

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

LIBBY LARSEN'S *LOVE AFTER 1950*

A SONG CYCLE FOR MEZZO-SOPRANO AND PIANO

A STYLISTIC AND INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

A DOCUMENT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

By

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Norman, Oklahoma

2008

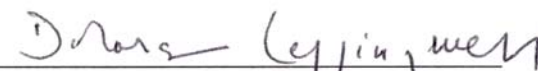
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Dr. Irvin Wagner, Chair



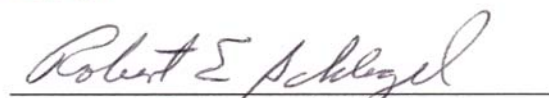
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document is dedicated to those who have so patiently encouraged me and guided me through this process. Dr. Wagner and Dr. Reichardt, especially, have been tireless in their response to help me in design and style of this document. Libby Larsen's music is a joy to study, and she has inspired me by her approach to poetry, composition, womanhood, and full and expressive living. I also thank Dr. Diane Coloton for introducing me to this work. I thank Dr. Michael Lee for his fascinating classes and inspiring mind, Dr. Leffingwell for her love of music and singing, and Dr. Schlegel for his prompt responses and kind encouragement.

My husband Earl has provided continued encouragement and support, technical assistance, and patience. Thanks to my special friend and technical lifeline, Jennifer Elbert, for her computer prowess. I am especially grateful for and blessed by the young women in my family, all music teachers, who demonstrate the highest level of musicianship, are dedicated teachers and performers, and continually amaze and inspire me with their maturity and grasp of womanhood: Christian Morren, Tracey Gregg-Boothby, Jenn Goodner, and Amy Logan. My first-born granddaughter, Tylar Rose, has been a source of joy and pride for all of her eleven years, and is becoming a fine musician and young woman in her own right, as well as one of the smartest people I have ever known.

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INTRODUCTION

Love After 1950 is a cycle of five songs dealing with love from a woman's perspective. It is full of humor, as well as tender poignancy, beginning with the first song, "Boy's Lips." Following each title is a subtitle, indicating the style in which the composer set the song. "Boy's Lips" is blues-inspired, followed by "Blond Men" (a torch song,) "Big Sister Says, 1967" (a honky-tonk,) "The Empty Song" (a tango,) "I Make My Magic" (Isadora's dance.)

Libby Larsen composes entirely on commissions, and her works have garnered many honors and awards, including a Grammy in 1994 for producing *The Art of Arleen Auger*, a CD featuring Larsen's *Sonnets from the Portugese*. She has composed over 200 works in a variety of genres, including solo, chamber, opera, theater, choral, dance and orchestra.

In her writing for the voice, Larsen is drawn to prose, as was her teacher, Dominic Argento. She states: "While I set both poetry and prose, I am more drawn to prose because of its rhythmic freedom and honest emotion. Texts that reveal strong, colorful and fearless people, many times women, are especially attractive to me."¹

Love After 1950 was commissioned for Susanne Mentzer by *artistic circles*, an Illinois not-for-profit corporation, and received its premiere on August 7, 2000 at the Ravinia Music Festival, in Chicago, Illinois. It was published in 2001 by Oxford

¹ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style and Literature* (Seattle, Psst. . .Inc., 1996), 294.

University Press. The cycle of songs for mezzo-soprano is a set of five songs to texts by five different women poets. Larsen states:

Susanne and I knew that we . . . wanted to create songs which are little real life-dramas which is exactly what the songs in *Love After 1950* are. This work, virtuosic in its performance and understanding of life, is no *Frauenliebe und -Leben*, rather *Love After 1950* is the new women's *Frau, Love 'em and Leave 'em*.²

Larsen, inspired by the “voraciously contemporary” language chosen by each poet, states that the group “felt like a dance set, with its own sense of rhythm, inextricably linked to the ways contemporary bodies move while dancing.”³

In her plenary address to the National Association of Schools of Music National Convention, 1997, Larsen stated:

It is the charge of the performers and composers that live and work, love and hate, breathe and exist, and hope and dream in a culture to use the best of their talent, the best of their techniques, the best of their imaginations, the best of their experiences, to make the music of their time.⁴

When questioned about her approach to writing music which sounds “American,” Larsen relates her observations of the rhythmic patterns, pitch ranges, tempo and phrase contour in American spoken English as being uniquely American, and her “striving to understand how these characteristics represent our American lives and emotions, and to use these elements in my music.”⁵

² Libby Larsen, *Love After 1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Libby Larsen, *The Role of the Musician in the 21st Century*, available from <http://www.libbylarsen.com/ResourcesRole.html>.

⁵ Libby Larsen, *On Music*, <http://www.libbylarsen.com/ResourcesFAQ.html>.

Love After 1950 is a celebration of life and love, awareness and experiences. The work playfully but thoughtfully paints word-in-music pictures with which most women of our generation can identify. The work is fresh and innovative, musically sophisticated but unstuffy, and a study in marriage of poetry and music and rhythm, voice and accompaniment. Libby Larsen is a gifted composer, and is exceptionally skilled at setting American poetry in a manner which helps the singer bring her songs to life.

In *Metaphor and Musical Thought*, Michael Spitzer provides insight into the significance of rhythm, an observation appropriate to a study of Larsen's approach to song composition.

At every period in which people have considered music's position in the world, the metaphor of rhythm has provided an interface between the patterns of stress peculiar to music and the cycles of life and the universe. Musical rhythm has been compared to the beating of the heart; the intake and exhalation of breath; the body in motion, gesturing, walking, and dancing; metrical patterns of poetry and speech; the alternation of night and day; and the cycle of the seasons.⁶

⁶ Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 212.

CHAPTER I

BOY'S LIPS (A BLUES)

Larsen planned a deliberate progression in the poetry of the cycle *Love After 1950*, beginning with this adolescent mystery of a first kiss, as young girls whisper in the hot summer evening at dusk. The picturesque story of one young girl's experience of adolescent revelations shared between friends begins the journey through a series of events dealing with womanhood. The use of familiar idioms provides accessibility for the singer to capture and portray the wit and humor of the work, as well as the tender poignancy of shared secrets.

STRUCTURE OF POEM/RELATION TO SONG FORM

Larsen chose the poem, "Boy's Lips," as the text for the adolescent leg of this journey through womanhood. The poem was written by Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet Rita Dove. Originally published in 1980 as "Adolescence-I" in *The Yellow House on the Corner*, the text is a fitting inspiration for the sensuous blues-infused song. It is easy to see why Larsen was drawn to Dove's poetry. In an interview with Robert McDowell, Dove states

Poetry is a kind of dance already. Technically, there's the play of contemporary speech against the bass line of the iambic, but there's also the expression of desire that is continually restrained by the limits of the page, the breath, the very architecture of the language – just as dance is limited by the capabilities of our physical bodies as well as by gravity. A dancer toils . . . to appear weightless. A poet struggles to render into words that which is unswayable – the ineffable, that

which is deeper than language – in the hopes that whatever words make the final cut will, in turn, strike the reader speechless.⁷

Larsen has a strong connection to the texts she chooses and was inspired by this poem by Dove. Larsen reads voraciously, selecting and memorizing a text and repeating it over and over, until she finds the natural flow of the words, the textures and colors.

Larsen indicates in the score preface that the poems she selected:

felt as a group like a dance set. First of all, the English chosen by the poets is voraciously contemporary. It has in each poem a sense of rhythm about it, which to me is inextricably linked to the ways contemporary bodies move while dancing.⁸

The inherent musicality of the text, the poet's shared love of dance, and the chronological starting place of adolescence for a woman's journey through the stages of life and love makes "Boy's Lips" an appropriate beginning for the cycle.

The text is as follows:

*In water-heavy nights behind grandmother's porch
We knelt in the tickling grasses and whispered:
Linda's face hung before us, pale as a pecan,
And it grew wise as she said:
"A boy's lips are soft, (as baby's skin, mmm_____)
As soft as baby's skin."
The air closed over her words.
A firefly whirred near my ear, and in the distance
I could hear streetlamps ping
Into miniature suns
Against a feathery sky. (mmm_____)*

⁷ Rita Dove, "Poet at the Dance: Rita Dove in Conversation: Interview by Robert McDowell" (American Poet, Fall 2003, biannual journal of Academy of American Poets.)

⁸ Libby Larsen, *Love After 1950*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

Dove's glimpses into the adolescent experience, enhanced by nature references, are set in languid, fluid movement by Larsen. The lazy mood of the song is set up by a five measure introduction, followed by the first two lines of text which set the scene of the story for the listener. The second line is not finished, then repeated and completed, enhancing the anticipation of what's to come by extension.

Following a measure of interlude, the next two lines of text set up the second section of the song, (B) – the first four measures describe Linda's countenance as she is about to reveal her important secret. This section is a syllabic chant on the same pitch, a1, fifteen times, until the word *wise* is punctuated by an upward leap of a tritone. There is no repetition of text within this section, as the young girl seems eager to advance the story.

The sentence is completed by chromatic descent, announcing the forthcoming revelation about the nature of a boy's lips. This revelation is set off by quotation marks in the poem, and given musical prominence in the song by a sudden change of texture: two chords, each supporting two long measures of recitative. Note that Larsen adds emphasis to Linda's revelation by announcing the whole statement, then repeating the last half linked by the sensuous "*mmm.*" A final 12-bar section begins with a two measure interlude, followed by the final section of text (C), in which the narrator describes the scene as she reflects on this magical encounter with Linda.

The complete form of the song may be sketched as follows:

TABLE 1:1 FORM OF “BOY’S LIPS”

m.1	6	13	14	18
{Introduction}	{A scene is set}	{ interlude}	{B anticipation}	{revelation}
20	22	30		
{interlude}	{C reflection}	{final <i>mm</i> __}		

The song’s form is balanced, with the introduction and first verse (A) comprising the first 12 mm., the interlude, anticipation (B) and revelation forming the middle section of 7 mm., and the interlude and reflection (C) the final 12 mm. The melodic and harmonic material is through-composed, however, with the only repetition associated with immediate restatement of small sections of text, and short sequential repetition of melody in the voice line or accompaniment.

MUSICAL MOTIVES IN VOICE AND ACCOMPANIMENT

Larsen uses recurring motives in the voice line and accompaniment to achieve unity throughout the song. The motives define the blues style that has been designated in the sub-title of “Boy’s Lips,” and enhance the secrecy, anticipation and sensuality of the text. Larsen’s compositional style is characterized by equal importance of piano and voice_ the piano determining the atmosphere, mood, and color through various compositional techniques. The voice line is used to inform the listener through the text and the notated melody, but also through inflection, articulation, and emotion.

In the score preface, Larsen says that she “built the song around two gestures, both of which are extracted from traditional blues.”⁹ One of these motives is most prominent in the accompaniment, and the other in the voice line. The first is a recurring triplet figure, which Larsen refers to as “lazy blue-third triplets, and blue-third resolutions.” The triplets are interwoven throughout the accompaniment, occurring in twenty-three of the thirty-one measures of the song, occurring on each beat of every measure in mm. 12-17. The composer elides or overlaps the first and second sections (A and B) by beginning the pervasive triplet figures on the final measure (m. 12) of the first section, foreshadowing the anticipation and excitement of what is to come in the middle section of the song. The continuous triplets appear first only in the left hand in m. 12, then in the right in m. 13. In m. 14, as the text continues (B,) both hands play the motive. The continuous motion in the accompaniment propels the chanted text forward, providing a hypnotic effect to the understated melodic line. By the last beat of m. 15, the texture of the accompaniment is beginning to thicken.

Ex. 1:1 Blue third triplets on each beat of the accompaniment

14 *a tempo*
mf

Lin - da's face hung be - fore us, pale as a pe -

⁹ Ibid.

One senses anticipation through this accompaniment (above) of descending triplet patterns. Alternating the patterns between the right and left hands supports the chant, with its pitches layered between octaves in the accompaniment. In m. 16, there is a change of pattern and increasingly thicker texture as we approach the tritone leap to m. 12, announcing a change in Linda's facial expression.

Ex. 1:2 Change of texture/pattern {tritone leap}

The musical score for Example 1:2 shows a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins at measure 16 with the lyrics "can, and it grew wise as she said:". The piano accompaniment features descending triplet patterns in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The score is marked with a '3' for triplets and a 'f' for fortissimo. The measure number '16' is indicated at the beginning of the system.

The second gesture is a blues slide on the interval of an octave, which occurs when Linda reveals her secret about a boy's lips. On the word *lips*, Linda slides down an octave to b-flat below c1. After the secret is revealed, the narrator echoes the octave descent a half-step higher, on a sensuous *mm*, then repeats the simile. The accompaniment echoes the b-natural octave in the next measure.

Ex. 1:3 Octave blues slide

{ octave slide } { octave slide }

freely, slowly
18 *sensually, revealing a truth* *savoring the thought*

"A boy's lips _____ are soft as ba-by's skin," mm, _____ soft as ba-by's skin. _____

p *mf*

There are two returns of the sliding octave descent motive in the final section of the song. One is on the word *feath'ry*, on b-natural, referring to the sunset-streaked evening sky. The protagonist has entered a new era of knowledge in her life, and can now echo the more experienced Linda in her grand sensuous sweep, looking forward to new experiences to come.

Ex. 1:4 Octave blues slide

{ }

28

gainst a feath - 'ry

The final slide is a half-step higher on c2-c1, the sensuous voiced *mm* stretches back up stepwise to d1 then up a fifth to a1. The narrator, recalling the metaphor Linda used in her description of a boy's lips, sighs in wonder and anticipation.

Ex. 1:5 Octave blues slide

In addition to the motives which Larsen identifies in the score preface, the use of recurring tritones, both harmonic and melodic, and frequent octave displacement occur. The tritones are used to underscore moments of anticipation or excitement in the story, such as the anticipation of Linda's revelation, melodically on the word *wise*. (See example 1:2.) Tritones are also used for emphasis in the accompaniment - harmonically (see -example 1:3, beat 1 of each measure) with double whole note chords of tritones in each hand, and melodically (Ex.1:4, beats 1-2.) In this case, we see octave displacement and the tritone used simultaneously. This motive also occurs in the opening measure of the piece and at measure 20, (Ex.1:6.)

Ex. 1:6 Melodic tritone/octave displacement (beats 1-2)

The image displays two musical staves in 4/4 time, illustrating melodic tritone/octave displacement. The first staff, starting at measure 1, is marked "Slow sway, languid, blue" with a tempo of quarter note = 56-60. It features a melody in the treble clef and piano accompaniment in the bass clef. The melody begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a dotted quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. A slur covers these three notes, with a tritone interval (G4 to B4) and an octave displacement (A4 to A5) indicated. The piano accompaniment includes a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) and a quarter note G4. The second staff, starting at measure 20, is marked "a tempo" with a tempo of quarter note = 56-60. It features a melody in the treble clef and piano accompaniment in the bass clef. The melody begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a dotted quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. A slur covers these three notes, with a tritone interval (G4 to B4) and an octave displacement (A4 to A5) indicated. The piano accompaniment includes a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) and a quarter note G4. The tempo marking "a tempo" is placed above the treble clef staff.

When the melodic augmented 4th interval is heard displaced by several octaves, the effect is one of dreaminess, a floating other-worldly quality that gives a sense of ambiguity. Larsen uses this pattern to set the mood at the beginning of the piece, and returns to the motive at the beginning of the last section of reflection. The motive appears again near the end of the piece, as we are again drawn far away to the *feathery sky*.

WORD PAINTING

Song composers often use melody to illustrate the text by using patterns, rhythms, ascending or descending motion, or other compositional devices to create an element of expression that gives emphasis or highlights a poetic idea. In addition to the use of the motives previously discussed, such as the ascending tritone illuminating Linda's wise face, Larsen further uses melodic motion to bring the text to life, such as in the downward

movement on *water-heavy*, adding weight to the final count of the measure, as she references the hot mugginess of southern summer nights.

Ex.1:7 Melodic drop on the word *heavy*

6 **a tempo**
as a warm memory

In the wa - ter - heav - y

A drop of a sixth on the word “knelt” is repeated a third lower two measures later, as the text is emphasized through the repetition, as well as described by the descending motion. Note the inversion of the minor third interval, and its resolution upwards. The slur on the word *knelt* further enhances the lazy, sliding blues feeling.

Ex. 1:8 Word painting on the word *knelt*

9 *mf*
knelt in the

11 *mf*
we knelt in the

p
rippling

In the closing thoughts of the narrator, (C section,) Larsen uses word painting in the voice line as she indicates a turn on the word “whirred”, referring to a firefly buzzing near her ear. Larsen recreates the memories of buggy, as well as muggy, summer nights.

Ex. 1:9 Melodic turn on *whirred*

The image shows a musical score for a voice and piano accompaniment. The voice part is in 4/4 time, starting at measure 23. The lyrics are "A fire-fly whirred near my". The word "whirred" is marked with a fermata and a wavy line above it, indicating a melodic turn. The piano accompaniment is also in 4/4 time and features a bell-like response in the piano part, marked with a wavy line and the dynamic *mf*. The piano part is marked with the instruction *warmly*. The score is written in G major and 4/4 time.

A bell-like response in the piano accompaniment to the word *ping* references the sound of the streetlights coming on in the dusky evening, illuminating the *feathery* sky, with its sunset colors strung out against the darkening backdrop. This accompaniment motive is especially effective because it only appears once and provides contrast to the more familiar lazy blues patterns.

Ex. 1:10 bell-like (acc.)

{ }

26

street - lamps ping in - to

LH *bell-like* 8^{va} RH

3

TEXTURE AND TONALITY

Larsen uses texture and timbre to paint aural pictures for the listener. The accompaniment varies from single notes separated by several octaves to triplet figures of eighth notes, quarter notes, and sixteenth notes, to lazy sounding quarter-note chords. For example, at the climax of the poem, the texture of the accompaniment changes from recurring triplet patterns on each count of the preceding six measures, to a two-measure homophonic recitative, supported by block chords of stacked augmented fourths. (See example 1:3.) On the partial repeat of the text, separated by the *mm.*, the chords move up by a half-step, as does the octave descent of the voice line. Larsen has set off the two-measure section by the change to the static chordal accompaniment, and emphasized the text by repetition and half-step juxtaposition. In addition, the two measures are long ones, 8/4 and 9/4. Time seems to stop, especially since the homophonic section follows the many measures of pervasive triplet motion.

In the next measure, following Linda's revelation, the triplet patterns return in the accompaniment for a two-measure interlude (example 1:4.) In the final section, one of reflection, Larsen uses triplets in assorted time values alternating with arpeggiated chordal patterns, similar in style to the beginning of the piece. The mood of reflection and references to nature echo the atmosphere of the introductory and opening section, and provide formal unity and closure to the piece.

In an interview with Glenda Secrest, Larsen states:

I very rarely use the piano or any instruments that are working with the voice as a mere accompaniment. There is always an active participation between the singer and the instrument(s.) It is often metaphorical, but often it is just contrapuntal passing material back and forth. It is a way of creating a context for memory for the entire piece and sharing motivic presentation of the work.¹⁰

In *Love After 1950*, Larsen does not use key signatures, a common trait in much of her music. The lack of key signatures allows her compositions to flow freely in what she terms "pools of tonality," pitch centers that do not have traditional harmonic function or movement.¹¹ The use of changing pitch centers, as well as the combination of simultaneous pitch centers suggesting polytonality, impart a sense of ambiguity; a floating quality, which enhances the feeling of dropping into a conversation which occurred in time and taps into our memory, bringing similar experiences into our consciousness.

¹⁰ Glenda Secrest, *Songs from Letters and Cowboy Songs* by Libby Larsen: Two Different Approaches to Western Mythology and Western Mythological Figures. (D.M.A diss., University of Memphis, 2000), 9.

¹¹ Laurel Ann Thomas, A study of Libby Larsen's "Me (Brenda Ueland)", a song cycle for high voice and piano. (DMA diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1994), 9.

RHYTHM AND RANGE

Rhythm is one of the most important elements of Larsen's writing style. In describing her style, she states:

I do have a style, but the style is not recognized in the consistent use of harmonic language. . My style can be recognized by its rhythm more than anything else. I believe that music springs from language of the people. I am intensely interested in how music can be derived from the rhythms and pitches of spoken American English.¹²

When asked about her goal of composing recognizably American music, Larsen replied:

Several years ago I began examining rhythmic patterns, pitch range, tempo and phrase contour in American spoken English. The example I like to use is Jesse Jackson speaking; if you were to analyze the interval of his pitch range, the tempo variations and rhythms, you would find an extraordinary musicality, uniquely American. I strive to understand how these characteristics represent our American lives and emotions, and to use these elements in my music.¹³

Larsen uses rhythms that follow speech patterns in a way that could be used as a guide for a dramatic reading of the poem. There is a sense of flow within easy patterns of quarter notes, dotted quarters and eighth notes. She sets word patterns that need equal stress and stretch to triplet quarter notes, such as *grand-mother's*, *baby's skin*, and *miniature*. When small monosyllables need less weight and stress, they are tied to quarters, moving after beat 4 on triplet eighths, such as *in the*, which flows more conversationally than if set to two eighths, for example, on the beat.

The vocal line moves to the irregular patterns of the English language in a conversational manner, using a moderate range, setting up small dramas about life, in this

¹² Matthew Balensuela, "The Composer – Libby Larsen: Composer Emphasizes Rhythm in Her Music," Online <http://mama.indstate.edu/users/swarens/larsen3.htm>, September 5, 1996.

¹³ <http://www.libbyLarsen.com/ResourcesFAQ.htm>.

case, young girls' sensual awakening on a hot summer evening. The melody is not memorable in a tuneful sense, but rather expressive of a mood or a memory which evokes feelings in the artist and listener.

By titling "Boy's Lips" a blues, Larsen has implied a variety of references. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* defines "the blues" as "a state of mind . . . of melancholy or depression. . . blues can also mean a way of performing. . . a musician's ability to play blues expressively is a measure of his quality."¹⁴ The most familiar blues structural pattern is the 12-bar blues, supported by a fixed harmonic progression of four bars of the tonic7, two bars on the subdominant(7), two more on the tonic7, one bar on the dominant 7th, followed by a subdominant 7, and two concluding on the tonic 7.. Larsen's composition does not follow the blues in a harmonic or structural sense, but the opening and closing sections are 12 bars in length. The mood of laziness, sensuality, and her use of blue-third triplets and sliding *portamenti* suggest the flavor and nostalgia of the blues and assist the singer in portraying a memory.

Descriptive instructions in the score further assist the singer and pianist in interpreting the song— *quietly, as a warm memory, sensually, revealing a truth, savoring the thought, sensually, blues piano, warmly, bell-like, sighing*. Larsen's articulatory instructions to both singer and pianist are helpful in interpreting the song, and in creating the atmosphere suggested to her by the poem. The mood is more one of discovery and mystery than melancholy and depression. "Boy's Lips" is an effective beginning for this nostalgic dance through womanhood.

¹⁴ Paul Oliver, "Blues," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (London: MacMillan Publishers Limited, 1995): 813.

CHAPTER II

BLONDE MEN (A TORCH SONG)

Blonde Men is perhaps the most sensual piece in this journey through womanhood. Larsen uses repetition and frequent tempo changes to create an increasing sense of heightened pleasure as the song progresses. In spite of the sexual connotations, Larsen sets the text in a playful manner, all the while professing, tongue-in-cheek, a dislike for blond men, and everything about them.

For this second song in *Love after 1950*, Larsen chose another female contemporary poet for her inspiration. The poem “Blonde Men” was included in Julie Kane’s first full-length collection, *Body and Soul*, which was published in 1987. Kane, born in 1952, was educated at Cornell and Boston University, later moving to New Orleans, where she became associated with the “Maple Leaf” group of poets. This group, along with musicians, frequented the Maple Leaf Bar on Oak Street for weekly literary reading sessions.

Kane later entered the Ph.D. program at Louisiana State University, where she received her degree in English in 1999. Other works by Kane include *Rhythm and Booze*, a second book length collection of poems, her New Orleans influence reflected in her title. Larsen chose another of Julie Kane’s poems, “Reasons for Loving the Harmonica,” for a commission by the American Boy Choir, which was also recorded on CD.¹⁵

¹⁵ http://thehypertexts.com/Julie_Kane_poet.

Libby Larsen subtitled “Blonde Men” “a torch song.” In the score preface, however, she states “If there is such a thing as an anti-torch song, ‘Blonde Men’ is it. I’ve indicated in the piano part the coloring ‘as a cocktail piano.’ Using twentieth-century harmonic language, I’ve created piano-lounge gestures as the atmosphere for the vocal line.”¹⁶

When I contacted Larsen to discuss this piece, I asked her to describe her cocktail piano gestures. She replied . . .

If you are familiar with really great cocktail lounge piano players, they bend, stretch and laze around the beats within a gesture, completing the gesture more as a suggestive narrative than a structural introduction, bridge, etc. When you add harmonic language that is built on 9th, 11th and 13th chords and proceeds in linear and parallel motion, you have the harmonic language for this song.¹⁷

The tongue-in-cheek mood of the song is soon revealed in its languid, bluesy style of the introduction and opening line. While a torch song usually laments unrequited love, this flirtatious piece is indeed an “anti-torch” song.

RELATION OF TEXT TO FORM OF SONG

The text (without repeats) is as follows:

*I think I ought to warn you
that I hate blond men
before you break your heart.*

*I hate the greenish gold
of their eyebrows and lashes,
how they shatter the sun into rainbows.*

¹⁶ Larsen, *Love After 1950*, 2.

¹⁷ Larsen interview by author,

*And their eyes:
like a long drink of water
That clear and that cold.*

*Worse than the eyes
is the blond hair (Reiterates all irritants.) (Climax, mm. 37-39)
the shock of a bright blond head
slanting above me like a sunbeam
on the covers of my dark blue bed.*

Larsen set the poem using a great deal of repetition, extending the short poem to a song forty-seven measures in length. The sections of the song are determined by the advancement of the text, as the singer lists the qualities of blond men that drive her crazy – with a love/hate relationship revealed at the end of the poem, when we realize that the couple is in bed together. The repetition, sometimes exact, sometimes partial, or in reverse word order, reflects the character’s involvement in the moment, as she daydreams while in the throes of passion. The use of a single syllable (*blond*.) stretched over four half-notes and followed by a long 6/4 measure on the word *hair* brings the music to a climax. This is somewhat unusual in the cycle - the text is usually set syllabically. The melismatic element is used only in the most dramatic moments. The structure of the song is as follows:

TABLE 2:1 FORM OF BLOND MEN

(m.)1	3	6	11	
{Introduction}	{Warning v.1 }	{repeated, reverse order}	{Gold brows and lashes v.2}	
15	17	18	20	27
{partial repetition}	{interlude}	{ one-word recollection}	{ Eyes (v. 3)}	{ interlude}
28	33	40	42	47
{Blond hair}	{ reiteration/climax}	{piano}	{ setting revealed}	{Piano}

USE OF MOOD/TEMPO CHANGES TO BUILD TENSION/REPOSE

Setting the romantic mood for the song, “Blonde Men” begins with the score notation *ironically calm*. By m. 11, Larsen cues the singer – *actually loving all of this*, belying the words of the text. Other notations in the score continue to direct the singer: *wistfully, musing, savoring*, then *becoming carried away*, and *with tortured delight*. Larsen uses score indications to assist the singer and pianist in capturing the emotion and communicating the message in the poetry through the style and articulation of the music. Her directions are precise, enabling the musicians to project a jazzy sense of implied improvisation, through careful observation of the composer’s intent.

The tempo markings are frequent, occurring twenty-five times within the forty-seven measure song. Beginning with the opening tempo marking, ♩ = 72-80, and “With ebb and flow,” the sexual tension builds through constant slowing, then pushing ahead. An actual metronomic change does not occur until measure 36 (♩ = c.88), but then, in measure 38, ♩ = 112 is suggested, only to ritard at the end of the measure, with the next measure marked “Broadly.” There are five tempo indications within four measures (36-39), as the singer projects the orgasmic climax of the song with a crescendo on an ascending line to a high e2.

The following measure (m. 39) is marked rit., and the beginning of the concluding section is marked “Slowly ♩ = 54.” This final section of the song retains the very slow tempo until the end of the piece, with two additional ritards indicated. The piano part is marked *very quietly* and *delicately*. The mood is one of repose (afterglow,) as the setting is revealed, *the covers of my dark blue bed*.

LANGUAGE, RHYTHM, AND RANGE

Libby Larsen gives careful consideration to rhythm, expressive again of her love of the irregular flow of the English language. Her settings help the singer communicate the message and mood of her songs in a manner that seems natural and conversational, and providing an intimacy appropriate for chamber music. Larsen has a knack for using speech inflections in her melodies, and ranges that fall mostly within the speaking range of the voice. In an article titled “Double Joy,” Larsen expresses her approach:

The rhythm of American English is like the rhythm of no other language. The phrases are uneven. There is a choppy flow from one sentence to the next. Emphatic statements are made by pitch variation. Generally, however, the pitch of American English falls within the interval of a fifth. In the hodgepodge of Americanized foreign words, it has a difficult time rhyming elegantly. I love American English. In my music, I generally let the rhythm of the words, the varying length of phrases and the word emphasis dictate specific rhythm, phrase structure and melodic material. When my music is performed, the words and phrases should flow quite naturally, almost conversationally.¹⁸

As “Blonde Men” begins, Larsen does indeed keep the vocal line mostly within a fifth – (f1 to c2.) During the first twelve measures, there are only five pitches above this range. The first occurs on the word “blond” (c-sharp2) in the first statement. The others, d-flat2 and e-flat2, occur as the statement is repeated for emphasis. This follows the first direction to *push ahead*. The repetition of the text, accelerated tempo, extended range and accent on the word *hate* work together to emphasize the text. (Example 2:1)

¹⁸ Larsen, “Double Joy,” *The American Organist* 18, 1984, 50.

Ex. 2:1 {tempo}

{extended range}

7 **push ahead**

— I think I ought to warn you that I hate — blond —

(8^{va})^{lo} *loco*

f

The following phrase moves back to the conversational comfort zone, f-sharp1 to c2. Then in mm. 13-14, as the tempo pushes ahead again, the melodic range stretches to a ninth (c-sharp1 to d-sharp2.) This is the largest range of any phrase within the song, as the woman is overcome by the image of prismatic light in the blond's eyebrows and lashes. The arpeggiated accompaniment figure supporting the poetic word *rainbows* is marked *wafting*, and occurs for the first time at this point, the peak of the melodic phrase. Larsen's characteristic use of triplets also appears in this measure for the first time in this song. (See example 2:2.)

Ex. 2:2 { triplets } { arp. Acc. }

The next section (verse 3) begins with an octave leap, then moves to a mood of nonchalance within a third, before a repeat of *the eyes simile, like a long drink of water*. On a second repeat of the text, the tempo pushes ahead again, and reaches out of its moderate third range, up to c2 to e-flat2 range. This echoes the range at the end of the first section of the piece (m. 9, Ex. 2:1) This rise in pitch reflects an increased intensity and excitement which occurs each time at the end of a section, before the protagonist regains a sense of composure before beginning a new verse.

As the climactic verse 4 begins, the range is extended as the sexual tension builds, until the climactic high e2 is reached at measure 39. This highest note in the vocal line is reached by stepwise ascent and longer note values. Larsen's use of broadening range and slowing melodic motion, as well as the previously mentioned melismatically extended text treatment, effectively brings the piece to its climax, a dramatic contrast to the easy rocking half-step melodic motion with which the voice line of the piece began. At the end of the piece, beginning with m. 41, a quiet sense of reflection is retained throughout the

final verse. The range is within a moderate fifth as well, encompassing the pitches f1 to c2.

ACCOMPANIMENT

Another of the most effective techniques Larsen uses in this piece is her notation (and indication) of the *cocktail piano* accompaniment. The piece opens with a series of stacked tritones, both hands moving in parallel motion for most of the two measure introduction before settling into rocking half-step motion on major thirds. The two beats of right hand thirds are supported by alternating major seconds and major sixths in the left hand. This settling into a more consonant pattern allows the singer to easily access the opening pitch, as well as establishes a motive that is continued in the vocal line, as she rocks back and forth between a1 and g-sharp1 for a measure in eighth notes.

Ex. 2:3 m. 1 -2

{rocking}

The musical score for Ex. 2:3 m. 1-2 is presented in three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in 4/4 time, starting with a whole note G-sharp1, marked 'rit.' and 'ironically calm'. The middle staff is the right hand of a piano accompaniment, starting with a piano (p) dynamic and moving to forte (f) and back to piano (p). The bottom staff is the left hand of the piano accompaniment, starting with a piano (p) dynamic and moving to forte (f) and back to piano (p). The score includes tempo markings 'With ebb and flow (♩ = 72-80)' and 'rit.', and a first ending bracket labeled 'I'.

The juxtaposition of half-steps that continues with the vocal line sets up a bluesy, nonchalant attitude in her warning. The accompaniment punctuates the point of the textual phrase by a shift in texture to triads, an A minor 6/4 in the right hand, (resolving

to major on beat 2,) over an augmented d6 chord in the left hand. The upper voice of the accompaniment echoes the voice line. However, the final f-sharp of the phrase is heard first in the bass, dropping two octaves (displacement,) and preceding the voice line by a half-beat.

Ex. 2:4 { }

4 **rall.**

The accompaniment shifts registers, continuing with a combination of the parallel rocking motion, and occasional triads. On the repeat of the warning in measure 8, both hands of the accompaniment move to contrary rocking motion of minor sixths in the right hand, while the left hand moves in contrary motion from minor sixths to augmented fifths. There is a long crescendo beginning at m. 7 to a *forte* at m. 9. The thickening texture in the accompaniment, along with the repetition of the pattern throughout measure 8, brings a sense of urgency and emphasis to the restatement of the text. (See example 2:1)

As the first verse ends, the texture of the accompaniment again changes to a chordal one, with an augmented g-flat triad in the left hand, the top note of the chord alternating between d and c-sharp, and eventually descending to c-natural, making the chord diminished. A c major 6 chord is superimposed in the right hand. By the third

beat, the motion has stopped, providing a moment of repose before the beginning of the second verse.

Ex. 2:5 thinning of texture, moment of rest on beat 3

10 rit. mp rall.

men, I hate the

As the next object of her hate/love is revealed, *the greenish gold of their eyebrows and lashes*, the accompaniment returns to familiar patterns, injecting a new arpeggiated motive when she arrives to the word *rainbows*. (See example 2:2.) This bit of sweetness in the accompaniment highlights the dreaminess of the word, following the fairly harsh warnings and declarations of hate in the poem thus far. This arpeggio is repeated twice at the end of the section, when the word “rainbows” is wistfully recalled. Note the simpler harmonic structure of the repeated motive, and the absence of the tritone at the beginning of the arpeggios in measures 18-19, as compared with the figure in m. 14 (see example 2:2.)

Ex. 2:6 absence of tritone in arpeggio

18 **freely** *wistfully* *p* *musing*
rain - bows. And their
wafting
sub. p *mf*

Beginning with measure 28, the accompaniment line is marked *gently – music box*. This is clearly a love poem finally revealed. The consonant rocking major sixths of the right hand are supported by a descending one-note chromatic scale in the left hand, over a pedal point. At measure 31, the left hand begins a single line sequential pattern in the bass, which continues for six measures, varying slightly as the right hand becomes thicker in texture, and moves toward the climax.

Ex. 2:7

31 **poco a poco accelerando**
eyes is the blond hair,
mf

The thickening texture and dramatic crescendo in the accompaniment support the vocal line of the climax in measures 37-39, as the singer reaches her *tortured delight*,

with pounding accents marked in the accompaniment's thickly stacked 9th chords at m. 39. The dynamic level of the accompaniment increases from *piano* to *fortissimo* during this section, further accentuating the thickening texture and supporting the rising pitch frequency of the voice line.

Ex. 2:8

The musical score for Ex. 2:8 consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins at measure 37 with the lyrics "blond" and "hair". The piano accompaniment features thickly stacked 9th chords. The score includes tempo markings "with tortured delight", "(♩ = 112)", "rit.", and "Broadly", along with dynamic markings "p" and "ff".

As the accompaniment sets the mood for the final section, marked *very quietly* and *delicately* (the afterglow,) the familiar patterns of the accompanying figures - the rocking sixths, the half-step juxtapositions and contrary motion figures are enhanced by two rolled chords, then move quietly back to the parallel tritones, reminiscent of the opening measures of the piece.

This piece expresses fully and dramatically the sensuous awakening of young love. Larsen uses musical tools, inspired by Kane's poetry, to project a sexy, bluesy, tease in the act of lovemaking. Through the use of abundant score indications, tempo changes, text repetition, and the cocktail piano accompaniment, the singer and listener are caught up in the mood which Larsen has so carefully projected. There is no dance form

indication, but rather a cocktail piano indication. A dance reference would suggest a more unflagging tempo, rather than the push and pull of tempo needed to fully express this sensuous poem. As the cycle continues, she moves to a playful honky-tonk of big sister teaching little sister the painful truth about becoming beautiful.

CHAPTER III

BIG SISTER SAYS, 1967 (A HONKY-TONK)

POEM

Big Sister Says, 1967 could only be a honky-tonk and nothing else. It's impossible to separate the "beauty-school dropout" message of the poetry from one of America's great contributions to the keyboard, honky-tonk piano. This is a song that takes stamina. It begins with a Pagliacci-like cry, "Beauty hurts." From that moment on, the (singer) rats, teases, pushes and pulls her voice as incessantly as adolescent women subject themselves to the perpetual motion machine of cosmetic beauty.¹⁹

This trip down memory lane for those of us with big sisters, and who remember sleeping in those awful brush rollers, is enjoyable to study and to sing. Although the subject matter denotes perhaps a younger girl than the one in the previous song, the honky-tonk is the longest in the set, forming the centerpiece of the work. The poem was written by Kathryn Daniels, and published in *Boomer Girls, Poems by Women from the Baby Boom Generation*. The anthology, edited by Pamela Gemin and Paula Sergi, was published in 1999, and features "coming-of-age poems written by women born between 1945 and 1964, give or take a few years."²⁰ Susan Stamberg, of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, states:

This rich anthology tracks boomer girls from birth to, well, knowingness. The writers in *Boomer Girls* touch themes that all generations experience but this generation can express for all of us – what it is to be a girl baby, then adolescent, then woman growing up in America."²¹

*"Beauty hurts," big sister says,
Yanking a hank of my lanky hair
Around black wire-mesh rollers*

¹⁹ Larsen *Love After 1950*, 2.

²⁰ <http://www.uipress.uiowa.edu/books/pre-2002/gemboogir.htm>

²¹ *Ibid.*

*Whose inside bristles prick my scalp
Like so many pins. She says I'd better
Sleep with them in.*

*She plucks, tweezes, glides razor
Blades over tender armpit skin,
Slathers downy legs with stinking
Depilatory cream, presses straight lashes
Bolt upright with a medieval-looking
Padded metal clamp. "Looking good
hurts," Beryl warns. "It's hard work
When you're not born beautiful."*

When contacted by the author about the inclusion of her poem in *Boomer Girls*, Kathryn Daniels replied by email that she had been delighted to have had her poem included in *Love After 1950*, especially after learning of Larsen's stature in American music. She was invited to the premier of the work and relayed the following anecdote about the event:

The most interesting thing about participating was that Libby's interpretation of my poem turned out to be quite different from what I had imagined. I'd always considered the piece a serious one, even painful, but her rendering and the audience's reaction was pretty lighthearted, even comical (it seemed to me, anyway). Though my initial impression was somewhat jarring, in time I came to appreciate the humor in my piece and also learned a perhaps obvious but important lesson: Each person interprets a work differently, and that's the beauty of the thing.²²

In her choice of the poem, Larsen found humor in the text, but she also omitted the final line, *When you're not born beautiful*, which might have seemed incongruous with the humorous setting of the text had it been included. When I asked Larsen about the deletion, and shared Daniels' comments, she replied:

Well, there can be so much pain in humor, can't there? I look at this song as painful, painful, painful, by which I mean the pain of humiliation most women

²² Correspondence from Kathryn Daniels to the author, February 19, 2008.

feel when confronting their bodies. Very few women feel that they are ‘born beautiful,’ and that is why they (we) poke, prod, pluck, tweeze, diet, engage in plastic surgery, etc. We do not have to say out loud that we are not born beautiful. . . our actions – cast in the light of fashion and style – say it for us. That is why I did not include the last line of the poem. ‘Beauty’ *does* ‘hurt’ - your body, you self-esteem, your right to be unique and to be loved because of it.²³

FORM

As typical, Larsen’s form and phrase structure is determined by the text. There are several interjections, with the Pagliacci cry providing vivid commentary as the younger sister is put through the paces of becoming beautiful. The form may be sketched as follows:

TABLE 3:1 FORM OF BEAUTY HURTS

(m.)1	2	7	25	32
{Pagliacci cry}	{intro }	{ verse 1 }	{refrain interjected}	{verse 1, completion}
37	55	61	71	
{v. 2, w/o repetition}	{ow interlude}	{ repetition begins }	{repetition, again}	
77	79	85	89	
{refrain cry}	{lists all acts of torture}	{ oh exclamation}	{Pagliacci cadenza}	

Larsen treats this poetry with a great deal of repetition, as she did in the previous piece. Although the text itself is of average length compared to the other poetry selected, the piece is extended to eighty-nine measures in length. There is more license in Larsen’s treatment of the text in this piece than in the previous songs. In addition to the deleted last line of text previously mentioned, Larsen adds wailing on *ow* and *oh*, further enhancing the idea of the pain of acquiring beauty.

²³ Larsen interview.

ACCOMPANIMENT/HONKY-TONK

Larsen uses typical boogie-woogie *ostinati* and hard-charging rhythms to propel this vigorous piece forward. The tempo begins at ♩ = 132-136, and is nearly unrelenting in its drive to the end of the song. Generally moving in an eight-to-the-bar pattern of eighth notes within a 4/4 meter, the tempo never changes except for stopping for a few one-measure interjections of fermatas on the cry, *Beauty hurts*, which becomes a refrain of sorts. In a few measures the accompaniment stops, and the voice continues the tempo and mood. The piano then punctuates the recitative-like vocal line, illustrating the text with staccato chords on words like *prick* and *pins*.

The most defining characteristic of this piece, other than the inventive text setting, is Larsen's honky-tonk piano accompaniment. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* defines honky-tonk as "a style of popular music first played by country music bands in Texas during the 1940's. Performed in dance halls known as 'honky tonks,' it was loud and had a heavy beat."²⁴

The piano introduction actually follows what Larsen describes as a "Pagliacci-like cry" in the first measure for the voice. After the short opening unaccompanied statement, *Beauty hurts*, the piano eagerly and aggressively takes off, beginning with three measures of pounding g-major staccato chords in the right hand. In the left hand, a sequence of

²⁴ Bill C. Malone, "Honky tonk music," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (London: MacMillan Publishers, Limited): 682.

descending patterns drops an octave with the first repetition, then drops another octave and doubles to octaves the third time. This becomes motive 1. The right hand stays in the upper register, leading to a fortissimo pattern of chromatic chords marked *Jerry Lee Lewis*.

Ex. 3:1 Motive 1

The musical score for Ex. 3:1 Motive 1 is presented in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 132-136. The piece begins with a vocal line in the treble clef, marked *f* (fortissimo). The lyrics "Beau - ty hurts," are written below the notes. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves: the right hand (treble clef) and the left hand (bass clef). The right hand features a series of five-octave descending glissandos, marked with *p* (piano) and *mp* (mezzo-piano). The left hand provides a walking bass line with a boogie-woogie feel, characterized by syncopated, half-step juxtapositions. The score is divided into four measures, with the first measure containing the vocal entry and the subsequent three measures showing the piano accompaniment.

A five-octave descending glissando leads to the voice entrance, marked *howling*, as the girl cries again, *Beauty hurts*. A walking boogie-woogie bass line supports the voice melody, with right-hand triads moving in syncopated, half-step juxtapositions, continuing for the four measures until the first line of text is completed. This basic walking bass pattern, with some variation, returns five times, at measures 20-21, 26-28, 54-56, 78-79, and 81-84, providing unity to the song through motivic repetition of the boogie-woogie theme.

Ex. 3:2 Boogie-woogie bass line Motive 2

Following the completion of the first line of text, (m.12,) the right hand of the piano plays the motive 1 pattern set out in the left hand at the beginning of the piece, in the same register. The left hand moves in contrary motion in mirror image of the right hand pattern until the fourth beat of the measure. The tritone appears both melodically and harmonically within the measure.

Ex. 3:3 Motive 1, tritone used harmonically and melodically

This motive reappears in m. 17-18, with both hands playing in unison, with the left hand in the original register, and the right hand an octave higher.

Ex. 3:4 Motive 1, both hands in treble clef, unison

17 *in pain, as if your hair is being pulled*

yank - - - - ing a hank of my

p *p cresc.*

WORD PAINTING

Larsen uses a variety of articulatory gestures and techniques to paint aural pictures of the beauty rituals which big sister is imposing upon the protagonist. The shape of the phrase *beauty hurts* is most always set with the word “hurts” being on the downbeat of a new measure and in a descent from the previous note giving weight to the verb. The melodic patterns are varied; within the first twelve measures, for example, there are three different melodic patterns to the text. Note the tritone from the first to the second measure of the initial statement.

Ex. 3:6 Tritone descent to *hurts*; *hurts* on downbeat

The musical score is in 4/4 time with a tempo of 132-136. It consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 1-8) features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and the lyrics "Beau - ty hurts,". The piano accompaniment includes a right-hand part with chords and a left-hand part with a melodic line. The second system (measures 8-11) continues the vocal line with the lyrics "Beau - ty hurts," and includes a piano accompaniment. The vocal line in measure 8 is marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic and the instruction "howling". The piano accompaniment in measure 8 is marked with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The piano part in measure 11 is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The lyrics "says, beau - ty hurts," are written under the vocal line in measure 11.

In measures 28-31, there is a cadenza-like passage, further enhancing the intensity of the situation. This melismatic setting of the text is similar to the one in the previous song at the point of climax. In this song, however, the first syllable of *beauty* stretches over nine pitches and almost three measures. This setting is effective, contrasting the mostly syllabic setting of the text. In addition to the extended word, the range is unusual for this cycle, with the phrase beginning on b1, moving up to f-sharp2, then down an octave and a half to B.

Ex.3:7 Melismatic text setting, extended range cadenza

28
beau - - - - - ty hurts. She

In measures 55-59, the text is truncated, with a simple “it hurts” following a long upward scale on *ow*. The range is truncated as well, moving from b1 to f-sharp2, and back down to the original pitch, within the more common range of a fifth.

Ex.3:8 Text truncated to *ow it hurts*, range of 5th

55
Ow, - - - - -
57
It hurts.

A final declaration occurs at the very end of the piece, on a 12/4 measure marked *freely*. A bluesy cadenza, with an optional low G, allows the singer to exhibit real commitment to the message, and a departure from the usual downward motion of the final word of the refrain.

Ex. 3:9 Final refrain

89 **freely**

Beau - - - ty (G) hurts.

Other uses of text painting include the treatment of the words *prick* and *plucks*, each followed with a rest in the vocal line, and staccato chords in the accompaniment, illustrating the uncomfortable sticking bristles and the quick action of the plucking tweezers.

Ex. 3:10 Staccato accompaniment illustrates text

22

in - side brist - les prick my scalp like

secco

When Larsen sets the text *glides razor blades*, the vocal line becomes legato, with longer note values, slurs, triplets, and chromatic motion, effectively illustrating the smoothly gliding blades. The accompaniment features descending sets of tritone tremolos in the right hand, expressing fear or possibly pain to the tender armpits.

Ex. 3:11 Longer note values, tritone tremolo in piano

38

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line with two measures. The first measure contains a half note on G4 with a slur over it, followed by a half note on A4 with a sharp sign. The second measure contains a triplet of three eighth notes: G4, F4, and E4. Below the vocal line, the lyrics 'glides' and 'ra - zor blades' are aligned with the notes. The piano accompaniment is shown in two systems below. The first system has two measures, each with a half note on G4 in the right hand and a tritone tremolo (F#4 and C4) in the left hand. The second system has two measures, each with a half note on G4 in the right hand and a tritone tremolo (F#4 and C4) in the left hand.

Presses straight lashes bolt upright is set descriptively as well, painting a picture of the wide-eyed result for the listener, with an atypical octave descent on *bolt* followed by a half step upward on *up*, then an octave ascent to complete the word *upright*. The word is accented as well. These large leaps are especially obvious and effective when heard in the context of declamatory statements of narrow speech-pattern ranges.

Ex. 3:12 Text painting to illustrate direction

{up}

75
bolt ————— up - right.

Descriptive articulation is sometimes added in the score directions for the singer, as in the following example (3:13) Because of the unrelenting rapid tempo, however, the articulation is more straightforward, with the only score directions the previously mentioned *Jerry Lee Lewis, howling, and in pain, as if your hair is being pulled*. One additional style indication, *blues slide*, is notated when *razor blades* is reiterated. Where the fermatas occur on the refrain cry, the score is marked *freely*. These one-measure interjections are unaccompanied, as is the one at the beginning of the piece, and provide a reminder of the message of the text, a brief moment of repose, as well as providing contrast to the usually vigorous tempo.

Ex. 3:13 Score notation, *blues slide*

83

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "blues slide". It consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in G major, starting with a half note G4, followed by a half note F#4, and ending with a half note E4. The lyrics "ra - z - or" are written below the notes. The middle staff is a piano accompaniment featuring a series of chords: G major, F# major, E major, D major, and C major, each held for a half note. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment featuring a melodic line: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, with a sharp sign (#) above the second C5 note.

Larsen sets this nostalgic romp in descriptive manner that forms the center piece of the cycle. The text repetition and extension, as well as the virtuosic vocal and piano style add substance to the piece and balance to the cycle. Her score indications are a guide to the performer, yet the style and melodic material are highly descriptive and clear and inherent in the music as well.

CHAPTER IV

THE EMPTY SONG

(A TANGO)

The Empty Song, (a tango,) reflects a lost love through the metaphor of an empty shampoo bottle. Larsen chose a tango for the dance, since the reference is of Spanish shampoo, bought while living in Spain, and shared with the now departed lover. The text is by Scottish poet Liz Lochhead, from a work titled *Dreaming Frankenstein and Collected Poems*. Larsen states in the score preface. . .

I love the image of the empty shampoo bottle as the metaphor for the draining of emotion from a failed love affair. In the case of the poem, . . .the shampoo happens to be Spanish. With extraordinary genius, Liz Lochhead has crafted her words to create the cadence of a slow tango. It seemed so natural to marry her words with a haunting tango of resignation.²⁵

POEM

*Today saw the last of my Spanish shampoo.
Lasted and age now that sharing with you,
such a thing of the past is.
Giant Size. The brand
was always a compromise.
My new one's tailored exactly to my needs.
Non-spill. Protein-rich.
Feeds Body promises to solve my problem hair.
(Ah,) Sweetheart, these days it's hard to care,
But oh oh insomniac moonlight
How unhoneeyed is my middle of the night.
I could see you
far enough. Beyond me
how we'll get back together.
Campsites in Spain, moonlight,
heavy weather.
Today saw the end of my Spanish shampoo,
The end of my third month without you.*

²⁵ Larsen, *Love After 1950*, 2.

Larsen's careful study and understanding of the text is apparent. When asked for clarification of the meaning of *I could see you far enough*, she replied:

Interesting is her decision to break up the line (above) so that the next line reads '*far enough beyond me*,' an e.e.cummings usage designed, I believe, to suggest that the person both sees the lover for what he/she is and decided to take the risk. The risk proved fatal to the romance. . . the question is – what was the consequence of the risk, and why did Lochhead choose the span of three months?²⁶

Larsen's approach to text setting obviously involves a careful analysis of the poem. Although we did not pursue the question of the three months, I assumed it was an estimate of the time for one person alone to finish a giant size bottle of shampoo.

RHYME SCHEME

Larsen selected this Liz Lochhead poem for inclusion in *Love After 1950* for its metaphorical message of a lost love. She was drawn to the rhythm of the words written by the poet, and its dance cadence. This poem is unique in the cycle because it has a rhyme scheme. However, the form still seems to be determined by the advancement of the story line, as the rhyming words often are obscured in the middle of a phrase, or even separated to a new section of the song. For example, the second syllable of *shampoo*, falling on beat one of measure 8, rhymes with *you*, on count three of m. 11, and is in the middle of the sentence. *Hair*, in m. 24, rhymes with *care*, in m. 28, separated by the beginning of a new section, moving from detached recitation of the qualities of the new shampoo, to the *ah sweetheart* phrase, overcome by feelings of loneliness and despair.

²⁶ Larsen interview.

Sometimes the rhyme is placed in more obvious positions metrically, and within the same sections. For example, *Giant Size*, and *compromise* occur on mm. 14 and 16, both set on triplets beginning at the beginning of the measures. That this is a rhyme is more obvious to the listener. In the last section, *shampoo* and *you* also rhyme in a more obvious way, both rhyming syllables on the downbeat of mm. 46, and 49, respectively, with similar accompaniment figures, and both on the same pitch, d1.

TABLE 4:1 FORM

m.1	7	14	
{intro}	{verse 1 -emptiness}	{new shampoo/detachment}	
26	29	31	33
{feelings}	{recit. - - continues, unaccompanied}	{inter.}	
34	45	47	50-52
{reminiscence}	{opening repeated}	{timeline revealed}	{post.}

The poem is set syllabically, in a clear, straightforward manner. Conversational in its range, Larsen keeps each phrase within a moderate fifth or sixth. The mood of the song is one of resignation, tinged with nostalgia, expressed through a cool, steady tempo marked languid, ♩ = 88. There are few tempo adjustments, the first at m. 29, a *rallentando* in one measure, followed by *freely* marked in the next, as an unaccompanied recitative section reflects loneliness as the result of a lost love. When a dance style is suggested as a sub-title, the rhythm and tempo remains constant, appropriate to the consistency needed to dance in a particular style.

Ex. 4:1 (mm. 29-32)

29 **rall.** **freely**
oh oh in - som - ni - ac moon - light how un - hon - eyed is my mid - dle of the night.

An *a tempo* follows, remaining unchanged until the next to last measure of text. A ritard is indicated over the single word, *without*, on the last two beats of the measure. Another *a tempo* follows in the next (final) measure of text. The nearly unflagging tempo enhances the feeling of sadness and resignation, with a touch of nostalgia, as the woman mourns the loss of her love three months previously.

MOTIVES

This fourth song is subtle and coolly sophisticated, in spite of the somewhat humorous metaphor of an empty shampoo bottle as a representative of a lost love. It is typical of Larsen's style of syllabic text setting, her use of motives which provide unity and structure to the piece, and her choice of poetry for this cycle. It is unusual in that there are few score indications for the singer or pianist, other than the ones previously mentioned, which provide pause for serious reflection and reference to romantic loneliness. Larsen's characteristic use of the tritone and octave displacement is common,

along with the use of chromatic melodic motion and frequent triplets in both piano and voice lines. The tango motive is derived from an *habanera* pattern, ♩. ♩ ♩ ♩ It occurs in the bass line of the accompaniment in thirty-three of the fifty-two measures of the song, providing unity and anchoring the style of the song. There are no accents or staccato articulation, only gentle syncopation, enhancing the serenity and resignation of the text. The legato style is inherent in the bluesy chromatic motion, although not indicated in the score in notations to the performers, a departure from the abundant descriptive notations in many of Larsen's other songs.

After a high single e-flat3 is sounded in the right hand and repeated an octave below, the first *habanera* pattern appears in the first full measure, in the left hand on a-natural, a tritone plus two octaves' interval below the e-flat3. Counter to the left hand pattern, a chromatic descent occurs in the right hand to c-sharp3, then, as the *habanera* pattern is repeated, another descent beginning on g2 moves to f2, then e2. The descent begins again on c2, then moves down to b1, dropping an octave to a-natural to complete the sequence in the left hand. Although the descending motion in the upper voice is not chromatic on the second and third occurrences, the whole step moves from the second note on occurrence 2 to the third note on occurrence 3. The downward motion is a metaphor for the nostalgia inherent in the poem.

Ex. 4:4 motive (r.h.) variety of textures and ranges

8

- poo.

27

these days it's hard to

The shape, direction, and rhythm of the voice line are determined by the text. The first two lines of text, statements that reflect emptiness, move downward, use quarter-note triplets, and stay within a moderate range of a fifth or sixth. The middle section, talking matter-of-factly about the new shampoo, moves upward in eighth notes, as the text portrays detachment from the now empty, old shampoo bottle the lovers had shared. As the label is read, the melody moves up and down in a chatty manner. A sixteenth note pattern in thirds, introduced in the preceding measure, appears a second and third time in these measures, the only section in which they appear. The motive seems to represent detached nonchalance.

Ex. 4:5 (mm 20-22)

20

{ } { }

Non - spill. Pro - tein - rich. Feeds - Bod - y,

As the mood of nostalgia takes over again, (m. 25-26,) the triplets return, the phrase moves downward, and, as the mood reaches its low point at the recitative, *how unhoneeyed is my middle of the night*. The voice line has moved down an entire octave from the beginning of the section, to d-sharp1. The accompaniment returns to the bass line habanera motive under the syncopated figures of the right hand, echoing the style at the beginning of the first verse. This section has expressed a “don’t care” attitude, but the mood is contrasted with *ah* and *oh, oh*, before the recitative section is reached, indicating deeper emotional feeling.

In the next section, beginning at m. 34, reminiscence, the protagonist expresses fond memories of the time in Spain, ascending to and remaining around a1. There is still a touch of sadness, reflected in the use of triplets. One of the few obvious examples of word painting occurs in this section, with a turn on the word *Spain*, adding an air of exoticism. The next word, *moonlight*, is set over two measures, with each syllable lasting a full measure. The right hand of the accompaniment, over an habanera bass,

begins a long three measure chromatic descent, beginning on c4, irregularly dropping octaves and bouncing back up to continue the half step pattern. The wide distance between the right and left hands give a dreamy, detached empty texture. The descent indicates the relationship has literally gone downhill.

Ex. 4:6 long note values in voice line; long descent (r.h.) over habanera bass

40

moon - - - light, hea-vy weath-er.

8va

Following the nostalgia section, a two measure interlude of chromatically descending stacked chords dramatically announce the final section and its mood of resignation through melodic motion, thickened texture, and triplet rhythm. The nearly constant motion of the song has slowed down to quarter note chords. The characteristic texture of single note counterpoint has thickened to chords of six simultaneous pitches. The first chord contains three tritones, G-flat to c1, f1 to b1, and b1 to f2. The following chords contain two each, due to the whole step in the top voice from the first chord to the second, followed by chromatic motion in all voices.

Ex. 4:7 Thick chromatically descending chords, rich in tritones

43

To

The sadness pattern of the opening of the song returns in a phrase which is an exact repeat musically and textually, except for the substitution of the word *end* for the word *last*, referring to the empty shampoo bottle. The last line departs to a new melodic line, centering around the low d1 of the previous and opening phrases. The time reference, *third month*, is revealed in the text, as the symbolism is illuminated by the low tessitura of d1 to f1, and upward melodic motion of a minor third on the word *third*.

The postlude, beginning under the last word of text, presents the habanera pattern in the bass, as the right hand of the piano leaps by octaves, repeating a short motive of the melodic pattern initiated at the beginning of the piece in three different registers, another reference to the *third month*.

Ex. 4:8 combination of habanera bass with octave displaced r.h. motive

49 **a tempo**

you.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef, starting with a whole note 'you.' followed by three measures of rests. The middle staff is the right-hand piano part in treble clef, featuring a melodic line with slurs and ties across measures. The bottom staff is the left-hand piano part in bass clef, showing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes, characteristic of a habanera bass.

The empty song is one of the easiest songs in the cycle vocally and musically. Its haunting melody and tango rhythms are fluid and legato. The piano part is more easily accessible than some of the other pieces. The story line is simple, amusing yet meaningful on the surface, with rich underlying metaphorical pictures skillfully interwoven throughout the composition.

CHAPTER V

I MAKE MY MAGIC

(ISADORA'S DANCE)

This final song in the cycle is the most difficult musically and textually, a dramatic climax to the cycle. Larsen states in the preface that “I Make My Magic” is the blood pulsing through your veins; it is what is often called survival, but even that word trivializes the base urgency of breathing, living, and self.”²⁷ Muriel Rukeyser is the author of “I Make My Magic,” published in 1973 as the final poem in *Five Songs from Houdini*. Long fascinated with the great American magician and escape artist Harry Houdini, Rukeyser worked over three decades on a play based on his life. It was finally performed at the Lenox Art Center in Massachusetts in 1973. Jan Heller Levi, editor of *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, states in the preface to *Five Songs*:

Though her sly wit is apparent in several of her later poems, and her delightful sense of the absurd came through often in her conversation, interviews, and public readings, these five ditties from *Houdini* are examples of Rukeyser at her jazzy, jaunty, and sometimes bawdy, best.²⁸

Rukeyser considered art as an “exchange of energy.”²⁹ The poem, “I Make My Magic,” is a complicated text which Larsen sets in an imaginative way. The source and original subject of the poem is enlightening to the performers, although not mentioned in Larsen’s score preface. Larsen called each of the songs in *Love After 1950* “an interior

²⁷ Larsen, *Love After 1950*, 2.

²⁸ Jan Heller Levi, ed., *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994),234.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 285.

monologue about love,” and refers to this final song as “a reconciliation of sorts.”³⁰

“‘Trust in the rhythms of experience,’ (Ruykeyser) wrote. More and more, Rukeyser’s poems speak of a trust in the rhythms and textures of a woman’s experience: a woman’s dreams, a woman’s waking.”³¹

When questioned regarding the origin of the subtitle, Isadora’s Dance, Larsen replied. . .

I chose the subtitle as an homage to Isadora Duncan’s contribution of freely flowing body movement to 20th century dance. A small group of pioneering dancers, including Isadora Duncan, cast off the corset and tutu, freeing the mid-section of the body for movement. I composed this free-flowing idea into the pulse of the accompaniment, which is not in a particular dance form, but rather it consists of pulse and flow.³²

POEM

*I make my magic
of forgotten things:
night and nightmare and the midnight wings
of childhood butterflies --
and the darkness,(ah. . .) the straining dark
underwater and under sleep--
night and a heartbreak try to keep
myself, until before my eyes
the morning sunlight pours
and I am clear of all the chains
and the magic now that rains
down around me is
a sunlight magic,
underwater and under sleep_
I come to a sunlight magic,
yours. (repeated three times)*

³⁰ Larsen, *Love After 1950*, 2.

³¹ Levi, *Rukeyser Reader*, 110.

³² Larsen interview

The references of magic, darkness, underwater, chains, and coming to a sunlight magic are seemingly drawn from Houdini experiences of escape, but in this context, become metaphors for struggle, maturing womanhood, and freedom. Mature love is expressed as sunlight magic, the protagonist bathed in light, emerging from darkness into a love relationship. In Rukeyser’s poetry, “darkness is chronicled as the place where a new kind of vision is possible.”³³ Larsen is drawn to nature references, and uses the metaphors of night, water, and morning sunlight to create memories of feeling.

TABLE 5:1 FORM

m.1	3	12	16	23	24			
{intro}	{v. 1 voice enters}	{ah cadenza}	{water v.2}	{interlude}	{line 1 repeated}			
27	32	34	43	44	46	47	48	49
{v.3 night,heartbreak}	{interlude}	{v.4 sunlight}	{interlude}	{recit.}	{yours, repeated 3x}			

The form of this piece is irregular and text-driven, enhanced with repeated lines of poetry, and a long cadenza-like passage on *ah*. There is an extension of the text at the end, as the final word, *yours*, is stated, then repeated three times, each note held for a full measure, over dazzling glissando accompaniment figures moving in parallel 6ths. The dramatic nature of this song is expressed by more melismatic text setting, wider ranges within vocal phrases, and Larsen’s typical techniques of extreme octave displacement.

³³ Levi, *Rukeyser Reader*, 110.

RELATION OF ACCOMPANIMENT/VOICE LINE TO TEXT

The accompaniment of “I Make My Magic” is marked *darkly, smoothly* and *Damper pedal throughout*, creating a blurry, murky background. The use of *ostinati* is pervasive, often in cross-rhythms with the voice line. The 6/8 meter is grounded in the bass line in steadily moving eighth notes, while the voice line moves in dotted quarters and dotted eighths, often creating a two-against-three pattern.

Ex. 5:1 bass ostinato, cross rhythms with voice line, gentle syncopation in r.h.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line in treble clef, marked '3' and 'darkly, smoothly'. The lyrics are: 'I make my ma - gic of for - dark again dazzling'. The middle staff is the piano accompaniment in bass clef, marked 'mp'. It features a steady eighth-note bass line and a syncopated right-hand part. The right hand has a melisma on the word 'dazzling' that is stretched across two measures.

The right hand of the accompaniment moves in a syncopated fashion against the bass line, adding yet another layer of rhythm. This creates a rather dense texture and blurred sense of rhythm. The word *night* at m.6 is stretched to eight pitches over nearly two measures, and covers the range of a tenth, rather unusual in comparison to Larsen’s more typical conversational range of a fifth or sixth. The rhythm of the melisma is varied, beginning with the dotted eighth note rhythm, creating a hemiola effect within the 6/8 meter. When the rhythm moves to eighths in m.7, the voice line is doubled in the bass line of the accompaniment, giving the word *night* textual weight and importance. The very next word, *nightmare*, is set simply, but marked *haunted* and *pianissimo*.

Most figurative motives in this piece occur in the piano part. The motive of short five-note *glissandi* in the right hand of the accompaniment occurs seven times in the first six measures. (See example 1.) The gesture is marked *dazzling*, and relates textually to the word *magic*. The motive disappears halfway through the *night* melisma, in m. 7, when the text moves toward the word *nightmare*. A new accompaniment motive, a tremolo, appears under the words *wings* and *butterflies* in mm. 9-10, representing fluttering wings. The tremolo appears again in m. 15, introducing the *underwater* verse, appearing under the text *dark underwater* (mm. 17-18.)

Ex. 5:2 tremolo in accompaniment

The image shows a musical score for Example 5:2. It consists of two systems of staves. The top system shows a vocal line starting at measure 17. The lyrics are "dark un - der - wa - ter, the". The vocal line is marked *mf*. The piano accompaniment is shown in two staves below the vocal line. The right hand of the piano part features a tremolo, which is a rapid repetition of a single note or a short sequence of notes. The left hand of the piano part has a more melodic line with some chords. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 5/2.

Following this verse, the tremolo motive does not reappear, but the dazzling *magic* motive appears four times in mm. 22-23, introducing a repetition of the phrase from the opening line, *I make my magic*. This repeat does not occur in the poem. The *magic* glissando motive reappears in m. 37, illuminating *sunlight pours*, and its repeat. There comes a kind of metaphoric metamorphosis, as the glissando now becomes the *sunlight magic* motive. Adding commentary to the end of the poem, a series of motives appears in m. 43, beginning on f1 and descending over three and a half octaves.

Ex. 5:3 r.h. long descent, motive figure

The image shows a musical score for piano, right hand, starting at measure 43. The score is in 7/8 time. The right hand part features a descending line of eighth notes, marked 'dazzling' with a dashed line above it. The left hand part features a descending line of eighth notes, marked 'cresc.' below it. The score ends with a fermata over the final note.

Following this event, Larsen adds her characteristic recitative to emphasize the final line of text, marked *ecstatic*. *I come to a sunlight magic, (yours.)* A rolled chord announces the change of texture, and the second measure is unaccompanied, creating a static pause which illuminates the line, contrasting the constant motion created thus far in the piece. This is the only pause in the ongoing rhythm, appropriate to a dance.

Following the recitative, and underscoring the repeated last word, *yours*, the glissando motive, marked *dazzling to the end*, occurs in both hands of the piano, in parallel intervals of major sixths.

WORD PAINTING

The text painting in the vocal line is minimal in this piece, with few gestures that illuminate specific words. Rather, portions of lines of text are repeated for emphasis. At m.16, *the straining dark underwater* is immediately repeated a minor third higher, and the phrase is then completed, and *under sleep*. This gesture apparently emphasizes the *straining*, as on the repeat, the rhythm is altered from eighth to quarter tied to dotted

quarter in mm.16-17, to dotted eighths tied to dotted quarter on mm. 19-20. This rhythmic alteration creates the hemiola effect against the bass line, a pulling or working effect. The repeat is further emphasized by the five note glissando in the accompaniment, ending with a trill marked *lightly*.

Ex. 5:4 (mm 16; 19) line repeated, enhanced through rhythm, motive

The image shows two measures of music, labeled 16 and 19. Measure 16 features a vocal line with the lyrics "strain - ing" and a piano accompaniment marked *mp*. Measure 19 features a vocal line with the lyrics "strain - ing" and a piano accompaniment marked *mf*. The piano accompaniment in measure 19 includes a five-note glissando and a trill marked *lightly tr*.

The accompaniment of the repeat doubles the vocal line an octave lower, and ends with another trill. A similar repeat occurs in verse 3. This time, the last half of the phrase is repeated, rather than the first. The sequential repetition moves down a minor third, rather than up, and the *dazzling* glissando immediately precedes the repeat.

Ex. 5:5 sequence, down a third

The image shows a musical score for Example 5:5, starting at measure 29. The vocal line includes the lyrics "keep my - self, try to keep". The piano accompaniment features a *dazzling* glissando. The score is written for voice and piano.

The single use of text painting of a single word occurs on the descending line on the word *pours* in mm. 37 and 39. The phrase *rains down around me* in m. 41 also paints melodic pictures of the text. The descending line provides a obvious metaphor for the direction of the rainfall.

Ex. 5:6 (mm. 37, 39, 41) descending voice lines illustrate text

37

pours

dazzling

5

39

pours and I am

p

41 **poco rit.**

rains down a-round me is

This final song is a fitting and dramatic conclusion to the cycle. The mood throughout the cycle has varied from innocent to sensuous, to hilarious yet insightful, nostalgic, and, finally, dramatic. Larsen has called this work virtuosic in its performance and understanding of life, . . . the new woman's *Frau, Love'em and Leave'em*.³⁴

³⁴ Larsen, *Love After 1950*, 2

CONCLUSION

Through expressive use of text setting, Libby Larsen's constructs songs for our time which are touching, moving, playful and metaphorical. Her composition by commission only leads to creations that are clearly defined by collaboration and intent from the beginning of the process. This creative intent leads to songs that are unified by design, through abundant use of gesture and motive which express the mood and articulation of the composer's concept. Larsen's style is, by her own admission, defined more by rhythm than anything else. The form of the songs in this set is text-driven, consistently determined by the advancement of the story. The use of dance rhythms and stylistic gestures illicit visceral responses in the performer, which helps transfer mood and memory to the listener.

Larsen typically uses no key signatures, which allows her to flow from one "pool of tonality" to the next. Her works are tertian rather than traditionally tonal, using diatonic pitches of scales, but the harmonic motion is not functional, so there is not a sense of traditional harmonic progression. Rather, Larsen uses motivic gestures which provide unity to the song. Dramatic contrast of texture and articulation in the piano creates ambiance for the singer's delivery of carefully chosen texts. Often, Larsen notates her sense of articulation and expression in the score for singer and pianist. Art song is a genre which is intimate by design, with one player per part. The combinations of text with music and song with dance bring performers and listeners to an intimate sharing of experience. Although Libby Larsen composes in a variety of genres, her chamber works

for voice and piano, especially those for women, incorporate virtuosity with drama, humor, and storytelling.

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APPENDIX

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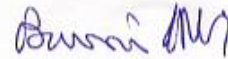
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