cowboy Dances, 86.
161 Ibid., 79.
Example 47. Ford, “Ford’s Varsovienne,” mm. 33-48.162

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Figure 7. Picture of square dancers stepping while dancing the Varsouvianna.  

Figure 8. Picture of square dancers crossing while dancing the Varsouvianna.

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164 Ibid., 82.
The most distinctive quality of the music of the Varsouvianna is the waltz time of 3/4 coupled with a strong downbeat in each measure. Larsen begins this movement in 6/4 but quickly moves to 3/4 time. She subtitles the movement “a simple dream waltz,” and she puts less emphasis on the downbeat of each measure in order to achieve long, legato phrases (example 48). The instrumentalists need to put slightly more weight on the downbeats and use them as a springboard to a lighter second and third beat in the measure, but the long phrases must still be shaped and flowing.

Example 48. Barn Dances, “Varsouvianna,” mm. 1-5.\textsuperscript{165}

The rhythm of the melody line is distinctive in the Varsouvianna dance, creating interest amidst a simple harmonic structure. While the melody line is repetitive, it uses dotted eighth-notes coupled with a lower neighboring sixteenth-note to decorate the

\textsuperscript{165} Larsen, Barn Dances, “Varsouvianna,” 15.
melodic line and create a forward motion. Larsen emulates this rhythmic decoration of the melody in this movement by frequently using dotted half notes and quarter notes on the final beat of each measure.

The flute and the clarinet play off of each other rhythmically throughout this movement, and Larsen points out that their interaction “represent[s] an interplay of color” (example 49).\textsuperscript{166} She wants the long melodic lines to be played expressively and slowly.\textsuperscript{167} The intimacy of a couples’ dance is seen in the colorful and lyrical music.

Example 49. \textit{Barn Dances}, “Varsouvianna,” mm. 17-20.\textsuperscript{168}

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ \text{\textit{Varsouvianna}}: \text{Melody} ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Larsen used the music of this movement in the sixth movement of her voice and piano work, \textit{My Antonia}, written in 2000. \textit{Barn Dances} was written in 2001, and the material for this movement originated from \textit{My Antonia}, a chamber work based on Willa Cather’s novel. Larsen discusses her reuse of the material in \textit{Barn Dances}:

\textsuperscript{166} Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{168} Larsen, \textit{Barn Dances}, “Varsouvianna,” 16.
It worked fine as a song, but really . . . when I was writing the song I was really thinking more in instrumental curves, instrumental phrasing - really beautifully slow, which is beyond the breath of singing. So I was thinking much more instrumentally, and so when I was working on Barn Dances, it just appeared and said, you belong here. And that’s the truth.\textsuperscript{169}

Larsen has created a lyrical, poignant melody line that translates into the long and intimate melodic lines of the Varsouvianna dance (the flute melody in example 50).

Example 50. Barn Dances, “Varsouvianna,” mm. 25-32.\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{169} Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.

\textsuperscript{170} Larsen, Barn Dances, “Varsouvianna,” 16.
“Varsouvianna”: Harmony

The music of the Varsouvianna is simple harmonically, moving mostly from the tonic to the dominant, and Larsen’s “pools of tonality” in this movement stay grounded in similar tones, often centered by the piano’s bass pedal tones. Larsen achieves the beauty and elegance of the Varsouvianna through her simplicity of harmonization (example 51).

Movement IV: “Rattlesnake Twist”

The final movement of Barn Dances involves a fast, upbeat piece based upon the Rattlesnake Twist dance. The call for this dance is as follows:

All jump up and never come down,
And swing your honey around and around,
‘Til the hollow of your foot makes a hole in the ground.
And promenade, oh, promenade.
Now all join hands and circle to the left.
The first couple break.
The first gent lead down the rattlesnake’s hole,
In and out with a rattlesnake twist. . . .

The dancers hold hands in a circle, and one person in line drops the hand of his partner and weaves in and out between the others. This creates a line of twisting dancers weaving in and out, “twisting” about on the dance floor (figure 9). Larsen explains that she has written a jazz-influenced tarantella inspired by the Rattlesnake Twist. The tarantella is an Italian folk dance with a quick, lively tempo in 6/8 time. The tarantella was once rumored to be the remedy for the poisonous bite of the tarantula spider, and the dance

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171 Shaw, Cowboy Dances, 274.

The Rattlesnake Twist dance takes its inspiration from the tarantella, putting a fresh American spin on the music’s theme, substituting a rattlesnake for the spider.

Example 51. *Barn Dances*, “Varsouvianna,” mm. 17-25.\(^{174}\)

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\(^{173}\) Ibid.

“Rattlesnake Twist”: Rhythm

The rhythm of this movement is driving. The music of a Rattlesnake Twist dance maintains quick perpetual motion to keep the dancers twisting. Larsen employs sixteenth-notes in the piano part which rarely stop throughout the movement to maintain a frenzied, feverish pitch to the music. She writes cross-rhythms in the piano part to add variety to the repetitive sixteenth-notes. Larsen notes:

It’s fun, and this one you have to know beyond reading it, that’s for sure. I continue to explore concentration on the brink of destruction. [laughs]
This is -- there are a couple of other pieces -- *Four on the Floor, Firebrand* is another one -- pieces where the ensemble needs to be as tight as tight jazz is, and the concentration has to remain or the piece crashes. And so,

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with this one, it’s a matter of really knowing the territory so well, that once the piece starts, intense concentration should really hold the performer but also the performance and therefore the audience to the point where they’re holding their breath.\textsuperscript{176}

The rhythmic interplay of the instruments must be precise, requiring a good amount of memorization in order to free the musicians to make eye contact with each other. This movement is a fiery close to the work, ending the dances with a frantically energetic and virtuosic movement.

Larsen incorporates frequent accents and staccatos to add rhythmic interest to this movement and perhaps imitate the idea of a person bitten by a rattlesnake stamping their feet and hopping to rid themselves of the poison (example 52). The flute and clarinet parts work closely together, often imitating each other or playing the same figures together. Their imitation vividly portrays the dancers locking hands and following each other through a maze of arms. The articulations need to be sharp, and the musicians need to listen carefully to each other to be sure that articulations are being played uniformly among the instruments.

\textsuperscript{176} Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
“Rattlesnake Twist”: Dynamics

The dynamics of this movement are stark – Larsen frequently moves from extremely soft to extremely loud dynamics over the course of one or two measures. Larsen adds nervous intensity to the repetitive nature of the music through her bold use of

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dynamics (example 53). The musicians should dive into the dynamic changes and make them fearless and unexpected.

Example 53. *Barn Dances*, “Rattlesnake Twist,” mm. 41-43.\(^{178}\)

“Rattlesnake Twist”: Harmony

This movement features frequent changes in tonal centers. Each tonal center is clearly established through extensive repetition in the piano part. Larsen employs jazz-like sonorities by adding sevenths and ninths to the tonal centers of the music, making contemporary the simple harmonic language of the Rattlesnake Twist dance. These jazzy chords are often emphasized with accents, adding excitement to the music (example 54).

\(^{178}\) Ibid., 21.
Example 54. *Barn Dances*, “Rattlesnake Twist,” mm. 49-50.\(^{179}\)

Larsen uses open fifths in the piano part throughout this movement, harkening back to the fiddler’s open-strings fifths. The virtuosic nature of this music requires the pianist to prevent the piano hammers from releasing too far away from the strings by staying deep within the repeating notes, catching each repetition at the let-off point (example 55).

Example 55. *Barn Dances*, “Rattlesnake Twist,” mm. 33-34.\(^{180}\)

\(^{179}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., 20.
“Rattlesnake Twist”

Larsen imitates a rattlesnake’s rattle in the opening of the movement with the flute part fluttering quickly over the span of roughly six notes, and the clarinet following with the same figure several measures later (example 56).

Example 56. *Barn Dances*, “Rattlesnake Twist,” mm. 1-7.181

Larsen writes repetitive notes and double-note intervals with alternating hands in the piano, and the pianist must twist and “dart” to play all of the notes quickly.182 This requires careful fingering and concentration. The music literally looks like it is twisting and dancing on the score (example 57).

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181 Ibid., 18.

Example 57. *Barn Dances*, “Rattlesnake Twist,” mm. 49-50.\(^{183}\)
CHAPTER VI
TRIO FOR PIANO AND STRINGS

TRIO FOR PIANO AND STRINGS: HISTORY

Libby Larsen was heavily influenced by jazz in this work, particularly the musical styles of Miles Davis. Miles Davis was born in Illinois in 1926, and was working professionally as a trumpeter by the young age of sixteen. He moved to New York in 1944 after completing high school, and soon became heavily involved in the jazz music world. He began performing in jazz combos, and his first recording session was in 1945. He soon reached acclaim for his virtuosic and inventive music, and he was one of the innovators of several new jazz styles throughout the course of his career, most notably, Cool Jazz and Fusion (figure 10). 184 Davis stated, “I want to keep creating, changing. Music isn’t about standing still and becoming safe.” 185

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185 Davis and Troupe, Miles, Figure 107.
The evolution of Davis’s musical styles began with his period of Bebop from 1945 to 1948 under the leadership of saxophonist Charlie Parker. This style of jazz included asymmetrical phrasing, virtuosity, intricate melodies, complexly rhythmic passages, and fast tempos. Solos were often improvisations on fragments of the theme. Unusual chord substitutions included the use of dissonant intervals such as the flat fifth, the flat eleventh, and the thirteenth.

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187 Gridley, Jazz Styles, 214.

From 1948 to 1949, Davis became more interested in a relaxed and structured style of playing known as Cool Jazz. Cool Jazz was carefully arranged, with a relaxed and melodic approach to improvisation, an avoidance of aggressive Bebop tempos, timbral shading, and a thoroughly composed arrangement.\(^{189}\)

Davis later became associated with a musical style known as Hard Bop. Hard Bop distanced itself from Bebop with slower tempos and a less radical approach to harmony and melody, often adopting popular tunes and standards as its improvisational starting point, and it distanced itself from Cool Jazz with a harder beat, and constant reference to the blues.\(^{190}\) This style also brought an African influence to jazz that was gospel-influenced.

Davis was leading a talented ensemble by 1964, and the group “incorporated more modern and even avant-garde elements” into their music.\(^{191}\) By 1968 their music included electronic music and rock. Freebop, Fusion, and electric styles rounded out Davis’s full career of creative invention.\(^{192}\)

**Movement I: “Sultry”: Style**

In this movement, Larsen is influenced by Davis’s Bebop style. The music is virtuosic and fast, as she marks the beginning of the movement “fluidly, a furious


\(^{190}\) Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, 187-211.


\(^{192}\) Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, 309.
rhapsody.” Intricate melodies, improvisation-like passages, quick rhythmic energy, and jazz sonorities including unusual chord substitutions all mimic Miles Davis and Charlie Parker’s Bebop style (examples 58 and 59).

Example 58. Parker, “Scrapple from the Apple.”

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Larsen notes in an interview with University of Washington doctoral student Linda Moorhouse that she is fascinated with Bebop:

I have explored this particular grouping of runs in two or three of my pieces (Dancing Solo for Clarinet, Fanfare, and Trio for Piano and Strings). I am trying to understand the notion of atonal running at be-bop speed. And again, it’s a cultural symbol that I’m working on . . . It should be played brashly – no holds barred!\(^\text{195}\)


\(^{195}\) Libby Larsen, interview with Linda Moorhouse, “A Study of the Wind Band Writing of Two Contemporary Composers: Libby Larsen and Frank Ticheli” (DMA essay, University of Washington, 2006), 68.
There were specific aspects of Bebop that she was exploring in *Trio for Piano and Strings* (example 60):

Restlessness, and then – I don’t know what the term is, but sort of back-accent. . . . if you go back to measure fifty in the piano part, the way the last note is accented: that really comes more from brass and guitar, not really piano. So it’s really looking to see if that can be translated into piano.\(^{196}\)

Example 60. *Trio for Piano and Strings*, “Burst,” mm. 50-52.\(^{197}\)

The Bebop style challenges the performer to be intelligible through break-neck speeds while maintaining a thread of melody. Articulation is extremely important, and the performers need to have sharp punctuations of accents and staccatos. The riffs need to be expressive, and the asymmetrical phrases should be played with a highly syncopated feel. The discontinuous, fast talk of Bebop is highlighted by skillfully weaving the melodic line through starts and stops. The sophisticated harmonies of Bebop in Larsen’s *Trio for Piano and Strings*, such as the flatted fifth and thirteenth, should be explored and enjoyed. A portion of a signature Bebop tune by Charlie Parker and Benny Harris,

\(^{196}\) Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.

\(^{197}\) Larsen, *Trio for Piano and Strings*, “Burst,” 16.
arranged for piano, is followed by a break-neck speed, Bebop-inspired passage from *Trio for Piano and Strings* (examples 61 and 62).

Example 61. Parker/Harris, “Ornithology,” mm. 1-12.198

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In this movement, Larsen is also influenced by the film noir scores of the crime and detective movies of the 1940s and 1950s. The primary characteristics of film noir can be described as “melancholy, alienation, bleakness, disillusionment, disenchantment, pessimism, ambiguity, moral corruption, evil, guilt, desperation and paranoia.”

The films were often gloomy, shot in black and white. The music of film noir featured studio

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string playing, with small ensembles creating a produced sound with a sad, melancholy, and mysterious tone. Larsen explains this influence:

The string playing in those scores is studio string playing, and it’s not necessarily orchestral. I really worked more towards film noir in the first movement – kind of the language of film noir. That is really string writing – string writing doing what strings do in films up until about the 1950s.²⁰¹

The title of the movement, “Sultry,” suggests the mood of a film noir score, and Larsen emulates the lyrical and mysterious sound of film noir music through stark dynamics, quiet passages of harmonic unrest, and angular melodic lines in the strings. A portion of an arrangement of the theme song of the film noir Laura is followed by a film noir-inspired passage from Trio for Piano and Strings (examples 63 and 64).

Example 63. “Laura,” mm. 1-8.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.

Composers such as David Raskin and Frank Comstock were well known for their film noir scores, but Miles Davis also tried his hand in this type of music. In 1958 Miles Davis was living in Paris, and he created the soundtrack to Louis Malle’s French film noir film, *Ascensur Pour L’Echafaud* (“Lift to the Scaffold”). Miles and his group of musicians had the movie projected onto a screen; Miles noted some harmonies, but the majority of the music was based on improvisations.\(^{203}\)

\[\text{“Sultry”: Harmony}\]

Charlie Parker, one of the main contributors to the development of Bebop, created “new ways of selecting notes to be compatible with the accompaniment chords” and “methods for adding chords to existing chord progressions and implying additional chords by the selecting of notes for the improvised lines.”\(^{204}\) Larsen uses unusual chord substitutions and dissonant intervals in her pools of tonality to evoke the rich harmonies of Bebop. Jennifer Kelly, a doctoral student at the University of California, discusses Larsen’s mimicking of American musical elements in her vocal music, stating, “Just as a flat scale degree rising to a natural on a strong off-beat sounds characteristic of blues or jazz, Larsen will intentionally use that common listening experience to evoke a sensual response from the listeners.”\(^{205}\) This harmonic coloring also reflects the tension in the film noir harmonic language. Larsen will often call for the pianist to roll jazz-like chords,

\(^{203}\) The Miles Davis Story, Turner Classic Movies, directed by Mike Dibb (2001).

\(^{204}\) Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, 136.

emphasizing the unique individual notes of the chords such as thirteenths. Larsen uses Bebop comping (syncopated chordal injections) in the piano part (example 65).

Example 64. *Trio for Piano and Strings*, “Sultry,” mm. 16-22.\(^{206}\)

Larsen often composes her instrumental music through the manipulation of certain intervals. In this movement, she employs a motif of rising and falling thirds (example 66). She also uses the interval of a third to create harmonic unrest by polytonal juxtapositions of thirds (example 67).

\[ \text{Example 65. Trio for Piano and Strings, “Sultry,” mm. 28-30.}^{207} \]
“Sultry”: Rhythm

The tempo of this movement is virtuosic and fast, with continuously changing rhythmic patterns. Larsen wants this movement to be played with incredible “fury” and flexibility, and intense, quick passages reoccur throughout the movement (example 68). The rhythm should be played flexibly to achieve an improvisatory-like agility, mimicking the conversational nature of Bebop.\(^\text{210}\) The performers need to play with a suitable tempo,

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\(^{208}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{209}\) Ibid., 4.

not too fast, that allows the music to be intelligible in spite of its quick and changeable rhythmic motion.

Example 68. *Trio for Piano and Strings, “Sultry,”* mm. 1-5.\(^{211}\)

Articulation is extremely important in this Bebop-influenced movement. Bebop created “new ways of accenting notes so that the phrases have a highly syncopated

The accents need to be played sharply in order to emulate the rhythmically tight riffs and interchanging solos and duets (example 69).

Example 69. *Trio for Piano and Strings*, “Sultry,” mm. 90-94.²¹³


“Sultry”: Melody

The melodic material in this movement is intricate and chromatic. Larsen builds new melodic material based upon originally stated melodic material. She also evokes the feel of solos, giving each instrument the main melodic material in different portions of the movement. These solos should be relished with expressively shaped melodic lines, flexible rhythmic vitality, and dynamic shading. Film noir music also brings out chromatic, lyrical solos, often over agitated rhythmic figures in the other instruments (example 70).

Example 70. Trio for Piano and Strings, “Sultry,” mm. 14-17.\textsuperscript{214}

Bebop relies more on fragments of scales and melodies than on full jazz scales and melodies, and Larsen mimics this in her fragmented melodic lines, as illustrated in the cello part of example 71. Miles Davis was one of the first Bebop players to play

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 4.
shortened portions of scales. He explained how this element of his playing garnered success:

Back in bebop, everybody used to play real fast. But I didn’t ever like playing a bunch of scales . . . I always tried to play the most important notes in the chord, to break it up. I used to hear all them musicians playing all them scales and notes and never nothing you could remember.  

Davis played shorter fragments of melodic lines to create memorable solos, focusing more on chord structures than scales.

Example 71. *Trio for Piano and Strings*, “Sultry,” mm. 27-29.  

Movement II: “Still”: Style

This movement is slow and reflective. Larsen marks the opening of the movement “fluidly, flexibly,” with performance directions such as “shimmering,” “as if breathing

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215 Davis and Troupe, *Miles*, 70.

deeply, peacefully,” “gently,” and “freely, slowly.” She is drawing from Miles Davis’s 1970 album, *Bitches Brew*. This album reflected his late stylistic period in which he began to experiment with electronic music, combining aspects of Modal Jazz, rock, and funk music in a style known as Fusion.217 A transcription of a portion of the title song is shown in example 72.

Example 72. Davis, “Bitches Brew.”218

An atmospheric, harmonically rich sound was championed by jazz Fusion players.

Dr. Thomas G. Evans, Director of Bands and Associate Professor of Kalamazoo College,


gives a detailed description of the characteristics of Fusion in his jazz history course: the rhythm section becoming a focal point; eighth-notes played straight instead of swung; static harmonic motion; repetitive, dry and syncopated bass lines; simple melodic lines; and typically a through-composed form.219 Davis’s Bitches Brew album featured the latest in studio technology, and the instrumentation included electric pianos and guitars as well as an amplified trumpet. Davis plays a wash of short melodic lines intertwined with long held notes, as his “few carefully chosen notes timed so well and played so expressively . . . [had a dramatic result].”220 Larsen explains her connection to Miles Davis’s Bitches Brew album:

I was really lucky in that Miles Davis came to the Guthrie Theatre here in Minneapolis when he released Bitches Brew and he gave a concert. It must have been about four hours long and just, man, to be a wash in the musicians just making the music up on stage really did suspend time. Fascinating.221

Larsen notes, “I take [the characteristics of Fusion] in, but I’m not analyzing them . . . I do take them in so I can go back and work with them.”222 She immerses herself in the music of a particular genre and subconsciously grasps the style in order to write music influenced by that specific style. Larsen observes, “the unconscious is always at work. You know, so many people believe that composition is right on the surface all the time – it’s all analyzed as we’re going – and it’s not.”223


220 Gridley, Jazz Styles, 216.

221 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.

222 Ibid.

223 Ibid.
“Still”: Harmony

This movement is full of expansive chords, and Larsen uses intervals of thirds and fifths to create open sonorities. She is suspending time with long phrases and stagnant harmonic motion in the same way that Davis suspended time in *Bitches Brew* (example 73). Larsen continues to use chromatic jazz chords with lowered third, fifth, and seventh chords within the varying pools of tonality. The instrumentalists should play the music flexibly, lingering on chromatic chords and trills.

Example 73. *Trio for Piano and Strings*, “Still,” mm. 42-45.224

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“Still”: Rhythm

This movement is rhythmically stagnant in comparison to the first movement’s rhythmically driven style. Larsen avoids forward motion by using long half notes in the piano that anchor the tempo and maintain a slow and reflective mood (example 74). The pianist should linger on the long held notes, and create a weightless wash of sixteenth-notes. The violin and cello parts move gently as well, alternating between quick, quasi-improvisatory riffs and passages and long held notes (example 75). The performers should “suspend” time by relaxing rhythmically, flexibly moving from short rhythmically driven notes to still rhythmic motion.

Example 74. *Trio for Piano and Strings*, “Still,” mm. 1-4.225
Example 75. *Trio for Piano and Strings*, “Still,” mm. 60-61.\(^{226}\)

\[\text{Diagram of music notation}\]

“Our Still**: Melody

Larsen forgoes long melodic lines, focusing more on musical effect and coloring in the style of Miles Davis’ *Bitches Brew*. She juxtaposes long notes with quick, improvisatory-like fragments (example 76). Larsen states that the art of playing long, held notes while moving forward in the music requires balance and flexibility.\(^{227}\) The musicians should play these phrases in a relaxed, “static” manner. Larsen often writes directions such as “ringing” or “shimmering” to focus on sound effects and mood instead of melodic direction.

\(^{226}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{227}\) Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
Movement III: “Burst”: Style

This final movement of the *Trio for Piano and Strings* is influenced by Miles Davis’s Bebop style, but it is also influenced by the novelty piano style of Zez Confrey. Larsen quotes Confrey’s “Kitten on the Keys” in this movement. She notes, in an interview with University of Washington doctoral candidate Linda Moorhouse, that “Kitten on the Keys” is “one of my favorite pieces from when I was a child . . . [it is] a fairly famous boogie piece and one of my favorite compositional quotations.”

Edward Elzear “Zez” Confrey, born in Illinois in 1895, became a pianist and arranger for a piano roll company after World War I. Ragtime had transitioned in 1917 to accommodate the advent of piano rolls and the phonograph, and the new style of ragtime featured showy, upbeat pieces with triplet and sixteenth-note figures dominating the usual strong off-beat “ragged” rhythms of traditional ragtime music. The novelty piano style

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229 See example 43 for a transcription of a section of Confrey’s “Kitten on the Keys.”

emerged as a descendent of ragtime. Confrey gained fame with his popular “Kitten on the Keys” piano piece released in 1921, and he continued to compose pieces within this genre. Confrey recounted that “Kitten on the Keys” was inspired by a cat at his grandmother’s house that he found jumping up and down on the piano keyboard. Confrey wrote jazz band music later in his life and died in 1971. 231 A picture of Confrey is shown in figure 11.

Confrey’s novelty piano musical style features fast tempos, chromatic piano roll flourishes, perpetual and virtuosic motion, and an emphasis on right hand triplets, sixteenth-note figures, and double-notes. 232 The novelty piano style “incorporates a number of purely harmonic attention-getting devices, such as higher-interval chords (the ninth particularly), the prominent use of minor modality, augmented triads and whole-tone-scale effects, and sudden unprepared shifts of key.” 233 Novelty piano showcased the possibilities on the piano for popular piano roll recordings.234

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233 Ronald Riddle, Ragtime, 287.

234 Jasen and Jones, That American Rag, 76.
Larsen notes that she was also influenced by Les Paul and Wes Montgomery in her exploration of Bebop in this movement. She explains:

. . . the devilish runs that start in measure fifty . . . That, you know, that comes from Gillespie and Bebop, but it . . . was actually Les Paul – he electrified the guitar – he’s one of the inventors of the electric guitar – and he electrified the guitar so that he could play runs like these and they could be heard, because you can’t pick that fast at that volume. So when he introduced these kinds of runs, tonalities like this, into that speed of running – that’s really Bebop.236

Transcriptions of solos by Les Paul and Wes Montgomery are seen in examples 77 and 78, respectively.

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236 Larsen, interview by author, December 29, 2009.
Example 77. Montgomery, “Geno,” mm. 22-32.\textsuperscript{237}

Example 78. Berlin/Paul, “Blue Skies,” mm. 9-13.\textsuperscript{238}

“Burst”: Harmony

Larsen uses complex jazz chords in this movement, reminiscent of the harmonic language of Bebop. She uses sevenths, ninths, elevenths, and polychords to create complex harmonies (example 79). The musicians should emphasize the dissonant notes, and the pianist should voice large chords to the top notes.


Example 79. Trio for Piano and Strings, “Burst,” mm. 1-2.\textsuperscript{239}

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Example 79
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\textit{“Burst”: Rhythm}

The rhythmic motion of this movement is an important element, drawing from the characteristics of novelty piano and Bebop. The “devilish runs” that Larsen describes in measures 50 and 51 must be played with sharp articulations and precise syncopation in the piano (example 80). Slurred sixteenth-note phrases ending with an accented note should move towards the accented note, with more weight on the final accented note to make the phrase pop. This type of phrasing and articulation is frequently heard in Bebop with riffs and interchanges in solos and duets.

\textsuperscript{239} Larsen, \textit{Trio for Piano and String}, “Burst,” 14.
The atonal running sixteenth-note patterns require concentration and careful fingering to maneuver (example 81). Dynamic contrast and shading is also important in order to add character to the “devilish runs.”

Typical rhythmic motives of novelty piano are seen throughout this movement, particularly through Larsen’s use of “Kitten on the Keys.” The “staggered” sixteenth-note-eighth-note rhythmic motive of “Kitten on the Keys” is heard throughout this movement (example 82). The left hand subtly maintains the syncopated rhythmic motion. Larsen often brings out off-beats with accents. The rhythmic motion should be flexible, and sixteenth-note runs should be sharp and clear. The “Kitten on the Keys” quotes should be played with agogic rhythm. Larsen frequently writes a swinging, syncopated bass line, and this bass line should be played dryly with an emphasis on the off-beats.

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240 Ibid., 51.
Example 81. *Trio for Piano and Strings,* “Burst,” mm. 112-116.\(^{241}\)

\(^{241}\) Ibid., 20.
Larsen writes intricate and chromatic melodic fragments in this movement (example 83). These fragments need to be played carefully, with attention given to articulation and dynamics.

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Example 83. *Trio for Piano and Strings*, "Burst," mm. 120-123.\(^{243}\)

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In an interview with University of California doctoral student Jennifer Kelly, Larsen describes her musical inspirations:

[My musical collection] has almost everything from the early Schoenberg string quartets to my Japanese collection of Elvis Presley . . . Bluegrass fiddling, African-American jazz, Chicago blues, symphonic music, chamber music . . . I am an academically trained composer. I’m also a culturally trained composer. I was trained in German repertoire and all the methodologies that were derived from that repertoire that forms the basis of our music education. But . . . I know that these methodologies comprise just one system of tonal language. It’s not the way. It’s a way . . . I freely draw upon the languages of all the music that I know. I analyze everything. I’m into analyzing rap now. I use all the academic techniques and tools to analyze all the music that’s in my music collection. And then I let what I learn from those musics inform how I write.244

Larsen is exceedingly concerned with creating music that has a relevant voice in today’s culture. She draws upon her eclectic musical background and her interest in varying genres to connect with the audience and bring a sense of currency to the classical concert world. Her fascination with the American vernacular infuses her instrumental music. She often creates fragments of American musical elements to achieve an “Aha!” moment from the audience – a moment of emotional connection and recollection which helps a piece of music remain in the minds and hearts of the listener. In this author’s opinion, it

is important to introduce Larsen’s chamber music to a wider audience because it is music that will enrich the lives of all who hear it.

Aaron Copland once said, “One might maintain that musical interpretation demands of the performer an even wider range than that of an actor, because the musician must play every role in the piece.”245 The chamber music of Larsen challenges musicians to thoroughly understand the American stylistic elements of the music in order to project the music effectively. Larsen wants performers to think about and discuss her music and its influences in order to understand not only the musical score, but also the broad spectrum of American culture.


Faulkner, Sanford. “Arkansas Traveler.” Transcription for piano by author. ca. 1850.


_____.“Composing to Communicate: Reaching the Audience.” *Symphony* 47, no. 5 (September - October 1996): 40-41.


_____.“Reaching the Audience.” *Symphony* 47, no. 5 (September-October 1996): 40-41.


Lowry, Robert. “Shall We Gather at the River?” Transcription by author. 1864.


Milhorn, Tina M. “Music and Memoir: Libby Larsen's Settings of First-Person Texts by Women: ME (Brenda Ueland); Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to her Daughter Janey; Try Me, Good King: Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII.” DMA essay, University of Cincinnati, 2004.


“When the Saints Go Marching In.” Transcription by author. 1800s.


APPENDIX 1

TRANSCRIPTION OF LARSEN INTERVIEW ON DECEMBER 29, 2009

Note: “MD” denotes the author’s initials, and “LL” denotes Libby Larsen’s initials.

This interview was conducted over the telephone.

MD: What was your inspiration for the new [chamber music] work that you are writing, *The Rodeo Queen of Heaven*?

LL: I decided to write this piece under this title because of the work of a Southwestern artist by the name of Arthur Lopez who works out of Taos and Santa Fe. He is Mexican, and he makes – do you know what a bulto is? They’re the papier-maché saints that you see in Mexico. Anyway, his work is bultos, but what he does is he combines cultural elements to make these bultos. So he has a series of bultos that are a combination of Catholic saints, but then also American past times I guess you would call them. Mostly rodeo past times. So when I was thinking about how to work with *Enhaké*, because they’re so good, I’m mean they’re just phenomenal musicians, and they asked me for a signature piece, which to me, when an instrumentalist asks for a signature piece, I immediately go to rhythmic technique, not pitch technique. Most of the pitch techniques for instrumentalists are centered around etudes that the language is derived from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So I go for rhythmic technique, and then combine the idioms of etude technique with contemporary rhythm. And so the Rodeo Queen of Heaven is one of the bulto, which is a Madonna and child – but dressed in rodeo garb, which is quite wonderful. And so one of the movements of this group is titled “Rodeo Queen of Heaven,” and then there’s another: “Saint Michael Rides the Bull.” So it’s a cultural combination of Catholicism and American frontierism.

MD: Now that I think about it, you tend to focus on rhythm more than tone and pitch.

LL: I do. Yes.
MD: It gives energy to your music. Rhythm is really the heart of Americana in a lot of ways.

LL: Well, not really Americana, but American. Whatever it is about music that is American is usually defined by the rhythm of the language. American English is not a pitch-centered language; it’s really a rhythmic-centered language. Our tessitura tends to ride somewhere between a fourth and a fifth, and we patter along in that tessitura in a quite rhythmically complex way. Then we use inflections outside of the fourth and fifth to express emotion. But really, our language is defined by rhythm much more than by pitch. And so, in my work, I find the rhythmic aspects of our culture to be infinitely interesting and always changing. We don’t have 3/4 in our culture; we really don’t have 4/4 either. We have a lot of 4. But march and waltz and jig and pastorale, they’re not part of our culture – not the culture of American English. It’s the culture of British English. American English, no. So, the rhythmic vitality that really defines us is really one of the central ways that we define ourselves as a group of people. It’s not Americana, because Americana is really based in European models.

MD: Interesting. I hadn’t thought of it like that before. Moving to *Holy Roller*, I found a great article discussing the revival and gospel music culture in the *Journal of Ethnomusicology*. A gospel singer and educator named Pearl Williams-Jones discusses various aspects of the gospel culture, including improvisation, variation, communal participation, and dancing. I found that I could check off each one of those aspects and find them in *Holy Roller*. It was very easy to apply this to my analyzing of this piece.

LL: Oh, I’m delighted.

MD: I’m wondering about your inspiration. I know you’ve said that you’ve listened to Reverend Jesse Jackson’s speech and that has influenced you.

LL: Oh, many, I’ve listened to many, many revival preachers. Many, many.

MD: Have you actually been to a revival sermon?

LL: Yes, I have.

MD: Really? In Minnesota?

LL: No, not in Minnesota. [laughs] But yes, I have. I’ve done a great amount of research. It really is one of the musical forms that our culture has evolved. We just invented it. And it’s used – once you know the form, you find it at work quite often, especially politicians. And you’ll notice it in acceptance speeches, in political speeches. Obama uses it all the time, all the time, really just elements of it. Really the revivalist preacher’s form is an emotionally manipulative vehicle designed to focus you on one idea – hope – or, “yes we
can,” and to use an emotional build to bring a crowd together as one in an excited way. Yes, I studied it quite deeply.

MD: In *Holy Roller* you begin with the preacher speaking to the congregation and it slowly evolves to a huge climax where everyone is rolling around on the floor. Were you meaning to parallel the storyline of a gospel revival sermon?

LL: It’s a direct parallel. That is the form – the sermon. But I wasn’t meaning to depict that visually. No. I was really more after vocal inflection and then the emotional crescendo.

MD: Going back to the question of your inspiration, do you have any favorite gospel singers or groups that you listen to that contributed to your understanding of the genre?

LL: Yes, many over the years. Mahalia Jackson, The Five Blind Boys of Alabama, most definitely Ray Charles, whose work I’m much more interested in these days than Mahalia Jackson because Ray Charles was using gospel to fuse with rock and roll. James Brown. Many. Buddy Guy, The Soul Singers, The Blues Singers. It’s all out of the same church.

MD: Great. Now, I read that you’ve included the three hymns in this piece for technical reasons: they all employ the third degree of the scale. You also mentioned that you had certain philosophical reasons. I’m curious to know your philosophical reasons for using these three hymns?

LL: You mean “Shall We Gather” . . .

MD: Yes, “Shall We Gather at the River?,” “When the Saints Go Marching In,” and “God Be With You.”

LL: Well, I have had a fascination with a fundamentalist approach; it’s very philosophical, actually. It has to do with our land mass, which is huge, and the notion that we have had working in the culture since about the 1840s or 50s that we can standardize our behavior and call ourselves one. I’m completely enthralled that a people would try to do that in order to define a land mass the size of what we call the United States and a people who have very little to do with each other, except that we’re all on this land mass, you know. And so I have been fascinated with fundamentalist preaching, revivalist preaching, really for decades and decades and decades, as a way to transcend language – the various languages of all the immigrant populations – and religious ritual, as a way of transcending cultural ritual in order to reach abstract, essential human emotions, which is what fundamentalist, really great revivalist preachers, can do. And since we’ve evolved this whole phenomenon of revivalist and fundamental preaching, it seems to me that we’ve been practicing virtual reality [laughs] really since the 1840s or 50s. And so philosophically I look for icons, evolved cultural icons, that can help us reflect upon our
notion that we are one, when in fact we are not [laughs], and I look for icons. I’m fascinated with fundamental religion because it insists on its patterns of behavior as the way, which really no other religions do. And not only the way, it’s that one particular definition of the Christ, too, which has been at work in the culture particularly over the last half of the 1900s. And so, that’s that. How can we be one when we’re not one, and we insist that there’s one way to be one?

MD: That’s so interesting. I grew up in Hawaii, so talking about the land mass - even Hawaii is such a unique culture!

LL: It is! Of course it is! Did you grow up in the hula culture?

MD: I did! We had hula dance as one of our segments in our gym class, believe it or not!

LL: Yes! My kindergarten teacher was from Hawaii. Yamamoto. She was here! [laughs] She taught us a lot and introduced us to the hula culture.

MD: Really!

LL: Yes! She was here for the year . . . she was here on an arranged marriage, and so she came to Minnesota from Oahu – can you believe it? – to meet her husband and then spend a year getting to know him before they were married! [laughs] So she taught kindergarten. Maybe that’s an influence, too! [laughs]

MD: Have you written any pieces including the ukulele?

LL: I just did, actually. I just included one in the score to my opera about Jacqueline.

MD: I know you like that about Carl Stalling - that he included the ukulele in his scores.

LL: Yep, and the Hawaiian slide guitar.

MD: Next question. I know you’ve said that you write in layers. I notice that in Holy Roller you seem to be writing literally – the chromatic fall of notes of the congregation falling to the ground, and in one part, measure 226, it looks like people are rolling, because you have these sixteenth-note slurred figures. I’m just curious if that’s my imagination, or if you did that on purpose?

LL: [laughs] No, no! That’s your imagination! [laughs] It never would have crossed my mind! [laughs] But, are you a visual listener?

MD: I am.

LL: Aha! Yes! Well that makes sense. Yep, it does. I also am a visual listener. So perhaps, without my knowing it, visualizations are influencing what I’m choosing. I did
not do that consciously. It’s really – measure 138, for instance, is really a modified boogie bass. But who’s to say?

MD: Do you have any specific advice for me as I work on playing this piece?

LL: The thing to do with this piece is to balance the chords equally. For instance, in measures like 162, 163, 164 [note: in published score, measures 158, 159, and 160] with all those tritone chordal chords, those are all to be equally balanced so that when there is an inner melody, it really comes across as the melody. But if you balance the chords, even the chords in 155 [note: in published score, measure 151], they’re meant to be balanced in a jazz balance. So that’s one thing. Another thing is, don’t be afraid to use ham hands.

MD: What do you mean? [laughs]

LL: Look at measure 129 [note: in published score, measure 125] – the staccatos – or even 128 [note: in published score, measure 124] – all the accents. If you attack them with classical accents, you’ll get a Prokofiev-like sound out of them. But we’re really going more for a Jimmy Johnson sound. So it’s a little flatter attack. Does that make sense?

MD: That does make sense.

LL: Yes, it’s a flatter attack. You can be very secco, on measure 121 [note: in published score, measure 117] in the left hand [sings]. What that is, if you were to say what is that when those kinds of gestures are happening, it’s really cultural noise, if that makes sense.

MD: OK.

LL: And then, the one spot that I’d say you guys can have some real fun, is really measures 122 and 123 [note: in published score, measures 118 and 119] where you’re doing the back and forth.

MD: The communal responsorial part.

LL: Yes! Just really play off each other, don’t wait.

MD: Fortunately, I have a great saxophone player.

LL: Great! Because really the piano should be literally rocking by the time you get to measure 139 [note: in published score, measure 138].

MD: Great! Moving on to Barn Dances. I am curious to find out if you have done some square dancing?

LL: I have!
MD: I would think there would be some good dancing in Minnesota!

LL: Oh, yes! There’s lots of different folk dancing – many different cultures. There’s a whole country dance tradition, and Irish traditional dancing with a stick – Morris dancing. There is Polish dancing, there’s Norwegian folk dancing, there’s Swedish folk dancing; there’s folk dancing everywhere! Plus there is a lot of square dancing.

MD: Now, did you dance these four particular steps and love them?

LL: No, but I did, like you, in the Girl Scouts – I square danced. Because I’m so interested in how we evolved musical forms, and I’m interested in American English, I got very interested in square dance calling. It is just so interesting. It’s got a lot of [talking in square dance calling rhythm] which is almost like fiddling. The question is, did fiddling come from the language, or did the language come from fiddling, or what? Anyway, so I got very interested in square dance calling for the rhythm of it, not necessarily for the words, and that’s what led me to these dances. Again, lots of research.

MD: I was going to ask you, because I was reading about the caller, and I found this interesting book by Lloyd Shaw. He goes through cowboy dances, and he gives a whole definition of the caller and it’s just hilarious!

LL: Now is this the book that’s from the 1940s, and it has pictures in it?

MD: Yes!

LL: I have that book!

MD: It has pictures of the dances that you chose.

LL: Yes, it does! I know, I have that book. I love that book! And that’s actually where I got these. That is my source for this piece.

MD: I had to look up all of the square dance terminology . . . it’s been a while since I’ve been square dancing so I had to go back and refresh myself. Did you listen to anything specific in your research? Maybe Gene Autry?

LL: Really, mostly Gene Autry, who is amazing. Also Burl Ives. The two of them are such folklorists.

MD: Do you have any favorite songs?

LL: “Blueberry Hill,” which was a Gene Autry song. And then “Don’t Fence Me In.” Those really exemplify the cowboy swing, which is much more of a lope than it is the jazz swing. The cowboy swing, I guess it lopes, I guess that’s the best word. And it
doesn’t mean the horse loping off into the sunset, but it does have that kind of back and forth [sings – “Back in the Saddle”]; just a little lazier.

MD: I think you did a great job capturing that in the second movement.

LL: Thanks!

MD: It really lopes, especially in the interludes.

LL: Also the yodeling – the yodeling sixth.

MD: In the second movement?

LL: [sings the skips in the piano part in measure two]

MD: Oh! That is a yodel, isn’t it!

LL: Yes! That is the cowboy yodel! Which is also very Gene Autry.

MD: It’s been so much fun researching this because I sit in the library and listen to Gene Autry.

LL: [laughs] That’s a little different from Elliott Carter! Well, you know, and you find so much about who we are in the music. It’s just so obvious there, and yet we don’t look at it in that way very often.

MD: I’ve noticed that a lot of American composers are tied to one region, yet you seem to have transcended that. You have interests in so many different types of regionalized music.

LL: Yes, I do. And it’s because when I was in grade school, I learned music as “movable do” Gregorian chant. I do really believe that music is infinite in its potential and possibilities to shape and perceive, and that various cultures evolve various systems to hear themselves through music. But I was born in 1950, and so I had a record player. The generations before me did not have access to various music the way the generations from 1950 on did. It is profound, you know. It is a profound difference. And so, if you understand that music is infinite, and really can be shaped any way you want, then the listening to music from that point of view gives you catholic ears – meaning all music is interesting, because it is all various systems of organization and perception. And so I have decided for myself that this is the new frontier. So is John Zorn, so are a lot of people. We’re all just realizing this through our own music in different ways. It’s all there, it’s infinite. So for a composer to choose a particular method for organizing sound in space, and saying this is mine, that’s one way to do it, although it can never be yours; you can never own music – not for an instant - but for me, the real frontier comes back to this question of – are we one or not? So I’m searching for the it of it, not saying that I, IV,
and V is the only way that we can practice being one. It’s non-Schenkerian. Although Schenker is a Pythagorian, and there are certain physical principals at work in the world that can be heard through sound- intervals that can be heard in sound. The actual making of music is evolved in any many numbers of ways, all of which are vital except the one that insists that they solve the problems of music by writing music. Those ones are not vital. Most of music education music is not vital.

MD: And today we have access to all different kinds of music in an instant.

LL: Absolutely! In an instant. And this is the new frontier. And you know, when I was in college, we’d only had the transistor radio for four years. I know, it makes me sound like an antique – and I’m not that old! [laughs] But really, I’ve actually given quite a few talks about what happened when sound changed.

MD: Right, I’ve read a good amount of your discussions about the radio.

LL: Yes. And it’s phenomenal. So my springboard is there.

MD: So interesting! Now this is probably my imagination again, but in the second movement it looks like you are dividing the ring of the music literally.

LL: Now where do you see that – and hear it?

MD: Even in the second full measure when you have the diminished fifth moving to the third.

LL: Well, you know – it’s “Kitten on the Keys”!

MD: Oh! It is!

LL: ‘Tis indeed! But also, yes, I meant that on purpose. I did mean to divide. Yes, I did.

MD: You also quoted “Kitten on the Keys” in Trio for Piano and Strings.

LL: Yep! It shows up everywhere. That darn cat!

MD: I know that you played “Kitten on the Keys” growing up and it’s one of your favorite pieces to quote.

LL: I do. I just love it!

MD: Is there a particular reason why you quote it so often?

LL: Actually, it’s because of that very gesture in the second measure [sings the sixteenth-notes found in the right hand of measure two of Barn Dances]. That you don’t find in European music, you know, because you have to ham hand to get it right.
MD: I love that expression!

LL: [laughing] I know!— sort of flat-knuckle “ham hand” to get it honky tonk and get it right, so it’s a gesture born of the fingers, but based in equal temperament, except that it doesn’t belong to functional harmony. That’s why I love it.

MD: I actually played that growing up as well.

LL: Oh, I’d love to hear you playing that! I got about half the notes, I’m sure you got all of them.

MD: I found a recording of Zez Confrey playing it. You can hear it on YouTube.

LL: Oh, I’m going to do it!

MD: I think it was a piano roll recording.

LL: Wow! Cool.

MD: I notice that you used the same material in the third movement waltz – titled “Varsouvianna” – that you used in My Antonia. What led you to use the same material? Did you have a reason for using it again?

LL: Yes. It worked fine as a song, but really . . . when I was writing the song I was really thinking more in instrumental curves, instrumental phrasing – really beautifully slow, which is beyond the breath of singing. So I was thinking much more instrumentally, and so when I was working on Barn Dances, it just appeared and said you belong here. And that’s the truth.

MD: Did you write it keeping in mind that it’s really a couple’s a dance?

LL: I did.

MD: How did that translate into the music? I notice that the clarinet and flute play off of each other.

LL: Yes, they trade off – they play together. I guess you could you say that they represent a couple. But they really represent an interplay of color, in my mind, rather than separate.

MD: Great. And on to the “Rattlesnake Twist!” This movement seems very literal.

LL: Yes, it is – this one is quite literal. I meant to be quite literal.

MD: My hands become so twisted playing this!

LL: And darting. There’s quite a bit of darting that you have to do.
MD: Exactly! Did you mean to start with a rattlesnake in the flute part in the beginning?

LL: I did, yes.

MD: What suggestions do you have for the players of this movement?

LL: It’s fun, and this one you have to know beyond reading it. That’s for sure. I continue to explore concentration on the brink of destruction. [laughs] This is – there are a couple of other pieces – *Four on the Floor, Firebrand* is another one – pieces where the ensemble needs to be as tight as tight jazz is, and the concentration has to remain or the piece crashes. And so, with this one, it’s a matter of really knowing the territory so well, that once the piece starts, intense concentration should really hold the performer but also the performance and therefore the audience to the point where they’re holding their breath.

MD: This movement reminds me of your *Viola Sonata*. You really have to be focused.

LL: Yes! You do.

MD: Now do you have any further suggestions for the other movements?

LL: Yes, I do! These come from various performances, but one is, in measure 22 and like places [in movement 1], the staccato should be very dry – very little and almost no pedaling. So that for sure is important. The opening should really blast forward; it should really explode. When you come to measures like 82 and 83, they have a similar explosive quality.

MD: OK. Dry staccato there.

LL: Dry staccato, and very explosive. Yes. Some people have fussed around with the last two measures of the first movement and have taken a pianoforte on the downbeat of [measure] 129 and then a crescendo up to forte. I don’t like that, but if you like it go ahead.

MD: So you want to maintain the fortissimo there.

LL: I do, yep.

MD: And then “Divide the Ring” . . .

LL: “Divide the Ring” . . . we talked about that. Except for the sixteenth-notes in “Divide the Ring:” try to make those very Baroque.

MD: OK. Could you give me an example in a measure?
LL: Yes, measure 51. So that would really apply less to you and more to the flute and clarinet, in measure 19 and 20, those measures. And then measures 30 and 31.

MD: And then the “Varsouvianna” is very warm.

LL: Yes, very warm with very long lines.

MD: It reminds of the second movement of the Viola Sonata.

LL: Oh, “Still”? 

MD: Yes. And actually the Trio reminds me of that too. It’s so challenging to play these long phrases but very effective if you can maintain the energy.

LL: Yes and just to maintain a complete still while moving. It’s very tai-chi.

MD: Moving on to the Trio for Strings. I know you have said that you believe orchestral stringed instruments have a difficult time speaking American English naturally. Did this present any problems for you in this piece?

LL: Yes, as a matter of fact. Not in the first movement. In the first movement I was listening to film noir scores. Are you an old movie fan?

MD: I am, but I’ve never heard of that term before.

LL: Well, if you listen to the scores of films like Laura [sings theme material], or my favorite is the score to The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

MD: Maybe I’m not a big older movie fan, because I don’t know any of those films!

LL: Well, I tell you. The string playing in those scores is studio string playing, and it’s not necessarily orchestral. I really worked more towards film noir in the first movement – kind of the language of film noir. That is really string writing – string writing doing what strings do in films up until about the 1950s. So then, the second movement . . . do you have questions about the second movement?

MD: I do, yes. I know you mention in the introduction to the work that the first movement is influenced by Miles Davis’s Bebop style. The second movement seems to me to be influenced by his Cool Jazz style. Were you emulating his Cool Jazz style in the second movement of this work?

LL: No, I didn’t do that on purpose, no. Although, the unconscious is always at work. You know, so many people believe that composition is right on the surface all the time – it’s all analyzed as we’re going – and it’s not.
MD: I was actually wondering about that. If you were listening to a Miles Davis piece, would you note the aspects of the music – the asymmetrical phrases, the atonal sixteenth-note runs – or are you subconsciously taking them in?

LL: I take them in, but I’m not analyzing them. But I do, yeah, take them in. I do take them in so I can go back and work with them. But no, I don’t listen to jazz analytically. If I’m going to do that I’ll go back and analyze it. But yep, Miles Davis. Do you know his album *Bitches Brew*?

MD: I have listened to parts of it, yes.

LL: That’s really more of the second movement. I was really lucky in that Miles Davis came to the Guthrie Theatre here in Minneapolis when he released *Bitches Brew* and he gave a concert. It must have been about four hours long and just, man, to be a wash in the musicians just making the music up on stage really did suspend time. Fascinating.

MD: Were there particular songs that you loved that you listened to later on that influenced this movement, or were you just remembering the experience?

LL: No, I’m not honoring melodies. No.

MD: In the third movement you quote “Kitten on the Keys,” and you have Miles Davis’s Bebop style happening here again.

LL: Yes. And also Les Paul and Wes Montgomery. Have you listened to their playing much?

MD: I’ve heard a little bit of it.

LL: Yeah, it’s just amazing. The thing about it – the runs, for instance, the devilish runs that start in measure fifty [sings] . . . That, you know, that comes from Gillespie and Bebop, but it was people – it was actually Les Paul – he electrified the guitar – he’s one of the inventors of the electric guitar – and he electrified the guitar so that he could play runs like these and they could be heard, because you can’t pick that fast at that volume. So when he introduced these kinds of runs, tonalities like this, into that speed of running – that’s really Bebop.

MD: You’re said before that you are trying to understand the notion of atonal running at Bebop speed, stating that it is a cultural symbol that you are working on. Were there specific aspects of Bebop that you were working on in this piece?

LL: Yes. Restlessness, and then – I don’t know what the term is, but sort of back-accent. Again, if you go back to measure 50 in the piano part, the way the last note is accented [sings the running sixteenth-notes found in the piano part in measures 50]: that really comes more from brass and guitar, not really piano. So it’s really looking to see if that
can be translated into piano. And it does not. I’ve tried these kind of Bebop runs with strings . . . no good.

MD: So that’s what you were referring to when you said that you were exploring the notion of Bebop.

LL: Yes. It just doesn’t work.

MD: Weren’t you writing a piece for electric guitar? Or was it electric bass?

LL: Yes, I was putting it into a piece that I’m working on. Oh then, oh yes, you did hear that, and then the singer that I was writing it for turned me down. Didn’t want to do it. Can you believe it?

MD: How terrible!

LL: I know! I’ll do it eventually with a singer who’s willing to take the risk.

MD: It is sort of risky to be writing with that type of instrumentation, at least as part of the classical music world.

LL: Yes, it is. Absolutely, it is. And, you know, it’ll happen.

MD: But I think that younger generations connect with that type of instrumentation.

LL: They do.

MD: It really is a new language that’s evolved.

LL: It is. It’s part of their sound palette. You know, it’s part of my sound palette. I grew up with electric guitar. It really is part of the post-1950s sound palette, again, that we all grew up with. There are some marvelous guitar players – really, really, fine – and into the third generation of master guitar players, too; we just don’t study it as a part of the academy. But that doesn’t mean that I can’t use it, and so I’m using it.

MD: That’s actually one of the reasons that I was drawn to you and your music. I grew up playing all types of genres – rock, pop, jazz, gospel – I have such an interest in other genres. I could sometimes feel like an outsider in the classical musical world.

LL: Yeah. Well, we’re birds of a feather. We really are I think on the forefront of the musicians. What is the music in the culture? And it’s all of these things. And the best musicians are fluent in many different styles. The instruments are vehicles. You know, you’re a pianist. The piano was one of the most fluent cultural vehicles we have. It speaks gospel, it speaks Rachmaninov, it speaks Schoenberg, it speaks honky tonk. But it is – it’s outside of the canon. Less and less though.
MD: I think you are one of the composers who is really changing that.

LL: I hope so.

MD: You’re finding ways to connect and evolve.

LL: I hope so. But I also think . . . you asked a question, you know, why is [my] chamber music not as well known as [my] vocal music? And I do think that part of it is that the chamber music world is not necessarily looking for new repertoire, [laughs] whereas the vocal world, the wind world, there are so many ensembles and instruments that are, that want to speak vitally through new repertoire. But the chamber music world doesn’t necessarily want to do that. It’s not really looking to build the repertoire.

MD: It’s true. Most of the pianists in the classical music world tend to stick to the canon of eighteenth and nineteenth century music. They’re comfortable there and they don’t want to stretch beyond that.

LL: And part of that – it’s partly the studio teachers. You as a studio teacher are going to be a God send – if that’s what you want to do – because you are who you are. But so many of the studio teachers come directly from the Leipzig model.

MD: They do. Actually, musical theatre has become one of my new favorite genres because it has managed to encompass all of the different styles, from classical to jazz. I think it’s been a bridge from classical music by incorporating different musical styles.

LL: Oh, wonderful. Yes. I think musical theatre is really one of our great bridges. Definitely.

MD: You have stated in the past that you approach vocal and instrumental writing differently, although your overall approach is to work to bring out the natural idiom of the instrument at hand. Is there a difference that you could describe between your vocal and instrumental writing?

LL: I’ll try. The voice is not a naturally chromatic instrument. My approach to voice is a lot less rhythmic and quite a bit less . . . well, it’s quite more conjunct than disjunct, the way that I approach lines with voice. Also the voice is a psychological instrument, and so part of writing for voice is to plant in the mind of the singer the belief that when they open their mouth that note in that range is going to come out. And that’s very different than writing for mechanical instruments who are built to make those . . . to let you manipulate them in such a way that you get the pitch that you want. The voice is . . . you really have to write for the breath and the psychology of the voice.

MD: Do you begin with words that you translate into your instrumental writing?
LL: No. Very, very rarely. There’s one piece called *Black Birds, Red Hills* that is words-based. One piece. And it sounds different, I think, than a lot of my instrumental music.

MD: Do you begin with intervals? I’ve read before that you often build upon intervals while composing.

LL: Yes. But with voice, I do in the instrumental parts of the vocal music but not in the vocal parts. But really the line comes from the words. That’s the way you can build characters. So many operas forget that characters have different tempos and speak in different ways, so you have many, many contemporary operas where everybody speaks the same way. And of course, if you really work on the words, work from the words to build the vocal line, you know, then the two really belong together and you don’t have words when you’re working with instruments. You’ve got physics, and you have mechanics, and you have muscle training because we all play etudes over and over again. We’re training our muscles in certain ways.

MD: You mentioned to me before that your use of musical quotations is not about quoting, but rather it is about being part of the culture.

LL: Honoring. Yes.

MD: How do you choose a quote and decide to integrate it into your music? Are you looking for something that is of a certain essence that somehow embodies a certain gesture of a musical style, or are your choices mostly of a personal nature?

LL: I think it’s the essence, yes. And often times a quote will present itself while I’m working on a piece.

MD: How so? You hear it and . . .

LL: Yes. For instance, I just finished a big piece for euphonium and wind ensemble and as I was working on the piece – the language is all abstract language – all of a sudden the piece resolved into a quote from “Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones,” but only the [sings: “Alleluia, Alleluia”), and I just went, you know, really? Do we have to do this? [laughs] And so I worked and worked and worked and worked to not have the piece do that, but it had to.

MD: How interesting!

LL: Yeah! And it happens a lot. Do you know – this may happen to you in your own musical mind, that maybe you’re talking with someone and they say something and suddenly a song just pops into your head?

MD: It does. Yes.
LL: Yeah. That’s musical thinking. And it happens composing too. And I throw them out all the time, all the time, just like go away – I don’t want you and you don’t belong here. But sometimes in a piece, it just belongs there.

MD: That is so interesting! It’s like you can’t escape it; it’s part of the music and it has to be there.

LL: Right. And sometimes it takes over. In *Holy Roller*, that’s a wonderful piece in talking about this, because I didn’t really say I’m going to use these three hymns. They just all showed up, you know?

MD: That’s so fascinating. Now, you have mentioned that Eric Stokes, one of your compositional teachers, told you to never be afraid to listen to any genre of music. You have mentioned that you listen to everything from bluegrass fiddling to rap music to Chicago blues. What are you listening to right now?

LL: Oh, good question! I’ve been listening to quite a bit of African music because I’ve been studying the African music perspective. In fact, I’m working on a section of a piece right now where the choir is going to be working from the African perspective. So here’s the way it works. In Western perspective, we tend to create a pitch based melody and chords that enhance the melody, and we tend to place our beats strongly on strong downbeats and subdivide – usually duple subdivision unless we get a little more complicated. In the African perspective, there are always, always two rhythms going at once, and none of them are the governing pulse. So the pulse, even if you are a soloist in African music, your pulse is internal, and then you have two more meters that are polymetric that you hear externally – at least two – and then you build on that. There’s no adherence necessarily to the center of pitch; it’s not pitch-based, and beauty is defined in how the lines come together in the groove. That’s the definition of beauty in African music.

MD: Interesting!

LL: Anyway, I’m analyzing African music to try to understand how and if it can exist abstractly in cultured music. Of course it defines rock- and- roll and clearly in that perspective defines so much of American music – the off- beat, back-beat, the fact that almost all the music making in funk is done in the second half of the second beat. Right now I’m interested in that.

MD: Which groups have you been listening to?

LL: I’ll have to go get my recording and read the list off to you.

MD: Oh, thank you!
LL: I’m walking over to my player right now. I want to give you one name in particular. And I’m almost there and let’s see if I can find him. Well, here we go. I’ve been listening to people like the African Rhythm Travellers, The Pleb, Madeka . . .

MD: I’ve got to check it out!

LL: Yes, do check it out. Issa Bagayo. Yes. You’ll hear it.

MD: I’ll listen to it. Thank you so much for your time! You have been so helpful and I’ve learned so much.

LL: You’re so welcome! And call me if you have any more questions. Happy to help you!