

A Guide to Libby Larsen's *My Antonia*

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MY *ANTONIA* RANKS AS ONE OF the great American song cycles written in the past twenty years. The cycle integrates excerpts of Willa Cather's beloved American novel with the music of one of the most prominent living American composers, Libby Larsen. In the seventeen minute, seven song work, Larsen adapts prose from *My Antonia* into poems that relate Jim Burden's idealized childhood and coming of age on the fertile yet uncompromising Nebraskan prairie in the late nineteenth century. The narrative focuses on Jim and his relationship with his Bohemian immigrant neighbor, Antonia, as the prairie looms as an ever present character. Larsen captures the tonal landscape of Cather's prairie with accessible and alluring music that makes this cycle an excellent choice to program on any recital.

This article provides a guide to *My Antonia* for both performers and teachers. In order to better inform any interpretation of the cycle, detailed harmonic analysis and character motivation for each song is included. In addition, this article addresses historical and geographical context for the story, musical and vocal challenges for the singer that include range and tessitura, and proper voice type assignment.

THE COMPOSER

Libby Larsen (b. 1950) is currently one of the most prolific and most frequently performed American composers. Her music has received glowing reviews for being accessible, fresh, modern, and intelligent. The *New York Times* praised her ability to "shift with swift effectiveness from anger to tenderness and back again," while *Gramophone* lauded her "sense of humor" and "genuinely lyrical music."¹ Although her *oeuvre* encompasses virtually every classical genre from solo instrumental music to full scale operas, much of Larsen's work reflects her fascination with the human voice. Due to her extensive output for solo voice and piano, Larsen has gained a reputation as one of America's foremost art song composers. Popular song cycles include *Try Me Good King, Me (Brenda Ueland), Cowboy Songs, Sonnets from the Portuguese, Songs from Letters, Love After 1950, The Birth Project, and Margaret Songs*.

VOCAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR MY ANTONIA

My Antonia was commissioned and premiered by soprano Jane Dressler and pianist Linda Jones in 2000. Larsen, however, has said she prefers a tenor to perform the cycle since a male character, Jim Burden, narrates the story.² A number of today's prolific American composers, including Ricky Ian

Gordon, Jake Heggie, Lori Laitman, and Libby Larsen herself, have a larger catalog for female voices than for males, but twenty-first century American repertoire for tenors is surprisingly small. *My Ántonia* offers tenors an opportunity to sing a contemporary song cycle.

The work is ideal for advanced college-aged tenors or beyond, having a range of C₃-A₄ and a comfortable tessitura that mostly stays within the middle to upper part of the staff.³ A few passages will be vocally challenging for tenors. The most difficult occurs at the end of “Prairie Spring,” as a phrase starting on an E^b₅ ascends by step to a sustained A^b₄, followed by two quick sixteenth-note flourishes and another sustained A^b₄ (see Example 8, page 399). At or around the indicated tempo (dotted quarter = 104), the sixteenth notes require vocal flexibility, and the ascending line requires the ability to negotiate a register transition. High lying phrases in “The Hired Girls” and “Landscape IV: Sunset” also extend beyond the *secondo passaggio*, soaring to G₄, A^b₄, and touching A₄.

Despite Larsen’s preference that a tenor sing the cycle, there is nothing in the vocal writing of *My Ántonia* that would preclude a soprano performance. The range and tessitura likely present less of a challenge and fall within the capabilities of a good college-aged soprano. However, she must be able to give a convincing interpretation as the male narrator. One of Larsen’s many female perspective song cycles might be a better choice.

Although the musical language in *My Ántonia* is often straightforward, several places in the score are more complex. These include the numerous changing and mixed meters in “Prairie Spring,” the severe chromaticism of “Landscape II: Winter,” and the competing tonalities between the voice and piano in “Landscape I: From the Train” and “Landscape IV: Sunset.” The singer will need a strong sense of pitch. Those who have performed music with advanced tonality will find the experience helpful in learning this score.

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

In *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather evokes in vivid detail the vast and daunting pre-industrialized prairie land of Jim Burden’s youth in the last decades of the nineteenth

century. At the time, the prairie soil was exceptionally fertile, and tallgrass occupied the bulk of the unbroken, level land. Trees were scarce, clustered on the land closest to the creeks and watersheds that ran through the prairie. In all directions, the pioneer could see “an infinite vault of sky in a world reduced to three immensities: the grass below, the sky above, and the single horizon beyond.”⁴ Much of Larsen’s music for the cycle is a sonic depiction of this prairie landscape.

With the Homestead Act of 1862, immigrants came in waves to collect the 160 acres of land the government promised to those willing to work the land. The new transcontinental railroad conveniently carried many ethnic groups to the Great Plains: Bohemians, Poles, Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, Scandinavians, as well as Americans from the East. Upon settling the prairie, these pioneers braved severe weather—the harsh blizzards of a bitter winter and the intense heat of an unforgiving summer—to find a better life.

Recollections of Jim’s youth on this rough landscape account for the bulk of the chapters in Cather’s novel. But by 1918—the present year at the end of the novel—the prairie is in the process of being converted to farmland, towns, and cities. Old roads have been paved over following highway surveys, and Ántonia’s eldest daughter even owns a Ford automobile. The prairie of Jim’s youth exists only in memory.

Larsen includes no information about Jim’s life in the present, some thirty years after being orphaned and sent to live with his grandparents in Nebraska. In the book, Cather offers only a few details about the adult Jim: he is over forty years old, married to an unlikable woman, and employed as legal counsel for the Western railways. His life in the inhospitable city of New York is far removed from his beloved prairie, and his inability to recapture his youth and time spent on the prairie with Ántonia drives Jim’s inner turmoil.

SONG ANALYSIS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERPRETATION

“Landscape I: From the Train”

Jim Burden recalls a conversation with a fellow passenger held during a recent train ride home from the Great Plains. Jim has just seen Ántonia for the first time in twenty years and his mind is awash with memories

Example 1. "Landscape I: From the Train," mm. 1-2.

Example 2. "Landscape I: From the Train," mm. 32-33, the *Ántonia* motive.

of his youth: "burning summers," "blustery winters," "fall afternoons," and of course, "my *Ántonia*." A dissonant *ostinato* motive in the piano at the start of the song evokes the unyielding, steady motion of the train Jim is riding. This motive recurs throughout the song, as Jim's mind returns to present time in between memories. Larsen's train is cold, mechanical, and ominous, a symbol of the relentlessness of time that carries Jim farther and farther away from his childhood and the prairie. Against the D-flat tonality of the train motive, the voice clashes as it centers around C minor (Example 1).

In mm. 12-15, bleak, "blustery winters" are painted by harsh tritones and minor seconds. A static piano part reinforces the "feeling that the world was left behind." The expansive pitch range (A_0 to D_6) of the piano embodies the vastness of the prairie. By contrast, Larsen depicts the other prairie seasons in mm. 20-23 with a pandiatonic wash of bright colors, replete with cascading planed chords and running triplet sixteenth notes. This pandiatonicism is a characteristic of much of the

prairie music in the cycle to follow. The climactic line, "Oh, I wish I could be a little boy again," is left exposed and unaccompanied for dramatic effect, a common technique for Larsen at emotional high points. Here, Jim's preoccupation with his youth is longingly expressed in one short sentence.

In m. 29, the voice and piano shift into agreement in D-flat Lydian on the words "prairie towns and boyhood and *Ántonia*." Jim is reinvigorated by the thought of the three things he holds most dear. The first of several iterations of the *Ántonia* motive follows. The perfect consonances of the motive characterize *Ántonia*'s strength and her connection to the open prairie (Example 2).

"*Ántonia*"

While "Landscape 1: From the Train" ends with Jim headed back to New York in the present, the cycle's second song, "*Ántonia*," begins thirty years earlier with Jim aboard a train bound for the Nebraskan prairie as a ten year old boy. Other memories of Jim's first year

1
 "They can't an-y of them speak Eng-lish," said the train con-duct or to me, the boy Jim. "Ex-cept"

Example 3. "Ántonia," mm. 1-3.

1
 Freely
 f
 Win-ter comes down sav-age-ly on lit-tle towns on the prai-rie.

Example 4. "Landscape II: Winter," mm. 1-2.

on the prairie follow: running through the prairie with Ántonia after their first encounter, teaching Ántonia the English names for objects, and watching storm clouds with Ántonia from the roof of the Burden's house.

The piano part in "Ántonia" begins with light, staccato chords in softly descending lines that sound weightless, like two children skipping through the prairie tallgrass. A second motive in m. 3 has the playful, dancelike quality of a children's game as it alternates between two chords in shifting staccato and legato articulation. The tonal palette of "Ántonia" reflects the prairie landscape, as prevailing parallel fourths and fifths create an expansive feeling with sweet harmonies. Several instances of the "Ántonia" motive connect Jim's friend to the prairie (Example 3).

In m. 33, Ántonia's manner of speech for the line, "Name? What name?" reflects a "dis-ease with the inflections of English."⁵ The major ninth leap is too rangy for ordinary English speech and shows Ántonia's "struggle with verbal communication."⁶ It stands in contrast to the smaller intervals and natural inflection of Jim's free recitative, as in m. 47. A Czech accent should be used for Ántonia's dialogue throughout the cycle. For example,

the [w] at the beginning of "what" should be replaced with a [v].

"Landscape II: Winter"

Larsen sets the depression and death of Ántonia's father against the bitterness of the Nebraskan winter, with harsh chromaticism and biting minor seconds prevailing throughout. Like a wild blizzard wind, a tremolo of clashing dissonances against a treacherously chromatic vocal line immediately plunges the listener into the heart of the storm. The ominous opening text "winter comes down savagely on little towns on the prairie" foreshadows the suicide of Ántonia's father Shimerda (Example 4).

In mm. 3-7, hanging, dissonant chords capture the "calm, silver-blue days of burning cold" that typically follow a prairie blizzard.⁷ Dynamic contrasts and register shifts in the piano evoke wind gusts of varying intensities. Starting in m. 8, a sparser gesture of delicate ascending leaps and mild harmonies illustrate the blank, still prairie.

The sullen Mr. Shimerda calls out to Ántonia at the end of m. 18 in the "mournful voice" Cather describes in the novel. Larsen captures his depression with a

2) *Subito, ♩=112*

And we ran to meet him.

jumpy, as a country dance

mf

Example 5. "Landscape II: Winter," mm. 21–22.

freely

42 *rubbing*

half-voiced

Tempo II (♩=80)

mf

"Oh Jim- my! What you think my love-ly Pa - pa." I could feel her heart

mp

mf *gently*

Example 6. "Landscape II: Winter," mm. 42–44.

downwardly inflected line at the bottom of the tenor range. By contrast, *Ántonia*'s answer, "Tatinekl," which means "dad" in Czech, is a bright and cheerful A-major arpeggio. The ensuing country dance is a spirited folk tune inspired by Norwegian fiddling that Shimerda might have played on his violin when he was happy in the old country and illustrates *Ántonia*'s ability to cheer her father up (Example 5).⁸ For Shimerda, his encounter with his daughter on the prairie represents a respite from winter isolation and his bleak contemplation of suicide.

An angry tremolo in m. 31 accompanying the words, "Winter comes down savagely . . ." jolts the listener back to the assault of the prairie winter. The completion of the sentence, "like light of truth itself," is simple, direct and unaccompanied. Along with a "half-voiced," exasperated delivery, this moment builds the sense of impending doom.

In m. 33, Larsen transforms the country dance into a dissonant, morose dirge. An *accelerando* in m. 35 matches *Ántonia*'s increasing distress over her father's

depression. Measures 40–45 contain the starkest texture of the entire cycle and the voice drops to its lowest pitch in the cycle, a C₃, on the final syllable of "papa," as *Ántonia* sobs over her father's death (Example 6). In the last four measures, the country dance-turned-dirge accompanies a final repetition of the text, "Winter comes down savagely . . ." The clashing tremolo of m.1 returns as well, as Larsen marries the suicide and the "bitter song" of winter one last time.

"The Hired Girls"

The death of Mr. Shimerda in "Landscape II: Winter" occurs on Jim's eleventh birthday, three months shy of *Ántonia*'s fifteenth birthday. "The Hired Girls" jumps ahead three years. Jim is now fourteen with a burgeoning sexuality and living in Black Hawk town with his grandparents. *Ántonia*, nearing her eighteenth birthday, and several other immigrant girls have also moved to town for work. As these "hired girls" dance to a grand waltz, Jim playfully asks them, "Now, you're Lena, are



Example 7. “The Hired Girls,” mm. 1–4.

you? And you’re Tony [Ántonia’s new nickname] and you’re Mary. Have I got it straight?” He is delighted to have the pleasure of watching them dance.

The song’s eight-measure introduction contains the most memorable melody in the cycle, a borrowed Norwegian tune called the “Valse Anders Sveen” (Example 7).⁹ Ternary form, regular phrasing, triadic harmonies, and authentic cadences contribute to a classicism eschewed by Larsen in the rest of cycle. Accented tonic pedals ground the song in G major and provide a robust quality that matches the “crashing waltz” Cather describes in the novel. The soaring of the vocal line above the staff on several occasions reflects Jim’s excitement watching the hired girls dance.

A dreamy, extended harmony of stacked thirds interrupts the waltz in m. 40. This harmony represents a suspension of time amidst the steady, boisterous waltz. Jim reflects, “if not for girls like these in the world, there would be no poetry,” revealing that he now views his childhood friends romantically. The final four bar codetta returns to the waltz music, as Jim is back to enjoying the moment.

“Landscape III: Prairie Spring”

Ántonia is not mentioned explicitly in “Landscape III: Prairie Spring,” but the “throb” of spring symbolizes Jim’s newfound amorous feelings for Ántonia. Constantly changing meter and an eighth-note *moto perpetuo* capture spring’s vivacity, driving the song forward with rhythmic energy.¹⁰ Larsen’s frequent use of duplets in the voice against triplets in the piano adds even more rhythmic intensity. Swelling crescendos and diminuendos and *subito* changes from *piano* to *forte* reinforce spring’s vigor. Chord clusters in the piano create a glow that replaces the blank prairie canvas of winter with the vibrant colors of spring.

In the B section, the vocal line soars into the upper register, ascending from an E₃ to an A₄. These rising pitches mimic the larks flying in the sky, “singing straight at the sun.” Sixteenth-note flourishes embody spring’s energy released after lying dormant for months. The sustained high-lying phrases in the final measures of the vocal line provide a spirited and climactic end to the song (Example 8).

“Ántonia in the Field”

The text for “Ántonia in the Field” is taken from an earlier section of the book, but Larsen recontextualizes it to apply to a later moment in the arc of Jim and Ántonia’s relationship. The song portrays a defining moment in Jim’s life, as he realizes that “he really loves [Ántonia] . . . maybe not physically, but that this particular kind of love is wrapped up in what it means to be deeply human.”¹¹ A much stronger sense of nostalgia and yearning penetrates the text than in previous songs.

“Ántonia in the Field” is Larsen’s personal ode that she “projects onto Jim.”¹² Ántonia is beautiful in spite of or perhaps in part because of the labors of the prairie life. The prairie is a part of Ántonia like the dust that plasters her throat in the poem, and she becomes a part of the prairie story. Jim exclaims in a line original to Larsen’s poem, “Oh, she was beautiful!” This song is the dramatic culmination of the cycle; both a tribute to this pioneer woman and a moment of revelation for Jim.

The final A-flat of “Landscape III: Prairie Spring” carries over into the start of “Ántonia in the Field,” musically linking the songs and symbolically connecting Ántonia to the throbbing prairie spring. An expansive, arching melody depicts both “the setting sun—a magnificent, burnished orb . . . and Jim and Antonia’s deep, abiding friendship.”¹³ Starting in m. 9, minor dominant seventh chords alternate with tonic chords in a calm

Example 8. "Landscape III: Prairie Spring," mm. 31–38.

Example 9. "Ántonia in the Field," mm. 9–12.

fluctuation, much like the Satie *Gymnopédie* #2 that Larsen used as a model for the piece.¹⁴ Tonally, there is more than a tinge of melancholy as Jim knows that, like the setting sun, his youth is bygone (Example 9).

The first of three long, descending lines begins in m. 27, as the sweet sounding sixth becomes the prevalent interval of the song. Several repetitions of the "Ántonia" motive portray Jim "holding [Ántonia] in his memory,"

as Larsen indicates in the score. Jim's final words, "My Ántonia," are left unaccompanied, an exposed and tender moment to underscore the intensity of Jim's feelings for Ántonia. In the final measures, Larsen continues an F pedal underneath A-flat tonic chords, sustaining to the end a tonal struggle that suggests Jim's conflicted feelings. With the piano's final descent into the bass register, the sun has set over the prairie and over Jim's past.

“Landscape IV: Sunset”

My Ántonia comes full circle with “Landscape IV: Sunset,” as we find Jim recalling the same conversation from “Landscape I: From the Train.” The train music also returns, and conflicting tonalities between the piano and voice remind the listener of Jim’s inner struggle. As the voice shifts up a half step in m. 8 and into accord with the piano, plush harmonies and a leap of a sixth in the voice link the “red disk” to the setting sun of the previous song.

Jim shares more of his childhood memories, which are like pictures permanently fixed in his mind. Like the “red disk,” Larsen also links these pictures to previous songs. For example, the country dance reappears during the mention of Shimerda’s funeral. “Ántonia running,” “Ántonia dancing,” and “Ántonia coming in from her work” all occur in the same key as in prior songs with the same imagery: “Ántonia,” “The Hired Girls,” and “Ántonia in the Field,” respectively. The Ántonia motive appears several times. Though the train motive keeps the memories unified, Larsen aptly varies it to paint each of the snapshots.

In m. 26, the melody soars into the upper register as Jim desperately attempts to hold on to the memory of Ántonia against the setting sun. The final seven measures of the piano part contain the train motive, a symbol of time inexorably marching on. Yet Jim has changed; he has come to terms with his past, and like the train, he will proceed forward, with the memories of his youth and Ántonia to comfort him.

CONCLUSION

Libby Larsen’s vocal compositions, including *My Ántonia*, deserve serious consideration for any singer or teacher interested in contemporary classical music. *My Ántonia*’s idiomatic vocal writing offers compelling pedagogic challenges for singers. Capable tenors will be challenged by passages in *My Ántonia* without being pushed too far, and the cycle provides singers with an opportunity to develop a convincing three-dimensional character. Furthermore, the cycle’s enchanting and accessible music, in addition to its beloved story, is sure to capture the audience’s interest.

Recommended interpretations of *My Ántonia* include a 2004 Albany Records CD with Paul Sperry, tenor,

and Libby Larsen, piano; a 2011 MSR recording with Ann Tedards, soprano, and Marva Duerksen, piano; a 2014 Centaur Records recording with Kerry Jennings, tenor and Amanda Hopson, piano; and a 2017 innova Recordings CD with Tracey Engelman, soprano, and Lara Bolton, piano. The score, published in 2004, is available through Oxford University Press. For a more in-depth discussion of the song cycle, including a transcript of my 2013 interview with Libby Larsen, my dissertation, “Libby Larsen’s *My Ántonia*: The Song Cycle and the Tonal Landscape of the American Prairie” may be accessed online at <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/12254>.

NOTES

1. Zachary Woolfe, “A Newcomer’s Auspicious Debut, Amid a More Eclectic Opera Scene,” *New York Times*; http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/02/arts/music/opera-modernes-modern-tryst-at-the-galapagos-art-space-review.html?_r=0 (accessed December 4, 2013); David Gutman, “LARSEN: Symphony No. 4, ‘String Symphony.’ Song of Light and Love. Songs from Letters,” *Gramophone Magazine*; <http://libby-larsen.com/index.php?contentID=278> (accessed December 4, 2013).
2. Libby Larsen, interview by author via telephone, Larsen residence, Minneapolis, MN (December 18, 2013). She states: “I knew *Ántonia* was going to be premiered by a soprano but I hear it as a tenor, so I had two ideal voices in my brain.”
3. Octave numbering throughout the article will correspond to the tenor voice.
4. John Madsen, *Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 18.
5. Larsen, interview.
6. Ibid.
7. Madsen, 168.
8. Larsen, interview. Larsen’s tune is inspired by the Norwegian fiddling she studied while composing *Eric Hermannson’s Soul* two years earlier.
9. Ibid. “Anders Sveen” is the name of a traditional Norwegian melody.
10. According to *Grove Music Online*, *moto perpetuo* is “a title sometimes given to a piece in which rapid figuration is persistently maintained,” for example, in Schubert’s “Gretchen am Spinnrade.”
11. Larsen, interview.
12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

Dr. Gregory Zavracky is a teaching associate at Brown University and an instructor of voice at the University of Connecticut. For the past seven summers, he has been on voice faculty at Boston University Tanglewood Institute. Gregory received his DMA in Voice Performance from Boston University in 2014, in addition to Master of Music degrees in both voice and opera studies from New England Conservatory and a Bachelor of Arts from Emory University. He has been inducted into both the Phi Beta Kappa and Pi Kappa Lambda honors societies.

A lyric tenor, Dr. Zavracky maintains an active performance schedule on concert, recital, and opera stages. Recent highlights include the premiere of Matthew Aucoin's *Crossing* with the American Repertory Theater at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, recitals with the Five Borough Music Festival

(NY) and Highland Center for the Arts (VT), *Messiah* with the Rhode Island Philharmonic, and Count Almaviva in *Barber of Seville* with Townsend Opera (CA). He is a frequent soloist with a variety of symphonies and choral groups in the Boston area and has also sung with Boston Lyric Opera, Utah Symphony and Opera, Chautauqua Symphony and Opera, Opera Saratoga, Opera North, Opera in the Heights, and Cape Cod Opera.

As a composer, Gregory has received commissions and awards for his music. Specializing in vocal genres, his music has recently been performed on a variety of recital series, including Calliope's Call (MA), Music of Norway Pond (NH), Virginia Tech, and Cotuit Center for the Arts (MA). He has been a finalist for the NATS Art Song Composition Award for the past two years for his song cycles *Sea Garden* and *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*.

Further information about his career may be accessed at www.gregoryzavracky.com.

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