Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers and Sifting through the Ruins: An analysis of two chamber song cycles by Libby Larsen

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BELOVED, THOU HAST BROUGHT ME MANY FLOWERS
AND SIFTING THROUGH THE RUINS:
AN ANALYSIS OF TWO CHAMBER
SONG CYCLES BY LIBBY LARSEN

by

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A doctoral document submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

*Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers* and *Sifting Through the Ruins*: An Analysis of Two Chamber Song Cycles by Libby Larsen

by

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American composer Libby Larsen is one of the most active, prolific composers living today. Although she is known for composing in many musical genres, her vocal works are among her most recognized compositions. When selecting song texts, Libby Larsen carefully chooses poems that speak to her personally, both in the rhythm of the language and in the text’s depth of meaning and spirit. In addition, a large number of her vocal works are based on texts by or about women.

In sum, authors and poets have profoundly influenced Larsen, specifically in her chamber song cycles *Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers* (1994) for mezzo soprano, cello, and piano, and *Sifting Through the Ruins* (2005) for mezzo soprano, viola, and piano. These two very different cycles embody Larsen’s unique, though always varied compositional style: *Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers* contains sweeping, Neo-Romantic qualities, while *Sifting Through the Ruins* is often angular, less lyrical and at times, stark. Critics laud her ability to create a synthesis of music and text, and this study will examine Larsen’s compositional devices in her musical settings, including her preference for setting to music prose rather than poetry. The analysis will
include songs from the song cycles mentioned above, as well as pedagogical aspects including performance practice and preparation.

The research for this study includes primarily interviews with the composer. Secondary research relies on dissertations and articles on Ms. Larsen, as well as my own brief examination of her vocal music language.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for strength and guidance.

In the late 1990s, I had the great pleasure of collaborating with Libby Larsen on her opera *Eric Hermansson’s Soul* for Opera Omaha, and my exploration of her vocal repertoire was born.

I am forever grateful to Dr. Carol Kimball, my committee chair, advisor, mentor, and colleague, for her support and leadership throughout my doctoral program and writing process. Dr. Kimball’s wisdom and encouragement, as well as her expert editorial advice, were a constant source of inspiration.

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There are no words to express the love and appreciation I feel for my family, specifically my husband, Eric, and children, Jaden and Logan, whose unceasing encouragement and patience gave me the strength to finish this document. A special thank you to my parents and sister for their constant love and support and for instilling in me a love for education.

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Thanks to Dr. Harriet Barlow, Associate Dean of the Graduate College at UNLV for her assistance in formatting this document and help with administrative issues.

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And finally, I am forever indebted to the remarkable Libby Larsen for her generosity and kindness. She has been an inspiration to me for over a decade, and it has been a true pleasure to discover her music. Her genuine, loving spirit and her willingness to talk in depth about her music led me on this journey – one that I hope to be on throughout my life. Thank you, Libby.
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CHAPTER ONE
LIBBY LARSEN: AN INTRODUCTION

Biographical Information

Elizabeth (Libby) Larsen was born in 1950 in Wilmington, Delaware, and raised in Minneapolis. As a young child, she was fascinated by music and the organization of sound. Growing up in Catholic School, her earliest music teachers were nuns who taught her Gregorian chant, which contributed to her excellent musicianship. Larsen’s first piano teacher introduced her to a wide variety of music and composers including Mozart, Stravinsky, and Bartok, as well as Japanese music and boogie.\(^1\) She began composing in the sixth grade and played many instruments, including piano, electric bass, and harmonica. Having sung most of her young life, she originally intended to major in vocal performance in college, but ultimately discovered her gifts were in composition. Larsen earned all three of her degrees from the University of Minnesota where she studied composition with Dominick Argento, Eric Stokes and Paul Fetler. However, Larsen’s primary influences and teachers have come to her from unexpected places in her musical life: “they have been poets, architects, painters, and philosophers. And I have learned by reading scores voraciously, from Chuck Berry to Witold Lutoslawski.”\(^2\)

Larsen is known as an ardent advocate for contemporary music and musicians. She co-founded the Minnesota Composers Forum in 1973 with composer Stephen Paulus, which is now known as the American Composers Forum. Libby Larsen was the first woman to serve as a composer-in-residence with a major orchestra, including residencies

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\(^2\) Ibid.
with the Minnesota Orchestra, the Charlotte Symphony, and the Colorado Symphony. Other residencies have included the California Institute of the Arts, the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, and the Philadelphia School of the Arts, as well as several major universities and conservatories.

She has served on the board of the American Symphony Orchestra League, the board of the National Endowment of the Arts, and was the 2003-04 Papamarkou Chair in Education and Technology at the Library of Congress. Larsen is the recipient of many awards including the American Council on the Arts Young Artists Award, the American Express “Women to Watch” and a Grammy award in 1994 for her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* featuring soprano Arleen Auger. In 2000, she earned a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Larsen is a prolific composer, writing in nearly all musical genres of composition from opera, symphony, choral and chamber music, art song, and solo instrumental music, including works for unusual solo instruments like the tenor steel drum and the carillon. Major opera companies and orchestras have produced her works including Houston Grand Opera, Opera Omaha, Minnesota Opera, the Houston Symphony, the Colorado Symphony, and the Minnesota Orchestra. Larsen’s commissions and recordings have come from world-renowned artists including Arleen Auger, Benita Valente, Richard Stoltzman, Eugenia Zuckerman, and the King’s Singers.³

Compositional Style

Larsen’s musical style is difficult to define. She was once asked: “Your music is tonal, but not too tonal. Have you honed that over the years?” Larsen replied:

We have enough tonal music around, and our culture isn't particularly tonal. Milan Kundera (author of Unbearable Lightness of Being) wrote about how certain cultures are reflected in certain kinds of music.4

Larsen believes that American music is not based on traditional Western functional keyboard harmony and considers America to be much more of a “fretboard” culture. She often writes chords and progressions that are more common to the jazz trained ear, and observes, “we still consider jazz marginal in our culture, yet it is the center of who we actually are as a sonic culture.”5 While her music is not atonal, it does contain musical elements that might challenge the classically trained ear, such as chords that contain both a tritone and a perfect fourth, or frequent dissonance between the singer and accompanying instruments. She pursues such seeming eccentricities primarily to express the text, but they also make a statement about the musical culture today:

My own philosophy stems from my belief that certain ratios and vibrations naturally exist in infinity. I believe that a culture will evolve the sonic forms and instruments that it needs in order to represent life through sound and music. It is my feeling that the Romantic era of music history has only recently ended. So I think that composers working today are in a strange bridging area; we are redefining ourselves. We are philosophizing about the nature of sound in our world today. We are struggling to figure out, in our noise-polluted world, what is sound, what is music, and what is silence.6


5 Libby Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.

Although Larsen’s harmonies are primarily tonal, she employs frequent shifts in key centers throughout her music and avoids key signatures and traditional harmonies. On her website, Larsen discusses her approach to harmony and the techniques she uses:

My music is built around tonal areas that are vaguely modal and reinforced through pedal tones in the bass. The key to my music is to hear tones that aren't articulated and to be able to listen to low tones. My approach is not four-part voice-leading functional keyboard harmony; however I would describe tonality for me as pools of “comfort” around a fundamental. The way I conceive tonality is horizontal, not vertical, meaning that the line comes first and the harmonies result. Intervals generally have a particular significance in my music — I choose the interval, I like Lydian fourths and major thirds — and develop the meaning of that interval musically throughout a piece.7

In her vocal compositions, Larsen writes primarily diatonic melodies and favors fourths and fifths, believing that they “fall naturally in the acoustics of the voice.”8 She utilizes both a declamatory and lyrical style in her melodies, depending on what the text dictates to her ear. Larsen often employs octave leaps and displacements, and many of the tonal shifts are supported by the accompaniment.9 In her dissertation on Libby Larsen, Martha Rowe discusses the significance of Larsen’s accompaniments:

The accompaniments, piano or orchestral, are often motive-based. The motives may serve as an ostinato or as a thematic germ. Larsen sometimes uses the accompaniment, especially the orchestra with its variety of colors, as a commentary on the inner motivation of the writer, in contrast with the external details given by the text.10

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10 Ibid.
Treatment of Text

As an avid reader and lover of literature, Larsen is strongly influenced by language and syntax. She places great importance on finding musical equivalents or metaphors when she is setting text to music. David Sterns wrote in USA Today: “Libby Larsen is the only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively.”¹¹ In writing vocal music, the text is the primary inspiration for Larsen’s compositional process:

The words are the dominant force. Trying to understand the significance of the choice of words is a place of immense inspiration for me. For instance, I begin by attempting to understand a single word, and then the word next to it. And then, the two words in combination. I try to understand the ecology of the words themselves, the choices of the words, and then the syntax. Only then I begin to understand what the music needs to be for the piece.¹²

Larsen deliberately tries to draw the music out of the text and strives to find the music that already lies in the text, “just as a good translator would do.”¹³ Larsen is often asked “Which comes first – the music or the words?” She confronts this question in an article she wrote called “Composing, Words, Music”:

Words and music are not only inseparable; they are one and the same. Their combination holds the meaning of the music. A word has meaning and in the company of other words, it has complex meaning, suggested by context. Music deepens the context by providing an abstract order of sound in time and space, which allows the listener to dwell in emotion – private and unique as that emotion may be.¹⁴


¹³ Libby Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.

Larsen’s appreciation and understanding of the sounds and patterns of American English influences how she sets texts by American authors:

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

Text Preferences

Like her mentor Dominick Argento, Libby Larsen frequently sets prose rather than poetry. As she wrote in a letter in 1994, “while I set both poetry and prose, I am more drawn to prose because of its rhythmic freedom and honest emotion.” When working with words in song form, Larsen tends to either choose very rigorous poetry like e.e. cummings, Rainer Maria Rilke, or Walt Whitman (each of these writers’ poems contain very specific images and textures), or she leans towards prose. She says that she applies a different kind of precision or rigor to setting poetry than to prose.

In my music, I generally let the rhythm of the words, the varying length of phrases, and the word emphasis dictate specific rhythm, phrase structure and melodic material. When my music is performed, the words and phrases should flow quite naturally, almost conversationally.

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16 Prose is defined as ordinary writing, resembling the natural flow of speech.

17 Libby Larsen to Carol Kimball, August 2, 1994.

Libby Larsen often sets texts by women and finds that “texts that reveal strong, colorful and fearless people, many times women, are especially attractive to me.”\(^{19}\) Her compositions include a wide diversity of female subjects, from the ancient Egyptian texts used for “I Love You Through the Daytimes,” to the letters of the Queens of Henry VIII in *Try Me, Good King*, to the texts of Willa Cather, Emily Dickinson, Georgia O’Keefe, and Margaret Atwood. Larsen once said that “all of these women decided to display their ideas widely and publicly and independently.”\(^{20}\)

Given all that has been written about Libby Larsen’s preference for texts by women, one may ask if Larsen chooses texts by women intentionally. Larsen insists that her choices depend on the text itself, how it moves her, and not who wrote it or the gender of the author. She is drawn to texts by or about women because she often relates to the emotions and subject matter; thus many of her songs are first-person settings of texts. “It’s not that I am intentionally choosing women over men; it is rather that I am looking for something in the poems themselves.”\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\) Libby Larsen to Carol Kimball, August 2, 1994.

\(^{20}\) Libby Larsen, email correspondence to author, July 30, 1994.

\(^{21}\) Libby Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.
Collaborative Process

Collaboration is an essential part of the compositional process for Larsen, and being available to performing artists is very important to her. She is an articulate, energetic, eloquent woman and working with her in the rehearsal setting is a dynamic, unique experience. She values performers’ input and interpretation and always makes the artists feel that they are an important part of the collaboration.

Part of my creative process is always working with performers towards a performance...It is very difficult for me to write a piece without knowing the physicality of the performers.22

She discovered that early in her career, she was “totally unprepared for the lack of access to the performers, and it seemed like a manufacturing line model to learning the music.”23 She emphatically advocates a creative process in which composer and performer collaborate in bringing a piece to life. She attends premieres of her works and workshops the pieces as often as possible before the premiere.

Larsen is remarkably sympathetic to the performers and values singers’ input regarding technical problems that may arise, such as issues of vowel placement on high notes, or tempo, phrasing, and dynamic shading. She says: “I will listen to what a chamber group is doing after one or two rehearsals so that the ensemble can find its own personality with my piece.”24 From my own personal experience in collaborating with


24 Ibid., 146.
Larsen, I can attest to her generous collaborative spirit. When working on both her opera, *Eric Hermannson’s Soul* with her in 1998, and her song cycle, *Beloved Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers* in 2004, Larsen listened to what we, the performers, chose to do interpretatively, and only afterwards did she offer any input. She believes that each performer’s interpretation should be a unique and personal choice.
CHAPTER TWO

BELOVED, THOU HAST BROUGHT ME MANY FLOWERS

Libby Larsen composed *Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers*, a song cycle of six songs, in 1994. The work was commissioned by Hella Mears Hueg as a gift for her husband Bill Hueg for his seventieth birthday. Hueg wanted the work to be produced and performed by women because she felt it was a woman’s present for the man she loves.\(^{25}\) Larsen describes the cycle as follows:

This group of six songs for mezzo-soprano, piano, and cello began with Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem “Liebeslied” and grew into a cycle of songs about mature love, music, nature, and flowers.\(^ {26}\)

The premiere performance of *Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers* was given at a private party in the Huegs’ home in 1994, and a public performance occurred shortly after on May 22, 1994 at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum (Bill Hueg is an agronomist) with Glenda Maurice, mezzo soprano, Laura Sewell, cellist, and Ruth Palmer, pianist.

Various poets are represented in the work, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Rainer Maria Rilke, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Percy Bysshe Shelley. This variety of poets and poetry allows for a diversity of musical ideas, though there is a Neo-Romantic quality throughout the music. This musical approach was inspired not only by the


Larsen’s musical language is primarily tonal, particularly in the instrumental interludes, yet often becomes less tonal when the voice enters. The instruments comment on the text and create moods through thematic material. Throughout much of the cycle, there is a sense of *allant* - a blossoming, forward motion - which further expresses the romantic nature of the poetry.

Larsen’s appreciation for literature includes knowledge about the development of American English, particularly its changing syntax, especially after 1930 with the rebirth of capitalism and innovations like radio and television. After World War II, a new generation of poets moved away from traditional verse forms, even more radically than the early Modernists, and began to write texts that combined spoken American English with free verse rhythms. Larsen recognizes that post-World War II poetry and prose sound quite different than pre-World War II poetry and prose. For example, it would be difficult to find a writer today who would write “Yet everything that touches us, you and me, takes us together as a bow’s stroke does.” Larsen points out that it is a “different syntax from a different world.”

Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers contains texts from different periods of literature, resulting in a textually diverse, yet musically unified song cycle.

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27 Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.


29 Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.
Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers

“Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers” opens the cycle with a setting of the last sonnet, number forty-four, from *Sonnets from the Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861). Larsen and Hella Hueg decided together to use the first line of the sonnet as both the title of this song and the title of the entire cycle. Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry is sentimental, she is also a philosophical poet whose poetry inspired many other philosophical poets, including Emily Dickinson. One of the great love stories of the Victorian era was that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and poet Robert Browning. This text celebrates Robert Browning’s gift of flowers to Elizabeth Browning, which he frequently brought to her, usually from his mother’s garden. In her poems, Elizabeth often used images of nature to indicate a woman’s renewed commitment to life and love, specifically her love for Robert.

The graceful expressiveness of Barrett Browning’s poem is represented in the 5/8 meter, marked “Brightly.” This unusual meter creates a sense of forward motion throughout the song, as the uneven 5/8 meter contains two strong beats: one simple and one compound. The compound meter on the second beat creates the sense of lilting, forward motion. Larsen captures the lover’s joy over the gift of plucked flowers from the garden with the piano’s opening theme (example 1).

From the very beginning of the song, Larsen suggests a spoken quality in the voice by marking “Freely” above an unaccompanied vocal line. This recitative-like treatment continues throughout the first twenty-five bars of the song. The constantly shifting meter reflects the natural rhythms and patterns of the text (example 2), a technique Larsen often employs in her song compositions.

Throughout the song, Larsen employs difficult intervals in the vocal line, such as tritones and large leaps, independent of the piano and cello. However, each of the instrumental parts echo the vocal line either harmonically or rhythmically, unifying the voice with the instruments (example 3).

At measure fifty, the piano introduces a haunting melody while the cello quietly doubles the pedal tone in the piano. The word-painting creates a dark, mysterious contrast to the lively thematic material presented earlier. Barrett Browning’s text describes the hesitancy that an independent person feels when first entering into a love relationship. It seems that the lover acknowledges that the “weeds” or “baggage” of one’s past must be removed before the relationship can advance. The contrapuntal and modal treatment in the music reflects the text’s uncertainty and caution (example 4).

By measure seventy-one, an E major chord returns, taking the listener back to the romantic, forward motion of the beginning of the song. In measure seventy-seven, where the E major chord is clearly marked in the piano, Larsen expects the performers to think of this moment as “more special” than the preceding measures.\textsuperscript{30} This “gift of eglantine and ivy” represents the love Robert Browning had for Elizabeth, and the hope of their love seems to override the haunting, confused middle section of this song (example 5).

\textsuperscript{30} Libby Larsen. Coaching with the author, February 2004.
In measures ninety-five through one hundred and one, the 5/8 meter returns with emphasis on the first beat of each measure. However, now the voice is in conflict with the instrumentalists, singing duplets against their compound meter. It is important that the singer maintains the duple rhythm in order to convey the apprehension of completely resigning to the love relationship (example 6).
The second song of the cycle, “Liebeslied,” is a musical setting of a poem by the German Romantic poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). In order to maintain textual consistency throughout the cycle, Larsen chose an English translation by M.D. Norton, and she also used his translation of “Do You Know” for the third song of the cycle. Hella Hueg asked Larsen to use “Liebeslied” because it was a favorite of hers and she often recited it at poetry readings in her German homeland. Larsen previously composed music using Rilke texts, especially in her early years of composition. “I started setting him in graduate school because his poetry is so very fluid and musical.”

Larsen scores this song simply for mezzo soprano and cello, and the two instruments interact as might lovers in a conversation. The text describes the fear of

\[ \text{And tell thy soul their roots are left in} \]

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31 Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.
losing one’s own identity when loving someone, yet ends with a sense of yearning and resignation.

The interplay between the voice and cello is the most interesting element of this song. Initially, their conversation seems to be in conflict, reflected by each instrument’s individual thematic material and commentary without consideration for the other. For example, the “two against three” section in measures twenty-two through twenty-eight has the vocal line articulating duplets, while the cello is in 6/8 time with the emphasis on beats one and four. In these same measures, Larsen also incorporates word painting, a technique she often employs in her compositions: the cello is to play “non-vibrato,” while the voice sings the text “in an unfamiliar, silent place that does not vibrate” (example 7).

The two instruments make a transition in measure thirty-four and finally come together on the same rhythmic pattern, in thirds, ultimately ending on a unison E. It is at this point that Larsen wants to unify the two instruments like a string quartet in which they breathe together and strive for unity. The two need to become one musically and symbolically, sharing a timbre in which it is difficult to differentiate between them (example 8). There is an intimacy to this song, and Larsen wants the cello to “float” and to be free through “temporal intimacy,” matching color and creating the illusion of a single voice.

Example 8. “Liebeslied,” mm. 34-44. Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers © Oxford University Press Inc. 1999. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Music extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved

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32 Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.
The conversation continues to the end of the song, when the voice finally echoes the cello’s playful, sweet theme on the text “O, sweet song” (example 9), ultimately succumbing to the love affair.


Do You Know

The third song of the cycle, “Do You Know,” is another Rainer Maria Rilke poem, translated by M.D. Norton. Larsen chose to write an intimate setting of this text about the private journey of the soul in a love relationship – the part of love that no outsider can fathom. Larsen explains this in more detail:
I was trying to express the extraordinarily private nature of the choice to love. Maybe it has to do with the fact that when you decide to love, you decide to get hold of it, rather than it getting hold of you! It is that humbling, private moment you decide to fall in love.\textsuperscript{33}

In order to reflect the very personal nature of the text, Larsen chose to write “Do You Know” in a way that is less clear in its format and musical structure than the other songs.\textsuperscript{34} By avoiding a “musical arc,”\textsuperscript{35} (as seen in typical Romantic phrasing which will be discussed further in the last song, “Go From Me”), the lack of structure allows the setting to be conversational, stark, and less demonstrative in its expression.

Throughout the song, the cello does not offer harmonic support, but instead interacts with the voice and piano, similar to its role in “Liebeslied.” This independent line is introduced in the first seven measures of the song (example 10).

Like other successful composers, including her mentor Dominick Argento, Larsen develops previously used material in order to create a cycle and to unify the work. A good composer, she says, “takes something recognizable and develops it so that it is recognizable but not repeated.”\textsuperscript{36} Larsen relies on this technique several times throughout this cycle. In measures nine through eleven of “Do You Know” (example 11), Larsen develops the theme first heard in the beginning of “Liebeslied” (example 12). The vocal line in “Do You Know” is an inversion of the vocal line in “Liebeslied.”

\textsuperscript{33} Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.


In measures eighteen and thirty-four of “Do You Know,” the vocal line continues to develop the cello’s sixteenth note figure from “Liebeslied” (example 13) in a falling eighth note pattern (example 14). Here, Larsen points to the third relationships in the melody and specifically writes minor thirds in the vocal line, perhaps expressing humility and the lovers’ private relationship.


Example 14. “Do You Know,” mm. 18 and 34. Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers © Oxford University Press Inc. 1999. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Music extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.
Thematic material is recognized from the beginning of “Do You Know” at the end of the song: the theme in the cello from measures one through five reappears without rests between pitches when it enters in measure thirty-seven (examples 15 and 16).

Example 15. “Do You Know,” mm. 1-5.

Larsen deliberately removed the rests in the repeat of this line because she says she was “not using silence in the same way.”\textsuperscript{37} Although the cello must still play the line \textit{pizzicato}, the pitches are no longer separated, indicating the unification of the two lovers. This line follows the text “You come too,” which serves as an invitation to love.

The use of the E major chord is significant in Larsen’s compositions. She says that she employs it frequently, compared to earlier years when she used D major more often. Larsen is intentionally moving towards an E major chord throughout this cycle, partly because it is written for a mezzo soprano and cello, both of whose ranges lie comfortably between E4 and E5. At the end of “Do You Know,” in measures thirty-seven through forty-one, Larsen deliberately establishes E major in the following way (review example 16):

Without looking at the G♯ and the triplet in measures thirty-seven and thirty-eight, the line moves from G♯ - F - E - E♭. The triplet figure is made up of B, C, D and the inversion of those notes are seen in measures forty and forty-one on the descending line D-C-B, an octave higher. Now if the G♯ is added in, we have E, G♯, and B – an E major chord.\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{center}
White World
\end{center}

“White World” is the fourth song in the cycle, based on a text by H.D., or Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961). Many poets of the same era, including Ezra Pound and others from Pound’s circle, were aware of the changes occurring in the American English language as part of the post-World War II trends. This group of poets, known as Imagists, based their poetic structure on the rhythms and clarity of common speech, often

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
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echoing Walt Whitman. Favoring imagery and clear, sharp language over the sentimental quality of Romantic and Victorian poetry, the Imagists created very descriptive texts.

Although Doolittle began to move away from the Imagists by the 1920s in order to create her own unique style, her “White World” from *Hymen* is an example of the influence of the Imagists’ descriptive method of writing:

The whole white world is ours,  
And the world, purple with rose-bays,  
Bays, bush on bush,  
Group, thicket, hedge and tree,  
Dark islands on a sea  
Of grey-green olive or wild white-olive,  
Cut with the sudden cypress shafts,  
In clusters, two or three,  
Or with one slender, single cypress tree.  

This song is set for voice and piano only and is the most pictorial of all the settings in the cycle. The blossoming and billowing quality in the accompaniment creates an homage to nature. Larsen called this song a “love letter from me to the Huegs.” It is a tribute to their love of nature and for each other.

However, this text is about much more than nature. Played entirely on white keys, the color “white” means more than light or the brightness of the sun in nature. Hilda Doolittle was very interested in Classical Greek literature and Greek mythology, and the word “white” in Greek literature is often indicative of eroticism and sensuousness. Larsen captures the sensuousness and the breath-taking nature of love by writing long, lyrical vocal lines and sweeping arpeggiations in the piano (example 17).

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Word-painting is prominent in this song, as seen in measures fifteen through seventeen on the word “three” in which Larsen utilizes a triplet figure (example 18). In measures twenty-one through twenty-five, virtuosic writing for the piano describes crumbling snowpeaks and rolling hills filled with citrus fields (example 19).

The final six measures re-introduce the piano’s arpeggiation from earlier in the song and continue the extended vocal phrases for the singer, expressing the passion of the lovers and the breathtaking views in the background (example 20).

Music When Soft Voices Die

The fifth song of the cycle is based on the popular Percy Bysshe Shelley text, “Music When Soft Voices Die,” which has been set numerous times by other composers such as Roger Quilter, Rebecca Clarke, Peter Warlock, and David Diamond. Larsen first used this text for her full-length music drama, Mrs. Dalloway (1993). The poem is about the essence of an object or person, and about how love still remains when the object or person is removed.

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory -
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the beloved's bed;
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.41

For its inclusion in this cycle, Larsen was drawn to the poem’s tone of non-resolution. She comments that: “the fact that sometimes the idea of the object, the soul, or the beloved is more powerful than the reality of it creates a conflict, which ‘vibrates in the memory.’”42 In order to echo this text, Larsen did not want an inflected pulse to appear in the music. She believes these vibrating voices are “unframed or unboxed things.”43 She achieves her effect by writing ties over barlines, rather than frequently shifting meter (example 21). Since she chose not to shift meters in this song (there is only

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42 Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

43 Ibid.
one measure where she shifts from 4/4 to 3/4), Larsen achieves accurate text inflection by frequently employing the triplet in the vocal line, which also appears in the instrumental parts (example 21).

Another example of Larsen’s development of thematic material occurs throughout this song in the vocal line. As discussed earlier, the themes in measures eighteen and thirty-four of “Do You Know” originated in “Liebeslied,” and Larsen continues to develop the theme in measures eight and seventeen of “Music, When Soft Voices Die” (example 22).


By avoiding a consistent pulse throughout this song, Larsen is also preparing her audience for the next song, “Go From Me” (example 23). Although the song begins in 3/4, the vocal line enters with a duplet rhythm against the 3/4 and is marked “Freely.”
This deliberate choice to write in an unmetered fashion is common in Larsen’s compositions when she strives to unify the songs or to inflect the text accurately. In this case, Larsen achieves both.

Example 23. “Go From Me,” mm. 1-12. Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers © Oxford University Press Inc. 1999. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.
Go From Me

The final song, “Go From Me,” is the most dramatic of the cycle. Larsen begins and ends the cycle with texts by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and this poem also comes from *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (number six).

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before,
Without the sense of that which I forbore
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
And sees within my eyes the tears of two.  

Larsen describes this song as the “most conservative of the set and the most idiomatic, in the Romantic sense.” Larsen felt that she needed to make a statement at the end of the cycle because she had been considering words so carefully in the previous songs. “Here, in this song, we aren’t making poetry as before – we are just singing a song.” She chose to write it this way because she was writing for what she considered to be a “very special occasion.” Thus, she abandoned some of her more unique musical

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45 Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

46 Ibid.

47 Bill Hueg’s seventieth birthday. For “rites of passage” commissions, Larsen intentionally writes in a celebratory manner. She thinks about who the gift is for and what the occasion is, rather than how she might interpret the text for a different occasion. She always keeps the receiver of the gift in mind.
devices for a more conservative approach.

These songs were for two people I loved. The world they fell in love in and the musical world they grew up in was more akin to this kind of writing, so this song was really for them.\footnote{Larsen, interview with author, July 12, 2010.}

Larsen observes that writing Romantic music is easy for her and that she feels a sense of freedom when she writes in this style.\footnote{Ibid.} This song is a celebration of a very deep love relationship, so Larsen chose to write what she describes as “Romantic Pop.”

Larsen states that what makes Romantic music “romantic” is the phrasing (long melodic lines, followed by repetition and variation). For example, measures seventeen through thirty-three could be divided in the following way (example 24):

A. Measures seventeen through twenty-three: first phrase
B. Measures twenty-four through twenty-seven: repeats the beginning of the first phrase
C. Measures twenty-eight through twenty-nine: repeat of the second half of the first phrase (at measure twenty-two)
D. Measures thirty and thirty-one: tag ending/variation
E. Measures thirty-one through thirty-three: longer variation.\footnote{Libby Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.}
Example 24. “Go From Me,” mm. 13-35. Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers © Oxford University Press Inc. 1999. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.
Another layer of “Romantic Pop” that Larsen adds in this song has to do with the treatment of the mezzo soprano *tessitura*, which, as mentioned earlier, is most comfortable and identifiable between E4 and E5. Reviewing example 24 above, one might notice that Larsen builds a long, lyrical line in measures seventeen through twenty-six, and the highest note given to the mezzo is an E5, which is reached at certain structural points (example 24).

However, at the climax (“Thy touch upon the palm”), the mezzo sings to a G above the staff. As the song winds back down on a melisma on the word “palm,” it ends back on E4, above middle C. The romantic curve heads for the high note, which allows the listener to reach the ultimate point of musical intensity. This methodology is central
to Romantic composition – “withholding” and “waiting” for a particular note (example 25).

Example 25. “Go From Me,” mm. 36-41. Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers © Oxford University Press Inc. 1999. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

Larsen writes a sextuplet figure marked “freely” and “lightly” in the piano in several measures in the last half of the song. This figure is a metaphor for each of the texts it precedes. In measure thirty-five, it represents the “touch of the palm” (example 26); in measure fifty-seven, it is the “dream” described in measure sixty (example 27); and in measure sixty-five, it represents the “tears of two” described in measures seventy-five and seventy-six (example 28).
Example 26. “Go From Me,” mm. 35-37. Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers © Oxford University Press Inc. 1999. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

Example 27. “Go From Me,” mm. 57-61. Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers © Oxford University Press Inc. 1999. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.
Larsen comments that the use of the sextuplet “just felt right at the time.”\textsuperscript{51} She was thinking about the magic of touch at that moment. “I was not thinking of two people touching. I was thinking of the kind of touch upon the soul that imbues you with the truth – thus, the peace of mind.”\textsuperscript{52} Theoretically, the sextuplets figure could be analyzed as two chords occurring in one gesture, each chord represented by three notes. The two chords, D minor and C\textsuperscript{7} major, are defined by D, F, A and G, B, C. “Two chords, each made up of three notes, if multiplied, equals six,”\textsuperscript{53} thus the sextuplet.

When asked about the final \textit{pizzicato} at the end of the song, Larsen says that she did not want to add it. The song originally ended on the fermata in measure seventy-nine. Larsen’s belief is that love never ends and never truly resolves. She observes, “that’s why

\textsuperscript{51} Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
we live, again and again, in the pursuit of love."  

However, the premiere’s performers thought closure was essential and asked for a tonic note in order to establish an ending for the entire cycle (example 29). This example of Larsen’s collaborative spirit and willingness to incorporate performers’ ideas is typical of her performance philosophy.

Example 29. “Go From Me,” mm. 78-80. Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers © Oxford University Press Inc. 1999. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Extract reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

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54 Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE

SIFTING THROUGH THE RUINS

*Sifting Through the Ruins* (2005) is a set of five songs for mezzo soprano, viola, and piano composed in memory of the lives changed forever by the attacks on New York City’s World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. In the score’s program notes, Larsen writes “I give these songs to you with a wish to honor the profound love of life, so gentle, but at present ferociously and blindingly evident in every second of our lives.”

The texts for this cycle of five songs came from letters, poems, and notebooks left on the streets of New York City, in places such as Union Square and Grand Central Station, by people who were living or working in New York City at the time of the terrorist attacks. These writings, along with makeshift shrines and photographs, were left on the streets by people who were either mourning, searching, or memorializing loved ones. After 9/11, the New York City Parks and Recreation department had the foresight to collect these writings and store them in a warehouse. Months later, the New York City folklore institution *City Lore* at the New York Historical Society pulled hundreds of these texts from the warehouse to put on display for their exhibition, *Missing: Streetscape of a City in Mourning*.

After it opened in September 2002, mezzo soprano and Metropolitan Opera star, Suzanne Mentzer, toured the New York Historical Society’s exhibition with a notebook in hand. She wrote down dozens of the texts throughout the day, and as she read through them, she thought the texts would make a powerful song cycle. She immediately

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55 Libby Larsen, Program notes from *Sifting Through the Ruins*, score, (©Libby Larsen, 2005): inside cover.
contacted Libby Larsen, whom she had commissioned and worked with on the song cycle, *Love After 1950*.

Larsen was already considering a 9/11 project, and was instantly moved by the texts Suzanne Mentzer sent her. Regarding collaborating with Ms. Mentzer, Larsen says:

> We chose the words we present as a way of bringing out essential emotions. The truths are stark. The words are simple, innocent, direct, and bereft of contrivance. In short, they are authentic. They are the only logical response of human beings to the utter shock of sudden death. That there are words at all astounds me. These are the hardest words with which I have ever partnered as a composer. But we trust that our work together can in some small way articulate their weight by letting the words speak for themselves, borne up by the music we make.  

*Sifting Through the Ruins* premiered at the Aspen Music Festival in 2005 with Suzanne Mentzer, mezzo soprano, Craig Rutenburg, pianist, and James Dunham, violist. These artists also collaborated with Libby Larsen in Houston, Texas for a recording of the work which is set to be released in the near future.

It should be noted that another group of songs was composed with some of the same texts from the *City Lore* collection in 2002. *Race for the Sky* is a set of three songs for voice, violin, and piano by composer Richard Pearson Thomas. Two of the poems that Larsen set in *Sifting Through the Ruins* appear in Thomas’s setting – “To the Towers Themselves,” and “Don’t Look for Me Anymore.” The songs premiered at the New York Historical Society on the first anniversary of 9/11 by Lisa Radakovich Holsberg, soprano, Kirsten Davis, violin, and Richard Pearson Thomas, piano. It could be perceived that the success of *Race for the Sky* may have deterred Larsen from promoting *Sifting Through the Ruins*, including the release of the recording. However, Larsen

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57 Libby Larsen, Program notes from *Sifting Through the Ruins*, score, (©Libby Larsen, 2005): inside cover.
insists that the primary reason for the delay had to do more with the lingering emotions she was dealing with in the years following 9/11. She simply did not feel ready to extensively discuss or share the work at the time.58

A Listing

The first song of the cycle, “A Listing,” is literally a listing of names. This text was featured in the *New York Times* and was written by an anonymous woman who worked in the South Tower (Tower Two) and survived the attacks. She was keeping a notebook of names of missing colleagues, and as she discovered the survivors, she crossed out their names on the list. This text represents a document of what was happening in New York City as it was happening, and establishes the first-person tone of the entire cycle.

Larsen condensed the list of names to create this song. For the premiere, the songs were performed with selected names from the original notebook, but Larsen and the performers believed they had to be careful about honoring victims, so the names were changed for the published score. For the Aspen premiere, Larsen changed one name to Mark Hardy, a victim of 9/11 who was the son of the former director of the Aspen Institute. His name is not in the original notebook, nor in the score of revised names, but Larsen and the premiere performers wanted to honor him by including his name in the recording and premiere performance in Aspen.

Larsen says that “in another world” she would have had no bar lines until bar six. She wanted to create a private, dreamlike place. In the first few measures, the viola

58 Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010
introduces the main theme, heard throughout the cycle. Larsen calls this theme a “lullaby to the self.” This lullaby theme is a simple, short, four-note figure, representing the deepest, most raw kind of grief (example 30).


The vocal line has a Sprechgesang quality, listing names, places, and phone numbers. Purely recitative, the line is not lyrical, as if the singer is thinking out loud while compiling the list (example 31). Larsen incorporates hidden, almost sub-textual devices, specifically harmonies and chord progressions that imply this tragedy happened on American soil. For example, there are chords in the piano, moving in parallel motion, that contain both a tritone and perfect fourth, a compositional device used frequently in jazz (example 32). Larsen incorporates this type of chord several times throughout “A Listing,” purposely emphasizing the influence of American jazz, which she calls a “cultural definite indefinite.”

59 Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

Example 32. “A Listing,” mm. 38-40.
Larsen includes another American quote by writing a variation of a chord progression from the anthem, “America,” labeling the measure “‘tis of Thee” in the piano (example 33).

Example 33. “A Listing,” m. 31.

![Example 33. “A Listing,” m. 31.](image)

In measures fourteen and fifteen, Larsen introduces a theme she labels “hollow” in the piano, which she uses to convey shock and a sense of relief: the singer has discovered two colleagues have survived (“Michael is ok…Patti is ok”). Musically, Larsen again explores an E major triad. The pitches in this figure in measure fourteen contain three possible chords: E, G♯, B♭ (diminished E chord); E, G, B (E minor chord); or E, G♯, B♯ (E major chord). In order to analyze the theme this way, the A♯ must be ignored (example 34). By including all the possibilities of an E chord, Larsen is pointing out that “things change and can become unsettled.”

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60 Larsen, interview by author, July 25, 2010.
from the beginning was important to Larsen, representing how most Americans felt on September 11th.


The role of the viola in the entire cycle is to express the emotion of the text. In order to evoke emotion, Larsen either writes expressive themes (the “lullaby” theme), or includes markings with adjectives describing emotion (gently, sadly), or writes specific technical markings for the instrument. For example, a marking for the viola throughout this song is *jeté*, which means to have the bow skip or bounce across the strings to produce fast, staccato arpeggios. Larsen utilizes this “*jeté glissando*” only at places of disappointment or realization that someone has died (example 35). This quality represents an unsettling grief, and the viola sounds as if it is moaning in despair. Larsen also calls this a disintegration. She says, “if I had just written a clean ‘octave to octave’,

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it would have sounded definite and the listener would have felt grounded. But the glissando makes it unsettling."\textsuperscript{62}

Example 35. \textquotedblleft A Listing,	extquotedblright mm. 22-23.

Throughout \textquotedblleft A Listing,	extquotedblright the viola plays a theme labeled \textquotedblleft keening.	extquotedblright This theme reappears later in the cycle, specifically in the fourth song, \textquotedblleft Untitled.	extquotedblright This marking represents a deep moan and \textquotedblleft crying out\textquotedblright in grief (example 36).

Example 36. \textquotedblleft A Listing,	extquotedblright mm. 8, 16, 21.

\textsuperscript{62} Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.
To the Towers Themselves

“I spend a significant amount of time thinking about what the words mean. Then I spend a great deal of time understanding what the words signify beyond their immediate meaning. It’s from this understanding that I compose the music.”

- Libby Larsen

The musical choices Larsen makes in “To The Towers Themselves,” reflects the philosophy above. She creates a backdrop for the Twin Towers, establishing a period of time and a specific place through thematic material. The interesting, descriptive text and subject matter of the towers inspired Larsen to create a theme she calls “one of ‘mechanization’ or ‘progress’ – this sort of 1950s and 1960s notion of progress.”

The music conveys a vigorous attitude of conquering the world, a typical musical energy of movie soundtracks of the 1950s and 1960s, ultimately slang for American culture at the time (example 37).

Example 37. “To the Towers Themselves,” mm. 1-3.

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64 Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.
The next theme, labeled “Celia Cruz,” leads into the text “not the Carmen Miranda Chrysler.” Here, Larsen creates a Latin musical slang introducing the description of the top of New York City’s Chrysler Building, which resembles one of Carmen Miranda’s hats (Carmen Miranda was a popular Latina performer from the 1950s and 1960s). Celia Cruz was named the “Queen of Salsa” and became very popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, during the same period of the building of the World Trade Center (example 38).

Example 38. “To the Towers Themselves,” mm. 4-6.

By employing the theme of American progress and the Celia Cruz theme, Larsen is painting a backdrop of the Towers and the period that led to their construction. By 1940, New York’s famous skyline had begun to take shape. Celebrated New York landmarks like the Chrysler Building, Rockefeller Center, and the towering Empire State Building became architectural symbols of the city itself, much like the Eiffel Tower,
which after its construction, came to epitomize Paris. The World Trade Center, completed by the early 1970s, ushered in a new era that embodied progress and international outreach. Larsen correctly observes that, “These musical slangs were symbols of who we thought we were at the time. The Trade Towers were the same way - they represented globalization, and the brash children of the 1950s and 1960s.” The text beginning in measure fourteen represents the symbolism of the Twin Towers and the cocky young men who occupied them on Wall Street:

They were two young dumb guys,
Swaggering across the skyline.
Beer drinking MBAs
Not too bright.

This text is accompanied by the progress theme in the piano, while the viola plays sporadically and with stress, or is given a marking labeled “fall off” in measure nineteen which expresses the swaggering of the “dumb guys” (example 39).

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65 Carol Kimball, interview with author, September 7, 2010.
67 Anonymous. Collected by the Parks Department, probably from Union Square. Quoted from musical score, “To the Towers Themselves,” from Sifting Through the Ruins by Libby Larsen (Libby Larsen, 2005): preface.

In the middle of the song at measure thirty-one, the momentum of the mechanical progress theme halts and is replaced by a starker quality. Larsen was intentionally trying to break out of the stereotypic behavior of making progress, if only for a moment. By taking us out of time and out of key on the text “Now that they are gone, they are like young men lost at war, not having had their life yet,” Larsen makes a statement about what the towers represented, as well as the senselessness of war (example 40).
The vigorous mechanization theme returns at measure thirty-seven marked “murmuring, menacing” on the text “they are lost like cannon fodder, like farmboys throughout time, stunned to death, not knowing what hit them.” The viola is embedded in the repeat of the progress theme, weeping like the mothers of the victims (example 41).
As Larsen says, “it is often the mothers behind war who weep while the soldiers march on and on...it just doesn’t stop.”\footnote{Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.}

Example 41. “To the Towers Themselves,” mm. 47-56.
Don’t Look for Me Anymore

“Don’t Look For Me Anymore,” the third song of the cycle, is perhaps the most emotionally moving with its stark quality, and passionate, anguished middle section. This text represents the “voice” of the unfound victims and pays homage to all those who worked endlessly during the rescue period, and beyond 9/11. Larsen says that the song pays tribute “to those who clean up after death.”

This text came from the “wailing wall” at Grand Central Station. Written by Alicia Vazquez, this is one of only two texts in the set that is not by an anonymous author.

The numb quality in the viola is marked “non-vibrato” and is joined by the voice in dissonance on the first note of the vocal line: a descending line against a steady heartbeat in the viola for the first eight measures (example 42). The lullaby theme reappears throughout, alternating between the viola and piano (example 43).

Example 42. “Don’t Look For Me Anymore,” mm. 1-8.

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69 Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.

Most of the expressive markings are for the viola: words like “gently,” “sadly,” and “mourning” - again expressing the emotion of the cycle. In the middle of the song, at measure sixteen, the viola takes off in an ascending line to the anguished text “Your eyes, burning red” and culminates in a passionate cry at measures twenty-two and twenty-three on the text, “Your hands sifting through the ruins”. The vocal line slows down appropriately at “endless hours of labor,” as if time is stopping and the quiet mourning continues (example 44).
Example 44. “Don’t Look For Me Anymore,” mm. 16-24.
The ending of this song does not resolve, reflecting the text at the end: “It’s my turn” (example 45). Larsen calls this “one person’s ‘turn’ to leave this earth.” She continues: “we keep thinking that death is final - that it is never going to happen again. But it does - it is part of life. It is a cycle – it keeps happening.”

Example 45. “Don’t Look For Me Anymore,” mm. 29-34.

Untitled

The fourth song of the cycle, “Untitled,” centers on the idea that things are never the way they appear. This anonymous text was taken from shrines and messages around New York City which were photographed by Martha Cooper, and describes one person, but symbolizes what could have been any number of the missing:

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70 Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010.

71 Ibid.
We keep them in our hearts and prayers,
Battalion 7 Ladder 12 Engine 3.
500 illegal immigrants un-named.
Nick Brandemasti
5’10”
190 lbs,
Dark brown hair
Hazel eyes
21 years old,
Employed by Keefe, Broyette, and Woods
Two World Trade Center
89th floor,
Wearing: dark blue dress shirt, gray slacks, black shoes,
And a silver Omega watch with a blue face.
Characteristics: collection of freckles in horse-shoe shape over right clavicle,
cleft chin.\textsuperscript{72}

Of the many who were lost on 9/11, there was and always has been a sense of
anonymity, thus the title “Untitled.” Larsen says:

We are talking about big numbers of people. We keep them in our hearts
and prayers, yet we don’t know who they are. We give them numbers like
Battalion 7, Ladder 12, etc. It is difficult to grieve for anonymity, and it
becomes a way of life in which we grieve for numbers instead of people.
We have become numb to the senselessness of war and the deaths of
thousands of young men and women serving our country.\textsuperscript{73}

The “keening” marking returns in the viola, but differs from the “keening” in “A
Listing.” Here, it quotes part of the lullaby theme and introduces a new theme that
contains triplets (example 46), representing a much deeper grief. Larsen says this emotion
“goes beyond moral outrage. It’s keening for the dream that can never be.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} Anonymous, Text taken from photos by Martha Cooper of shrines and messages around New York City,
from musical score \textit{Sifting Through the Ruins} by Libby Larsen, v.

\textsuperscript{73} Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
In measure eighteen and later in thirty-four, a “searching” theme in the piano oscillates between C and D♭ (or C and C# in measure thirty-four) (example 47). This theme is later marked “as a shadow.” By using a falling third at the beginning of the theme, Larsen implies a sense of yearning. Musically, this yearning is for either the octave or the fifth of the chord, both of which are absent for most of the song. Throughout “Untitled,” none of the musical ideas resolve to the octave, a technique Larsen employs to create a lack of grounding. Without the presence of the fifth, the listener also feels much less grounded. In this shadow theme, the outer voices are C and D♭, and the inner voice is an A. Larsen says that if she had used an F instead of an A, this would have suggested F major or D♭ minor 7. By using the C, D♭, and A, the result is unsettling, yet the listener knows they belong together somehow.

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75 Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.
In addition to a sense of yearning, Larsen further exemplifies the free, trancelike state introduced in “The Listing” by writing an unusual time signature, $N/4$, implying that the meter is not bound to a number (example 47). By marking “slowly, freely, recitative” for the voice, the singer continues the dreamlike state, echoing the piano’s them “as a shadow.”

The fifth reappears sporadically but up to that point, it is the tritone that colors everything, as heard in the vocal line (example 47) and piano (example 48). The tritone implies dissonance and maintains the feeling of non-resolution: “there is no resolution to 9/11 and to the wars that followed, so I purposely didn’t want any fifths hanging around, implying resolution.”

---

76 Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

Regarding the harmonic language of this song, Larsen says her approach was to unify the song within the cycle but also to keep the heart unsettled and unresolved, as mentioned above. When the fifth finally appears in measure thirty-two and thirty-five, it is embedded in thick chords while the viola remains “keening” (example 49).

Example 49. “Untitled,” mm. 32, 35
The vocal line is disjunct throughout this song, and the singer must become very comfortable with large intervals, use of the tritone, and shifting meters. Larsen allows for expressive freedom by writing markings such as “slowly,” “freely,” and “recitative” in several places, primarily to give clarity to the descriptive text. It is important for the singer to seem methodical in the delivery rather than emotional. While the violist continues to express grief and “keening” throughout “Untitled,” the role of the singer is more about the business of recovering and recording bodies. These differing roles create a dichotomy, representing the conflicting emotions of the need to grieve and the need for closure.

Someone Passes

The final song of the cycle, “Someone Passes,” originally began in what is now measure six. The viola held over the G# at the end of “Untitled” which tied over to measure six. However, after Larsen and the performers rehearsed it the day before the premiere in Aspen, they decided as a group that something was missing. Larsen believed it was the shape that needed improvement. Pianist, Craig Rutenberg, said “maybe there is a moment when we need to have no words…a moment when we are still holding a thought that has words connected to it.” That is when Larsen decided that the song, and the cycle as a whole, needed a moment of meditation. Although the premiere was the next day and the performers were concerned about any last minute changes, Larsen stayed up all night and wrote what is now measures one through five of “Someone Passes.”

77 Larsen quoting pianist Craig Rutenberg, interview by author, July 12, 2010.
Larsen says that this song attempts to authenticate the emotions represented by the words, so she “needed to bring back all of the themes and all of the emotions at this moment so that someone who is engaged deeply in the piece has a moment to sort through the chaos of their own emotional palette.”\textsuperscript{78} As a result, she includes recognizable material from the previous songs: the “shadow” theme from “Untitled” (example 50), the lullaby theme from “A Listing” and the anguish theme from “Don’t Look for Me Anymore” (example 51), as well as the opening melody from “Don’t Look For Me Anymore,” followed by the shadow theme from “Untitled” (example 52).

Example 50. “Someone Passes,” m. 1.

Example 51. “Someone Passes,” m. 2.

Example 52. “Someone Passes,” m. 3.

\textsuperscript{78} Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.
In measure ten, Larsen labels the viola and piano parts “as a heartbeat” with emphasis on the strong beats of the 6/8 measure (example 53).

Example 53. “Someone Passes,” mm. 10-14.

The heartbeat represents humility and the idea that we are all just a heartbeat away from death. Larsen deliberately repeats the text (example 54) in order to create emotional time and the finality of loss.

Example 54. “Someone Passes,” mm. 16-21.
Larsen movingly explains her experience with the finality of loss:

It’s like when something becomes final and maybe you planned for it, but you never really believed it would be over. When this feeling has happened to me, I actually had to disconnect myself from the process of the relationship with it because so much of my being and emotion and biorhythms had been in a relationship with the process or person, I didn’t know how my energy should go without it.79

The traveling bass line also accounts for this feeling of loss and “searching” while the heart is beating. Musically, the bass line travels as if it is searching for octaves. In measure twenty-eight, the traveling bass finally stops, yet does not stop on the octave. In measure thirty, the line finally reaches octaves in both the left and right hand, but in a very open position. While the octaves are there, they are not particularly “graspable” within the human range. Larsen concludes:

This continues the non-grounded feeling. However, in measures twenty and twenty-one, I suggest the octaves are achievable while holding the G down while it travels (and the same in measures fourteen and fifteen while holding the D down while tritone moves around). This is just as human beings do - trying to find ground when we are so ungrounded!80

After the fermata at measure thirty-four, Larsen pens an abrupt change at the \textit{meno mosso assai}, and the heartbeat stops (there is only a glimpse of the heartbeat in measure forty-two). In this section, the vocal line becomes more emotional (as marked in measure thirty-seven as “an outpouring”), and the voice finally outwardly expresses what has been an inner turmoil up to this point (example 55).

79 Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

80 Ibid.
Example 55. “Someone Passes,” mm. 34-49.

The heart stops briefly when someone dies,

when someone dies, a quick pain, a quick pain as you hear the

news, As you hear the news, When
In measure forty-two, the viola takes over the heartbeat rhythm again, but it is different: it also brings back the lullaby theme, as if there is full acceptance of the grief (example 56).

Example 56. “Someone Passes,” m. 44-45.

In measure fifty-seven, Larsen introduces a “bell-like” marking in the higher registers of the piano (example 57). She says she has used this type of marking since she first started composing:

I like to use the upper registers in the piano while the lower registers are so low that all the strings are resonating. It has a lot to do with physics. There is something about the tone when the pianist plays it in a bell-like way that goes straight to the heart and captures overtones so that everything about your air and breath, and your ears, and the wholeness of the way you hear the tone with the low D resonating…it just does something emotionally.\(^{81}\)

\(^{81}\) Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.

71
Example 57. “Someone Passes,” mm. 57-59.

In measure sixty-eight, Larsen writes in harmonics for the viola (example 58). Although it is articulated as harmonics, this quality parallels the bell-like quality in the piano. Again, Larsen’s goal here was to create a sense of searching for grounding: “It is a basic human need to feel embodied and grounded.”

Example 58. “Someone Passes,” mm. 68-70.

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82 Larsen, interview by author, July 12, 2010.
Finally, at the end of the entire cycle, the voice quietly hums the lullaby theme while the viola ties over the bar line in thirds with an accented open fifth on beat two. In the final measures, the piano plays open sixths or fifths in one hand, and D in the lower registers with the other. The open fifths in both the viola and piano imply closure: the missing fifth from earlier in the cycle is finally present here, replacing the haunting quality of the tritone. However, in the final measure, the singer creates a dissonance at the end of the lullaby theme by holding an E against the piano’s D. This dissonance does not allow for complete closure, expressing the continuous grief and confusion in a post-9/11 world (example 59).

Example 59. “Someone Passes,” mm. 72-75.
CONCLUSION

Performing the music of Libby Larsen is both challenging and fulfilling. Emotionally and dramatically, Larsen goes right to the heart of the texts she sets and says, “I try to draw the music out of the text.” Her attention to the natural inflections of the English language, and her ability to “read between the lines” of the text creates songs that are dramatically intense and vivid in their representation of the subject matter. Her unique musical style and impressive, diverse catalog enriches the American art song repertoire.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in performing Sifting Through the Ruins is the appropriate choice of a venue in which to perform it and how to program the work in a recital setting. This cycle could be best suited for an event or anniversary, honoring those lost on 9/11. Perhaps performing the song cycle in combination with other works on loss or war would be appropriate; however, one must consider the audience, and an entire evening of death and grief could overwhelm even the most seasoned recital enthusiast.

In addition, performers may be confronted with the issue of whether an audience should applaud or not. In prior performances of Sifting Through the Ruins, Suzanne Mentzer has asked audiences not to applaud at the end of this cycle, in respect for the seriousness of the texts and for the victims and their families. German playwright Bertoldt Brecht coined the performing arts concept of Verfremdungseffekt (“distancing” or “alienation” effect), “which prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and

83 Larsen, interview by author, March 8, 2010
84 Mentzer, interview by author, March 13, 2010.
which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer.”85 In *A Short Organum for the Theater*, Brecht observes that this technique “allows us to recognize the subject, but at the same time makes it unfamiliar.”86 Brecht thought that the audience required a certain amount of emotional distance in order to reflect objectively on the subject. As important as it is for the performers of *Sifting Through the Ruins* to give a genuine, honest presentation, it may benefit them to incorporate Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* in order to maintain composure throughout the performance of this deeply moving cycle.

Although programming this compelling work may be a challenge, the effort to share it with audiences is a worthy one. Larsen’s honesty, depth, and compassion are apparent throughout *Sifting Through the Ruins*, and listening to this cycle in its entirety is a cathartic experience, allowing everyone to be deeply affected by it, just as each of us was affected on so many levels by the tragedy of 9/11. By sharing this important work, both performer and audience may be able to work through emotions brought on by such a tragedy.

*Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers* and *Sifting Through the Ruins* are two very different song cycles that showcase Libby Larsen’s versatility as a composer. Her keen sense of drama and understanding of setting text are integral parts of both of these works. Larsen’s unique compositional style permeates both cycles – expressive, interesting vocal lines, unusual meters and irregular time signatures, and frequent word painting blend into musical settings that express both mood and culture.

86 Ibid., 192.
As a collaborator, Libby Larsen wants “performers to think about and discuss her music and its influences in order to understand not only the musical score, but also the broad spectrum of American culture.”

Larsen's importance as a composer of vocal works is well established, and these two song cycles help explain why she is one of America's most performed and highly acclaimed composers.

APPENDIX ONE

CATALOG OF VOCAL COMPOSITIONS
BY LIBBY LARSEN

(Songs, Sets, and Cycles - Current as of September 2010)

**Soprano**

**Center Field Girl (2007)**
(Soprano/flute/piano) Text: Michele Antonello Frisch

**Chanting to Paradise (1997)**
(Soprano, piano) Text: Emily Dickinson

*Bind me – I can still sing; In this short life; By a departing light; Out of Sight?*

**Cowboy Songs (1979)**
(Soprano/piano or Soprano/Chamber Ensemble) Texts: Anonymous, Belle Star, Robert Creeley

*Bucking Bronco; Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly; Billy the Kid*

**De Toda La Eternidad (2003/2005)**
(Soprano/Wind Ensemble or Soprano/Piano) Text: Sor Juana In

*Un instante me escuche; ¡Afuera, afuera, afuera!; Tersa frente, oro el cabello; Esta tarde; Diuturna enfermedad de al esperanza*

**Forget-me-not (2008)**

**Late in the Day (1998)**
(Soprano/piano) Text: Jeanne Shepard

*The Ant and the Grasshopper, Clinging, Traveling*

**Margaret Songs (1996)**
(Soprano/piano) Text: Willa Cather, Libby Larsen

*Bright Rail;, So Little There; Beneath the Hawthorne Tree*
ME (Brenda Ueland)
(Soprano/piano) Text: Brenda Ueland

*Why I Write This Book; Childhood; Adolescence; Greenwich Village; Marriage...Divorce; Work; Art (Life is Love...); The Present*

My Antonia (2000)
(High voice/piano) Text: Willa Cather, Libby Larsen

*Landscape – From the Train; Antonia; Landscape II – Winter; The Hired Girls; Landscape III – Prairie Spring; Antonia in the Field; Landscape IV - Sunset*

Notes Slipped Under the Door (2001)
(Soprano/flute/Orchestra) Text: Eugenia Zuckerman

*A Kiss, That’s All; My Throat Hurts; The Rock We Used to Sit On; What Could Possibly Happen; Anything I Put My Mind To*

(Soprano/flute/piano) Text: Michele Frisch Antonello

Saints Without Tears (1976)
(Soprano/flute/bassoon) Text: Phyllis McGinley

*The Temptations of St. Anthony; The Giveaway; Sonnet from Assisi; Conversation in Avila; Paterfamilias*

Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke (no date)
(Soprano/flute/guitar/harp) Text: Rainer Maria Rilke

*The Merry-Go-Round; Lady on the Balcony; Spanish Dancer*

Song (2009)
(Soprano) Text: e.e. cummings

Songs from Letters (1989)
(Soprano/piano or chamber ensemble) Text: Calamity Jane

*So Like Your Father’s; He Never Misses; A Man Can Love Two Women; All I Have; A Working Woman*
Songs of Light and Love (1998)
(Soprano/chamber ensemble – English horn, marimba, strings) Text: May Sarton

Invocation (A Summoning); The Snow Light (A Rapture); A Light Left On (A Quietude); The Fear of Angels (A Beatitude); Evening Walk in France (A Gymnopedie)

Sonnets From the Portuguese (1991)
(Soprano/piano or chamber ensemble) Text: Elizabeth Barrett Browning

I thought once how Theocritus; My Letters!; With the same heart, I said, I’ll answer thee; If I leave all for thee; Oh, Yes!; How do I love thee?

Take (2006)
(Soprano/piano) Text: Margaret Atwood

This Unbearable Stillness: Songs from the Balcony (2003)
(Soprano/string quartet) Text: Dima Hilal, Sekeena Shaben

A Different Morning Altogether, No. 1; Fourteenth Ode; A Different Morning Altogether, No.2; Tempest

This Unbearable Stillness: Songs from the Balcony (2003)
(Soprano/percussion/string orchestra) Text: Dima Hilal, Sekeena Shaben

The Rain; Time Spirals; The Rush of Rain; This Unbearable Stillness

Try Me, Good King: Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII (2000)
(Soprano/piano) Text: Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Katherine Howard

Katherine of Aragon; Anne Boleyn; Jane Seymour; Anne of Cleves; Katherine Howard

When I Am An Old Woman (1990)
(Soprano/piano) Text: Jenny Joseph
**Mezzo Soprano**

**Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers (1994)**
(Mezzo soprano/cello/piano) Text: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Hilde Doolittle, Rainer Marie Rilke, Percy Bysshe Shelley

*Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers; Liebeslied; Do You Know; White World; Music, When Soft Voices Die; Go From Me*

**Hell’s Belles (2001)**
(Mezzo soprano/handbell choir) Text: Tallulah Bankhead, Billy Jean King, Gertrude Stein, Nursery Rhyme

*There Was a Little Girl; Footlight Wisdom; When I Am An Old Woman; The Magic City Golden Transit*

(Mezzo soprano/piano) Text: Rita Dove, Julie Kane, Kathryn Daniels, Liz Lochhead, Muriel Rukeyser

*Boy’s Lips; Blond Men; Big Sister Says, 1967; The Empty Song; I Make My Magic*

**Mary Cassatt (1994)**
(Mezzo soprano/trombone/orchestra/slides) Text: Mary Cassatt historical letters

*To Be a Painter; Travels; Franco-Prussian War; Europe Again; Early Work; Degas; Maturity*

**Raspberry Island Dreaming (2002)**
(Mezzo soprano/orchestra or piano) Text: Joyce Stuphen, Patricia Hampl

*The River Is….; Where the River Bent; Raspberry Island*

**Sifting Through The Ruins (2005)**
(Mezzo soprano/viola/piano) Text: Hilary North, Anonymous, Alicia Vasquez, Martha Cooper, and Ted Berrigan

*A Listing; To the Towers Themselves; Don’t Look For Me Anymore; Untitled; Someone Passes*
**Tenor**

**Far in a Western Brookland (2008)**
(Tenor/piano) Text: A.E. Housman

**Fern Hill (2004)**
(Tenor solo) Text: Dylan Thomas

**Forget-me-not (2008)**
(Soprano/Tenor/piano) Text: Anonymous, from a book of poems published by Cupplies and Leon Given

**Jazz at the Intergalactic Nightclub (2001)**
(Tenor/piano) Text: Thomas McGrath

**Lord, Make Me an Instrument (n.d.)**
(Tenor/piano) Text: St. Francis of Assisi

(High voice/piano) Text: Willa Cather, Libby Larsen

*Landscape – From the Train; Antonia; Landscape II – Winter; The Hired Girls; Landscape III – Prairie Spring; Antonia in the Field; Landscape IV – Sunset*

**Three Rilke Songs (1980)**
(Tenor/guitar) Text: Rainer Maria Rilke

*From Requiem; I Am, You Anxious One; If I Had Grown Up*

**A Pig in the House (2004)**
(Tenor/piano) Text: Alvin Greenberg

**A Verse Record of My Peonies (1980)**
(Tenor/tape/percussion) Text: Masaoka Shiki
Baritone

The Apple’s Song (no date)
(Baritone/piano) Text: Edwin Morgan

Before Winter (1982)
(Baritone/Organ) Text: Arthur Mampel

Chain of Hope (2010)
(SATB choir/Baritone/piano/actress) Text: Libby Larsen, Kathleen Holt, Jeanne Soderberg

Slavery; Women’s Rights; Human Rights

I Love You Through the Daytimes (2007)
(Baritone/piano – also available in high key) Text: Ancient Egyptian texts translated by John L. Foster

Perenio (1993)
(Baritone/piano); Roberto Echavarren, text; 5 min.; available in "The AIDS Quilt Songbook," published by Boosey and Hawkes; 1993

A Quiet Song (2007)
(Baritone/piano – also available in high key) Text: Brenda Ueland

Strange Case of Dr. H.H. Holmes (2010)
(Baritone/prepared piano) Text: H.H. Holmes, aka Herman Mudgett

State My Case; As a Young Man; I Build My Business; Thirteen Ladies and Three Who Got Away; Evidence

Within the Circles of Our Lives (2007)
(Baritone/soprano/orchestra) Text: Wendell Berry
APPENDIX TWO

POETIC TEXTS: SIFTING THROUGH THE RUINS

A Listing

Patty is OK, Michael is OK,
John, Susan are missing,
Cross out Susan,
Jenna Wilson, Thomas, Margaret, Allen,
Tim Lewis, Anna Ward, William D. Teigh are alright.
Cross out William D. Teigh.
Ted saved somebody,
Joe saw the first plane hit,
Ellen McCarthy was below fifty-eighth when second plane hit,
Was in Chelsea when collapse occurred.

Linda was late.
John Yelland, He is OK, Was at WTC 7.
Kids got out of daycare center in time.
Operator 214-271-3000
Red Cross 800-435-7669
Ask about Tina Dellagano,
Len Aliano, Kip Warner,
Jennifer Daniel, Jack Palatino, Tina Dellagano - not found.
Len Aliano, not found.
Kip Warner,
Jennifer Daniel,
Len Aliano......

Anonymous

To the Towers Themselves

They were never my favorites,
Not the Carmen Miranda Chrysler,
Nor Rockefeller’s magic boxes,
Nor the Empire, which I think would have killed us all if she fell.

They were two young dumb guys,
Swagging across the skyline.
Beer drinking MBA’s
Not too bright.
Now that they are gone,
They are like young men
Lost at war,
Not having had their life yet.
They are lost like cannon fodder,
Like farm boys throughout time,
Stunned to death,
Not knowing what hit them
And beloved
By the weeping mothers left behind.

Anonymous (collected by the Parks Dept., probably from Union Square)

Don’t Look For Me Anymore

Don’t look for me anymore,
It’s late and you’re tired,
Your feet ache standing atop the ruins of our twins
Day after day searching for a trace of me,
Your eyes burning red,
Your hands cut, bleeding
Your hands sifting through the ruins
And your back crooked from endless hours of labor.
Don’t look for me anymore.
It’s my turn.

Alicia Vasquez (September 14, 2001)

Untitled
We keep them in our hearts and prayers,
Battalion 7 Ladder 12 Engine 3.
500 illegal immigrants un-named.
Nick Brandimasti
5’10”
190 lbs,
Dark brown hair
Hazel eyes
21 years old,
Employed by Keefe, Broyette and Woods
Two World Trade Center 89th floor,
Wearing: dark blue dress shirt, gray slacks, black shoes,
and a silver Omega watch with a blue face.
Characteristics: collection of freckles in horse-shoe shape over right clavicle, cleft chin.

Anonymous (text taken from photos by Martha Cooper of shrines and messages around NYC)
Someone Passes

Missing –
At first you were missing. Now I just miss you. (1)

The heart stops briefly, when
Someone dies
A quick pain
As you hear the news, and
Someone passes
From your outside life to inside
Slowly the heart adjusts
To its new weight. (2)

1. Texts taken from photos by Martha Cooper
APPENDIX THREE

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


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