

# A Voice from the Prairie: Martha Hill Duncan's *Saskatchewan Songs*

Bonnie Cutsforth-Huber



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CANADIAN COMPOSERS HAVE A LONG TRADITION of creating individual songs, song cycles, and song sets for mezzo soprano or contralto. Largely due to the influence of contralto Maureen Forrester (1930–2010), composers such as R. Murray Schafer (b. 1933), Harry Somers (1925–1999), and Robert Fleming (1921–1976) were inspired by the depth and richness of the mezzo soprano and contralto *Fachs* and their dramatic possibilities.<sup>1</sup> The art songs of several female Canadian composers, including Violet Archer (1913–2000) and Jean Coulthard (1908–2000), also were heavily influenced by this trend.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most recent contributions to this long established tradition is Martha Hill Duncan's five-song concert set, *Saskatchewan Songs*, for low voice. What is unique about this song collection is that the poetry was written by a professional classical singer—contralto and Saskatchewan native Bonnie Cutsforth-Huber.<sup>3</sup> That the poetry was written from a singer's point of view is obvious in the vivid word choices that command a lively, communicative, and expressive approach to their performance, a fact that was noted by the composer herself.

I felt an instant connection with [Bonnie Cutsforth-Huber] and was thrilled with the possibility of composing for a singer who also happened to be the poet. This collaboration has been extremely rewarding for me and I hope that my music has fully showcased her evocative, imaginative and nostalgic poetry about Saskatchewan. As a transplanted Texan living in Canada, I certainly feel a bit of nostalgia myself when I've experienced the big sky, vast landscape and friendly people of this beautiful prairie province.<sup>4</sup>

The poetry is a wistful portrait of a childhood typical of many who have roots in the Canadian prairie province—one spent on the family farm where one moment is filled with the joy of wide open spaces, and the next can be darkened by the fickleness of Mother Nature's whims. Duncan took full advantage of the highly descriptive poetry and the skills of a professional classical singer. The songs are technically challenging and reveal her as an imaginative composer whose art is clearly inspired by the dramatic and expressive nuances of text. Indeed, the composer insists that the song set is "one of the most fun and challenging things I have ever written."<sup>5</sup>

## ABOUT THE COMPOSER

Native Texan Martha Hill Duncan (b. 1955) is a prolific composer, choral conductor, and piano teacher. Much of her childhood was spent in Austin

and San Antonio, but her interest in voice eventually led her to Houston, where she earned a vocal diploma from The Houston High School for Visual and Performing Arts. Her musical interests expanded to include piano and composition; she received a degree in composition from the University of Texas at Austin, where she studied composition with Donald Grantham and piano with Gregory Allen, Danielle Martin, and Errol Haun. In 1982, she and her husband, astrophysicist Martin Duncan, moved to Ontario, Canada, and there, she continued her study of composition at the Royal Conservatory of Music under the tutelage of Sam Dolin.

Aside from her many piano compositions, much of Duncan's compositional output is art song and choral music, much of which is set to Canadian poetry. Her art song collections range from beginner to advanced levels, and include *Singing in the Northland*, *Summer*, and *Florals*. Many of her compositions for treble choir were written for She Sings, a women's choir based in Kingston, Ontario, of which Duncan has been the artistic director and conductor since 2004. It should be noted that Duncan has also written a youth opera, *Searching the Painted Sky*, which received its premiere in New York in 2014 at the National Opera Association Convention.<sup>6</sup>

*Saskatchewan Songs* is Duncan's most recent art song set. As the following discussion reveals, she is a composer whose craft is innately tied to the poetry and therefore exhibits a style that is entirely dependent on textual nuances.

## THE MUSIC

### "Outside to Play on a Winter's Day"

B $\flat$ <sub>3</sub>-E<sub>5</sub>; approx. 3:30

The first song of the set immediately reveals the sense of drama that permeates the work. The boredom of a cabin-fevered child is instantly represented by an introduction that consists solely of a syncopated C ostinato. For Duncan, the ostinato emerged from the text—a static representation of indifference, boredom, and cold.<sup>7</sup> The song is quick to showcase other uses of rhythm and meter for purposes of word painting. For example, as the child is finally released outdoors, the meter whisks away from 4/4 to 9/8 and on to 6/8 to rep-

resent the child bounding into the snow, an image that is reinforced further by the brief use of solid rather than broken and arpeggiated chords (Example 1, mm. 19, 21). This example also exhibits other common Duncan traits. Planing and open fifths (mm. 19 and 21, 25), along with liberal use of chromaticism, and key changes to blur the tonal center, paint a harmonic picture of a vast landscape free of boundaries. Word painting is also present in mm. 22–27; the descent of the vocal line represents the falling snowflakes and their "dancing" and "melting" are brought to life through syncopation and increasingly smaller note values in the accompaniment.<sup>8</sup>

Duncan's highly chromatic palette not only challenges the skill of the singer, but creates a rich, colorful sound world. As the child describes the cold air in mm. 47–54, a poignant tritone in the vocal line on the word "wails" is mirrored in the accompaniment as the music literally waits and listens. One can picture a pouncing cat in m. 51 with the descending staccato vocal line that briefly rests on an A<sup>7</sup> chord that is neither prepared nor resolved. A G tonic is suggested in m. 54, but it is destabilized by chromaticism, as if it is literally being carried away by the wind (Example 2). This excerpt also illustrates Duncan's liberal use of dynamics and expression markings, which greatly aid the singer in bringing the text to life.

It is important to note that throughout the entire song set, the frequent changes in time and key signatures, along with a plethora of rhythmic patterns, are all firmly rooted in the text. Duncan explains,

I know what it feels like to perform something that makes you excited. It's an interplay between the audience and the music . . . I want them to experience the music along with the singer. The key and rhythm changes are my way of keeping them on their toes . . . and for me they come from the text. I don't write in key—I think in line. And I don't think in a certain meter—the words drive that.<sup>9</sup>

### "Bike Ride in the Country"

C<sub>4</sub>-F<sub>5</sub>; approx. 3:30

One of the most interesting aspects of the second song of the set is the treatment of unity and transformation in both text and music. The poetry's statement "click, click, click" recurs throughout the work; however, at

and man - y games of Fox and Goose beg - ging to be -

gin. Like a race-horse from the gate, I launch my self out my front

door to crunch the glit - ter - ing snow in my

new wool - en mit - tens and to feel the snow - flakes

dance and then melt on my tongue. marked My

rit. *mp* *p*

Example 1. "Outside to Play on a Winter's Day," mm. 13–28.

*a tempo*

45 wind- you'll stay warm - er that way. The air is a -

*a tempo*

46 live. It bites, it pinch - es, it wails, and then

*f*

47

*mf*

*broader mp*

49 lis - tens on bait - ed breath, like a cat a - bout to pounce. It is

*broader p*

50

*rit.*

52 wait - ing, it is wait - ing, it is wait - ing for

*rit.*

53

*meno mosso c. = 120*

54 me. With a squeal I fling my - self in - to the

*meno mosso c. = 120*

55

*mf*

Example 2. "Outside to Play on a Winter's Day," mm. 45-55.

each return, its meaning is different—from the sound of bicycle tires against gravel to swarming grasshoppers and oil wells pumping in a field. This text was the creative catalyst for Duncan; indeed, she explains “The ‘click click click’—that’s what drove the whole song for me.”<sup>10</sup> At each recurrence of this text, the same ascending intervals of a perfect fourth and major second are used; the accompaniment moves in contrary motion to the vocal melody and is derived in rhythm, melody, and/or contour from the material presented in the piano introduction (Example 3). Since the recurring material is not a direct restatement, the song is unified, yet perpetually fresh at the same time.

Word painting is also prevalent. Beginning in m. 29, for instance, the marking “freely flowing,” along with the surging 16th-note rhythms in the accompaniment and undulating ascending and descending motion of the vocal melody, all paint a vivid picture of a swarm of grasshoppers. A humorous twist on this technique is found in mm. 38–39 at the mention of oil (beginning on beat 3 of m. 38)—the use of an octatonic scale in the vocal line lends a decidedly Middle Eastern flavor. The dip in the vocal line followed by an ascent also imitates the motion of an oil well. Also significant in this example is the ever present ascending perfect fourth and major second in the vocal line on the words “click, click, click,” and the rhythm and melodic contour of the accompaniment, which, as illustrated in Example 3, are recurring unifying elements that derive from the first measures of the song (Example 4).

### **“I am a Farmer’s Daughter”**

A<sub>3</sub>-F<sub>5</sub>; approx. 5:30

The longest song in the set is based on the poet’s life growing up on a farm and the connection between nature, her emotions, and her outlook on life.<sup>11</sup> For Duncan, this connection translated into a style rooted in jazz and blues. The composer’s Texas roots (Houston and Austin, specifically) played significantly into the musical language of this song, particularly her exposure to cowboy songs and progressive country music, with its prevalent jazz and blues influences.<sup>12</sup> Duncan’s use of blues was motivated by the text.

The text is just so sensual; it’s really a woman’s song.  
The words are earth mother words—like the reference

to a “sixth sense,” all of the references to fertility of the earth, rebirth, and nurturing things. And the story of the father/daughter relationship and being a woman in a man’s world.<sup>13</sup>

The earthy ambience of jazz and blues is achieved in several ways. For instance, as shown in Example 5a, Duncan lowers the 3rd (D natural), the 4th (E natural), and the 7th (A natural), includes a portamento on the word “thaw” in m. 18, and provides an instruction to sing “twangy and slightly flat” in mm. 19 and 20, all of which create a jazz-like flavor. Moments like that in Example 5b create the same ambience, but this time through the use of syncopation, “swung” sixteenth notes, and a liberal use of augmented seventh and eleventh chords. Yet another salute to jazz and blues is exhibited in Example 5c with its syncopation, walking bass, portamenti, and instruction to be “bluesy” and to “swing” the eighth and sixteenth notes.

Although jazz is obviously the main influence in this song, the musical language is still very flexible and adjusts when the text demands it. As the text becomes more reflective about a fond childhood memory in Example 6a, the key signature suddenly changes; the chromaticism drastically decreases and the music has a clearer tonal center of B<sup>b</sup>. In a more dramatic moment when the text describes the terror of a hailstorm (Example 6b), the stretto immediately emphasizes the anxiety at the heart of the text. The repeated interval patterns in the accompaniment imitate the pounding of the hail, while the liberal use of chromaticism in both the vocal line and the accompaniment create a jagged, unsettling environment.

### **“Prairie Lily”**

A<sub>3</sub>-F<sub>5</sub>; approx. 3:00

In this ode to the poet’s ancestors and to Saskatchewan’s provincial flower, the text undoubtedly takes center stage.<sup>14</sup> “Prairie Lily” is the only song in the set that does not change key signature and does not make liberal use of chromaticism. The tonal center is much clearer and the rhythmic patterns are considerably less complex; the clarity and simplicity of the harmony, melodic contour, and texture create an air of sincerity and plaintiveness. Indeed, these characteristics, combined with the broad phrases, place the text and the quality of the singer’s voice on full display.

a. *Bouncing along* ♩ = 80

b. *a tempo*

Click click click My bi - cy - cle tires

crack - le on the gra - vel road, They pop and bounce o - ver the ti - ny

Click click click My mind is calm and clear, On - ly

me, my bi - cy - cle, and the prair - ie out here.

**Example 3.** “Bike Ride in the Country.” a) mm. 1–8, piano introduction and initial vocal entrance. Note how the accompaniment at the beginning of the vocal entrance is exactly the same as mm. 1 and 2, but the end of the phrase is both harmonically and melodically different. b) mm. 15–18. Note the vocal line uses the same intervals for the text “click, click, click” as found in 3a. The accompaniment uses the same rhythm as the vocal line here, which is derived from m. 1 of 3a. The melodic contour of the accompaniment is also derived from m. 1 of 3a.

a.

swarm re - treats to the depths of the ditch to the  
thick swatch - es of grass that a - waits them;  
safe - ty and sus - te - nance. safe - ty and sus - te - nance.

b.

Click click click The oil wells bow and then rise as I pass.

**Example 4.** Examples of Word Painting in “Bike Ride in the Country.” a) mm. 29–32; b) mm. 38–39.

The expansiveness of the prairie is immediately represented by the uncluttered open fifths in the piano introduction (Example 7). Open fifths are used liberally in the melody and accompaniment throughout the song, as are sweeping crescendos and decrescendos and longer note values. All of these elements emphasize the

aforementioned characteristics of text clarity and the performer’s vocal tone.

The piano introduction is a direct quote from another of Duncan’s compositions, the piano solo “Water Lilies.” The composer found an instant connection between water and prairie lilies. Although only the beautiful

a.

an - ces-tors My child-hood was care-free Red rub - ber boots in the mud when the thaw came, bare feet in the grass when the ground re-turned to life.

b.

grain truck was old, and I did n't care. The hole in the floor was my fa - vorite thing; The road whizzed by un - der my dan - gling feet as the dust stam - ped ed through and clung to my skin. I loved the grain el - e -

Example 5. "I am a Farmer's Daughter." a) mm. 14–20; b) mm. 31–38.



C.

chute. I still love the smell of a

har-vest-ed field; The scent of ripe-ness that

has been plucked, a blank slate for na-ture to be

Example 5. c) mm. 47–55.

flower of the water lily is seen, it has a strong root that sinks deep into the earth of the pond. The prairie lily also has strong, hardy roots, and Duncan equated this characteristic to the ancestral roots that are central to the meaning of the poetry of “Prairie Lily.” The liberal use of fifths in this song is also significant; on the one hand, Duncan equates it to her “Americana or Aaron Copeland[sic]-ish influence coming through,” while on the other, their use is tied to the meaning of the poetry. She states, “Fifths to me feel solid, grounded—almost peasant-like, from the earth. I was also thinking about the immigrants, especially Celtic.”<sup>15</sup> Not only did this latter influence materialize in open fifths, but it can also be found in the lilting rhythm.

Particularly poignant moments in the text are emphasized by the piano accompaniment. For instance, Example 8 illustrates how most of the accompaniment

proceeds in flowing eighth notes and arpeggiations; however, with the words “toil” and “fortitude,” the accompaniment features solid chords, thereby emphasizing strength. The planed quarter note sixths in the accompaniment on the word “unstoppable” convey the same message.

Recurring melodic material is also used to emphasize specific text and to connect separate statements. Example 8 illustrates how the vocal melody used for the statement, “They came here and coaxed a life from the ground,” returns in a modified version in the accompaniment at the end of the song with the text “my land, my people” (Example 9). The connection between the province’s unwavering people, including the poet’s ancestors, and the land is therefore affirmed through the use of recurring melodic material. It should also be noted that these excerpts begin with an ascending

a. *sweetly, no swelling* *mf* *mp* *legato*

I re - mem - ber bal - ing hay with my fa - ther; — I kept vig - il at the

truck's back win - dow, watch - ing and count ing De -

b. *stretto* *mp* *a tempo*

The sound of hail as - sault - ing the roof of the house,

*stretto* *a tempo*

The vi - o - lent at - tack a - gainst the win - dows was

The musical score is divided into two sections, a and b. Section a (mm. 23-26) features a vocal line and piano accompaniment in B-flat major. The vocal line starts with a melody in the right hand and a supporting line in the left hand. The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand. Section b (mm. 95-101) is in 3/4 time and features a more complex piano accompaniment with syncopation and staccato rhythms. The vocal line continues with a melody that incorporates some syncopation and staccato notes. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (mf, mp), articulation (stretto, a tempo), and phrasing slurs.

Example 6. "I am a Farmer's Daughter." a) mm. 23–26; b) mm. 95–101.

minor third, the same interval that begins the Canadian national anthem.

### "Saskatchewan Lessons"

E<sub>4</sub>-E<sub>5</sub>; approx. 2:12

The final song of the set is a humorous laundry list of Saskatchewan facts and stereotypes. For Duncan, "it felt

like the text was an advertisement, a radio jingle—like a travel jingle for Saskatchewan."<sup>16</sup> The lightheartedness of the piece is immediately apparent in the staccatos, syncopation, and accents, as well as the instruction to perform the song "à la 50s radio jingle," seen in Example 10. As in the other songs, the musical language is quick to change in order to meet the demands of the

Expansively ♩ = 75

Expansively ♩ = 75

*mf legato*

*p*

*mf*

*mp*

Prai - rie li - ly our

*p*

*ped. simile*

Wes - tern Red. Mo - tion less flame in the depths of the woods.

*careful pedaling*

Example 7. "Prairie Lily," mm. 1-9.

22

They came here and coaxed a life from the ground, Toil for - ti - tude re -

25

sil - ience... Un - stop - pa - ble, like you.

*f*

*mf*

Example 8. "Prairie Lily," mm. 22-27.

40 *broadly*  
beau - ti - ful. My land, my peo - ple and the

40 *broadly*

Example 9. "Prairie Lily," mm. 40–42.

*à la 50's radio jingle*  $\text{♩} = 80$  *mf*  
Sas - ka - toon ber - ries make the

*à la 50's radio jingle*  $\text{♩} = 80$  *mp* *mf* *mp*

world's best pie and stain your mouth pur - ple. The *mp*

*Expressive, freely*  
north - ern lights put the best dan - cers to shame, and make

*Expressive, freely*  $\text{♩} = 80$   
*with pedal*

41 *Straight perky 8ths, swung 16ths* *mf*  
fire - works seem pale. It's o - kay to help some - one or to

*Straight perky 8ths, swung 16ths* *mp*

Example 10. "Saskatchewan Lessons," mm. 1–11.

Example 11. "Saskatchewan Lessons," mm. 24–28.

text—it immediately modifies into a flowing, freer 6/8 in order to illustrate the nebulous nature of the northern lights. The shift in tonal center from E up to B also aids in this depiction; it is as if the listener is transported from the earth to the sky.

Several of the humorous moments in the text are set to repeated pitches, which help the words, and their comedy, to be heard clearly (Example 11, m. 24). The comedic climax of the song occurs in mm. 25–26, where, instead of using repeated pitches for emphasis, Duncan changes the mood through the use of a whole tone scale in the vocal line. The whole tone scale lends an other-worldly flavor to the section; the singer is encouraged to take this mood to the next level through the marking "divine inspiration!"

The song set *Saskatchewan Songs* is undoubtedly another excellent example of technically challenging, creative writing for low voice in the tradition of Canadian art song. The text is the undisputed catalyst for the evocative musical language, which embraces everything from whole tone scales and folk influence, to elements of blues, jazz, and popular music. Both

singer and pianist must therefore possess the flexibility and expressive and technical skills to embrace these diverse components, all for the purpose of bringing the stories alive for the audience. Indeed, the performers are challenged to be as colorful, diverse, and emotionally powerful as the Saskatchewan landscape itself.

## NOTES

- For more information on the output of these composers, please see the following articles:  
 Stephen J. Adams, "Schafer, R. Murray," Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/24738> (accessed January 22, 2016).  
 Brian Cherney, "Somers, Harry," Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/26175> (accessed January 22, 2016).  
 Godfrey Ridout and Elaine Keillor, "Fleming, Robert," Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/09812> (accessed January 22, 2016).

2. For a comprehensive list of vocal compositions by female Canadian composers for low voice, see Katherine Eberle Fink, "Finding North: Noteworthy Canadian Women Composers' Contributions to Vocal Compositions for Mezzo, Contralto, or Unspecified Voice," *Journal of Singing* 65, no. 2 (November/December 2008): 153–167.
3. The songs were premiered by contralto Bonnie Cutsforth-Huber and collaborative pianist Arlene Shrout at the Wolf-Kuhn Theatre, Penn State Altoona in May 2012. A recording of this performance can be heard at <http://marthahillduncan.com/compositions/vocal-compositions/collections>.
4. Martha Hill Duncan, *Saskatchewan Songs* (Ontario, Canada: Martha Hill Duncan, 2014), introduction. The score is available for purchase at [marthahillduncan.com](http://marthahillduncan.com).
5. Martha Hill Duncan, interview by the author (January 28, 2016).
6. Martha Hill Duncan Biography; [marthahillduncan.com/biography](http://marthahillduncan.com/biography) (accessed May 17, 2016).
7. Duncan, interview.
8. All music examples are used by the kind permission of Martha Hill Duncan and are taken from the score cited in endnote 5.
9. Duncan, interview.
10. Ibid.
11. Since the song set is labeled "for low voice," it is possible for all of them to be sung by a baritone except for "I am a Farmer's Daughter," which is clearly from a female point of view.
12. Duncan, interview.
13. Ibid.
14. Duncan has also composed SSA choral arrangements of both "Prairie Lily" and "Saskatchewan Lessons." These can be heard at the following links: Saskatchewan Lessons; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQwL6g9pnVc>; Prairie Lily; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfpSoGEWycw>.
15. Duncan, interview.
16. Ibid.

Saskatchewan native **Bonnie Cutsforth-Huber** is active in oratorio, cantata, and operatic circuits. As a concert artist, she has appeared in prestigious concert spaces across the world, including Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, Vienna's St. Stephen's Cathedral, Strasbourg Cathedral, and Cemal Resit Rey Hall in Istanbul, Turkey. Highlights include Bach's *St. John Passion*, Handel's *Alexander's Feast* and *Messiah*, Duruflé's

*Requiem*, Mozart's *Solemn Vespers of the Confessor*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Haydn's *Mass in Time of War*, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Among Ms. Cutsforth-Huber's operatic credits are performances with Kentucky Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Center Stage Opera, Rome Festival Opera, Amalfi Festival Opera, and Amici Opera; roles include Dalila in Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*, Marcellina in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, Carmen in Bizet's *Carmen*, Meg in Verdi's *Falstaff*, Isabella in Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri*, and Zita in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*.

An active recitalist and supporter of new works, Ms. Cutsforth-Huber was a featured artist in the 2013 Mahler Festspiele in Vienna, Austria, where she performed several concerts with members of the Mahler Philharmoniker. Her interest in new music has led to several world premieres, including the concert set *Saskatchewan Songs* by Martha Hill Duncan (set to poetry written by the singer), *Alzheimer's Stories* with the Susquehanna Valley Chorale and orchestra, and Timothy Melbinger's *Something So Necessary, So Real*, a concert set for contralto, piano, and chamber orchestra. She also sang the United States premiere of *Triptych*, a cycle for mezzo soprano, alto saxophone, and piano by Canadian composer Lloyd Burritt in 2014.

Ms. Cutsforth-Huber holds a Bachelor of Music in vocal performance from the University of Saskatchewan, a Master's degree in vocal performance from Southern Illinois University, and a PhD in musicology from the University of Kentucky.

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