

MUSICFEATURE



ANN MARS DEN

Boulevard blazer

*Not just a path blazer or
a trailblazer, Libby Larsen
carves out a wide swath for
women in music*

by Anne Hamre

Libby Larsen is a rarity in the music world—a living, woman composer. A graduate of the University of Minnesota (undergraduate, master's and Ph.D. programs), Larsen has created more than 500 compositions, from individual vocal pieces to chamber music to full orchestral works, plus more than 15 operas. She co-founded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now known as the American Composer's Forum, in 1973. She is the first woman to serve as a resident composer with a major orchestra (the Minnesota Orchestra), and is a professional composer as well as an advocate for music and musicians.

Larsen spoke with the Minnesota Women's Press about storytelling through composition, advocating for women in music and the importance of music.

Minnesota Women's Press: You were the first woman to serve as a resident composer with a major orchestra. What was the significance of that to you?

Libby Larsen: That Meet the Composer orchestral residency program was designed to place composers in orchestras, major orchestras, so that composers who actually are alive can become part of the orchestral world, the orchestral repertoire. When that program was launched, I felt that it was really important, really essential, that this program include women.

This was in the early 1980s. The question in my mind was, if there's a national program that's being launched and all of the composers who are part of the first round of composers in residence are male, white male, then we've missed an opportunity to learn and change. So it wasn't really so important that I was the composer in residence; it was important that a female be part of that first round. Otherwise, we would run the risk of maintaining a heavily gender-biased art form for another 50 years.

MWP: Who has inspired you?

LL: I tend to like the free spirits. In the classical world, I really like Hector Berlioz, who was writing in the early 1800s; he was writing music that nobody else was writing. In our century, Lou Harrison ... John Cage ... James Brown ... Big Mama Thornton ... Rufus Thomas, who is extraordinarily important in American music ... Chuck Berry. Musicians who had something to say, were really alive and just blazed their own path.

MWP: You've also been described as a leader, a change-maker for women's careers in music and a champion of the music and musicians of our time. Do you agree?

LL: In retrospect, I do agree with it, and it makes me feel very proud—because I am not setting out to change the world. And I'm saying that in the present tense, because with every piece I write I'm setting out what it's like to be alive right now. I was about 20 years into my professional life when I began to understand that one way to make a change for women—and this was a conscious thought—was just to consistently put out at a professional level, whatever that is ... just be consistently public. At a college I was visiting around that time, someone asked, "Are

“Music is an essential part of the human condition. So why does it matter? It matters as much as breathing matters. Or drinking water matters.” —Libby Larsen

you a path blazer?” and I was fumbling around trying to answer, and a young woman in the audience said, “No, no, it’s not a path, it’s a boulevard.” And I thought, wow ... that’s fabulous.

MWP: How do you think the world of music is changing?

LL: The definition of a composer is changing, away from the European dead white guy who’s a marble bust on your piano to the fact that each one of us, each person, has the capacity for expressing themselves through making music that is their own music. You now can compose on your iPhone. You don’t have to learn to play a cello for 20 years and pass through all kinds of rigorous tests to be considered an expert and therefore a composer. We have the capacity to put our material out in public and receive feedback for it in ways that haven’t been possible. That changes the whole discussion of what is good, what is terrible, what is better—and does it matter?

MWP: What kinds of stories are you telling in your compositions?

LL: It’s not really stories, per se; it’s more like essays or memoirs of energy and emotion and tempo.

For instance, I’m really interested in the whole idea of ridge running. If you look it up, it says it’s a hillbilly term and it’s used for moonshiners. But the way I interpret it is that there are a lot of us alive today who, in an abstract way, are ridge runners. In other words, we’re trying to survive; our survival depends on our wit. If you’ve been laid off [from] your job for five years and you can’t find a job, you become a ridge runner, meaning that you have to make your life up ... in order to put food on the table or whatever. You have to make up your life in a way that is much more improvisational than it would be if you had a steady job.

So the story I’m telling is not of an Appalachian moonshiner. The stories I tell in my music are stories of energy and emotion as I observe it culturally. Kind of cultural anthropology.

MWP: Why does music matter?

LL: There isn’t a culture ever discovered that hasn’t expressed itself, in some way, musically. Music is an essential part of the human condition. So why does it matter? It matters as much as breathing matters. Or drinking water matters. It is an essential mode of communication—internal communication and external communication.

MWP: What would you like your musical legacy to be?

LL: I hope that the music I’ve created in this short span has given whoever has come in contact with it a heightened sense of who they are. If they hate the music, that’s fine; if they love the music, that’s fine. If they perform the music, that’s fine. But [I’d like to give people] a heightened sense of their own time here on earth.

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