

A Woman's Place

The combination of an historical text with contemporary music can give a new perspective to both. Sounds which are now acceptable to modern ears often enhance a textual idea presented by a writer from an earlier era. In return that long distant thought may have a reminiscent effect on our modern musical language. For singers who enjoy history as well as the identification of strong female voices from the past, there are two song cycles which quite successfully present a woman's point of view within the context of her experience. Both of these cycles offer words of real women concerning their treatment and place in society at the time in which they lived, as well as a view of personal relationship and their effect on everyday life. These are vivid, strong women whose struggles may be similar to those experienced by many women today. The century may be different in context, but the social, political, and emotional ramifications may be surprisingly similar to many.

Marilyn Ziffrin, composer of numerous works for voice and instrumental combinations, has written a revealing and memorable song cycle for voice and piano called, *Three Songs of the Trobairitz*. It is available in both low and high keys. She chose the works of three women troubadours to give a sense of life for women in the Middle Ages.



Sharon Mabry

The texts are:

- I. "Oh friend, if you had shown consideration" Castelloza, born c. 1200
- II. "Now we are come to the cold time" Azalais de Porcairages, born c. 1140
- III. "I thrive on youth and joy" Countess de Dia, born c. 1140

Ziffrin's musical language is modern, flexible, and sensitive to textual influences. She has provided a cycle of three songs with diverse character. The first is a conversational lament with recitative-like vocal declamation underpinned by a solid harmonic base and recurring melodic ideas in the piano. Song two begins slowly, thoughtfully as the voice and piano seem to converse, each having its turn. The sadness of this song is heightened by the interjection of vocal wails or soft cries on *ah* and *ooh*, very effectively bringing out the emotional quality of the text. The speaker's resolve is clearly evident in the steady, rhythmic, speech-like movement of the vocal setting as well as the detached accompaniment which punctuates important vocal assertions. Song three is a dance, very rhythmic, light and in the style of a troubadour song. The singer is given the choice to beat a small tambourine to the rhythm of the music, but it is not required. This playful piece is filled with trills and cascading *la's* and *ha's* providing a dramatic ending for the cycle. This is traditional vocal writing at

its best. There are no extended techniques required, just great imagination and a desire to present an historical viewpoint in a modern context. The work is available from the composer at P.O. Box 179, Bradford, NH 03221.

Libby Larsen, one of America's significant composers, has a large volume of work in several mediums. She has written a number of works for solo voice, but certainly her 1989 song cycle for voice and piano, *Songs from Letters* (Calamity Jane to her daughter Janey, 1880-1902) is unique. It is approximately thirteen minutes long and contains five songs. They are: "So like Your Father's" (1880); "He Never Misses" (1880); "A Man Can Love Two Women" (1880); "A Working Woman" (1882-1893); and "All I Have" (1902). The texts are taken from the diary of Martha Jane Canary Hickock (Calamity Jane). In the preface to the cycle, the composer discusses the history of Calamity Jane and how she sent her only daughter, Janey, whose father was Wild Bill Hickock, to live with her friend Jim O'Neil, whom she calls a 'normal daddy.' She supported the child by working as a gambler, trick shooter, cowhand, barmaid, stagecoach driver, and prostitute. Larsen's interest in the toughness of Calamity Jane and her attempts to explain her odd life to her daughter are always in the forefront.

The compositional style here is angular, thoughtful, highly rhythmic, with recurring motifs which connect the five songs. The songs are at times

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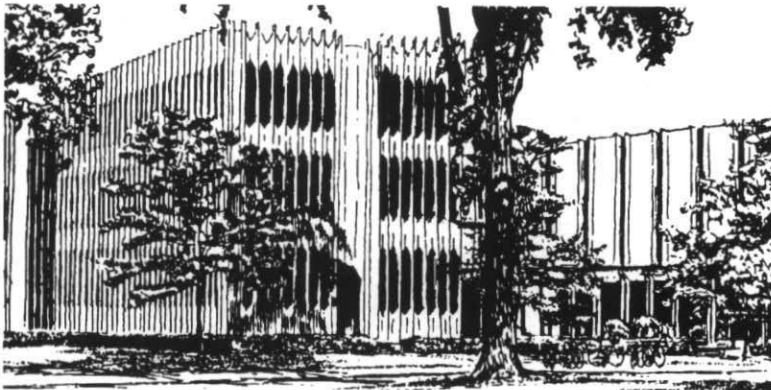
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introspective, but more often show the intensity and brashness of Calamity Jane's personality. This cycle could be sung by either soprano or mezzo, but she must have clean diction and a flexible voice capable of high drama as well as subtle nuance.

There are no extended techniques involved, but a good keen sense of pitch is essential, as is the ability to sing a high C. This cycle is a must for an advanced singer who considers acting as important as tone. It is a *tour de force* and would be a spectacular addition to a recital program. The work is available from E.C. Schirmer. ♪

Sharon Mabry first received national recognition in the 1980 National Public Radio Art of Song series when she was featured recitalist. She has performed at several international music festivals and is in demand as a recitalist and master teacher of vocal techniques. Her three recordings on the Owl and Coronet labels have received outstanding critical acclaim and international air play on public radio.

In 1986 she made her critically acclaimed New York recital debut in Merkin Concert Hall, Abraham Goodman House. In 1988 she was awarded a Solo Recitalist Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts to perform recitals of twentieth-century music with an emphasis on American composers. In 1990 she received a recording grant from the NEA to record works by Vercoe, Goossen, and Barber.

In addition to her concert career, Dr. Mabry is professor of music at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN. She holds the Bachelor of Music degree from Florida State University, where she studied with Elena Nikolaidi, and the Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from George Peabody College for Teachers, where she studied with Louis Nicholas. As a scholarship recipient to the Franz-Schubert-Institute in Austria, she studied with Walter Moore, Erik Werba, Hans Hotter, Norman Shetler, and Brigitte Fassbaender.