FORGET THE FAMILIAR: THE FEMINIST VOICE IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMATIC SONG

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ABSTRACT

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Female figures are rarely prominent characters in classic literature, nor are they featured in history. Many of them are often remembered only in relation to their male counterparts. Such is not the case for subjects of three contemporary dramatic vocal works, each of which reimagines and engages with familiar female characters from history, literature, and myth. Three versions of Shakespeare’s Ophelia manifest in Amy Beth Kirsten’s chamber opera *Ophelia Forever*, three conceptions of the siren myth interact in Kate Soper’s music theater piece *Here Be Sirens*, and five wives of Henry VIII take center stage in Libby Larsen’s song cycle *Try Me, Good King: The Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII*.

In this thesis, I investigate how contemporary composers portray and dramatically construct female characters through music and the voice. Although I am not using a specific feminist approach, the discussion itself is inherently feminist as it critiques the societal structures that surround these familiar women as well as the gendered roles they are expected to fulfill.

Building on interviews I conducted with each of the composers, I engage in hermeneutic musical analysis by observing the conformation or refusal of operatic vocal conventions, studying text-music relationships, and interpreting the compositional voice of each composer. I argue these female characters are empowered because these pieces expose the sexism embedded in their past artistic and historical representations. I also suggest, however, that although all three of these pieces give voice only to women, they also demonstrate that the influence and reach of men is still very present. Nevertheless, in dramatizing these familiar figures in a musical setting, these composers attribute agency to females who have traditionally lacked voices of their own.
For my loved ones who've
Never failed to support me
And those lost to time
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INTRODUCTION: RECLAIMING THE FEMALE VOICE

Women seem to be absent from history and the classics. When they are present, they are often silent. Take, for example, Helen of Troy: it is unknown whether or not she went willingly with Paris, but it doesn’t matter to Virgil or Homer. All that matters is that Menelaus wanted her back. In the Bible, most female figures are referred to simply as “the woman” or “the widow.” In story after story, women are relegated to the background. They play supporting characters, take on subordinate roles, and are relevant only to advance the plot of the male. It is easy to forget them, to leave out the female figures entirely. For some stories, it can be difficult to remember that the women were even there. But it is almost impossible to rewrite a story without men.

What is possible is to rewrite a story from the perspective of women, to ensure their side of the story is heard. History is currently being rewritten by scholars who are finding people, usually of a minority, that were left out of the story. Movements like Herstory, which provides information missing from history as construed from a masculine point of view, offer competing or supplementary narratives that are all true to their own realities.\(^1\) Whether or not it was their intention, composers Amy Beth Kirsten, Kate Soper, and Libby Larsen, have all taken part in this reclamation and reinterpretation of the past.

In 2000, Libby Larsen wrote a song cycle, setting letters and speeches of five sixteenth-century English queens. *Try Me, Good King: The Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII* provides a chance for the words of women, sung by women, and set by a woman to enter the repertoire and to be heard without male commentary. In 2005, Amy Beth Kirsten explored

\(^1\) Other examples of works that challenge dominant historical narratives are Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980) and Malcolm Gladwell’s *Revisionist History* podcast.
Shakespeare’s character of Ophelia and her endless reimaginings at the hands of artists over the past few centuries. She presented her findings in a chamber opera, *Ophelia Forever*, which featured three common versions of the character, each of which showed the myriad expectations she had been molded to meet. Kate Soper, between 2012 and 2014, composed and performed in her music theatre piece *Here Be Sirens* which questions the existence of three mythological sirens and their songs, searching for reasons about why and where they are. She reveals how powerful these women creatures seem, but how powerless they actually are.

Composers have long used a diverse array of compositional techniques to create nuanced, three-dimensional dramatic characters, whether on the opera stage or in the recital hall. Contemporary composers have even more techniques at their disposal. However, they still characterize primarily through the voice. By analyzing the interactions and relationships among musical style, structure, voice, and persona, I argue that these three composers, through their engagement with or subversion of operatic convention and particular musical associations, produce music that strongly characterizes the historical women in these works. Some composers engage with operatic conventions that link character archetypes with specific vocal types, whereas other composers define their characters through an association with various musical styles.

How the voice lends itself to the characterization of these fictional, mythological, and historical women ultimately reflects on the gendered, societal positions of these women. It says something about their situation, sometimes in a critical way, at other times as an observation. Ophelia is overwhelmed by societal expectations; the sirens have power but it renders them powerless; and the Tudor queens are measured by their success of bearing a son, the rest of their accomplishments and strengths forgotten.
In my examination of these characters and their music, I draw on interviews I conducted with each composer (full transcriptions of these interviews appear in the appendices). These offer valuable perspectives—though not the only perspective—on these works. I also lean on music analysis, voice type, musical associations and references, and text-music relationships to interpret these characters. My thesis contributes, then, to understanding how the voice—on stage, in recital, and in the act of composition—can be deployed in support of a feminist revision of familiar female archetypes and historical figures.

Women historically have been restricted to certain roles within society. Learning expectations and understandings from those around them, women conform to the examples set for them and continue to reinforce the gender structures in place. Andrea Dworkin, a radical feminist activist, points out that throughout representations in art, literature, and entertainment, “[w]e see that powerful women are bad, and good women are inert. We see that men are always good, no matter what they do, or do not do.”\(^2\) The stories that surround us propagate these ideas. The stories themselves may be fiction, but the interactions and behavior of the characters reflect the imprints of society.

Authors work hard to create characters that are relatable and lovable. But as Dworkin further argues, the archetypal women of literature, on which many subsequent heroines are based, come from fairy tales: “Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow-white, Rapunzel—all are characterized by passivity, beauty, innocence, and victimization. They are archetypal good women—victims by definition. They never think, act, initiate, confront, resist, challenge, feel, care, or question.”\(^3\) Women in literature, in art as a whole, are confined by the limitations set by

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\(^3\) Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 42.
society. If they attempt to exist outside it they become outcasts, unacceptable and unfit to belong within the world for which they were created.

Nowhere is this more applicable than in opera, where the female characters are often the ones best remembered, the ones that capture the audience’s attention, the ones that haunt the rest of the roles. Musicologist Ralph Locke points to the voice as the source of this power, claiming that there is “something irresistibly admirable and troubling about woman’s voice in opera, something that commands our attention and our deeper involvement, almost in spite of ourselves.”4 Even as their voices enrapture a performance, as characters they become statues entombed in time, reflecting the composers’ and society’s perceptions of women.

Heroines in opera conform to various stereotypes and these archetypes frequently correspond to certain vocal categories. There are many different characters that each voice type can assume. Traditionally opera roles have separated voices into high and low, sometimes with what can be considered a neutral voice in between. Female voices are a bit more complicated than male voices because there are four common divisions, instead of three: the coloratura soprano, the soprano, the mezzo-soprano, and the contralto (listed from highest to lowest).5 The most common voice type, of course, is a soprano.6

Since K. Mitchell’s work in 1970, few scholars have explored further the strong connections between voice types and character archetypes in opera and art song, particularly within more contemporary repertoire. Although, Susan Rutherford’s “Voices and Singers” and Heather Hadlock’s “Opera and Gender Studies” in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*

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6 My discussion of voice types deliberately deals with broader categories rather than working with the Fach system, which is an elaborate web of categories that have arisen in response to specific traditions.
and Michal Grover-Friedlander’s “Voice” and Julian Rushton’s “Characterization” from The Oxford Handbook of Opera all discuss the role of the voice in opera, they do not deal with substantial character archetypes in detail.7

The conventions that associate certain character archetypes with voice types developed because, as K. Mitchell explains, “the auditory mask of the voice type is meant to be expressive of the character type represented by the operatic personage.”8 Voices are differentiated based on how they are perceived. Higher voices are generally described as brighter, lighter, and light-hearted whereas lower voices are attributed as being darker, heavier, and heavy-hearted. The combinations of these perceptions form associations with voice types.9

Regardless of their voice type, female characters tend to be viewed as nothing more than a possible love interest. The soprano often plays a character who is considered pure and innocent, while the lower voices of the mezzo and the contralto contrast this with voices closer “to the region of the male voice” which sometimes attributes the “hard and aggressive character of such figures.”10 This can make them sound tainted if they pursue their own interests, as a man would.11 Mezzo-sopranos and contraltos are usually cast as a seductive character, although the same attributes can be applied to upper voices. Contraltos, after losing “access to heroic roles (both male and female), became the lost voice of the century, assigned only to the characters no one else wanted to play: ‘tarts, old women and boys’ is the usual summary of her lot.”12

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female voice that differs most in characterization is the coloratura soprano who became “the epoch’s aural portrait of femininity, later to be joined by the lyric soprano.”13 She can be portrayed as hysterical, crazy, or mystical.14

All of these women are opposite men, and in nineteenth-century opera, almost all sopranos become their victims.15 As Catherine Clément acutely pointed out in an early instance of feminist criticism applied to opera, most operatic heroines “die a death prepared for them by a slow plot, woven by furtive, fleeting heroes, up to their glorious moment: a sung death.”16 Female figures in opera are known for the glorious aria they sing before being sentenced to death or, more often than not, sacrificing herself for her male counterpart. They are not always restricted to death, but they are restricted by the confines of society. In fact, Locke explains that all opera characters are “socially conditioned visions or models—negative or positive—of gender-appropriate behavior.”17 Women in opera, like women in society, are a carefully controlled commodity. Their appearance and their actions are coached and limited due to certain expectations that society impresses upon them. The structure of the stories, the treatment of the characters, and the interaction with the music results in a portrait of society painted by the composer.

The woman that rejects societal standards, according to Dworkin, “is repulsive and she must be destroyed” because she threatens the patriarchy: “She is the female protagonist, the nonmale source of power which must be defeated, obliterated, before male power can fully

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16 Catherine Clément, Opera, or the Undoing of Women, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 45.
17 Locke, “What Are These Women Doing in Opera?” 74.
flower. She is repulsive because she is evil. She is evil because she acts.”18 Any woman that exists outside of the patriarchy challenges it. Therefore, the reaction is to punish her, to destroy her: she is not allowed to exist. In opera, this can culminate in a mad scene.

A female figure that “surpass[es] the normal limits of ‘femininity,’” is too powerful to accept the limitations imposed on her by the patriarchy and ends up delirious and dead.19 She becomes a madwoman, whose “deranged mind without inhibition” is reflected in her “excess” as her vocal range soars beyond comprehension.20 The best example of this is Donizetti’s Lucia from Lucia di Lammermoor. She rejects the reality in which she has been forced to function and operates in a false reality fueled by her insanity. A woman is not allowed to disobey or appropriate control over her own life. Any heroine that does so must be insane and so she is depicted as such.

It seems then, that a woman who proliferates societal standards, on the other hand, is never allowed to die. She is continuously used to set an example of what women should strive to become as their roles in society evolve. The goddess Venus, or Aphrodite, or even DC Comics’s Wonder Woman continue to be upheld as paragons of appropriate femininity. Those who are sentenced to death are also used as constant reminders of what is unacceptable behavior. Martyred saints, like Joan of Arc, are often depicted with symbols reflecting how they died, rather than contributions they made during life. Women used as role models—both for how to behave and what not to do—exist in art and history, often in both. Many of them have been examined and studied and reinterpreted so many times that it is difficult to identify the original.

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18 Dworkin, Woman Hating, 48.
19 Heather Hadlock, “Opera and Gender Studies,” 265.
Three of these model women are subjects of dramatic musical works that attempt to provide an additional perspective: that of the characters themselves. Kirsten’s chamber opera *Ophelia Forever* explores the mind of Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Soper’s music theater piece *Here Be Sirens* works with the lore of the mythological sirens, and Larsen’s song cycle *Try Me, Good King* gives voices to five English Tudor queens. In giving agency to female figures who are often reflections by which to understand their male counterparts, considered nothing more than plot points, or only the wives of Henry VIII, these three composers come as close to possible in creating what ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Currans envisions: “a world where women [aren’t] defined by men.”

The word “women” itself includes “men,” reflecting the way society is structured. In truth, women are never free of the masculine presence and that truth pervades each of these pieces. Ophelia is unable to escape Hamlet, even in her mind, the sirens are constantly sinking ships of (male) sailors, and the Tudor queens are framed by their relationship to the infamous king. Kirsten, Soper, and Larsen present their women as the focus of their works. The only singers are women playing women, and yet they are unable to leave men out entirely. In order to present their characters accurately, the composers must include the influence and interference of men—even if they do not allow male voices to be heard.

It is important to note that these three composers are women. However, in framing these composers’ decision to provide a voice to characters who are often silenced and used to promulgate the ideals of society as a feminist issue, I do not want to confine these brilliantly and diversely talented musicians to the realm of feminism. In fact, while I want to acknowledge that

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21 Dr. Elizabeth Currans, “Michigan Women’s Music Festival and Dyke Marches” (colloquium presentation, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH, 16 February 2018).
they are women, I do not want to qualify the term “composer” by specifying their gender. They are composers, who are also women, and each maneuvers carefully around the issue of gender within the contemporary classical music world.

Amy Beth Kirsten argues that the use of the term “woman composer” suggests “that the corresponding body of work is of a lesser quality; in effect, the term renders it a subgroup.” It is an understandable aggravation. The only reason the word “composer” needs to be qualified by “woman” or “female” is if they do not belong in that category in the first place. Kirsten believes that there is no longer a need to distinguish gender when referring to composers and that pieces should be performed and discussed for their merit, not because of the composer’s gender. In particular, she is responding to the celebration or criticism of ensembles’ concerts based on their programming, or lack thereof, of works composed by women. Kirsten however feels that “[n]either art nor artist is served by segregation,” and that she “would hate to think [her] work had been programmed simply because [she’s] a woman.” She makes an excellent point. It is unacceptable to exclude women simply because of their gender, but it is also inappropriate to include women explicitly because of their gender. Composers should be honored and respected for their work, not because they did work while being a woman.

Soper, too, pushes back against the simplistic categorization of “female composer.” In fact, she has expressed her frustration at being constantly asked about feminism. She has “other works that have literally not a thing to do with it and [she does] get frustrated when people are like ‘so, you’re singing about feminism again?’” and she has to respond that she is “singing

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23 Kirsten, “The ‘Woman Composer’ is Dead.”
24 Some would argue that programming works of women and other perceived minorities of the musical world is making an explicit effort to ensure those underrepresented voices are heard.
about Wittgenstein, actually.” She has struggled with trying to balance her roles as a composer and as a woman. While composing *Here Be Sirens*, her dilemma was: “I don’t want to have to pretend to be a man, because I was doing that in grad school” but also worried she wouldn’t be taken seriously if seen as a female and especially if seen “as sexual or sensual.” Soper’s concerns betray the sexism that is still prevalent in the field and is one of the reasons why discussing composers who are women can be problematic.

Despite their concerns, I do focus on gendered aspects surrounding these pieces because I believe that discussion is relevant to these specific pieces and an understanding of their broader significance. Yet I also should state that I chose the three works I studied for this thesis because of my musical and dramatic interest in them. The characters in each caught my attention initially; the feminist lens I use to interpret them developed later. There was nothing intentional about all three composers being women, although I do like the idea of women being the ones to talk and write about women. It just happened that the three pieces that intrigued me and I chose to explore were all written by women. I have done my best to work my conclusions with respect to the women I am working with. Larsen believes that her work can be “shoehorn[ed] into feminism” but “letting the words speak for themselves is a contemporary issue.” I have taken all of these perspectives into consideration and have adjusted my arguments to honor the intention of these composers while still examining the feminism I believe is reflected in their work.

Chapter I focuses on characterization primarily through the voice. Chapter II discusses characterization that deals with both the voice and musical associations, extending beyond voice type and into the voice of the composer herself. Chapter III shifts primarily to looking at how the

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25 Kate Soper, Skype interview with author, 27 February 2017.
26 Soper, Skype interview with author, 27 February 2017.
27 Libby Larsen, phone interview with author, 26 February 2018.
composer’s voice constructs the commentary. The chapters shift from attention on how the voice of a singer is used to evoke characters to how the composer’s voice can bring characters to life.

Chapter I: A Moment of Madness examines Kirsten’s *Ophelia Forever*. Through the interaction of her three representations of Ophelia, Kirsten exposes the stress and pressure of societal expectations. The character has constantly been cast as an example for the ideal woman for different societies throughout history. Kirsten is inconsistent in meeting or refuting conventions, especially regarding voice type, and this, I believe, is a reflection of the impossibility of Ophelia simultaneously meeting all of the expectations she has been asked to model.

Chapter II: Playing with Power focuses on Soper’s *Here Be Sirens*. I detail the musical associations made with the three sirens that characterizes them. Without being able to use words to express their personality, it is their music that defines and identifies them. I also explore the issue of power that Soper presents. The sirens have the power to sink sailors and their ships, but they have no control over it or themselves. In fact, they do not have any control over any dimension of their circumstance. Soper shows this through her choice in voicing: all three sirens are set for soprano voices. Considering that sopranos are usually cast as the victim, it is interesting that Soper places hers in a position of paradoxical power: they are simultaneously powerful and powerless.

Chapter III: The Struggle for a Son concentrates on the five songs from Larsen’s *Try Me, Good King*. This cycle is written for one singer (soprano) and piano, and therefore the characterization of each queen is reflected less by a differentiation in vocal type than in the music each is given and the lute song that accompanies her. Larsen sets her cycle up as a palindrome, drawing connections between wives with the same name to allow for an arch form.
By doing so, Jane Seymour—Henry’s third wife—becomes placed at the center of the cycle. Her song is structured around the birth of her son, and Henry’s only male heir, thus revealing the influence of men even in their absence.

All three composers made choices regarding music, convention, text, and structure. The results lead to implicit critiques of how familiar feminine figures are represented, and to the creation of a feminist voice for these characters to contribute their perspective. In addition, these works show that, even when focusing on the female character and her perspective, it is impossible to exist without the presence of men. Ophelia—alone in her mind—is still haunted by Hamlet, the sirens are constantly interrupted by the passing of ships, and the queens were all married to an overbearing monarch and were mostly discarded because of their failure to bear him a son. Instead of being presented as objects, these women are presented as people struggling against stereotypes and societal conventions. Sometimes they succeed in overcoming them and sometimes they fail, but their experiences open an avenue for a discussion of the treatment and empowerment of women in music.
CHAPTER I: A MOMENT OF MADNESS

Ophelia is one of Shakespeare’s most remembered heroines and is often associated with her death—an event that is only reported after the fact. As the prince’s love interest, she is typically described through her relation to men—daughter of Polonius, sister of Laertes, rejected by Hamlet—and her actions show a subservient girl reduced to doing what she is told. She speaks with her own voice only once she goes mad.

Amy Beth Kirsten’s *Ophelia Forever* is set after her mad scene, in the moment between her slip, or jump, and her falling into the water.¹ Ophelia’s death is shrouded in ambiguity, as Shakespeare never addresses whether it was accidental or intentional. This instance is the most significant to Ophelia’s character. The uncertainty intrigues the audience and thus it has become the crux of her character. It is what artists and thinkers continue to explore. This moment defines her, yet Shakespeare had it take place offstage.

In exploring this moment, Kirsten plumbs the depths of possibility within Ophelia’s mind. She makes use of different artistic interpretations of Ophelia from the past and “the magic and the ingredients of the stage to bring [Ophelia] to life using [her] own musical language.”² In this rendition of Ophelia’s thoughts, Kirsten demonstrates, through simultaneously conforming to vocal convention and refuting it, that Ophelia is a character confused and consumed by intrapersonal conflict.

Although an early piece of Kirsten’s, *Ophelia Forever* demonstrates her taste for theater. Her exploration of the character’s mind is a common theme in much of Kirsten’s work. A number of her theater pieces are placed in the moment before death such as *Quixote* (2017) and

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¹ Amy Beth Kirsten, *Ophelia Forever* (Bad Wolf Music, 2005), ii.
² Amy Beth Kirsten, Skype interview with author, 12 January 2018.
Savior (2018). In addition (speak to me) (2010) deals with the familiar characters of the Echo myth while pirouette on a moon sliver (2011) and Columbine’s Paradise Theater (2010-2013) engage with stock characters from the commedia dell’arte troupe. Ophelia Forever presents an accurate representation of Kirsten’s compositional style.

Despite her demise, Ophelia’s character has persisted beyond the stage, long after the curtain has closed. Elizabeth Klett, a professor of literature and a Shakespeare scholar, deems that “Ophelia has become an icon of attractive suffering: a girl with long trailing hair in a white nightgown garlanded with flowers.”

Ophelia’s death, rather than her life, made her such an intriguing character. It renders everything we know from her about the play suspect—there’s something more to her than just an obedient daughter, sister, and subject. Her death, connected intimately with her madness has been the moment audiences and artists want to know more about. Artists have reimagined this moment hoping to solve the puzzle of who Ophelia is or who she could be.

Despite the persistent popularity of Ophelia’s character, many of the poems, artwork, and literary analyses concerning Ophelia do not give her agency, but rather deprive her of any she retained. Elaine Showalter argues that “to liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to re-appropriate her for our own ends” and that her story is the history of her representation.

Many creative minds have focused on the moment that happened offstage and let their imaginations and ideas run wild, rather than trying to honor the character that Shakespeare

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represented. Yet, all of this material surrounds her death; it has to. Without her death, there would not be as much ambiguity and possibility surrounding the character.

*Ophelia Forever*, a chamber opera written for three female voices and a silent role (representing Hamlet), premiered in 2005 at the Baltimore Theatre Project as part of the Peabody Institute Opera Department’s program “Singing Shakespeare.”  

This was the result of Opera Etudes, a two-semester class that tasked three composers with writing an operatic scene, based on Shakespeare, for the opera department to stage. Kirsten constructed the libretto herself and included poems—related to Ophelia, but external to the original play—written by Elizabeth Siddal, Christina Rossetti, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and herself in addition to text from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Rather than develop a new story, the chamber opera offers an interaction between parts of Ophelia’s psyche, all present on stage together, in which they recount the madness that led them to this moment.

Kirsten took inspiration from the catalog of an art exhibit, *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia*, in which curator Carol Solomon Kiefer explored the reinterpretation and remodeling the character has undergone at the hands of visual artists over the years. Kiefer explains how representations of Ophelia developed from an eighteenth-century “idealized conception of the pure and innocent Ophelia, a sentimentally precious, aesthetic object, bereft of sexuality and pitiful in her frail, delicate madness” to more “wild, emotional, and erotic visual representations of her insanity” in the nineteenth century.

Kirsten took her inspiration primarily from three artworks (included in Appendix A) that were featured as part of the collection: John Evert Millais’s “Ophelia” (1851-1852), Linda

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Stark’s “Ophelia Forever” (1999), and Gregory Crewdson’s “Untitled (Ophelia)” (2001).\textsuperscript{8} Millais’s pre-Raphaelite oil painting depicts Ophelia floating in the river, clutching flowers. Millais makes use of mostly earth tones, with some pale hues of blue. Stark presents an abstract view that is “very contemporary, very feminist” with a pair of breasts surrounded by an infinity symbol in bubbles of blue.\textsuperscript{9} Crewdson’s work is a photograph of a flooded living room in which a lone girl, clothed in white, floats, seemingly dead.

Kiefer argues that “madness became the defining trait of Ophelia’s character,” and this madness is “intimately linked to her femininity.”\textsuperscript{10} Ophelia’s madness, in Shakespeare’s play, is dominated by the presence of song. This is because, as Leslie Dunn states, “[i]n women, music mirrors their own inherently excessive feminine nature.”\textsuperscript{11} *Ophelia Forever* acts as a presentation of Ophelia’s excess of femininity, because her thoughts are presented in song. This intimate connection between song and the feminine also has a role in the myths surrounding the sirens.

Kirsten provides agency to a character forced to “participate, often subtly, in the process of forming, perpetuating, transgressing, and destroying existing norms and stereotypes.”\textsuperscript{12} The exploration of Ophelia’s psyche in the moment preceding her death provides a critical feminist perspective of the treatment she has been subjected to and reflects the pressures she feels from societal expectations. *Ophelia Forever* exposes the pressure that the character succumbed to as she tried to align herself with society’s ideals. The conversation that plays out on stage reveals the amount of responsibility and guilt that Ophelia is burdened with by believing that the events of *Hamlet* are her fault.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} Kirsten, Skype interview with author, 12 January 2018.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Kirsten, Skype interview with author, 12 January 2018.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Kiefer, *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia*, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Kiefer, *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia*, 36.
\end{itemize}
The three leads of this opera are oddly all Ophelia herself. They are, however, different versions of the character. Ophelia I is referred to as the Violated Saint, Ophelia II is nicknamed the Mad Mermaid, and Ophelia III is called the Faithful Seductress. In order to convey that these characters are three manifestations of a single fragmented psyche, Kirsten uses hocket—itself a kind of fragmented unison—to help the audience understand “that this is one person and then she breaks apart.”13 As Example 1.1 demonstrates, this technique of passing the melody between Ophelias to create one voice unifies the different manifestations musically into one person, even if only for a fleeting moment.

EXAMPLE 1.1 Ophelia Forever, “I know that voice…” mm. 1-4

The three titles that Kirsten gives to the different versions of Ophelia provide insight into the roles each one assumes. Ralph Locke discusses how “female characters in serious opera are based—if not in every detail—one of a small number of stereotypes of womanly behavior,” and they often end up categorized as the devoted lover who either gets married or dies, the rebellious one for whom things go terribly wrong, or the femme fatale, among others.14 Although Locke’s categorizations are most accurate in describing opera of the Romantic era, many of these conventions carry into contemporary works, such as Ophelia Forever.

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13 Amy Beth Kirsten, email to author, 24 March 2018; Kirsten, Skype interview with author, 12 January 2018.
14 Locke, “What Are These Women Doing in Opera?” 61.
The Mad Mermaid is quite a fitting description for Ophelia, who is often remembered for her songs of insanity and her possibly suicidal drowning. The name also alludes to the mythical siren, a sea creature that lures men to their deaths. The Violated Saint and the Faithful Seductress both come off as slight paradoxes. They offer a perspective on past and present societal commentary on a woman’s love life: she is either prudish or promiscuous.

The contradictory names given to Ophelias II and III allow for a comprehensive depiction to be presented. A saint is usually thought of as pure, but the state of being violated invalidates that concept. This allows Ophelia to maintain her innocence. The Faithful Seductress assigns Ophelia a role of sexual aggression and, simultaneously, reduces her to the complacent woman. The confusion inherent in such names reflects Ophelia’s mental state. She is trying to be everything society asks of her but cannot make it happen all at once. All three of these names are products of stereotypes that are further impressed upon the character. Ophelia has become the mold to which women are expected to conform. In constructing these three characters, Kirsten engages with operatic vocal conventions, albeit unintentionally.

Ophelia III—the Faithful Seductress—is written for a soprano, the standard role for operatic women. Kirsten clarified that for this Ophelia she “had more of a Broadway feel [in mind] for her” and “intended her to be a little smokier,” as opposed to the traditional operatic soprano. This is appropriate and inappropriate at the same time. Typical heroines of opera are often the love interests and, most of the time, subsequently die. As the Ophelia who as described by the score is “[l]oyal to only one thing…Hamlet,” she easily fits the mold of the tragic lover. But the score also describes her as a “voluptuous beauty, strong willed, extremely sexual, and

15 Kirsten, Skype interview with author, 12 January 2018.
sensual.” The role of the sexually charged, powerful woman—such as Carmen—is usually given to the lower voices, rather than a soprano.

Instead, the mezzo-soprano part is sung by Ophelia I: the Violated Saint. Intended by Kirsten to have “an early music sound,” her character actually seems a perfect fit for the archetypal soprano part. The score designates her as “righteous, moral, pious, dedicated to Hamlet, but concerned for his soul, and for her purity.” Only the adjective “violated” suggests Ophelia is anything less than the ideal female lead. This taint provides an opportunity for Ophelia to act against her wrong-doer, to become a woman scorned or to submit to defeat and become resigned. This possibility for darkness could explain the lower timbre of her voice. However, her character remains loyal to Hamlet and pure in thought, making her voice type a mismatch with convention.

This leaves Ophelia II—the Mad Mermaid—as the only voice to follow convention. She is cast as a “high-soprano” to portray a woman the score defines as “[i]nsane, mumbling, fidgety, intense, yet…in control of the other two.” The height of her range aligns with the expectations of the character. Most coloratura ranges compliment roles described as deranged, prone to outbursts, and altogether the stereotypical hysterical woman, such as the Queen of the Night in Die Zauberflöte or Madame Mao in Nixon in China. Due to the high range of the soprano tessitura, words become secondary to music. This further conveys madness as textual understanding is obscured. In addition to her high range, she makes use of extended vocal...

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17 Kirsten, Ophelia Forever, v.
18 Kirsten, Skype interview with author, 12 January 2018.
19 Kirsten, Ophelia Forever, v.
20 Kirsten, Ophelia Forever, v.
techniques: voicing consonants, and repetitively clicking her tongue. This is likely because she is Kirsten’s “take on new music,” but it also provides an additional realm of incomprehensibility.\(^{22}\)

It is interesting that this Ophelia follows vocal convention, since her mad scene in *Hamlet* is considered disruptive and inappropriate. However, according to Klett, Ophelia’s madness “grants her access to ‘voice’—perhaps by the only means available—to expose duplicity and sexual double standards characterizing male/female relationships.”\(^{23}\) Madness is the only power accessible to Ophelia, and the reason the Mad Mermaid is so powerful: she has the only weapon the Ophelias can wield.

The choice to both follow operatic character vocal convention and to subvert it, reflects the internal struggle that Ophelia is undergoing. Through the three versions of her psyche interacting, we see the one in control, the Mermaid, meeting expectations, while the other two try to escape them. Kirsten paints a narrative of Ophelia confused about herself. She knows what is expected of her but is unsure of her ability to fulfill or refute these expectations. The example of two of the Ophelias subverting convention can be seen as an act of social defiance, something that would have been punished through madness. This furthers the idea that madness is the only avenue available that provides freedom.

Kirsten structured *Ophelia Forever* with testimonies of what each Ophelia saw and tangential episodes interspersed with what she labels a ritornello. Taken from one of Ophelia’s lines in *Hamlet*, the text of the ritornello (Example 1.2) reveals the core of Ophelia’s anxiety: “We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”\(^{24}\)

\(^{22}\) Kirsten, Skype interview with author, 12 January 2018.  
\(^{23}\) Klett, “Reading between the Lines,” 132.  
EXAMPLE 1.2 *Ophelia Forever*, “Ophelia Forever,” mm. 35-39

The text conveys the disagreement among the Ophelias about whether or not to conform to societal convention. With the presence of multiple Ophelias, this line also takes on an intimate meaning as “we” can refer to all of the Ophelias, instead of to humanity as suggested in its original context. The line also provides a new perspective unique to the character herself. This simple sentence divulges the belief that Ophelia clearly understands her place, but that her potential has been stifled. The fact that this sentiment is repeated throughout the chamber opera and continually brought up among the other conversations suggests that the thought preoccupies Ophelia. Furthermore, the melody of the ritornello is used to set other text as well. This suggests that even when Ophelia is vocalizing different thoughts, she is still focused on this concern. Her limited potential haunts her songs.

The three Ophelias always sing the ritornello in unison, reinforcing the idea that all three iterations share this anxiety. The second iteration (Example 1.3) of the ritornello continues, in the voice of the Saint, into a segment of one of Hamlet’s lines: “that ever I was born to set it right.”

The third occurrence (Example 1.4) leads into the same line but with a different melody and from the voice of the Seductress.

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26 Kirsten, *Ophelia Forever*, 63.
There is an inherent amount of responsibility present in this additional text. It admits the feeling of being burdened. Juxtaposed into the vernacular of Ophelia, it presents the possibility that she feels accountable for the chaos that has ensued over the course of the play. The different melodies could demonstrate the differing mindsets of the characters, but sharing text highlights that they both come to the same conclusion. The fourth appearance of the ritornello does not continue into this line, thus leaving the Mermaid as the only Ophelia who seemingly does not feel this burden of responsibility. Since she is defined by her madness, her lack of logic may be what frees her from this sense of guilt.

27 Kirsten, *Ophelia Forever*, 82-83.
The fourth and final ritornello (Example 1.5) repeats the word “not” twelve times: “we know, we know what we are but not, not, not, not, not, not, not, not, not, not, not, not what we may be!” The stress placed on that one word conveys the intensity with which Ophelia is plagued by her limitations. The rests that punctuate each of these utterances only increase that stress and the anxiety conveyed through the word’s repetition. Since this is the last presentation of the ritornello, the drawing out of its text lends to a hesitancy to move on. Additionally, the crescendo from mezzo-piano to mezzo-forte that begins in the reiterations of “not” enhances the feeling of agitation. The last reiteration of Ophelia’s line demonstrates that all three parts of her psyche are disappointed with her failure to reach her full potential.

EXAMPLE 1.5 Ophelia Forever, “Ritornello 4,” mm. 7-12

Catherine Clément states that “almost all heroines are victims, persecuted by men, baritone or bass.” Ophelia, all three versions of her, again both accept and refute this expectation. Ophelia, as a group, is a victim; she has gone mad, she has been violated, and she will die. Yet this opera presents a silent man as her persecutor, so that, according to Kirsten, “she is not an object like she is in the Shakespeare and instead Hamlet is the object.”

28 Kirsten, Ophelia Forever, 83.
30 Kirsten, Skype interview with author, 12 January 2018.
presence within the chamber opera, but he simply wanders in and out of the scene, silent and reactionless. Although the three Ophelias recount acts that led up to this moment, they do not discuss the scoldings by their father or brother, their confrontation with Hamlet, or their experience with madness.

It is only through the reactions of the three Ophelias to Hamlet that the audience can understand him as the oppressor. This ambiguity compliments that of Shakespeare’s surrounding Ophelia, since he is unclear about both what drove her to madness and the circumstances of her death. Additionally, the uncertainty also stipulates that the suffering Ophelia has experienced may have only existed in her mind. It is possible that all of the abuse inflicted by Hamlet and the offense taken by Ophelia occurred only because she misinterpreted his actions or read too much into them. But this doubt is shattered when, during the last section of the chamber opera, Hamlet begins strangling the Mermaid—the only Ophelia he interacts with—and his action affects all three Ophelias.

Klett points out that in some interpretations of Hamlet Ophelia “serves as a mirror for Hamlet” which “invariably uses Ophelia to foreground Hamlet.” Ophelia Forever, however, reduces him to silence, as is so often done to Ophelia. At the same time, the opera conveys the understanding that Ophelia is a reaction to Hamlet, that she only exists as a character within his context. As Kirsten points out, Ophelia “is expressed in the context of how other people think about her, no matter who it is.” Ophelia Forever provides Ophelia with the opportunity to reverse the roles she and Hamlet have played, but Kirsten cannot free her entirely.

33 Klett, “Reading between the Lines,” 131.
34 Kirsten, Skype interview by author, 12 January 2018.
Although not part of an opera, Shakespeare’s heroine follows a similar track of tragic operatic female leads except that “unlike those opera heroines…her death is not the play’s climax.” Ophelia’s death does not even take place on stage, it is merely reported after the fact because it is not crucial to the play. She literally outlived her usefulness. Ophelia Forever, then, seems to give Ophelia the moment that was denied her in her original medium. She is given a sung exploration of the instant between her fall and her death. However, Kirsten does not kill Ophelia off; she omits that plot point in her story. Kirsten, in supporting Ophelia, gives her the agency that she was denied in Hamlet. She does not need to show Ophelia dying because that would only be giving in to the concept that women in opera need to die and only reinforcing the idea that most female characters can be reduced to plot points.

Kirsten presents three different versions of Ophelia, inspired by representations that developed, particularly in the visual arts, over the years. The interaction of the personifications of Ophelia’s psyche provides the audience with a new perspective on her story. The three Ophelias are presented as different societal expectations to which the character has been held, and through their discussion it is evident that these have worn down her sanity. The character’s inability to either conform to or deny convention—societal, operatic, vocal—expresses a trapped mentality. Indeed, the text of the ritornello stresses Ophelia’s preoccupation with her inability to discover herself. This new perspective on Ophelia acts as a feminist commentary on the oppressive and sometimes paradoxical societal expectations to which women have been subjected over the centuries since Ophelia first drowned offstage.

Here Be Sirens, like many twenty-first-century dramatic works, was not designed to align with a specific genre but takes elements from opera, music theater, and spoken play. Set in both the past and the future, the story centers around three sirens stuck on a Mediterranean island. The set is minimalistic and unchanging. It consists of an uncovered grand piano on stage left, played by the sirens, and a chalkboard surrounded by piles of book on stage right. The backdrop depicts the shore of the island that the sirens are, effectively, stranded upon. Seven of the eight scenes end with a shipwreck and the broken hulls accumulate across the shoreline over the course of the work. The opera is more of an extended conversation and a series of songs than an elaborate story, with the three sirens—all sopranos—being distinguished from each other not only musically, but also through their actions and motivations.

Composed between 2012 and 2014, Here Be Sirens comprises a series of ensemble numbers strung together instead of the more traditional combination of recitatives and arias.\(^1\) The musical style and compositional choices of these ensemble numbers is influenced by which siren is more central to a particular number. This dramaturgical choice strengthens the fluidity between the sirens’ stages of evolution since there is no pause in action on stage. Although many operas rely on arias to convey the inner thoughts and emotions of its characters, Kate Soper instead forces the audience to rely on the music she chooses, as opposed to the words, to learn about the characters.\(^2\) By doing so, she emphasizes where the power of the sirens lies and that

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their ability to speak is a form of rebellion. The musical reference to past Western styles offers a reinterpretation given that many of the styles were established and written in by men.

*Here Be Sirens* is a strong example of Soper’s compositional voice. There is an exploration of each singer’s abilities while also working with erudite, sometimes philosophical, text. In addition to the sources that contribute to *Here Be Sirens*, she later set Freud, Aristotle, Sophocles, Ovid, Kafka, and Thomas Merton to music. *Here Be Sirens* was one of her first theater pieces, but it is still a solid representation of her work as a composer and as a performer. Soper has performed in other of her works, including *Ipsa Dixit* (2010-2016) and *The Ultimate Poem is Abstract* (2016). In a recent interview for the *New York Times* Soper states that “‘Sirens’ is a collage of my style, my influences.”³ Her work shows a deep engagement with her subject, as she uses research to yield a plethora of possibilities.

The sirens “are able to sing in every style because that’s [their] profession” so Soper shows how they have “access [to] all of [the styles], but at a superb level.”⁴ However, each siren has different pieces that she leads or inspires; it is these pieces that define their personality. Peitho has the entertaining songs where they reenact past episodes of their existence; Polyxo has the songs that express the research she has done and the explanations she has found; Phanio has the damning songs, only leading a song when it fulfills the purpose of sinking a ship.

The words of the sirens do not matter. It is their melodies, rather than their words, that create “temptations that ought to have been resisted.”⁵ Their music is what gives them power. Yet, in this way they are metaphorically silenced. Their voice is important but they cannot use it

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⁴ Kate Soper, Skype interview with author, 27 February 2017.

to empower themselves because what they have to say is irrelevant. In fact, within the piece, Polyxo, the most self-aware of the sirens, claims “we could sing from the goddamn phonebook and you’d doggy paddle through a flaming oil slick to get a better listen!”

The work’s texts are all related to siren mythology in some form or another, but they reveal nothing about the specific sirens on the stage. According to Elizabeth Eva Leach, “[b]eautiful music defeats reason, removes self-control, and is therefore mortally dangerous.” It is the embodiment of temptation. The “beautiful sound” of the sirens forces their victims “to confront a conflict between desire and discipline.” The sirens challenge the strength of men; they must be resisted. They are dangerous because they emasculate men by causing them to forget their purpose. The opposition of desire and discipline reflects the dichotomy of female and male, respectively and, in the historical debates over texted music, the gendered dichotomy of music and text. The music of the sirens represents the power that women can wield to destroy men. The appeal of women is the weakness of men and the sirens take advantage of that. It is fitting, then, that it is style of music, and its connotations, that create the character of each individual siren.

Soper derived the three sirens from different imaginings of the siren lore. Phaino is stoic and passive. She is based on the sirens from Greek myths, making her the earliest conception of a siren. Her entire existence revolves around her role as a siren: she signals the coming of ships and sings to bring them closer. Peitho, the middle siren, is earnest and naïve. She wants to love

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6 Kate Soper, *Here Be Sirens: For Three Sopranos and Grand Piano* (New York: Project Schott, 2014), 34.
8 Leach, “The Beauty of Sound,” 74.
the men she draws in; she does not desire for them to die. She spends her downtime lazing about and humming to herself, perfectly content with her lot in life. Polyxo, a postmodern siren in her self-awareness, is baffled by her existence and determined to figure her way out of her position. She does not want to be a siren but cannot control herself when the time comes to contribute her voice to the sinking of ships.

Polyxo, played by Soper, “combs through books (rather than hair),”\textsuperscript{11} writing notes on her chalkboard, desperately trying to gain knowledge about the circumstances of their situation. Mirroring the process Soper went through to write the opera, Polyxo looks at every source that has something to do with sirens—including Plato, Homer, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Erasmus, John Milton, and Sappho—in desperate hope of finding a way off the island.\textsuperscript{12} She does not want to sing but is compelled to. At the beginning of the opera Polyxo is the only siren who has the capability of speech (rather than song). As the opera progresses Peitho forces herself to speak instead of sing so that Polyxo will answer her questions. Polyxo’s research yields episodes from their past that none of them have the capacity to remember, but that they reenact—at Peitho’s urging—in an attempt to entertain themselves. Phaino does not respond much to the other two sirens; she engages in their skits and songs, but does little apart from sing.

To Soper “it was clear that part of what activated the material and created conflict was, and in fact one of the central conflicts is, speech versus song.”\textsuperscript{13} Despite her ability to speak throughout the piece, by the end of the opera, Polyxo becomes voiceless like Phaino. Her loss of speech marks her assumption of the complete “mythological identity.” In stressing the difference


\textsuperscript{12} Consequently, these sources comprise a large portion of the libretto.

\textsuperscript{13} Soper, Skype interview with author, 27 February 2017.
between the two forms of communication, Soper plays with the “dichotomy between the singing voice, with its penchant for transcendence and intoxication (the singing voice is unbound, ambiguous, and disruptive; it is seductive and dangerous; and it renders the text unintelligible and thus forms a threat), and the abstract, rational, and logical spoken voice.”\footnote{Michal Grover-Friedlander, “Voice,” 322.} The power of the sirens is contained in their music, which is alluring and deceptive. They are required to sing and the ability to speak is a protest of their purpose. Speech accompanies their desire to learn more about their situation and break out of it, but it is also difficult to maintain.

According to Soper’s score, Phaino is the most developed of the sirens.\footnote{Kate Soper, Here Be Sirens for Three Sopranos and Grand Piano (New York: Project Schott, 2014), v.} Although she is representative of the earliest siren archetype, she also represents the furthest stage of development, having assumed the complete “mythological identity” that allows her no individual personality.\footnote{Soper, Here Be Sirens, “Roles,” v.} She has no thoughts or opinions and seems inhuman. She exists entirely to be a siren. At the other end is Peitho, the least developed. She does not truly understand her predicament—that being a siren means that she does not have a life to live. She is in love with every sailor that washes ashore. Soper describes her type of siren as coming from the early-Romantic era, among the legends of the German Lorelei and the Russian Rusalka.\footnote{Soper, Here Be Sirens, v.} Polyxo lies between these two levels of development. She is aware of her situation as a siren—trapped on the island to serve a specific purpose—and she still retains something of a personality. Polyxo is completely of Soper’s design. She does not correspond to any identifiable siren lore, but she is necessary to the story because she creates dramatic conflict.\footnote{Soper, Here Be Sirens, v.} Without her, the story is more of...
an observation: the sirens sing and sink ships. Polyxo provides an explanation of their predicament and their potential. Without her, there is no possibility for something more.

*Here Be Sirens* utilizes the operatic convention of associating certain character archetypes with voice types. All three sirens are written for the soprano voice which provides the opportunity for these characters to transform. Phaino, being stoic and incapable of change, reveals herself in “the final stage in siren evolution” and most static in terms of vocal identity.\(^\text{19}\)

In the ensembles, she usually takes the role of the lowest voice. Her vocal range corresponds, as far as characterization is concerned, to her age, as the most developed, and her serious nature, since she is generally unresponsive and does not interact with the other two.

Phaino leads the damning songs, which the sirens sing in order to fulfill their purpose of sinking sailors and their ships. The songs associated with Phaino are reminiscent of early music. When she sings by herself the music is similar to that of antiquity: the text is in the original language instead of her vernacular (English), and the music makes use of approximate pitches and rhythms, a smaller vocal range, and a bare accompaniment. Stylistically, the damning songs evoke styles from the “early” periods of Western music history: the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque eras.

Phaino constantly signals the arrival of ships to sink, but her power over songs is greatest at the beginning of the opera. The first damning song, “Sirenbraid,” is sung partially in Greek and partially in English. The Greek is set with approximate pitches in chant form while the English text is set to be sung within a minimal range. The second damning song, “Witch-Wife” is a strophic, waltz setting of an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem. It is mostly monophonic, but there are two phrases with harmony. Taking after an organum technique used to avoid tritones,

\(^{19}\) Soper, *Here Be Sirens*, v.
the three lines begin in unison and slowly split into harmony. “Hymn to Neptune,” the third damning song, is structured like a Bach chorale. Each phrase has a strong cadence, after which there is a brief pause for a collective breath. Many of these cadences have suspensions and resolutions within them. The music reflects the metrical nature of the iambic pentameter poem.

Phaino also is given music that resembles chant. The fourth damning song, “O Sailor,” (Example 2.1) contains percussive vocal lines with disjunct motion, but many of the intervals are octaves, fourths, and fifths, all of which were prominent in organum from the Middle Ages. “O Sailor” makes use of imitation and dissonant harmonies but gives an overall feeling of open sonorities. The frequent disjunct leaps often function as octave displacements. In this way, Soper is merely displacing the expected conjunct motion. The middle section of the piece uses early notation of only a note head on a staff to indicate pitch with text underneath to be sung on that note freely in time.

EXAMPLE 2.1 Here Be Sirens, Scene 5, “O Sailor,” mm. 5-8

“Song to Odysseus,” the final damning song (Example 2.2), is like much of the music that Phaino sings earlier in the work. It keeps the text in the original language and assumes an ancient feel, with the voice sliding around among pitches and a percussive accompaniment. The text is set in a way that is very close to imitating natural sounds, such as speech. This is the
closest Phaino comes to speaking. It is a particularly interesting piece within the plot structure, because it is ultimately unsuccessful. The music theater piece ends with a ship, likely belonging to Odysseus, sailing by without stopping. This is also the moment where Polyxo is broken; the failure of their song coincides with her transformation. She no longer desires to learn about her situation anymore, she joins Phaino in playing on the piano waiting for the next ship, and she ceases to respond to Peitho. Peitho, in turn, takes up the chalk and a book and begins her next step in the progression.

EXAMPLE 2.2 Here Be Sirens, Scene 8, “Song to Odysseus,” mm. 5-8

As a siren infatuated with the sailors whom she lures to death, Peitho expresses herself in a more operatic vein. Her vocal work has many attributes from the operatic style. Peitho is cast as the highest soprano, with a range that resembles a coloratura. Conventional characterization would attribute this to her innocence, her lovesickness, and her giddy spirit. She has a high range and elaborately decorated lines that are designed to show off her voice, which she enjoys doing. The core of her being is related to her voice; it is the most important part of her. The little lines she has between the action in the beginning of the opera are whimsical and sound like sighs of contentment. They reflect the lovesick nature of opera darlings that fall in love so fully and so
fast. These musical and vocal references to opera are extended to the two large pieces that are Peitho’s: the reenactments of the stories that Polyxo finds during her research.

The first of these stories, “The Abduction of Persephone,” makes prominent use of the recitative. In this number, Soper has all three sirens singing, but with different purposes. One of the sirens tells the story of Persephone, in a recitative fashion, with many of repeated notes that imitate speech. A second siren actually speaks the same text, doing her best to stay aligned textually with the singing siren. The third siren has a drone-like line, sitting on the name ‘Persephone,’ as in the unmetered excerpt below (Example 2.3). This bass part functions like the accompaniment of secco recitative, in which the basso continuo plays bare harmonies that do no more than support the singer.

EXAMPLE 2.3 Here Be Sirens, Scene 4, “The Abduction of Persephone,” system 1

The tonality and structure of “The Muses Elyzium,” Peitho’s second reenactment (Example 2.4), reflect a unique style cultivated by Soper, with techniques reminiscent of the Baroque style. Soper mimics embellishments used during the Baroque era to display virtuosity; all three lines contain a myriad of grace notes, triplets, sextets, and melismas. The ornamentations place further emphasis on the music and distract from the text.
Polyxø is the most modern of the three sirens, both musically and in conception, and her voice is set in between those of her sisters. Thus, she is given a musically neutral role that allows her character to explore the associations on each side of her assignment and, eventually, to change as she finishes her development. Her songs are those that involve discussing their current situation and many of the conversations and musings that she has are spoken unlike the other sirens. Polyxø’s music contains modern undercurrents. It is her sharing of knowledge that inspires her pieces. When this happens, she takes the singing stage, often engaging in extended vocal techniques and operatically unconventional music.

“Muses Entr’acte” (Example 2.5) is one of the songs that Polyxø leads. It mixes spoken word with unconventional piano playing. The three sirens rotate through three different actions: speaking a phrase, playing a chord, and working within the piano.
The cycle is fluid and there is no break in motion while they change. “Across the Turbid Waves” (Example 2.6) is another unconventional piece. It uses indeterminacy—an approach developed by John Cage—as the decisions are left up to the performers during the performance itself.

Much of the piece is specific to time duration instead of beats within a tempo. It is chromatically and rhythmically complex and also makes unconventional use of the piano. Likely an homage to Cage’s work with prepared piano, the sirens strum it with wire brushes, they sing into it, and they tap its screws with rocks.

Soper’s sirens are characterized through their songs and the musical styles they are influenced by. Phaino, as the one who signals the arrival of the ships, commands the songs to complete the task of dooming the sailors. All of those pieces are influenced by the early Western
music tradition, particularly in their compositional style. Peitho, concerned with being entertained and happy, is the one who leads their playtime and thus, their reenactments of their unremembered past are written as if they belong in the operatic canon, emphasizing the voices and styles of the characters they are portraying. Polyxo, desperate to figure out the enigma of their existence, works in modern music with unconventional piano playing and extended vocal techniques as she discusses and explains what she reads.

These associations show the progression of the sirens in their conception. Phaino is the earliest imagining of a siren: she lacks a personality. Therefore, her music is the earliest. Peitho is a Romantic conception but content where she is; she is happy just to sing. Her music is influenced by operatic conventions. Polyxo, being the most self-aware, questions her existence and is exposed to all the material the composer could get her hands on. She sings in a modern style to show her acquisition of knowledge.

Soper subverts the convention of the helpless operatic soprano by providing three sopranos that use their song to wield power. It is the women who are the threat and the men who are the victims in this scenario. However, even as Soper positions the sirens to be dangerous and lethal, she exposes the fact that “the sirens are incredibly powerful but in another sense are completely powerless.”20 They have no control over their situation. There is a “sense of claustrophobia” as they are trapped “in this awful snow globe” of an island.21 It is only as a siren that they have power—the power of their song to sink ships. They do not even have the ability to choose whether they want to doom the sailors to drowning. In fact, their entire existence seems to revolve around this requirement, meaning that their existence is dependent on men. They are

unable to leave the island and, therefore, their positions as sirens. This power that they hold
resembles a curse rather than a blessing.

In addition to not being able to control this power that makes them fearsome, they have
been left without the capacity to remember how they came to have it. It is this power itself that
renders the sirens powerless. Zeus, the father of the Gods, was the one who stripped them of their
wings after they lost a contest with the muses. A masculine figure bestowed them with their
power of song and deprived them of their control over themselves.

Soper explains that “the femininity of the sirens is a complicated subject” because
“there’s no real reason why they are female. They’re singing but they’re these monsters.”22 It is
not their qualities that made them female because “[t]hey’re not feminine.”23 It is the men who
created and extended these myths that decided they would be female.24 Perhaps it is because they
are so intertwined with the idea of temptation and that is inherently a sexual idea. Discussing the
myth’s resurfacing in the nineteenth century, Lawrence Kramer describes the “Loreleis, naiads,
sirens, mermaids” as “undulant forms of dangerous femininity” and argues that “their seductive
trade” is a projection “of masculine anxiety in a world of changing gender roles.”25 Sirens, then,
have become a reinforcement of current societal expectations. Soper, when writing Here Be
Sirens, had “things to say about femininity and masculinity in this abstract realm, the way those
terms interact with power and powerlessness and sensuality and intellect,” which in turn explores
the associative qualities assigned to different genders.

24 This is evident from a Tweetstorm posted by Emily Wilson (@EmilyRCWilson), a classicist and translator, about
the translation of the sirens passage in the Odyssey: “Everyone knows the story of the Sirens from the Odyssey,”
Phyllis Austern and Inna Narodistkaya (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 195.
Soper’s use of voice types and musical styles to characterize her sirens shows that traditional techniques from operatic conventions can be applied to contemporary opera in a modern way. She is not constricted by the past use of these strategies, but instead applies them as are useful for her composition, regardless of how they may defy standards. She empowers her female characters, instead of trapping them in the role of a love interest for the male protagonist. Her musical choices define her characters so the libretto can reveal their lack of control and in dialogue they can discuss ideas and scholars instead of feelings and other characters. But, even as Soper shows men at the mercy of women in a form of female empowerment, a closer examination reveals that the sirens are subject to the same standard societal hierarchies as women, even though they believe themselves to be monsters isolated from the rest of the world.
CHAPTER III: THE STRUGGLE FOR A SON

The wives of Tudor King Henry VIII (1491-1547) are often understood and presented by historians in a simplified, rather one-dimensional manner. Lucy Worsley, for instance, presents Catherine of Aragon as the bitter, abandoned first wife, Anne Boleyn as the original “other woman,” Jane Seymour as a bit of a doormat, Anne of Cleves as the ugly one, Kathryn Howard as the one who slept around, and Katherine Parr as a saintly nurse.¹ David Starkey refers to them, respectively, as a queen, a lover, a mother, an outcast, a victim, and a survivor.² But these names, these wives, these queens are more than that. They are their own persons, with complicated lives and stories that are seldom told from their perspectives. Through her song cycle, Libby Larsen works to correct that injustice.

Larsen’s *Try Me, Good King: The Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII* (2000) features five songs for soprano and piano accompaniment.³ Each song presents a musical portrait of a different queen, through words either written or spoken by the women themselves. Quotations of Elizabethan lute songs (text included in Appendix B) act as subtext, relaying unspoken feelings about the harsh reality each wife was facing. Although the songs implicitly focus on the deaths of the queens via their last words (often to Henry himself), Larsen manages to show the crux of the relationship between the monarchs and captures the essence, the *sine qua non*, of each queen.

Larsen crafted the libretto herself. Most of the songs set the text of letters, often the last ones the queens wrote to Henry. Unlike many song cycles, this one does not reflect the voice of a

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³ There is much discrepancy about how to spell the names of Henry’s wives as spelling was variable at the time. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to follow scholars who spell Catherine three different ways, each associated with a specific wife. This choice does not align with that of Libby Larsen who chose to spell “Katherine” consistently throughout. Larsen only includes two Katherines; she excluded the last wife of Henry, Katherine Parr, because she outlived him and partly because there were, reportedly, less trials of the heart associated with their marriage.
single character. Instead, five distinct characters present their thoughts and appeals to the king. Larsen worked hard to not let her own interpretation influence this work; she wanted to “take [the] frame away and just let the words speak for themselves.”4 By “giving the original primary words their due within the art song repertoire” Larsen creates an opportunity for the essence of these women to shine through. She set “each queen’s specific place in the historical moment” to highlight that “each queen had her own specific set of circumstances and each chose to be queen.”5 These women are connected through a man they all married, the infamous Henry VIII, but it is his struggle for an heir that overwhelms the cycle. It is not his perspective, though. History remembers these women mostly as Henry saw them, but in these musical renditions, they come closer to voicing their own stories.

Although each queen has her own song, the cycle is written for “one versatile singer”—in this case, a soprano.6 As far as operatic characters go, the soprano is generally known as the tragic lead. Devoted to her lover, she often submits to death in order to prolong his life, his honor, or their love. This archetype applies to almost all of the wives of Henry VIII, even if not all of them would be interpreted as his lover. While not an opera, there is an “innate theatricality” about this cycle that was part of Larsen’s “personal investigation of how a song recital [can] become theater of the mind” where “you actually feel like you’re at an opera.”7 The drama that is inherent within these songs heightens the understanding of the characters that are presented.

Instead of the singer and vocal attributes defining the character, as in Ophelia Forever, each song in Try Me, Good King is differentiated more through the voice of the composer, often

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4 Libby Larsen, phone interview with author, 26 February 2018.
5 Larsen, phone interview with author, 26 February 2018.
6 Larsen, phone interview with author, 26 February 2018.
7 Larsen, phone interview with author, 26 February 2018.
through the piano accompaniment. Larsen is well versed in the realm of art song. Many of her contributions set the words of women to highlight forgotten historical figures. *Songs from Letters* (1989), *Mary Cassatt* (1994), and *The Magdalene* (2013) all use primary sources, often letters and scholarship from the time, to tell the stories of these women who have either been recalled apocryphally or not at all.

Larsen has a strong devotion to the words themselves. She wants them to be presented without a frame. Often art songs provide words that are commented on by the composer, who is usually male. Larsen, instead of trying to set the words within a specific mindset, allows music to act as her commentary. The accompaniment, like negative space, works complimentary to the words and the voice to convey the context the words exist within. In *Try Me, Good King* Larsen incorporates Elizabethan lute songs into her accompaniment to provide “a tapestry of unsung words, which comment on the real situation of each doomed queen.”

The subtext provided by these lute songs comes from a male perspective, which provides another level of reinterpretation for the queens.

Humble and Loyal: Katherine of Aragon

Catherine of Aragon’s song (Example 3.1) focuses on her last letter to the King, addressing him as her husband and defending her position to her last breath. Catherine was married to Henry for twenty-four years, longer than the rest of his wives (separately or

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9 Each section header in this chapter references each queen’s motto adopted during her reign, followed by the corresponding song by Larsen. With the exception of Kathryn Howard, these devices were chosen by the queens themselves (Howard’s was given to her by Henry), and they provide context by hinting at what expectations each woman had entering into her marriage and monarchy with Henry VIII.
combined). She never acknowledged the annulment of their marriage and, until her death, refused to accept any reality other than one that included her as queen. Larsen’s repetition of Catherine’s opening—"My most dear lord, king, and husband”—emphasizes this fact.

EXAMPLE 3.1 *Try Me, Good King*, “Katherine of Aragon,” system 3

![Musical notation](image)

*Catherine’s devotion was strong; her religion—and her marriage—were central to her life. As such, her song is structured as one continuous thought, much like a prayer, without a meter or measures. While the placement of phrases does suggest an overarching formal structure, there is no metrical separation throughout the song. The entire song is one elongated measure, symbolizing that her relationship with Henry was not finished until she passed. It was only after her death that Henry was truly free of her. But it also shows Catherine’s reluctance, and indeed refusal, to admit defeat to the end. In addition, its free structure could be interpreted as an homage to her religious devotion. The lack of meter and key evoke the chant that Catherine would have experienced during daily mass services. Moreover, the song centers around the dichotomy between C-sharp and C-natural, which act similar to reciting tones in their function of grounding the vocal line.

The piano accompaniment is primarily comprised of two components: an incessant stream of sixteenth notes and the quotation of John Dowland’s “In darkness let me dwell.” The
repetitious drone hints at Catherine’s stubbornness, her unfailing belief in her God, and her insistence that Henry is her one true husband. The lute song, meanwhile, contains a half-step motive that Larsen has transferred into the vocal melody, frequently featuring C-sharp and C-natural and the half-step above or below each pitch respectively.

Dowland’s song tells of a grim experience and welcomes death, since the narrator is practically living death as it is. This mirrors the state to which Catherine was subjected during her years of exile after the annulment. Catherine shuffled from decrepit castle to aging manor constantly—each more dismal than the last—and was isolated from many of her friends and supporters. Thus, hers is a melancholy song about the miserable state of life. Catherine was in a poor state of health and her banishment only made it worse. At the moment of writing the letter used for the libretto, she was near death’s door. Transferring the sentiments of the lute song as subtext to her letter to Henry expresses the neglect and abuse that Catherine would never admit to, nor accuse Henry of. Catherine of Aragon was cast as the woman scorned and betrayed, but as a good heroine does, she stayed loyal until her death, never abandoning her love.

Happiest of Women: Anne Boleyn

Anne Boleyn’s song (Example 3.2) reflects wild fluctuations—between hysterics and an eerie calm—of her mood during her last days in the Tower of London. Anne died because, in Henry’s eyes, she failed him by not producing a male heir to continue his legacy. Activist and women’s scholar Karen Lindsey claims that “Henry loathed Ann[e], and he wanted a son. He needed to be rid of her for the second reason, but he needed her killed for the first.”

desperate to extend his dynasty; it was one of the reasons he annulled his marriage to Catherine. When Anne failed to deliver him a son, she was charged with adultery. Supposedly, she had affairs with five men, including her own brother, although, as Lindsey has noted, “eleven of the occasions when Ann[e] was supposedly committing adultery, either she or her alleged lover was somewhere other than the place in which the couple were accused of meeting.”

EXAMPLE 3.2 Try Me, Good King, “Anne Boleyn,” mm. 68-72

Anne’s song displays two contrasting moods. The first and third of the four sections, which use text from a letter to Henry written thirteen days before her death, focus on her reaction to being accused of adultery and protestations of her innocence. These sections feature repetitive text, duple against triple rhythms, an abundant use of tritones, and vocal projections into a coloratura range. The textual repetition demonstrates a fixation and an insistence: Anne believes in her innocence and is desperately trying to convince the King of it. But her pleas are ultimately rendered ineffective by the persistent use of tritones in the accompaniment, which reflect the opinions of Anne held by Henry and his people. The public viewed Anne as a witch, a devil, a woman who had tricked Henry into believing that he loved her. The tritones thus provide a

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11 Lindsey, Divorced, Beheaded, Survived, 128. Anne’s real crime, according to Worsley, was that she failed to provide Henry a son and she became difficult to live with. Anne had played hard to get and that had been her most attractive quality. Once she was won, she was still demanding but was no longer in a position of power. She could not give Henry what he wanted: between 1534 and 1536 she had three miscarriages and stillbirths. Her failure to deliver a son and her assertive mannerisms became intolerable. Worsley, The Secrets of the Six Wives.
commentary, a reaction to and rejection of her claims of innocence. The tempo of these sections is fast and marked ‘furiously,’ ‘pleading,’ and ‘in desperation.’ This contributes to the hysteria that Anne succumbed to. Her high notes on the repeated phrase “Try me, good king” and the phrase’s consistent ascent to greater heights act as bursts or shrieks as she grapples with her fate.

The second section, which quotes Henry’s letter to Anne early in their relationship, evokes a waltz and is much calmer in comparison to the first section. The last section, containing Anne’s execution speech, references this waltz suggesting that Anne was thinking of her husband when she delivered her resignation to her fate and championed the King. Both sections contain a much smaller range and simpler rhythms. They are grounded metrically, without disagreement from the accompaniment, as opposed to the instability of Anne’s letter to Henry which features triplets and displaced accents in the piano.

The second section, in which Anne is quoting one of Henry’s love letters, features the lute song quotation. Dowland’s “If my complaints,” describes a lover, dedicated and true, that is betrayed by life. Realizing this, the narrator is content to die. The text “Is Love my judge, and yet I am condemn’d?” is particularly fitting to Anne’s situation. Interpreted one way, Anne loved Henry so much that if love could have convinced him she surely would have been saved. But Lindsey finds it “hard to believe that shrewd, savvy woman really loved the obvious lout that Henry had become.”12 Henry was no longer the charming prince who had reformed religion in order to marry her. Lindsey believes that Anne never had much choice in the matter, that she “had known Henry first as a predator, then as a self-deluding hypocrite.”13 Another interpretation then, could be that if Henry had more than hatred for Anne, if there were any semblance of love left, then surely, he would have saved her.

12 Lindsey, Divorced, Beheaded, Survived, 117.
13 Lindsey, Divorced, Beheaded, Survived, 117.
Bound to Obey and Serve: Jane Seymour

Jane Seymour’s song (Example 3.3) focuses on her defining legacy as queen: her son. The song is quite short, likely to parallel her marriage with Henry, which only lasted sixteen months before Jane died from complications after childbirth. The birth of her son, Henry’s only male heir, was her last act as queen. She is often declared to be the only wife Henry ever truly loved and is remembered as his favorite. Two pieces of evidence support these arguments: she delivered him a legitimate heir, and she did not last long enough for him to tire of her.

EXAMPLE 3.3 Try Me, Good King, “Jane Seymour,” mm.18-20

Despite her significance, history remembers little else about her. Lindsey notes that “Jane is the only one whose personality never clearly emerges. In popular mythology she’s close to a saint, the perfect foil to the temptress Ann[e] Boleyn. It’s an ironic image, since she did exactly what Ann[e] had done.”14 Jane initially was one of Anne’s ladies-in-waiting, and one of Catherine’s before that. As Anne had done before her, she declined Henry’s advances once she

14 Lindsey, Divorced, Beheaded, Survived, 118.
caught his eye until she secured her position as his wife rather than his mistress. On 20 May 1536—the day after Anne’s execution—she and Henry were betrothed.

Jane is remembered as the mother that secured the Tudor dynasty. Fittingly, Larsen incorporates two quotations into Jane’s song: Michael Praetorius’s “Lo, how a Rose e’re blooming,” and “Tudor Rose,” an anonymous lullaby—both of which are associated with children. The former hails the coming of the holy child, Jesus, whereas the latter is a lullaby from the period. Both suggest the pressure put on Henry’s wives to produce an heir and how much Jane prevailed for having succeeded in having done so. The quotation of Praetorius’s “Lo, how a Rose e’re blooming,” is a bold statement, as it compares the birthing of the Tudor heir to the coming of the Christ child. But to a King who went through three wives to get a son, and to an unstable country in desperate need of a continuing dynasty, there probably was an almost holy reverence for this long-awaited child. Ideally, the child, Edward, would save the country from certain civil war, secure the future, and protect the life of his mother.

The piece is in compound meter, mainly in duple, although it shifts for a few measures to triple. The shift from duple to triple perhaps evokes Edward’s birth, as the royal family expanded from two to three. Jane’s death soon after his birth, reduces the number back to two. The first section, containing text from Jane’s letter to the Privy Council, contains many hemiolas, suggesting the interplay between duple and triple. The first half of the song foreshadows the bittersweet nature of Edward’s birth through modal mixture. The allusions to minor hint at the tragic ending that awaits Jane.
God Send Me Well to Keep: Anne of Cleves

Henry knew that for a dynasty to continue he needed two boys: the heir and the spare; he himself ascended to the throne only because of his brother’s death.\(^\text{15}\) However, he was unable to consummate his marriage with Anne because he was completely repulsed by her. The damage caused by her first impression and her failure to meet his expectations created a “combination of disappointment and humiliation that sifted through Henry’s narcissistic mind and forced Anne to become ‘ugly.’”\(^\text{16}\) Without being able to conceive children, the union was useless to Henry.

Anne of Cleves’s song utilizes text from her letter to Henry in which she accepted their divorce. Most of the letter was dictated to her and this is demonstrated in the use of the piano. It initiates the song, “speaking”, before the voice enters. The piano acts as Henry’s committee, telling Anne what to say and then allowing her to translate it for the audience, as only she hears the advisors’ instructions. As the song progresses, the exchange of music between the accompaniment and the voice begins to overlap as Anne’s true feelings begin to show. The piano evolves into Anne’s accompaniment as she becomes joyous at the outcome of her marriage. Anne of Cleves discloses a mutual desire for divorce, and the end of the song expresses her celebration of her release from marriage or her happiness at managing to survive.

The settlement was quite generous with only a requirement that Anne stay in England as the king’s “sister.” Larsen stresses the term, instructing the singer to wink as she says it and indicating this musically with an ascending vocal scoop up an octave, almost as if the singer is laughing while she says it. As the King’s sister, Anne would enjoy one of the most prestigious

\(^\text{15}\) Lucy Worsley, \textit{The Secrets of the Six Wives}.  
\(^\text{16}\) Karen Lindsey, \textit{Divorced, Beheaded, Survived}, 145.
and comfortable positions in England, with more freedom than that afforded a queen. Moreover, she would not have to worry constantly about pleasing her husband.

The piano contains Thomas Campion’s lute song “I care not for these ladies,” almost certainly a reference to Henry VIII’s declaration—“I love her not!”—after his first meeting with Anne. Anne of Cleves caused offense by failing to recognize the King, who had arrived before schedule disguised as a rogue intending to impress her. Unfamiliar with the customs of England and Henry’s mischievous flirtation, she was appalled and let her dismay show.\textsuperscript{17} As in Anne Boleyn’s song, the accompaniment acts as Henry’s voice, a commentary on the wife’s appeal, or lack thereof. The lute song quotation is harmonized primary with augmented fourths and diminished fifths—these tritones display what Henry believed to be her ugly and unpleasant nature.\textsuperscript{18}

No Other Will Than His: Katherine Howard

Kathryn Howard was a cousin of Anne Boleyn. Once again, a lady-in-waiting caught the eye of the King and replaced the queen. Similar to her cousin, she was accused and found guilty of adultery. Unlike her cousin, however, there is little debate that she was guilty. Larsen chose Kathryn’s execution speech as the text for her song. In it she alternates between asking for mercy, protesting her innocence, and professing her love for Thomas Culpepper. She seems obsessed with this man, with whom she carried on the affair that ruined her relationship with Henry.

\textsuperscript{17} Lucy Worsley, \textit{The Secrets of the Six Wives}.
\textsuperscript{18} It is only after Henry became disgusted with Anne that records reflect this opinion of her. Prior to their meeting, she was considered beautiful.
The most prominent musical feature of Kathryn’s song is the constantly changing time signatures. All maintain the quarter note as the beat, but the number of beats switches without pattern or predictability, perhaps reflecting the changing vision of Kathryn in Henry’s eyes. She was not who he thought she was. He had believed she was a virgin when he wed her; learning she was not led to her downfall. Henry could have saved Kathryn but, Lindsey argues, she “had wounded the royal ego, and it was because of this that he decided to kill her.”19 She had humiliated him by duping him and cuckolding him, thereby exposing him as an ailing man who could not sexually satisfy his queen.

The changing time signatures may also reflect the frantic inconsistency of Kathryn’s statements. When questioned by Thomas Crammer, her story changed: first she denied the accusations, then she claimed she was forced into relations, finally she was persuaded to make a confession.20 There is little question that something happened between Kathryn and Culpepper, but there is controversy surrounding what happened. Some believe that she was just a “silly slut” sleeping around.21 Others think she was really just a young girl in love. Lucy Worsley believes that she was taken advantage of. Thomas Culpepper was a notorious womanizer and, as for her previous relationships, Kathryn could easily be understood as an abused child.22 Lindsey presents the idea that “Kathryn Howard was a woman who listened to her body’s yearnings, and in spite of all she had been taught, understood that she had a right to answer those longings.”23 Because of the way history has been constructed, there is no way of knowing which of these Kathryns is the accurate portrayal, or if any of them are.

19 Lindsey, Divorced, Beheaded, Survived, 177.
20 Starkey, The Six Wives of Henry VIII.
23 Lindsey, Divorced, Beheaded, Survived, 169.
Larsen has chosen to portray Kathryn as the naïve girl in love. The first expressive marking in the score reads “like a frightened child” emphasizing the youth and lack of experience this queen had. Many of the musical features that defined the strength and resiliency of Catherine of Aragon also define Kathryn Howard. They share a half-step motive and a lute song, but these musical gestures demonstrate the differences between the two queens. They portray Kathryn as unsure and terrified of death. The half-step motive that grounded Catherine undermines Kathryn, exposing her as a girl with little understanding of how the world works. She protests her innocence and is caught in thoughts of regret. The lute song that matched Catherine’s acceptance of death—“In darkness let me dwell”—mocks Kathryn’s terror.

The climax comes when Kathryn reveals that, had she done as Culpepper wished her, she would not die but “nor would he.” In those three words, Larsen emphasizes the Kathryn who is truly in love. She is exposed as a heroine who is unable to save her lover, even with her own death. Distraught over this fact, she has three repeated and accelerating ascents between her pleas for mercy before revealing that she “would rather die the wife of Culpepper.” Thus, Larsen paints Kathryn as a tragic lover.

* * *

Henry saw none of his wives’ deaths, with the possible exception of Jane Seymour. As soon as arrests, annulments, or banishments were made, he was done with them: out of sight, out of mind. Larsen has created portraits of his wives, but these are women that—in a way—Henry never knew. These were the women that he abandoned in favor of the possibility of a male heir.

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24 Larsen, *Try Me, Good King*, 21.
That may be one reason Katherine Parr, his last wife, is not included in the collection. She outlived Henry and, therefore, her last words were not directed to him.

What ties the first five wives of Henry together is the desire to conceive offspring. In addition to being diminished, in history’s view, to wives of a monarch as opposed to queens in their own rights, these women were also reduced—by Henry—to being mothers. If they did not meet that expectation, they were discarded and dishonored. Although understandable for the time, these women were much more than the possibility for offspring. Larsen emphasized that “each queen was strong, in and of herself,” and “each made the choice to assume a role that was specific in its perception.”26 They commanded armies, they reformed religion, they restored a family, they negotiated for independence, and they climbed the social ladder. It is unrealistic to consider them in the absence of men, but it is important to remember the accomplishments they achieved as queens.

Larsen further enhances her musical reclamation of the queens’ identities by creating solidarity among them through the use of an arch form that ties the cycle together.27 It is an interesting result, given that most of the women competed against each other for power in Henry’s affections in real life. Yet Larsen includes repeated notes—to imitate the lute—and bell tolls in every song in order to unify them. The same lute song is given to Catherine of Aragon and to Kathryn Howard, bookending the cycle and both Annes are accompanied by harsh judgement in the form of augmented fourths and diminished fifths. Jane lies at the center and at the center of her song is the child.

Formally, then, the whole song cycle is more than the voices of Henry’s queens: it is the saga of Henry’s struggle for a son. The first two wives, whose children were not enough for

26 Larsen, phone interview with author, 26 February 2018.
27 Larsen, phone interview with author, 26 February 2018.
Henry, fought harder to maintain their place than the last two, because they had more to fight for. Whereas Anne of Cleves was trying to save her own skin and Kathryn Howard was worried about her ill-fated lover, Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn were thinking of the welfare of their daughters.

By allowing the women to tell their own stories, so to speak, Larsen gives them something they are so often denied: agency. Nevertheless, the songs are all connected to a man. Most of them speak to Henry, some of them speak to a broader collective. Together, these women weave a tapestry of life with a demanding, powerful man.

The result of writing the song cycle for one performer blends all the wives into one. Though they are different people, their stories are very similar. In aligning all their stories together, Larsen is not telling their story; she is telling that of King Henry VIII. By using the women to tell the story, she gives them agency, but she also submits them to relaying the life of the man that controlled theirs. It portrays their relationships: their lives and stories are overshadowed by the man that brought them to light.
CONCLUSION

These three works by Kirsten, Soper, and Larsen provide new, revisionist outlooks on women—mythical, fictional, and historical—who have not been presented previously from their perspective. By working with myriad versions of these characters in their original conception as well as how they have been reinterpreted through additional sources, these composers provide narratives with multiple viewpoints.

Kirsten works with representations of Ophelia in poetry, visual art, and literary analyses, transforming them musically and dramatically into three different forms of the character. Her voice comes through not only her poetry used in the libretto, but also in the way in which she both builds on and challenges conventional operatic vocal characterizations. Soper sets writings by many different scholars to create three different conceptions of the sirens. Her own thoughts are embodied within Polyxo. Larsen sets letters, lullabies, and speeches written or spoken by Tudor queens prior to their deaths. She has five different historical figures she is capturing in musical portraits. Her commentary can be heard in the piano, specifically in the quotations of the Elizabethan lute songs.

Instead of creating a world without men, Kirsten, Soper, and Larsen acknowledge the legacy of patriarchal structures that surround their familiar figures in literature, the arts, and history. By engaging with material from throughout history, they work within the reality the women were conceived in to empower them. In doing so, they do not free these women from the shackles of society, but instead reveal that these women still grapple with their relationship to men and their place within history. These pieces show how far the masculine presence reaches—even when the men are absent. Ophelia is in a state of madness, consumed by her mind, yet is
still preoccupied with the Prince of Denmark. The sirens have been punished by Zeus, placed into a position of powerlessness masked with deceptive power. The queens of England are remembered and referred to as the wives of Henry VIII, divorced or beheaded for their failure to provide the kingdom with a male heir. The attribution of agency cannot erase the sexism that is inherently present.

Though unable to change the gendered stories of these female figures, the composers create a community through which they can form solidarity. Ophelia is allowed to process through recent events from different angles. The sirens act as sisters, coaching each other to become better and helping stave off endless boredom. The Tudor queens are able to take a stand together and expose the unrealistic expectations and unrelenting demands of their common husband, Henry VIII. Kirsten, Soper, and Larsen, while unable to alter the past, have provided possibilities for these characters to grow out of the restrictive confinement they were conceived in.

Vocal empowerment becomes a metaphor for these feminist authors. They are not afraid to mix modern styles with historical ones. Kirsten, Soper, and Larsen, perhaps more importantly, empower themselves to write about subjects that fascinate them and provide opportunities for singers to portray real women. They use new compositional techniques that complement their styles, but they still characterize these women vocally. Ophelia Forever, Here Be Sirens, and Try Me, Good King are pieces that expand and amplify the female voice in the world of music. They contribute to the repertoire that is still mostly about and by men, and add a feminist perspective to the lives and stories of the women they are about.
ABBREVIATED BIBLIOGRAPHY


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APPENDIX A: VISUAL INSPIRATION

Untitled (Ophelia) 2001 © Gregory Crewdson

Ophelia Forever, 24" x 24" x 2" oil on canvas on panel ©1999 Linda Stark

Ophelia, 30.0" × 44", oil on canvas, 1851-1852, John Everett Millais

APPENDIX B: LUTE SONG TEXTS

“In darkness let me dwell,” John Dowland

In darkness let me dwell,
The ground shall Sorrow be;
The roof Despair to bar
All cheerful light from me,
The walls of marble black
That moisten'd still shall weep;
My music hellish jarring sounds
To banish friendly sleep.
Thus wedded to my woes
And bedded to my tomb,
O let me living die,
Till death do come.

“If my complaints,” John Dowland

If my complaints could passions move
Or make Love see wherein I suffer wrong:
My passions were enough to prove
That my despairs had govern'd me too long
O Love, I live and die in thee
Thy grief in my deep sighs still speaks:
Thy wounds do freshly bleed in me
My heart for thy unkindness breaks:
Yet thou dost hope when I despair
And when I hope, thou mak'st me hope in vain
Thou say'st thou canst my harms repair
Yet for redress, thou let'st me still complain
Can Love be rich, and yet I want?
Is Love my judge, and yet I am condemn'd?
Thou plenty hast, yet me dost scant:
Thou made a God, and yet thy power contemn'd
That I do live, it is thy power:
That I desire it is thy worth:
If Love doth make men's lives too sour
Let me not love, nor live henceforth
Die shall my hopes, but not my faith
That you that of my fall may hearers be
May here despair, which truly saith
I was more true to Love than Love to me
“Lo, how a Rose e’re blooming,” Michael Praetorius

Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung
It came, a flower bright
Amid the cold of winter
When half-spent was the night

Isaiah ’twas foretold it
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it
The virgin mother kind
To show God's love aright
She bore to men a Savior
When half-spent was the night

This Flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere
True man, yet very God
From sin and death He saves us
And lightens every load

O Savior, child of Mary, who felt our human woe
O Savior, King of glory, who dost our weakness know;
Bring us at length we pray, to the bright courts of Heaven
And to the endless day!

“I care not for these ladies,” Thomas Campion

I care not for these ladies,
That must be wooed and prayed:
Give me kind Amaryllis,
The wanton country maid.
Nature art disdaineth,
Her beauty is her own.
Her when we court and kiss,
She cries, “Forsooth, let go!”
But when we come where comfort is,
She never will say no.

If I love Amaryllis,
She gives me fruit and flowers:
But if we love these ladies,
   We must give golden showers.
Give them gold, that sell love,
  Give me the nut-brown lass,
Who, when we court and kiss,
  She cries, “Forsooth, let go!”
But when we come where comfort is,
  She never will say no.

These ladies must have pillows,
   And beds by strangers wrought;
Give me a bower of willows,
  Of moss and leaves unbought,
And fresh Amaryllis,
   With milk and honey fed;
Who, when we court and kiss,
  She cries, “Forsooth, let go!”
But when we come where comfort is,
  She never will say no.
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW WITH AMY BETH KIRSTEN

12 January 2018

AS: What drew you to Ophelia as a character to explore?

ABK: That’s a good question. I wrote the piece because I took this class at Peabody, where I went to school, and the class was called Opera Etudes and it was a two semester class and the first semester—oh, and the theme of the class, for the whole year, was going to be called “Singing Shakespeare”—because of that, there were three composers in the class and we were tasked with writing a scene, a single scene, that the opera department was going to stage, it was this very ten-minute thing. And I Hamlet and I started really researching the character of Ophelia. I was very intrigued by how few lines she had in Hamlet and how much literary analysis, poetry, interpretation of her character there has been over the hundreds of years and how each interpretation of her character is really kind of guided by how society kind of feels about women and their role and so it was just a very rich character to throw myself into for a little while. And so, I asked the guy who was teaching the class and said ‘you know, I have this idea, I don’t just want to write a scene, I want to write like a fifty-minute piece about Ophelia.’ And I showed him, I had made the libretto, I put this whole libretto together, putting fragments together, fragments of Shakespeare, fragments from poetry at the time. And I showed him the idea of three Ophelias and he was like ‘go for it.’ Somehow, we made it happen with the opera department. It was really because of this class, it was intellectually stimulating and discovering the character and I just kept coming back to the fact that we really don’t know much about her from her point of view. She is expressed in the context of how other people think about her, no matter who it is. Not just the men around her, but also
the other female characters and so it was really interesting to see that there’s so much out there about her. She’s this tiny little character and I thought she deserved some time on the stage by herself.

AS: Well, I’m glad you did.

ABK: Oh, thanks.

AS: Why did you decide three Ophelias? Or how did that come about, that you decided more than one and came to the conclusion that three would work?

ABK: Three is a good number. It has a lot of literary significance but the idea really came from this book called *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia*, you may have seen in my notes and if you get the chance to check out that book

AS: I have it!

ABK: Oh, good! So, you know from looking at that book, it really covers a lot of interesting ground. I think she even mentions some of the archetypal things and she may have even phrased them in the same way that I did. It really is coming directly from the experience of reading that book and the research that I did. I liked the binary opposites that the names: the Faithful Seducress, the *Faithful* Seducress, the Mad Mermaid, that’s not too opposite, and then the other one is the Violated Saint. Those are these really interesting binaries. I felt like just the poetic names of them, of the different characters gave me a lot to think about in terms of what they would sound like. I was thinking about the Faithful Seducress and what her music could sound like and the Violated Saint and the Mad Mermaid and they all brought to mind very different kinds of music and so it seemed a good three to focus on.
AS: And how did you come up with the names? What inspired them? What was the reasoning behind them?

ABK: It probably had something to do with the research that’s in the book which basically lays out that at certain periods of time Ophelia was portrayed as mad, at certain periods of time she was portrayed as a seductress, in certain performances, film, dance, whatever it happened to be, at certain periods of time in our history she has been portrayed as kind of like this saint who was really hurt and violated by her surroundings and so it all really came from and was inspired by, the piece is greatly indebted to that book, that coffee table book, you know?

AS: Yeah, definitely.

ABK: Which, I think, actually was an art exhibit, if I remember correctly, at the Amherst Museum.

AS: I think it was, yes.

ABK: I would have loved to have seen that in person, but I’m really glad they made that book out of it.

AS: I am too, it’s really cool. How did you come to the different voice types of the characters? Were you writing for different singers or were you just starting out and then learned who would be singing it?

ABK: I wrote for specific singers, mainly me. I was writing the piece with my own voice in mind.

AS: For all three of them?

ABK: All three of them, because I knew who was going to be singing but I hadn’t actually met the singers yet and this was really my first big piece for voice and being a singer and
having access to different ranges and different colors and so forth I was sort of focusing the Mad Mermaid on the higher aspect of my voice, the Faithful Seductress was the lower tessitura and that sort of thing and there’s some overlap which is why I’m not hugely specific in the instrumentation about voice type. I think I say high soprano, soprano, and mezzo-soprano or something. I might even say alto or contralto or something, I don’t remember. I wrote it with my own voice for my own voice and it just happened to work out that the voice types that were assigned to the piece matched up, for the most part, to what I’d written.

AS: Did you change anything once you learned the voices of the people singing?

ABK: I don’t think so.

AS: I think that’s just amazing, because as I’ve listened to it, to me they’re so distinct, so it’s amazing to me that your voice can cross that massive of a range.

ABK: Somewhere in my files, I have the original composer sketches, the audio files of me singing everything so it would be funny to go back and listen to this. I don’t know where those are, but anyway…

AS: How do you use the voice as a way to establish or distinguish the characters? You’ve talked a lot about knowing each one separately and specifically with what music you would give them. Were you thinking about any vocal conventions or thinking about other operas or anything like that?

ABK: I was not thinking about other operas, mostly because at that point I had yet to take my opera history class, my contemporary opera class at Peabody. I came to classical music rather late, I was 30 and so I had a lot of wrapping up to do. There was a lot of rep that I didn’t know and at the point I think I might have had heard *Pierrot Lunaire* at some
point, but all this stuff was very new to me. I was mostly thinking about style of composition versus style of singing, now there’s a little bit of overlap there. So, for example, with the Violated Saint I was thinking about chant and I was thinking about an early music sound which actually doesn’t happen in the several renditions of the piece. I haven’t heard all of the performances, there have been a couple of runs that I haven’t been able to go to, but I have yet to hear the Violated Saint sung as an early music soprano.

AS: In the original production, was it sung as you intended?

ABK: No, it was very operatic because we had certain people from the opera program that were assigned to the piece. It was fine. In some ways I feel a little bit flexible, especially for school productions. You’re an opera student, this wasn’t an early music singer, it was an opera singer and so it was fine. I figured one day I’d be able to hear it the way it was intended, but I haven’t yet so it’ll be interesting to see if that ever happens. So, you see what I mean? Compositional style as well as vocal style, there’s a little bit of overlap. For the Faithful Seductress I had more of a Broadway feel for her, I was thinking about maybe Kurt Weill or something like that. I intended her to be a little smokier, not pop—I don’t want to say pop—but there’s definitely a more popular essence to the music and to how I was hearing her voice and we got that in the original production which was great…so vibrato’s okay but there’s a little bit of Broadway inflection every once in a while. It’s nothing over the top or anything like that, just little flavors of things. You can see in the tango that she sings kind of has that feel to it. The Mad Mermaid is my take on new music, which tends to be, in my experience, more like an early music voice than an operatic voice, not a whole lot of vibrato and attention to intonation and landing in the
middle of the pitch right away instead of around it or that sort of thing. I had for her in mind a very bright high soprano sound, almost a coloratura. I think she goes up to high C, I can’t remember if she goes up to a high C, it’s been a long time.

AS: She gets up there. I don’t know how high, but she gets up there.

ABK: So, voice type was on my mind a little bit but it was mostly musical style.

AS: You mentioned the art exhibit before, the book *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia*, how is that reflected in *Ophelia Forever*? You have a few notes on specific, like ‘you’re supposed to be in the position of this painting at this time,’ but are the characters supposed to match up to specific paintings or is it just the general idea?

ABK: There are a couple of paintings that were really influential. One of them was the John Everett Millais painting where she’s floating in the Downing River and in the original production, I can’t remember if they do this in the one that’s posted online, the production that’s online, but that position of her, with her hands like this *gestures* down at her sides and like this *gestures*, was a really strong image for me and I kept coming back to that and that’s how the piece ends with her like this *gestures* and *gasps* that sort of thing And then there’s another one, there are two other paintings and I can’t remember the names of them. One of them is a more modern photograph that is a—I wonder if I have that somewhere, let me just see if I have that on my website. I think it’s under Visual, yes that’s right…It’s online. You can go to my website and if you click on Visual, and then if you go to the square that says “Inspirations,” it’s the last one. The top photograph is the one that was very inspiring to me and that’s by Gregory Crewdson: *Untitled (Ophelia)*, which I thought was really interesting. And then the middle one is just this very WOO okay Linda Stark. It’s very contemporary, very feminist. But it’s
underwater and I thought it was so incredible and the infinity symbol, which is where the title comes from, *Ophelia Forever*. And then the John Everett Millais panting is there at the bottom. And I believe all of those are images in the book.

AS: They are and, actually, when you said ‘modern,’ the first two were the ones I was wondering if it was one of those two. Did you decide to call the chamber opera *Ophelia Forever* because of that second painting?

ABK: Yes, that was why. I mean, that was part of the reason, but I was also thinking about the character having lived for so long in our imaginations and the fact that she was on stage for five seconds and she caused so many imaginations to just run riot. There’s something powerful in the mystery of her, there’s something powerful about the fact that we don’t know how she died. We don’t know from her own perspective what her life was like. It’s open to interpretation which can go on forever.

AS: How did you come to the decision to place the story in the moment before she hit the water and isolating it in that one moment that doesn’t exist in the play?

ABK: That’s a good question. I think because I had seen some art in the book, there was one and I can’t remember who, I think it was an etching or a watercolor or some kind of sketch of Ophelia with this draped blouse that was kind of falling over shoulder, she was reaching out across the branch and that image captured that moment in time and I thought what if I could set the whole opera in that moment? It’s kind of a cinematic conceit, isn’t it? Where you elongate a single moment, time sort of stops, and then it’s picked up again after it’s suspended. So that’s the idea I was playing with.

AS: Okay. Why did you decide to include Hamlet?

ABK: I included Hamlet but he is mute. *laughs*
AS: Yes, that is one of my other questions: why he is mute.

ABK: I thought it would be really interesting to see Hamlet as an object, rather than a character. In *Ophelia Forever*, she is not an object like she is in the Shakespeare and instead Hamlet is the object. And the three Ophelias, especially the Faithful Seductress is responding to his presence. I thought it would be an interesting visual thing to include and also especially at the ending when he comes back and is responsible for her death. It didn’t seem like I could do a forty-minute piece about Ophelia and not have Hamlet in there somewhere but I knew that I didn’t want him to talk and I didn’t want him to sing. I wanted him to just be a presence.

AS: And why is he the only other character? Because you could have included her father, you could have included her brother because they have—I would argue—done damage to her as well.

ABK: Yeah, absolutely. I think mostly because all of the lines that we know that Ophelia speaks in the play have only to do with Hamlet. When she’s singing at the end about the different kinds of flowers and that sort of thing, in her mad scene or whatever, it’s still in response to him and his behavior and so I just really wanted to hone in on that relationship.

AS: Okay, that makes a lot of sense. To what extent do you see, if you do at all, a feminist intention with this opera, or chamber opera?

ABK: Well, it’s interesting, when I was composing it, I wasn’t thinking about that. I was just thinking about how amazingly fertile this subject was. I was so inspired just by everything that I read about and all the research that I did. Not just in TMMO, but all the literary analysis and all the research that has gone into just trying to understand her and a
lot of the articles read, I remember, a lot of them talked about her lack of voice in the Shakespeare. I tend to be drawn to characters are either minor characters who we don’t know about it or whose voice are not fully explored in the original version. Those are the things that I’m sort of drawn to and that’s what drew me to her. I’m sure it probably has some sort of feminist connotation and I mean, there’s different aspects of women that are portrayed in the piece, but to me I was just thinking about human beings, I was thinking about her as a character and her situation in that time period. I wasn’t trying to make it a political piece or I wasn’t trying to send a message or anything like that. But I’m sure some smart graduate students will probably have a better understanding of that than I do because I’m really too close to the piece to know the full ramifications of that. Also, one of the assignments for the class was that we had to write a piece that included a lot of women and the reason was a very practical one: they had a lot of singers. They needed to give them something to do, because not everyone could be Carmen or whatever so we used this class as an opportunity to create roles for the students that were there so all of the threads of this came together into making the piece.

AS: That’s interesting because there are so many operas and vocal settings of songs that kind of tie into a feminist approach in contemporary opera because they’re female composers engaging with female characters and it’s almost revising the characters and giving it a reading we haven’t gotten before, which I feel *Ophelia Forever* so much runs in line with that’s it interesting that there wasn’t anything specific about that.

ABK: My imagination just really lives and breathes in the world of fiction characters and how to use the magic and the ingredients of the stage to bring them to life using my own
musical language. Honestly, it was just compelled from that curiosity and sense of
discovery about the sounds I could make with this character.

AS: Were you working on any other compositions at the time?

ABK: No, I don’t think so. For the class, we were assigned to set some text from Shakespeare
because it was called “Singing Shakespeare.” So, I actually made a separate song for
Soprano and Piano called To See What I See that set her only monologue. And that music
doesn’t appear anywhere in Ophelia Forever. It was just a separate kind of thing, I was
doing a little musical research in a way. Making a piece, trying to get inside the character
a little bit more and get inside the text and figure out how I was going to make something
bigger, a bigger piece.

AS: Now what was your process in constructing the libretto? How did you choose the text
that you did and why those? I know you couldn’t have included everything, because
there’s so much on her.

ABK: You probably would’ve laughed if you could’ve seen the process; it was really fun. I
basically through the research I did I would really keep very copious notes of different
quotes from different poets from the Rossetti to Shakespeare to all the different people that
I quoted and where those quotes came from. And then I printed out this fifty-page
document that all these and a lot of the source is from Hamlet itself but the lines are
actually either spoken by Gertrude, or they’re spoken by this person, or her brother
sometimes speaks them but she’s singing them. I didn’t say in my notes who was
speaking them. I just wrote the lines down and where they were from. So, when I printed
out this document, I started just taking scissors to it. I had my three columns of the three
Ophelias and I was thinking “who would sing that line?” and I started to organize based
on who I thought would sing what lines. It was a very organic process just based on my own imagination about “oh that’s an interesting line, I bet the Seductress is going to sing that.” The Baudelaire poetry, the fragments of the B, is very evocative and sensual for example, and I thought the Seductress would probably sing that stuff so it was that sort of thing and I made this word document that had three columns and I just started organizing the order of things. After I understood who was going to say what, it was that process that started to reveal to me which scenes had to come first and the order of things then is started organizing that way in this word document with three columns. It was really fun, I had so much fun doing it. I love working with words.

AS: Those are all the questions that I had prepared and it’s been amazing talking with you. I want to ask more, but I can’t think of anything. Are there any questions you were expecting or that I should’ve asked?

ABK: Gosh, you did a really good job. I’m trying to think. One of the things that might be interesting for you to know and you’ve probably already picked up on is that one of the things that was on my mind while I was writing the piece was how to create these different characters musically but also to show, musically, that it was the same character. So, there’s a lot of passing of a line or a word, even mid-word, this idea of creating a musical sense that this is one person singing and then she breaks apart. That was something on my mind a lot while I was thinking about making the music.

AS: Thank you so much.

ABK: My pleasure.
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW WITH KATE SOPER

27 February 2017

AS: I thought I’d start off by asking you what drew you to the sirens as a subject?

KS: I think I was looking for something that would let me explore the voice in kind of an all-encompassing critical way in addition to all the artistic ways one does in opera and I was looking for something that could be populated by women only. Not even necessarily for cultural or feminist reasons but just wanting to have that experience as someone who is a composer and who doesn’t get a lot of chances at that point to work with women and then I think I was rooting around in myth just because it’s always a very forgiving ocean of information that you can delve into and you can shape with whatever your own critical or artistic or compositional concerns are. I triangulated that I have a lot of stuff I want to think about. What can I do with that? Well, myth is always a source of looking for anything you want to talk about. I want to think about the voice in a bunch of different z-axis ways, I need to find a subject that’s going to accommodate that, and then I want to be populated in a world of women somehow in this first theatrical endeavor. Where can I do that? And then sirens was the Venn diagram of that.

AS: Cool! Why were you looking for a world populated only by women?

KS: I think that was a personal impulse in a way. When I first had a conversation about sirens with a friend of mine who was originally going to play Phaino but she couldn’t do it when it came down to it. I had spent a few months away from New York where I was living at a residency and came back and just kind of realized that while away I had admitted to myself that I was missing some certain experiences in my grad school life at Columbia where I worked pretty much only with men and hung out pretty much only
with men, which is totally fine, but I knew I was going to be in it and I wanted to be on stage and do something that felt risky and fun and subversive, and even a little burlesque or something and just felt like those theatrical performances of myself were things that I just felt like would be just so much more fun and easier to do with women than with these serious composers guys that I knew. I think that’s kind of what I was thinking. And also, as you may know, it’s so much easier to find female collaborator when you’re doing contemporary opera than men anyway. I still don’t know a lot of male singers, but I know a lot of sopranos.

AS: Well that makes sense. How is Here Be Sirens unique from some of your other works?

KS: It was very different for me because it was the first real theatrical piece I’d done. It was the first absolutely staged piece I’d done and it was the first time I’d really written text. As you know, it’s not just about the song stuff, but crafting the libretto, writing the dialogue, writing the monologues, etc., so it was a big departure for me. In a lot of ways, it was a first for me.

AS: Cool. How would you define it or classify it?

KS: I feel like I don’t really have to do that. That’s your job. I feel that opera was just convenient because that has come to be a very broad term in the last several years or so. But I think if some people were to tell me it’s not really an opera, which some people did, I’d be like “oh, okay, you’re right,” so then music theater is sometimes a nice term but that’s complicated in this country because it’s hard to know where that overlaps with musical which is another term, but probably has some relevance. So, I guess I wouldn’t, but I don’t have any objections to any particular classifications.
AS: Okay. I’ve noticed that reviewers, like you said, kind of characterize it all over the board. What, whatever we want to call it, what brought you to that mixture of elements that made it ideal for exploring the subject of sirens?

KS: I think it was just the way that it happened as I started creating it because I didn’t set out saying I want to write an opera or I want to write a piece of music theater or I want to write a play and then activate it with music, I just set out saying okay, I’m doing this thing who’s Polyxo or stuff started happening and some of the things I wanted to explore. I really wanted to root around and investigate and I think it’s difficult to do arithmetic in vocal music. It’s hard to sing Foucault or something and have people know what you’re saying. They listen to you differently when you’re talking. There was a lot of stuff that I wanted to explain and then, because we were sirens, another thing that’s kind of weird about opera sometimes is why are these people singing? What’s going on? You’re telling a story and you’re pretending that this is real but where’s the orchestra? That’s not real, which obviously that’s not a big problem in opera, it’s just that it was a problem for me when I was thinking about it. But with sirens, every single time we sing in that piece it can be diegetic and it’s like now is the time in the sirens we sing, because we do that all the time. I think the very, very, very first thing I wrote was this monologue that Polyxo has about whether or not we actually eat the sailors that are washing up on shore and I has this character voice in my head that was a speaking voice essentially and then as I went on and did research it was clear that part of what activated the material and created conflict was, and in fact one of the central conflicts is, speech versus song. So, it was important to me that both those be represented. And that it be clear what they were both useful for. Why you would argue for the primacy of speech and why you would argue for
the primacy of song and whether or not you have to actually make a choice between those two is one of the big conflicts.

AS: So, you feel like your use of speech versus your use of song in some ways has to do with how to respect the material you’re working with?

KS: It’s not even how to respect the material, it’s that that was what the material was. So, as I was writing sometimes I would be writing something and it would be a monologue and sometimes it would be a song and sometimes it would be some combination of speech and song. That’s just what happened as I was exploring the material and thinking how do these creatures communicate? You know, to each other, to themselves, to the audience and it was important that that be using the voice in both of these ways. In order to say that I am examining the way I’m using my voice right now and then the way I’ll use it when I start singing.

AS: Okay. You perform in a lot of your works and in this one you performed. I am interested in how you as a composer and you as a performer influences your works. When you have more than one vocalist do you find that you experiment with each part in your own voice and then give parts away or do you find that you identify with a character and say ‘this is going to be my voice,’ and write for other specific voices?

KS: I think it depends but I think when I write for multiple voices, in a way this opera is very difficult vocally but it’s more generic than maybe some of my other music where I’m the only singer because I did feel like this was another thing about life and singing in some way that had to be recognizable as such because it doesn’t actually have that much extended technique and that kind of thing and I think I basically wrote it for three sopranos. I originally wrote it for two sopranos and a mezzo but then somebody had to be
replaced so I just hiked up one of the tessituras. I think actually because the cast was a little unstable for a while, I normally do much more sculpting of individuals and not necessarily even just vocalists but performers: this is what this person can do really well; in this one I didn’t really do that as much. There’s a little bit of that, like the woman who played the coloratura soprano, I tried to make a little more use of her in some ways, and the woman who played Phaino, I knew she could knock the Odysseus aria out the park with the wailing. I guess I did do some shaping a little bit, in some specific instances, especially in that last aria with Odysseus, but in general I think it’s more about voice types per say. And I think it’s not anything that anyone couldn’t end up learning to do, in terms of any writing I wrote that was shaped towards a character. Where the voices came more into play and in terms of me experimenting was actually more the literary voice of the characters. Polyxo really does speak in my voice a lot in the way that she talks and the things that she says and the two other characters don’t have personalities that have anything to do with the two women I worked with but they were very specific voices for me in the theatrical/dramaturgical sense.

AS: So, do you write one character at a time and then figure out how to fit them all together or do you write them all at once in more of a chronological—

KS: I think for the writing of the libretto it was like writing a novel or a play or something. I wrote them to interact with each other and they unequally share—they’re all on stage all the same time but in the libretto Phaino hardly ever talks or never talks really and my character talks the most so sometimes I would come up with some dialogue for one of the other persons but I think I wrote it mostly all together and when I wrote the music I wrote it like anyone would write a vocal trio, thinking about the available voices and such.
AS: How do your experiments with the voice influence your characters? I know you said you didn’t experiment quite as much as you usually do, but there were some non-traditional uses of the voice.

KS: I’m trying to remember. Are you thinking about anything in particular in terms of non-traditional uses in Sirens?

AS: I mean the one that stands out the most to me is the singing into the piano and the use of the piano as, not necessarily a character, but a modification on the voice.

KS: Right. Well actually probably the most experimentation I did was with the piano because I did inside the piano stuff but that again is just something that anyone can learn to do and it was just a matter of thinking about what was on the island and what I could populate it with and what might help bring the story to life and how could I get away with not having anyone else involved except for these three performers and still have a depth of instrumentation so that piano worked for that. So yeah, I did plenty of experimenting with the piano and I would always sing everything and experiment with the music. So, I guess maybe I’m not understanding your question because I experimented like any composer would experiment even if someone was writing it who wasn’t a singer so trying things out and checking things out and, because I am a singer, I was able to try that. But I guess I was using my voice not as like ‘this is the instrument that will be on stage,’ just like ‘okay, I have a voice, here’s a piano, what’s going to sound cool?’ I guess there was a lot of experimentation, it just wasn’t like ‘oh I found a weird thing only I can do, I’m going to put it in there,’ which is something I do in other pieces.

AS: Right, that makes sense. How do you use the voice as a way to establish or distinguish your characters?
KS: The singing voice?

AS: Not necessarily just the singing voice. In general, how do you use the voice? Do you use conventions to distinguish it or do you use certain aspects of the voice or…?

KS: I think I definitely used voice to distinguish, for example there’s a scene where there’s an American Idol thing between the muses and the sirens and for that it was very easy to say ‘okay, I can write something that reads as a fussily ornamented vocal trio in A-flat major with the inside piano and it has a little bit of weird stuff in it.’ But kind of increasingly over the top trills and runs and stuff. That’s something that has specific, stylistical elements like meter and tonality and phrasing and vocal elements like the way we sang them. And then the sirens contest entry has in improvised-ish section that I did work on with the girls and figured out how to do the improv together in a way that felt right and it has this pale, otherworldly, built-in thing at the end. That was another thing that was helpful about the sirens, I could really roam the categories of vocal music, of which there are so many. We did the Hymn to Neptune and I knew I just wanted a straight-up church hymn and told everyone to sing like an obnoxious, gigantic soprano or something. With the opening chant, I didn’t have to talk about because we know how chant sounds: it doesn’t have much vibrato and it has a pulsing, ametrical thing. So I think I used, in Sirens, vocal types to distinguish vocal styles not so much to distinguish characters because the point is our characters are able to sing in every style because that’s our profession but to make that point clear, that the voice can be used in all these different ways and if you’re going to be the most effective vocalist as the sirens are you have to be able to access all of them, but at a superb level. I established that premise and then to shape the music and the variety of it, and the characters have a couple of things here and
there. Peitho starts the Saffo stuff with her interjections and Phanio has the kind of
keening Odysseus and then I join in too, but I think that is the point: that everyone can
end up joining into all of the styles eventually. And then in terms of distinguishing the
characters, voices in a more conceptual way there was this idea that I just can’t shut up
and I’m always running my mouth, my character, which is probably myself, too, and then
Phaino doesn’t speak so that’s her voice and that’s actually her voice, playing that
waiting theme on the piano and then Peitho, her sound is always in the blackout, she’s
sort of humming, she’s just always vocalizing in some generic soprano sort of way. And
then we see that evolve over the course of the play so that we see Peitho speaking more
and eventually I become voiceless in terms of logos and speech but joining Phaino in her
piano stuff. So, using that to highlight the evolution. And then we had character, in terms
of Peitho and myself who were really the only ones who had dialogue, we had very
different ways of talking so I talked in this very grad student way with a lot of words and
dropping quotes all the time and she just talked in this languid little sister way, little flirty
interjections and stuff like that.

AS: That makes a lot of sense. Thank you. Speaking about *Here Be Sirens*, was there any
reason behind having the soprano range? You mentioned having a mezzo earlier.

KS: I wanted to have a mezzo, actually just because those are the people that I knew so I
originally just thought that that would be more balanced. The reason why it ended up
being three sopranos, Amber Yule who had been directing Morningside Opera moved to
Switzerland or something and I knew Gelsey Bell and asked her to be in it so it was
pretty much circumstantial. I’m a soprano and I knew that I wanted Brett Umlauf to be in
it, she’s a soprano and I think that’s why, it ended up just being a matter of circumstance mostly.

AS: That makes a lot of sense, especially when you’re working in contemporary opera with a small cast.

KS: There’s so many sopranos also. I think there’s a lot of new music sopranos but it’s hard to find new music anything else sometimes.

AS: Sometimes it’s hard to find altos in general.

KS: Yeah, that’s true. I grew up singing alto because I could read music and there were no other altos so I was always just like *sings below resonance* singing below the staff.

AS: I get that; I traditionally will sing alto, it’s the part I enjoy the most and if I need to find a sub if I need anything, it’s like ‘this soprano is willing to sing alto for you.’

KS: Right. Yeah, totally.

AS: Is there a reason we only interact with the three sirens? That we never see any of the victims, or the muses, or the gods, or Persephone, or…?

KS: I think I wanted there to be this sense of claustrophobia and this sense that they have to people the island themselves so I think there could be a question of whether any of this is really happening. The muse thing, it does come from them playing with this idea ‘what would happen if the muses, let’s see what happens’ and then you get this sense that this fantasy takes over but it is a fantasy sort of and I think it’s like those old school No Exit or whatever or Waiting for Godot where it’s like you see people having fun on stage but you also know they’re desperately trying to distract themselves from this torment of anguish, of existential boredom that they’re in. Persephone is sort of again, and it happens earlier so maybe the mood is more optimistic, but there’s this sense of ‘okay,
what would it have been like?’ and I think she says in the play even, Peitho’s like ‘we’re going to act it out’ and my character’s like ‘why would we do that?’ and it’s like ‘what the hell else are we going to do?’ ‘Oh, good point, let’s do it’ They have eternity so anything you can find twenty minutes to distract yourself and then the victims I think, again I didn’t want to disturb, I could see—I hope someone does play this again someday—but I could see some idea, it might be interesting to see some body wash up but I felt that was another sense, like that’s not even real. I always knew that I wanted this scene, which happens where my character runs, jumps into the ocean and you think ‘oh, maybe she can get off on a boat’ and then to come back dripping with water, and even that’s not real. It’s kind of like a nightmare scenario. You know when you have a nightmare and there’s the bad guys or aliens or whatever and you’re looking for someone that can help you but you run up to your mom and it’s actually another monster. That sense that there’s no way to escape from this subjectivity that they’re trapped in. I think it was really this idea of closing them in this awful snow globe and then also showing this fantastical, the way they use their imaginations to keep themselves from going completely crazy. It sounds crazy now that I talk about it.

AS: No, it makes sense. It really does. How would you say that Here Be Sirens engages in feminism?

KS: That’s a very leading question. How would you say that it engages in feminism?

AS: Well, then, would you say that it does?

KS: Well, I don’t know, it’s interesting. That definitely came up in a couple of reviews. I don’t know that I would say that it—I’m not sure what to think about what that might mean. I mean, do you have any theories?
AS: Oh, I have loads of theories, but I’m a grad student.

KS: Well, I know, but then I could rebut them or something, or agree. Well I guess, I think, I was writing with this impulse that some of these things that I want to include as a composer seem feminine in some ways that I resist because I’m worried I won’t be taken seriously if I’m seen as female and especially if I’m seen as sexual or sensual so there was part of me that felt like I want to do something where I don’t have to worry about fitting in with the men and the boys because they’re not on this island. But it was also very important to me that the sirens be hideous, I was like ‘we are not going to be sexy mermaids, I want to look like a freak. Give me the padding, I’m ready; I want the hobbit feet.’ So, it was this sense that I want to be in this space that feels neutral. I don’t want to have to pretend to be a man because I was doing that in grad school but I don’t want to have to make sure that I fit in and I also don’t have to be a woman, I don’t have to worry about anyone thinking I’m just trying to be sexy or something. Those are things that I was thinking about as a human. And then, in terms of the opera, it’s interesting actually because the femininity of the sirens is a complicated subject and I don’t think I actually went that much into it, although maybe someone looking outside from the work would disagree, because Homer talks about they’re female, but there’s no real reason why they are female. They’re singing but they’re these monsters. They’re female like—I’m trying to think of another monster—like bigfoot is male. They’re not feminine. Sirens later became reanimated in the nineteenth century as these beautiful, sensual mermaids and that’s bled over into today. If you asked someone to draw a siren, they’d probably draw a mermaid with boobs. And then the sailors are men so that’s the interaction there. There is some sense of what are they really doing. I did have a line that I took out once where the
sailors wash up with hard-ons or something but then I was like ‘I don’t think I want to make it that explicit.’ What are they doing? What do they think is going to happen when they land on that island? Do they think they’re going to have sex with the sirens or what do they think? Are they not even thinking? So, I decided not to really answer or explore that. But then there is the character that is in love with them so she’s engaging in this courtship thing. So, I don’t really know what it has to do with feminism because the sirens are incredibly powerful but in another sense are completely powerless. I guess there is the issue of objectification which is something that my character is railing against. And these are issues that I think about. When I sing, myself as a composer, I do feel that there is some feminized way that I’m being observed or interpreted or something that is very separate from my composer persona somehow. I do feel this resistance that we have this idea as a society to let go that the intellectual stuff is male and the sensual stuff is female. So as an intellectual composer and a soprano, I do feel that conflict a lot and I think that is why I was writing sirens but I wasn’t trying to enlighten anyone. I’m not sure. I mean I’m a feminist but I guess I don’t know. Yeah, I don’t know.

AS: There wasn’t an intention to make a feminist statement.

KS: No, and I’m not sure that I even accidentally did. Although, maybe I did. I don’t know. But I think I did have things to say about femininity and masculinity in this abstract realm and the way those terms interact with power and powerlessness and sensuality and intellect and that kind of thing.

AS: That makes a lot of sense. Thank you.

KS: Okay. Yes.
AS: I was going to ask how being female and a female composer influenced your work but I think you just answered that.

KS: I think I, yeah, check that one off.

AS: I’m wary of asking this question, but I’m going to anyway: did I offend you by asking that? Do you get frustrated by being asked about feminism because you are a female?

KS: I get frustrated with it but it’s complicated. I just did someone’s podcast, who she has a podcast about women composers and I get sick of it. But then it’s like well it’s not like it’s a stupid question. And also, for me in particular, I do have works, I mean Sirens I can understand why someone would ask that question. I don’t think it necessarily is on the surface but I think as like as the sixth question in a list of ten questions, that makes sense. And then I have a piece, Voices from the Killing Jar is a piece of mine where I could never deny that that has something to do with feminism. But then I have other works that have literally not a thing to do with it and I do get frustrated when people are like ‘so, you’re singing about feminism again’ and I’m like ‘no, I’m singing about Wittgenstein actually’ but I just had a big—do you the New Yorker? Do you ever read that magazine?

AS: No, but I did see your new work and, forgive me, I don’t remember the name.

KS: Right. No forgiveness required. But that is a big work that just got this great review in the New Yorker and he didn’t say anything, he did say something about how, again, we can’t get away from this, that genius is something that’s usually applied to men and it’s not a useful term but then “Kate Soper, the genius” which was silly, but that work is something I feel like, well people still try to engage with the feminism thing but it’s more clear that I’m just setting Aristotle. So, I guess it frustrates me in all the ways one might imagine. I wonder if that’s the only reason why people are paying attention to me, or if that’s the
only way people can think to engage with my music, if I’m still being singled out or separated from other composers or is this like a footnote. There’s no reason for me to suspect you having these motivations or the woman who did the podcast with me. When you’re a woman in the world, especially now, this is serious. People are still trying to tell me who I am, or what I’m worth, or that I’m not worth anything. There’s a reason that question keeps coming up and it’s not because someone doesn’t know how to understand my music and sees the obvious thing—that I’m female—and makes an extrapolation that is trivializing what I’m doing. I think it’s frustrating but I understand it and I’m trying to figure out a way to be more generous about engaging with that so if I kind of reacted to you, this is a sort of a time in my career where people are talking to me about my work, that’s still sort of recent for me and I’m learning how to field things or something.

**AS:** No, I understand. I think, for me, *Here Be Sirens* is a real empowerment for women and I love that about it.

**KS:** That’s interesting. Why do you think that it’s empowering for women?

**AS:** I think probably because it’s just the three women. They don’t need anyone else to be a love interest, they don’t need anyone else to tell them what to do. It’s just the three of them.

**KS:** Oh yeah, it does past the Bechdel test or whatever.

**AS:** Right. And there’s also the fact that sirens, in particular, are so often subjects of desire and instead of just being like ‘aha, they’re being desired by men,’ you really flipped it around: ‘well, we’re just going to kill you; it’s fine.”

**KS:** Yeah. Right.
AS: So, I mean that’s how I look at it. And I like that a lot about it. I think it also gives huge experiences to women who want to do something without a man or being able to be like ‘I am a female lead and I don’t have to worry about who I’m going to be playing opposite or what that says about me. Am I the right fit for the right male character’ or anything like that.

KS: That’s interesting. I had never done any opera before and never performed in this way, so I never really had to think about that stuff.

AS: I don’t think it’s a bad thing at all.

KS: No, I was just curious.

AS: I think it’s wonderful. I wanted to make sure—I worry sometimes about asking about feminism because I don’t want to seem sexist in the way that ‘oh, it’s a woman composer, we must ask her about being a woman composer and being a feminist.’

KS: This is why I say, I do see how it has certain relevance to some of my work, it’s just not relevant to all of my work. But it’s always a question that comes up.

AS: I definitely understand your frustration and I appreciate you answer. I’m trying to find the balance between ‘let’s empower women’ and ‘let’s not box women into just empowering women.’

KS: Right, let’s not make that the goal or assume that’s the responsibility of the female.

AS: Those are all of the questions I had. Did you feel there was a question I should’ve asked and didn’t or were expecting?

KS: No, I don’t think I had any particular expectations.

AS: Okay. Is there anything else you’d like to say or mention?

KS: I don’t think so.
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW WITH LIBBY LARSEN

28 February 2018

AS: What drew you to the wives of Henry VIII as a subject to explore?

LL: I had been interested in the subject of Henry VIII and his wives really since I was a teenager. I came across the PBS version of the wives of Henry VIII and was completely captivated with that version and its six episodes and so I had it in mind for years and years and years and really kept coming back to the particular era sometimes because of the wives and sometimes because of the historical significance of the secularization of the church that was happening during that period.

AS: Wonderful. I’ve always loved the wives as well so this is really exciting for me. How did you choose the sources you chose to study for the libretto? I’ve read that you tend to read them a lot and memorize them, but how did you figure out where to start with what to read and what to look through?

LL: I’m an inveterate researcher which I’ve always been but that passion of mine was intensified when I was doing my doctoral work at the University of Minnesota. I worked with a brilliant woman, Donna Cardamone Jackson, who was a musicologist and I was her TA for three years even though I was in the composition department. She really taught me how to research which is go to the primary source, if you can possibly find the primary source, go there. So, when I determined that I wanted to make a libretto of the last words of the wives of Henry VIII, I researched and researched and research until I found sources that I could identify as primary source material for them. I read those sources and created a libretto based on my research.
AS: Okay. Did you intend to draw parallels between wives of the same name? Like Catherine of Aragon and Kathryn Howard both have the same lute song, both Annes have some tritone harmonization. Was that an intentional thing to try and connect the names or was it just coincidence?

LL: Actually, that’s a compositional technique. Because I was creating a five-song cycle, I wanted to create a particular form for the cycle which is an arch form. Are you familiar with arch form?

AS: I am, and that was my guess but I didn’t want to assume.

LL: I really set out to make a frame around the cycle to get a particular feeling for the audience of being inside the moment of those particular years in which Henry himself basically was rebelling against the Roman Catholic Church and lost his temper.

AS: That’s one way to put it.

LL: Yeah!

AS: And how did you use the voice as a way to establish or distinguish your characters? You have one soprano slated to sing all of them. How did you distinguish the characters from each other using the same voice?

LL: Well, you know what, I have two questions that you sent me that I actually think are for you to answer.

AS: Okay.

LL: And this is one of them.

AS: Okay.

LL: And the other one is number six: to what extent feminism question.

AS: Okay.
LL: Just because that’s your thesis you’re exploring and so I’ll tell you what, number six I really am going to leave to you. But number four, if you want to suggest things you’ve found in the songs we could talk about those.

AS: I guess I’ve just found the way that you structured each song is so different and really reflects what I feel is the mindset of the queens at the different time. You have Catherine of Aragon who’s in a very quiet, almost meditative state with this free-ish rhythm, like a free meter that reflects, I think her Catholic devotion. And then you have Anne Boleyn, who is rapidly changing between hysterics and an eerie calm, which is how she was described in the days before her death.

LL: Right.

AS: So, I think you’ve captured them wonderfully.

LL: So far, so good.

AS: I guess I was just wondering: what thought went into that? How do you work to characterize it to make sure that it wasn’t just reflecting one person? Because it is one person singing. How was that a challenge?

LL: Well, actually it wasn’t a challenge at all, believe it or not.

AS: Oh, wonderful.

LL: No, not at all and that is a result of research. The more that I researched, the more I thought I could gain an understanding for myself of each queen’s personality, each queen’s specific place in the historical moment and that was natural because each queen had her own specific set of circumstances and each chose to be queen. The important thing, in my mind, while each queen was strong, in and of herself, each made the choice to assume a role that was specific in its perception.
AS: Right. That’s a great point. And how did the inclusion of the five different personas challenge the concept, or the unity of the song cycle?

LL: I didn’t find it a challenge actually, I found it a really interesting investigation of how to create the feeling of a cycle. You give me your definition of what is a song cycle and then I’ll respond to that, talking about the queens.

AS: Well, a typical song cycle is usually from the same perspective, it usually describes one character or one story. And I would say this is one story but the fact that it reflects so many different characters and some might feel like that can’t all be represented by one person.

LL: Oh, well, we’re talking about sopranos here.

AS: That’s true.

LL: Meaning, yes indeed, it is one story and that is the story of the perspective of Henry VIII at the time he was ruler and not selected to be the Holy Roman Emperor as he wanted to do and was really angry when he wasn’t. There’s that perspective that was supported by his cabinet, the people around him. That’s the one perspective that is the overlying thematic part of the cycle. For me, I was not thinking of one singer, I was thinking of one singer. Not one singer equals one person. I was thinking of one versatile singer. Maybe it’s from the performer’s perspective that singer’s, that singer’s I myself among them because I did study voice, not very long but long enough to understand that I was training my instrument to inhabit many different perspectives over the period of my career if I had had a singing career. So, I considered the singer as the instrument and the material of each of the queens in this one particular perspective as the repertoire for the instrument within this song cycle.
AS: Okay. That makes a lot of sense.

LL: Okay. Cool.

AS: I know you don’t want me to ask six, but I guess I’m curious: was there a feminist intention? Was there a feminist point behind it or was there a thought that you wanted to tell this from the queen’s perspective because they never get to speak or was that just coincidence because you loved them so much?

LL: Well, that is a very good question and one that I’d like to keep you poking away at. So, let me ask you: what is your definition of feminism?

AS: This is such a hard question!

LL: It is, isn’t it? That’s why I’m turning it back on you; it’s an old lawyer’s technique.

AS: I guess the way that I am discussing feminism in this thesis the act of—all of the characters that I’m working with have not had their voices heard throughout history and all of these pieces give them agency that they have not had before and allows them to tell their story and allows them to gain a foothold in history, really, so they are represented equally instead of just as plot points or as wives as a king instead of queens.

LL: That’s a really interesting perspective and it’s one that I share. When I compose a cycle like this, many of my song cycles are words written by women or spoken by women, spoken by women.

AS: Yes, I’ve noticed that.

LL: So, I would say, if anybody has had a voice throughout history, these queens have.

AS: Okay.
It's just that those words have not been uttered through a singer’s perspective. It’s like Mary Magdalene. When I researched Mary Magdalene, I went all the way back to the Coptic and set her song half in Coptic and half in American English.

Right. You understand that these queens lived in the 1500s. Are their voices heard throughout history? Absolutely they are because I was able to research them. I looked at my work with them, which is quite a privilege to work with primary source words from historical figures and I felt that within the given repertoire for art song that the words of these woman or calamity jane or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, they have not been heard in this repertoire. They have been commented upon by composers in the art song repertoire, most of whom happen to be male. I wanted to take the responsibility of giving the original primary words their due within the art song repertoire. No frames allowed, meaning in so many art song—and I’m an art song devotee. But the words themselves have a frame around them and are considered as an object and looked at as an object. With this whole body of my work, rather than putting a frame around and I think this about that and I think this about that, I do want to take that frame away and just let the words speak for themselves. You can shoehorn that into a definition of feminism,

But I think letting the words speak for themselves is a universal issue, particularly now, in our contemporary culture.

Yeah. That makes a lot of sense.

Yeah.

Wow.
LL: It’s like hip-hop and rap. The words are speaking for themselves.

AS: Yeah, they are.

LL: And that’s about as contemporary as we are in music, never mind the style. Nobody gets to own the words and put their particular point of view on them. The words are speaking for themselves.

AS: That is really cool. Is there anything you’d like to say? Anything I should’ve asked or anything you’d like to make sure that comes across.

LL: Let me think. Yes, there is something I’d like to say, that you didn’t ask, but I’ve been dealing with with the song cycle as it lives in the world which is just so interesting to observe how the song cycle is perceived in many, many different circumstances. There are instances where the singer and the pianist want to expand on the innate theatricality, you know there’s a theatricality that’s innate in this cycle. And that is my own personal investigation of how can a song recital become theater of the mind? In other words, can there be moments in a song recital when you actually feel like you’re at an opera? Without seeing the costumes and the lights and all that stuff. This particular song cycle is one among three or four of mine where people will say I really would like to expand this and the thing I and it’s fine with me except Henry doesn’t get to speak. That’s it. He doesn’t get to speak.

AS: Well that makes sense.

LL: Doesn’t that make sense? He doesn’t get to be on stage and he doesn’t get to speak. No letters, no dialogue, nothing. And that is probably the feminist angle here.

AS: Yeah, no. I would agree.

LL: Yeah, it’s just like no-no, no-no, not your turn. No mansplaining. None.
AS: Yes!

LL: So anyway, that’s all I’ve got to say.

AS: Wonderful, thank you so much.

LL: Thank you so much.
APPENDIX F: IRB EXEMPTION LETTER

DATE: August 10, 2017
TO: Alexis Scangas
FROM: Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: IRB APPROVAL NOT NEEDED
DECISION DATE: August 10, 2017

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board has determined this project does not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to federal regulations.

We encourage you to continue to confirm with the IRB whether future projects of this nature require review.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence for our records.

If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or orc@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board’s records.