

Composers' Corner



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Interview with Libby Larsen
Kathy Romey

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Held on June 10th 2002, for the 6th World Symposium on Choral Music in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, August 3-10 2002

Conducted by **Kathy Romey**

Kathy Romey (KR): *What about the choral medium appeals to you?*

Libby Larson (LL): I could never be thinking of not working with the voice. The voice is part of me! Though I compose for solo voice, operatic voice, commercial voice – what appeals to me about the choral voice is congregation. It is the idea of a congregated group of individuals lifting their voices beyond the street, in my mind, in an effort to heighten emotion, to experience something that none of us can experience alone. Voice in a congregate way – I mean the secular term of congregate – is an extraordinary experience. It is a very rare gem of an experience. I think you and I were talking right after September 11th, and you noted the event in which several of the senators gathered on the steps of the Capitol. The media was there, and there was going to be a press conference. And what did those senators do? They sang! It was extraordinary that somehow the congregate lifting of voice beyond speech, beyond reason, is at the heart of choral – whatever “choral” is. That is what interests me about it.

KR: *What about this medium challenges you, if anything?*

LL: I can tell what it is that challenges me: the attempts of certain individuals to define and own the definition of choral singing. I really am a rebel in conservative clothing. I am constantly challenged by the attempts of people to own music – to own its definition, to make rules for it, to define it hierarchically as certain, crafted “sound.” All the while, there is no such thing as a choral sound. There is only a congregate vision. And it changes as the clothing in the culture changes, as the sound palate of the culture changes, as the need to express the language of the culture changes. Language is fluid,

you know, and it expresses itself. I find an extraordinary challenge in creating a choral utterance, which is the way I think of my pieces. I don’t think of them as pieces, but as creating an utterance. And then, taking it into a culture which has specific definitions about what is and is not choral, is really a challenge.

“Choral” is infinite. Where two people are together, that is choral. Challenge is to continue to work in utterance as an art form which has defined itself as a field with markets, and with subdivisions of markets within the field. But that’s nothing new. That’s an age-old challenge of any artist.

KR: *Let’s talk about your choral compositions. Are there certain works that are significant to you?*

LL: Yes. *Who Cannot Weep, Come Learn of Me* was a significant piece for me. It is a chant-based piece. It is about the casting of the voice into a reverberant space, and trusting that the air and the space will hold the music in it, which is one of the profound aspects of chant. I want to say that it takes supreme trust, as we are talking about a sacred tradition. There is supreme trust that when voices come together in a conductorless, meterless flow, there will be unity. This striving for unity through singing chant becomes a philosophical and spiritual process, far outweighing an objective search for choral sound. Following *Who Cannot Weep, Come Learn of Me* came *I Just Lightening, Psalm 121*... other pieces that are about flow, congregate flow, and utterance. So that was a very significant piece in many, many ways.

KR: *Would you discuss your creative process for setting vocal music versus instrumental music.*

LL: It has taken me 45 years to understand that we have two disparate theoretical and

performance practice ecologies which influence the creative process. The global ecology of choral singing and the global ecology of instrumental performance are quite different. They are not at odds, but they are quite different just in their fundamental requirements. I am into my fifties now, and I feel that for the first time in my musical life I am beginning to understand how the instruments work. Oh, I had made them sound, and I had understood technique, and the physics of them and what have you. But I am now beginning to understand metaphysically, why the instruments work. For the voice, it is possible to write piece after piece, which sounds well, and is successful. But to take the voice beyond what it knows in an organic, idiomatic way is where I am right now in choral work. I want to take the notion of congregate utterance beyond its tradition in a way that makes perfect sense for the choir. That is also what I have been doing in my instrumental composing. The instruments must be taken beyond the traditional idiom in a way that makes evolutionary sense. Even though the journey – the getting there – seems unfamiliar, one has to trust the journey more than the piece itself. Then, when you get to perform the piece, you go – Aha! You have to have an audience in order to get the Aha!

KR: *So in writing vocal music, are there certain compositional elements, which inform your writing? It sounds as if text is a dominant force.*

LL: Yes. The words are the dominant force. Trying to understand the significance of the choice of word is a place of immense inspiration for me. For instance, I begin by attempting to understand a single word, and then the word next to it. And then, the two words in combination. I try to understand

49

Composers' Corner

...Interview with Libby Larsen

Conducted by Kathy Romey

50

the ecology of the words themselves, the choices of the words, and then the syntax. Only then I begin to understand what the music needs to be for the piece. For me, the music must be MORE meaningful to the words than the words are meaningful to the music. It is all process. Fluid, fluid, fluid.

KR: *Would you talk about MAY SKY*. What factors had an impact on the creation of this composition besides the parameters of the commission itself?*

LL: There were outside factors which inspired me right away. When you contacted me about composing this work for the World Choral Symposium, my mind immediately leapt to the idea that the World Choral Symposium is an opportunity for international utterance and understanding. And then you said, "We would really like for you to write for the Okubu Chorus in Japan". I knew that I wanted to try to speak through a culture that our country had once defined as our enemy and whose people our country confined in internment camps during WWII and I thought, "Our cultures need to talk, not through Beethoven but through our own words! There are things that we can say that we rarely have the opportunity to say to each other. Just maybe this one little four-minute piece can be like a breeze blowing over the barbed-wire fences." I live in the Midwest. I wasn't born until after World War II. I have a particular perspective. Since I am American, and since the World War II effort in America included the internment of Japanese-Americans, I wanted like to facilitate the voices of their poets through this piece, MAY SKY. I view poetry and music as an artist/facilitator. I am the facilitator, searching for ways to raise the poetry off the page. And so I approached this piece as I approach many of my choral works: as an opportunity to speak, if only for

four minutes, in a way which none of our other musical rituals allow us to speak. I decided to compose a work which combines the metric and the non-metric world as a metaphor for free spirit and hope as more powerful than regulation. Running through the work is a drone, sung almost as a little metric *ritornello*, for which it takes the sonic form of the letter Z. This drone, in and of itself, is ironic, since in its natural world, the drone of the cicada is non-metric. I then set the text, both English and Japanese so that it appears to be metric. But this also is ironic, as the text needs to flow like chant in order to make its best impact.

As you know, it took me a long time to write this piece...because I wanted to take some chances culturally, and I was afraid to do that. But now I am not afraid. I said, "No, no, no. This is a culmination." We talked about me putting cymbals in the chorus, and I decided upon the letter Z instead... I thought, 'If I cannot compose the work as an a cappella piece, then I've chosen the wrong text. And if I cannot combine flow and meter in a way that questions flow and meter, then I negate the meaning of the texts of the piece.' And what I found in these texts...! I am so humbled by these texts.

KR: *Yes, they are remarkable.*

LL: An extraordinary freedom in acknowledging the imprisoned being but the free will and spirit. But it is profoundly humbling to understand that this tradition of Haiku Kai uses the pen to escape the pen (pun intended). The texts express the ability of confinement to foster timelessness and spiritual freedom. The poetry is not about escape. There is nothing in this text that talks about escape.

KR: *No, but there is awareness of the world surrounding you. And that awareness takes you beyond internment.*

LL: Immediately. The image of barbed wire feels like the filament of a spider's web, in its fragility, because of the strength of the spirit. You just move in and out and around it. You work with light, wind, heat, the sound of the cicadas, the shadow on the wall... None of these things can be contained by barbed wire. None of it! In the simple, true strength of the texts and the Haiku Kai poetic form barbed wire turns into a spider's web that is batted away – just absolutely batted so that there is really no containment. Only situation. This was extraordinarily humbling to me. What I was grappling with, and I think this piece is one of my important pieces, is this: Is it possible to use the bar line in the way that the barbed wire was used in the internment camps, so that the bar line itself can be batted away? Even though it appears and is by tradition regulating, can it be batted away? Can it be negated by the music?

KR: *Then you have strong feelings about the interpretation of the work. It seems as if you are attempting to move the ensemble away from what is here on the printed page to discover what is within themselves as interpreters.*

LL: Yes. Remember, I am suspicious of anyone who believes that they own music. That goes for me too. Every time I sit down I struggle with this within myself. I don't own music. No one owns music.

KR: *So in coming to any performance of your own works, you are open to the process which has brought the performers to that point.*

LL: Yes, I am. I am more and more interested in the process than I am in controlling the process. Hence, there is no tempo marking. It is not a mistake. There is just no tempo

marking. And I will be really interested to see if what I think about ownership now is actually true. We'll see! ●

* *May Sky* is based on Haiku poetry of Japanese inmates living in various American internment camps during World War II. The text, in both Japanese and English, is set in a highly descriptive manner, evoking different images of nature (cf. next page). The work was premiered by The Okubo Mixed Choir – Masayuki Tsuji, conductor, in August 2002 at the Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

Reference: *May Sky* – SATB, a cappella, Tokuji Hirai, Neiji Ozawa, Reiko Gomyo, Suiko Matsushita, text; 4 min; 2002 (OUP)

Libby Larsen is one of America's most prolific and most performed living composers. She has created a catalogue of over 200 works spanning virtually every genre from intimate vocal and chamber music to massive orchestra and choral scores. Her music has been praised for its dynamic, deeply inspired and vigorous contemporary American spirit. In April 2003, the Library of Congress announced Libby Larsen's appointment as the first holder of the Harissios Papamarkou Chair in Education and Technology in the John W. Kluge Center. Larsen has received numerous awards and accolades, including a 1994 Grammy as producer of the CD: "The Art of Arleen Augér", an acclaimed recording that features Larsen's "Sonnets from the Portuguese". The first woman to serve as a resident composer with a major orchestra, she has held residencies with the California Institute of the Arts, the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, the Philadelphia School of the Arts, the Cincinnati Conservatory, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Charlotte Symphony, and the Colorado Symphony.

Larsen is also a vigorous, articulate champion of the music and musicians of our time. In 1973, she co-founded (with Stephen Paulus) the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composers Forum. She has been Vice-President of the American Music Center and a director of the College Music Society. Consistently sought-after as a leader in the generation of millennium thinkers, Libby Larsen's music and ideas have refreshed the concert music tradition and the composer's role in it.
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Composers' Corner

...Interview with Libby Larsen

52 MAY SKY

A collection of Haiku Kai, written by poets Tokuji Hirai, at Rohwer Concentration Camp and the Denson Valley Ginsha Haiku Meeting, 1944; Neiji Ozawa, at the Gila Camp Hospital; Suiko Matsushita, at Denson Valley Ginsha; Reiko Gomyo (pseudonym of Sadako Abiko), written at Denson Valley Ginsha.

KISHA NO OTO KIKOYU NAGAKI
YORUO SAMETE ORI
Hearing sound of train
-AWAKE-
this endless night (1)

WATASHI RA MOKUSHITA MAMA
MADO NO SORA GA KAROPPO DE
We are silent
above the window
empty sky (2)

AKETE HOSHI WA KIE YUME WA
DOKO E SUTERU
At daybreak
stars disappear
where do I discard my dreams? (3)

When day breaks
reality is there
as the oats by the barbed wire fence (4)

AKEKURU NI HIMA ARI SUBETE O
OMOI
Day in day out
time on our hands
thinking of many things(5)

KONO HI HATSUZEMI NO KOE O
KIKU KONOHI KUSA HIKARU
Today
the first cicada chirps
this day the grass glistens (6)

From the window of despair
May sky
there is always tomorrow (7)

SEMI MADO NI KITE NAKI KODACHI
NI SARITE NAKI
Cicada buzzing by the window
flew away to distant tree
continues to sing (8)

Found in:
May Sky There Is Always Tomorrow
An Anthology of Japanese American
Concentration Camp Kaiko Haiku.
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Kazue de Cristofora.
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Inc., 6026 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles,
CA 90036)

(1)Page 121 - Hearing sound of train (Tokuji
Hirai, written at Rohwer Concentration
Camp)
(2)Page 243 - We are silent (Tokuji Hirai -
from the Valley Ginsha Haiku Meeting,
1944)
(3)Page 221 - At daybreak (Neiji Ozawa,
written at the Gila Camp Hospital)
(4)Page 247 - When day breaks (Suiko
Matsushita, written at Denson Valley
Ginsha, after Japan's surrender, August 16,
1945)
(5)Page 239 - Day in, day out (Tokuji Hirai,
written as a Haiku letter to Neiji Ozawa,
August 26, 1945, Denson Valley Ginsha)
(6)Page 195 - Today the first cicada (Reiko
Gomyo - pseudonym of Sadako Abiko -
written at Denson Valley Ginsha)
(7)Page 223 - From the window (Neiji
Ozawa, written at Gila Camp Hospital)
(8)Page 121 - Cicada buzzing (Tokuji Hirai,
written at Rohwer Concentration Camp)