Cowboy Art Song: A Contextual and Musical Analysis of Libby Larsen's "Cowboy Songs"

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Cowboy Art Song:
A Contextual and Musical Analysis of Libby Larsen’s “Cowboy Songs”

by

Ann Gabrielle Richardson

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Letters
and the School of Music
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

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May 2018
ABSTRACT

This dissertation sprang from a combination of two personal interests: cowboy culture and classical art song. The union of my cowgirl heritage with my career as a classical vocalist has long fueled an interest in a particular niche of repertoire: *soprano art song with thematic connections to the North American cowboy*. A conducted state of research reveals no scholarly literature exploring this specific topic. Libby Larsen’s collection, *Cowboy Songs*, fulfills the aforementioned niche, successfully capturing the spirit, musical idioms, and cultural themes of the North American cowboy.

Chapter I lays a contextual foundation for cowboy song, providing a catalogue of critically accepted “cowboy art songs” in the classical vocal canon as well as a brief state of research, and discussing the difficulties of creating a cowboy-art song fusion. Chapter II presents a biography of Libby Larsen and establishes her compositional philosophy. Chapter III provides an analysis of *Cowboy Songs* utilizing the parameters of Larsen’s self-stated compositional philosophy. Chapter IV informally notes three additional “cowboy art songs” by Larsen, Ives, and Previn, then delivers its closing remarks. The document includes three appendices containing the full email interview with Larsen, a letter of permission to use the score, and the appropriate IRB approval letter.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincerest gratitude, wonder, and admiration to Dr. Maryann Kyle, my committee chair, advisor, studio professor, and God-friend through it all. You are single-handedly responsible for turning my musical and personal lives around; it has been an exquisite honor. Likewise, I must thank Dr. Jay Dean, for being the most inspiring professional mentor with whom I could ever have the privilege of working; it has been my highest pleasure to collaborate with you these five years and there is no question that you have drastically shaped my approach to this career. I want to thank my lovely and dedicated committee members, Dr. Douglas Rust, Dr. Christopher Goertzen, Dr. Susan Ruggiero, and Dr. Jonathan Yarrington, for your presence during this process. I further wish to thank Libby Larsen for her beautiful spirit, her enthusiastic discussion of her composition, and her willingness to aid my scholarship endeavor. Lastly, I must thank Dr. Lori Guy for her words of wisdom concerning the writing procedure and the doctoral process at large; your guidance has been invaluable, and I could not have navigated this degree without you.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To Mom, first and foremost, for inspiring my love of writing by reading stories to me every night as a child, and for being there every step of the way during our homeschooling days as well as now. To Dad, for imparting a thirst for knowledge and exploration, and for giving me the backbone to stand on my own two feet...you can now call me “Dr. Roo!” To both of you, for raising me up as a woman of faith, and for empowering me with a “cowgirl code” that has guided and defined my principles since the first time I got bucked off of Penny. To my sister Juliet and my brother Joseph, for being the best siblings I ever could ask for. To Mama Freda, who fostered my love of music. Finally, to my fiancé, the light and joy of my whole world: Brendan. This dissertation spent long hours being formed in the depths of your basement while you patiently brought me tea, talked out ideas, and encouraged me when I was stuck. This is for you.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES ........................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................ 1

I. Personal Interest .......................................................................................................................... 1

II. Catalogue of Cowboy Art Songs ............................................................................................... 2

III. State of Research ...................................................................................................................... 4

IV. Problems with Cowboy-Art Song Fusion ................................................................................... 5
   1. Genre ......................................................................................................................................... 5
   2. Nationalism .............................................................................................................................. 6
   3. Culture ...................................................................................................................................... 7
   4. Poetry ........................................................................................................................................ 8
   5. Myth ......................................................................................................................................... 9

CHAPTER II – LIBBY LARSEN .......................................................................................................... 11

I. Brief Biography ........................................................................................................................... 11

II. Compositional Philosophy .......................................................................................................... 12

CHAPTER III – CONTEXT AND ANALYSIS OF “COWBOY SONGS” ........................................... 14

I. “Bucking Bronco” (Text by Belle Star) ...................................................................................... 16

II. “Bucking Bronco” Analysis ....................................................................................................... 19

III. “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” (Text by Robert Creeley) ............................................................ 27

IV. “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” Analysis .................................................................................... 29
V. “Billy the Kid” (Anonymous text) ................................................................. 36

VI. “Billy the Kid” Analysis ................................................................................... 39

CHAPTER IV – CONCLUSIONS .............................................................................. 49

I. Additional Cowboy-Art Song Fusions ................................................................. 49

II. Concluding Remarks ......................................................................................... 51

APPENDIX A – E-mail Interview with Libby Larsen ........................................... 53

APPENDIX B – Permission to Use Score ............................................................... 57

APPENDIX C - IRB Approval Letter ....................................................................... 58

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................ 59
LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Musical Example 1 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 1-3, Acapella chant) .................................................................................................................................................. 20

Musical Example 2 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 34-35, Acapella chant returns) .......................................................................................................................... 20

Musical Example 3 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 3-4, Melodic Lydian fourths from D-flats to G-naturals) .......................................................................................... 21

Musical Example 4 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 7-8, Rhythmic setting preserves cadence and emphasizes meaning) ................................................................. 23

Musical Example 5 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 11-12, Text painting of “with a swing and a jump”) .................................................................................................. 23

Musical Example 6 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 18-19, Text painting of “a high-headed thing”) ..................................................................................................... 24

Musical Example 7 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 25-28, Text painting of the piece’s emotional and musical climax) ................................................................. 25

Musical Example 8 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 9-10, Pattern 1, saddle tune) ............................................................................................................................ 26

Musical Example 9 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 15-16, Pattern 2, eighth notes) .......................................................................................................................... 26

Musical Example 10 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 9-10, Saddle tune motive) ............................................................................................................................. 29
Musical Example 11 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 1-2, Cowboy’s lament motive) ................................................................. 29

Musical Example 12 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 3, Contrasting directions of accompanimental and melodic lines) ................................................................. 30

Musical Example 13 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 9-10, Bass line planing of 6th intervals) ................................................................. 31

Musical Example 14 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 19-20, Synthesis of melodic 6ths with accompanimental 6th planing) ................................................................. 32

Musical Example 15 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 11-12, Half steps, and F1) ..................................................................................................................... 33

Musical Example 16 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 7-8, Thick texture, active accompaniment, vocal *portamento*) ........................................................................ 33

Musical Example 17 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 12, Modified blues scale) ..................................................................................................................... 34

Musical Example 18 (*Alfred Basic Piano Library Lesson Book: Level 3*: Goodbye Old Paint theme) .................................................................................................................... 39

Musical Example 19 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 1-2, Goodbye Old Paint theme in “Billy the Kid”) ..................................................................................... 40

Musical Example 20 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 1-5, Goodbye Old Paint theme becomes “Billy the Kid” melody) ........................................................................ 40
Musical Example 21 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 19, Melody derived from opening vocal figure in mm. 3) ........................................................................................................ 41

Musical Example 22 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 20, Goodbye Old Paint bass line, retrograded in “Billy the Kid”) ........................................................................................................ 42

Musical Example 23 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 19, Eighth note “Bucking Bronco” pattern, articulated in “Billy the Kid”) ........................................................................................................ 42

Musical Example 24 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 8-11, Rhythmic setting according to natural textural stress) ........................................................................................................ 44

Musical Example 25 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 12-13, Ambiguous tonality in F major) ............................................................................................................................................... 45

Musical Example 26 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 1-3, Alternating meters 4/4, 3/4, and 4/4) ............................................................................................................................................... 46

Musical Example 27 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 6-7, Lydian mode scale on E-flat) ............................................................................................................................................... 46

Musical Example 28 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 14-17, Three sequential repetitions of “Billy was a bad man”) ........................................................................................................ 47

Musical Example 29 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 20-21, Final textual line, and Goodbye Old Paint fragment) ........................................................................................................ 48
CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

I. Personal Interest

This monograph sprang from a combination of two personal interests: cowboy culture and classical art song. A farm-raised horsewoman who has tossed lassos and worked roundups since the age of three, I grew up living the physical lifestyle of the modern cowgirl. I am also a musician on track towards a professional career in classical voice and pedagogy. The combination of these influences has long fueled an interest in a particular niche of repertoire: soprano art song with thematic connections to the North American cowboy.

A search for such repertoire has uncovered thirty-eight works by eight American twentieth-century classical composers (see next page for the full listing). Of these eight composers, six have produced critically accepted art songs that fit the aforementioned repertoire niche. However, one composer in particular stands out; she produced an engaging art song cycle that captures the spirit and musical traditions of the American West and the North American cowboy. The composer is Libby Larsen, and the cycle is \textit{Cowboy Songs} (for soprano and piano).

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1. This list includes only repertoire which was penned by twentieth-century American classical composers (such as Charles Ives and André Previn) and which may be found in the canon of American vocal art song. It does not include repertoire penned by balladeers or popular composers. Additionally, many fusion ballets, operas, and instrumental compositions exist in the classical canon (Puccini’s \textit{La fanciulla del West}; Copland’s \textit{Rodeo}; Bohmler/Kohn’s \textit{Riders of the Purple Sage}, based on Zane Grey’s novel; etc.). These fusions are relevant; however, the scope of this document is limited to the occurrence of cowboy themes in \textit{soprano art song} only, specifically in \textit{Cowboy Songs}.

II. Catalogue of Cowboy Art Songs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack Beeson</td>
<td><em>Cowboy Song</em></td>
<td>1978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth Bingham</td>
<td><em>Five Cowboy Songs</em></td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Farwell</td>
<td><em>The Lone Prairie</em></td>
<td>1905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar J. Fox</td>
<td><em>Rounded Up in Glory</em></td>
<td>1923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Cowboy’s Lament</em></td>
<td>1923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Old Chisholm Trail</em></td>
<td>1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Greer County</em></td>
<td>1925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>A Home on the Range</em></td>
<td>1925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Come All Ye Jolly Cowboys</em></td>
<td>1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Old Paint</em></td>
<td>1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Texas Cowboy’s Last Song</em></td>
<td>1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Whoopie ti yi yo</em></td>
<td>1927</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Jesse James</em></td>
<td>1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>A Prisoner for Life</em></td>
<td>1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Sam Bass</em></td>
<td>1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Prairie Night Song</em></td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David W. Guion</td>
<td><em>The Bold Vaquero</em></td>
<td>1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Cowboy’s Meditation</em></td>
<td>1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Texas Cowboy’s Meditation</em></td>
<td>1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>All Day on the Prairie</em></td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Home on the Range</em></td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Roy Bean</em></td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
McCaffie’s Confession 1930
When the Work’s All Done this Fall 1931
O Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie 1931
The Cowboy’s Dream 1933
Little Joe, the Wrangler 1933
Ol’ Paint 1933
Ride, Cowboy, Ride! 1934
My Cowboy Love-Song 1936
Carry Me Home to the Lone Prairie 1937
Song of the Whip 1942
Roll Along, Little Dogies 1947
Pinto 1948

Charles Ives  Charlie Rutlage 1920/21
Libby Larsen  Cowboy Songs 1979
  Songs from Letters 1989
André Previn  Sallie Chisum Remembers Billy the Kid 1994
III. State of Research

There are two sources in particular containing discussions related to Libby Larsen and her cycle *Cowboy Songs*. The first is Glenda Denise Secrest’s 2000 doctoral dissertation from The University of Memphis, *Songs from Letters and Cowboy Songs by Libby Larsen: Two Different Approaches to Western Mythology and Western Mythological Figures*. The second is Denise Von Glahn’s 2017 book *Libby Larsen: Composing an American Life*, published by The University of Illinois Press. Secrest examines *Cowboy Songs* as feminist expressions in art song, and her analysis is quite brief. By contrast, this dissertation focuses on the set in terms of its “cowboy-art song” context, utilizing analytical parameters described by Libby Larsen herself. Any modest overlap with Secrest’s work is cited, and the full credit given to Secrest. Von Glahn’s book, while not directly cited in this text, is the definitive biography of Libby Larsen; as such, it is included in the bibliography.
IV. Problems with Cowboy-Art Song Fusion

In a “classical” sense, the American vocal canon consists of art songs, which are associated with high poetry, Western-European compositional styles, and venues such as concert halls, vocal literature courses, and voice studios. Cowboy songs, by contrast, exist far outside this canon, and are largely associated with saddle-tramp poetry and commercial singing cowboy figures such as Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. As a potential part of the canon, cowboy songs have been either romanticized or ignored completely.

Why does so little satisfactory “cowboy art song” exist in the classical vocal canon? Why are there so few fusions of the two? Are they simply incompatible?

1. Genre

The Oxford (Grove) Music Dictionary defines art song as “A song intended for the concert repertory, as opposed to a traditional or popular song.”\(^3\) Cowboy song, however, is defined as “An American occupational folk song of working cowboys.”\(^4\) The implication is that one niche is musicological, the other is ethno-musicological; one is considered to be high art, and the other is considered to be humble musical vernacular.\(^5\)

American art song is tied closely to European styles, specifically to the traditions of German Lieder and French mélodie. American art song composers of the late 1800s

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and early 1900s looked to Europe for their muse, traveling abroad to study, and composing in those styles upon their return.\textsuperscript{6} Cowboy songs’ closest European musical kin were English sea chanteys, from which they occasionally borrowed at the time; these sea chanteys themselves, however, had long since fallen out of use by the time cowboy songs began to appear.\textsuperscript{7} It took years before composers began seeking a basic American sound, much less one that included western idioms; indeed, such a sound print did not begin to materialize in bulk until the mid-decades of the 1900s, mostly in the works of Aaron Copland and Virgil Thompson.\textsuperscript{8}

\section*{2. Nationalism}

Nationalism was a booming topic of musical conversation during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, specifically concerning what constituted American art song. As Charles Hamm stated it:

“What many classical composers of the time period came to consider as distinctively American music was not essentially folk music, but music by immigrant urban Jewish composers, like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, drawing on black, Jewish, Irish, and Italian

\begin{itemize}
\item[6.\textsuperscript{]}] Carol Kimball, \textit{Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature} (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005), 245.
\item[7.\textsuperscript{]}] Grove Music Online, “Cowboy song,” ibid.
\end{itemize}
styles, accepted both at home and abroad as the most distinctive American music of its time.”

Many composers of the era focused on aspects of the east-coast panorama, capturing pop, jazz, ragtime, etc., largely ignoring the cultures brewing in the American West.

3. Culture

Residents of the generally urban northeast coast were so far removed in both lifestyle and geography from the isolated western prairies that they had tremendous difficulty grasping the-day day-to realities of such a culture, and vice versa. Composers who were interested in setting cowboy song were dependent upon “archival rhetoric” for their source material: i.e., dime novels such as Owen Wister’s 1902 The Virginian, newspaper essays such as Wister’s influential 1895 “The Evolution of the Cowpuncher”, and personal accounts of those who had physically traveled the western geography (the collections of Jack Thorp). Other examples of skewed archival rhetoric were the new media of theatrical “frontier melodrama” (produced by figures such as Frank Mayo and William “Buffalo Bill” Cody) and moving pictures such as the silent film The Great Train Robbery.

_________________________

9. Raessler, 46.
10. Ibid, 48.
11. Michael Slowik, “Capturing the American Past: The Cowboy Song and the Archive,” The Journal of American Culture, Music Periodicals Database 35, no. 3 (September 2012): 208. Note: Wister’s 1902 novel is considered to be the first “authentic” Western. In style, it is a “novel of manners”; the prose is highly romanticized, and modern criticism has noted a marked European influence in terms of social order and Anglo-elitism. It so impacted east-coast perception of cowboy culture that it was subsequently adapted into a play in 1904; along with silent film The Great Train Robbery, it was responsible for kick-starting the media trend that would result in the mid-century commercialized “singing cowboy” brand.

To make matters more complicated, cowboy culture was nothing like the mythological representations of Sam Peckinpah. The melting pot of the late 1800s North American cowboy culture was diverse, and this diversity naturally extended to the music. Additionally, the very term “cowboy” carried negative cultural undertones. Archival rhetoric and popular media had rendered the word offensive; it came to represent people living in the West who were the lowest of the low – bums, drunkards, lazy cowhands, and outlaws. For an example, see the following quote from a September 1879 article by the New York Police Gazette:

“[The cowboy’s] home is in the saloon houses. He soon gets gloriously drunk and then begins to yell like a wild Indian and shoots off his big revolvers promiscuously into the crowd. He is little else than a crazy demon at such times and woe betide the man who crosses his path.”

4. Poetry

Art song and cowboy song draw from very different poetic traditions. Art song is largely based on classic literature and the works of High Romantic poets; cowboy song pulls from balladeer and improvisatory traditions, and is stigmatized as a “less educated” tradition of poetry. For example, consider the elegant verses of William Blake alongside the “Whoopie ti yo!” rhymes of Baxter Black: many a casual listener would say that there

13. Ibid, 11-12.

is no comparison at all.

Classic poetry is well documented in writing, however the poetic source material for cowboy songs is largely preserved via the oral tradition.\textsuperscript{15} Guy Logsdon notes that “song catchers” such as Jack Thorp, John Lomax, Frank Dobie, Ina Sires, and Charles Siringo were forced to edit their field collections because oral retellings had distorted or roughened the stories.\textsuperscript{16} This “doctoring” resulted in a branded perception of the North American cowboy; as Mark Fenster remarks:

“Lomax’s work helped to define the romantic nature of the singing cowboy figure that was to follow in mass media. [His] romantic musings on the cowboy followed the popular spirit and extended this mythic quality to the cowboy songs.”\textsuperscript{17}

5. Myth

Lastly, what Fenster called the “mythic quality” of the North American cowboy culture complicates attempts to set aspects of it to music. As William Savage stated, “The cowboy is today less important for what he \textit{was} than for what he is \textit{thought} to have been.”\textsuperscript{18} Images of the working cowboy were commercially crafted, and they morphed

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} John O. West, “Jack Thorp and John Lomax: Oral or Written Transmission?”, \textit{Western Folklore} 26, no. 2 (April 1967): 113.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Scott B. Spencer, \textit{The Ballad Collectors of North America: How Gathering Folksongs Transformed Academic Thought and American Identity} (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 51.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Mark Fenster, "Preparing the Audience, Informing the Performers: John A. Lomax and Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads," \textit{American Music} 7, no. 3 (1989): 266.
  
\end{itemize}
into a Hollywood cliché: the knight in shining chaps on a charging steed. “Hi-ho Silver, away!” indeed. To the academic Eastern mentality, this invented culture lured the imagination with tales of train robberies, gun-slinging showdowns, moonlit nights on cattle drives, range wars and cattle barons, etc. However, these images ignored the variety, the realism, and the simple day-to-day experiences of cowboy. With such a mythical perception surrounding cowboy culture, perhaps it is no wonder that few composers attempted to work such material into art song.

This document now will turn to a thematic and musical analysis of one particular collection that does function successfully as a cowboy-art song fusion: Libby Larsen’s *Cowboy Songs*. In order to grasp why and how this set “works” so effectively, it is necessary to understand Larsen’s musical background, including her exposure to certain musical influences as well as her personal compositional philosophies.
CHAPTER II – LIBBY LARSEN

I. Brief Biography

Libby Larsen was born in 1950 in Wilmington, Delaware. She attended a Catholic grade school, where she developed the perspective that music is “logic of the mind”. She naturally composed music throughout her childhood, later proceeding to study composition at the University of Minnesota under Dominick Argento. She further crafted her skills under the tutelage of Eric Stokes, who, according to Larsen, impressed upon her the importance of utilizing her surroundings for inspiration: i.e., scenery, objects, sounds, and colors. Her works, spanning solo and chamber vocal music to eclectic symphonic and operatic works, are now among the most prolifically performed repertoire in the United States, securing her place as the representational female composer of contemporary American music. She is the first woman to hold the position of resident composer with a major orchestra, and her dedicated support of American composers resulted in her co-founding of the American Composer’s Forum. Artists across the globe have commissioned her works; additionally, she was awarded the George Peabody Medal for her passionate championing of American music.


20. Strand, 52.


23. Ibid.
II. Compositional Philosophy

Larsen adheres to progressive views on music and composing. She defines the basic elements of music as “pitch, motion, architecture, and emotional impact”.24 Those definitions are as follows in Strand’s interview. Pitch, she defines as a frequency, pure and unmoldable in itself but subject to interpretation in the approach and execution. Motion is her definition of the concepts of meter/rhythm under the considerations that 1) human culture is always in motion, never in strict time, and 2) motion is warped depending on your cultural perception. Architecture is her word for “structures,” the traditional forms of which she contends are mostly irrelevant in today’s musical society. Emotional impact describes her belief that music, if created in a culture only to be heard, is not music at all.

To clarify the last term, Larsen emphatically makes the point that music evolves due to culture more so than due to performance practice; she maintains that music is emotionally expounded from within the heart of a culture:

“A culture evolves the music it needs in order to reflect itself immediately and across time.”25 “I believe that the music that grows over time in a culture grows out of the language those people speak. Instruments evolve out of a culture in order to express the culture through sound.”26


25. Libby Larsen, E-mail Interview with Ann G. Richardson, September 11, 2017.

In terms of her use of tonality, intervallic treatment, and harmonic construction, Larsen says the following:

“My music is built around tonal areas that are vaguely modal and reinforced through pedal tones in the bass. 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.” 27

These particular views, combined with her four compositional elements, are only a sampling of her “music as a logic of mind and culture” approach to composition. Her compositional tools can be summarized as the following: horizontal conceptions (line/harmony), pitch (melody/intervallic content), motion (meter/rhythm), architecture (structure/form), and emotional impact (communication of culture through sound).

In our email correspondence, I asked Ms. Larsen if she might provide an example of how these tools manifested themselves in Cowboy Songs. She replied:

“Actually, I would be interested in hearing you discuss how these terms are dealt with in the songs. I would think that your discussion would yield some interesting content for your thesis!” 28

Thus, the compositional tools discussed above will form the foundation for the following musical analysis of the Cowboy Songs cycle.

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28. Larsen, E-mail Interview with Ann G. Richardson
CHAPTER III –

CONTEXT AND ANALYSIS OF “COWBOY SONGS”

*Cowboy Songs* (1980) is a set of three narrative character pieces utilizing cowboy/cowgirl poetry to illustrate various flavors of cowboy culture and the American West. While not an epic song cycle in the sense of Schubert’s *Winterreise* or even Larsen’s *Try Me Good King*, the seven-minute set is cohesive, and functions most effectively when presented in its entirety. From Larsen’s website notes:

“I wrote these [*Cowboy Songs*] for Jeannie Brindley Barnett to sing for a concert in 1979. The 3 poems made a nice set, suggesting a narrative without specifying one, giving me the opportunity to begin working with American English as a source of musical syntax and shape.”

29

At the onset of our email correspondence, I enquired of Ms. Larsen what she finds to be most compelling about the American musical vernacular. She responded:

“American English and the natural music it generates. The [*Cowboy Songs*] didn’t evolve. They came naturally from my work with [their] texts. I did want to set a character for each song (story song, blues in six, patter song) and enjoyed working this out… These songs are the first of my art songs to explore the music of text within its own context.”

30

I further asked if she considered *Cowboy Songs* to be a particular genre; she replied:


30. Larsen, *E-mail Interview with Ann G. Richardson*
“Definitely art songs… Art Song is a discreet, focused consideration of the quality and meaning of words by allowing music to interact with them. An art song is the product of one composer’s interaction with the words.”

Ms. Larsen’s opinion of what constitutes art song opens up a much wider interpretation of the term than does the limited nomenclature presented by the Grove Online Dictionary. For Larsen’s interpretation is driven by what I will call *textual experience*: “A discreet, focused consideration of the quality and meaning of words by allowing music to interact with them” (refer to previous quote).

This textual experience is the vital parameter by which *Cowboy Songs* is safeguarded from romanticization. When addressing the tendency to romanticize cowboy culture and American Western themes, Larsen had this to say:

“In many ways, the ‘old’ west exists presently and is very real. I think that trite and romantic depictions of the “Old West” are creations of 150 years of commercial media content. The West I experience is honest and full of characters. Since my definition of composing is “making an order of sound in time and space in order to communicate what it is like to be alive”, I would not romanticize, rather I try to speak through what is alive in the subject matter.”

Taken together, Larsen’s perspectives on composition and textual experience allow for the preservation of folk character in art song. This refreshing freedom enables the *Cowboy Song* set to function effectively – and honestly – as a “cowboy-art song” cycle.

31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
I. “Bucking Bronco” (Text by Belle Star)

*My true love is a rider, wild broncos he breaks,*  
*Though he promised to quit for my sake.*  
*It’s one foot in the stirrup and the saddle put on,*  
*With a swing and a jump he is mounted and gone.*

*The first time I met him – it was early one spring –*  
*A’ riding a bronco, a high-headed thing.*  
*The next time I saw him, ‘twas late in the fall,*  
*A’ swinging the girls at Tomlinson’s ball.*

*He gave me some presents, among them a ring;*  
*The return that I gave him was a far better thing:*  
*A young maiden’s heart, –*  
*I’ll have you all know, that he won it by riding his bucking bronco.*

*Now all young maidens, wheree’er you reside,*  
*Beware of the cowboy who swings rawhide,*  
*He’ll court you and pet you and leave you to go,*  
*In the spring, up the trail, on his bucking bronco.*

“Bucking Bronco” is Larsen’s setting of a cowboy ballad attributed to the notorious cowgirl figure Belle Starr. Born Myra Belle Shirley, of Carthage, Missouri, she moved to Texas and scouted Union troop positions for the Confederate army throughout the course of the Civil War. During this time, she frequently rode with the James brothers, William “the Kid” Bonney, and Cole Younger. Belle Star was privy to a classical education in reading, writing, arithmetic, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, piano, and poetry; outside of stealing a horse, she was never convicted of criminal activity. She was killed in Oklahoma in 1889 by an unidentified gunman in a case that remains unsolved.

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Jack Thorp recorded “Bucking Bronco”, also known as “My Love is a Rider”, in its original form and sanitized it for popular consumption; he was the first to attribute “Bucking Bronco” to Belle Starr (there was another mention of authorship by James Hatch in 1882, but this claim is doubtful). John Lomax, in contrast to Thorp, recorded two additional verses and left the poem in its suggestive state.

My love is a rider, wild broncos he breaks,
Though he’s promised to quit it, just for my sake.
He ties up one foot, the saddle puts on,
With a swing and a jump he’s mounted and gone.

The first time I met him, ’twas early one spring,
Riding a bronco, a high-headed thing.
He tipped me a wink as he gaily did go;
For he wished me to look at his bucking bronco.

The next time I saw him ’twas late in the fall,
Swinging the girls at Tomlinson’s ball.
He laughed and he talked as we danced to and fro,
Promised never to ride on another bronco.

He made me some presents, among them a ring;
The return that I made him was a far better thing;
’Twas a young maiden’s heart; I’d have you all know,
He’s won it by riding his bucking bronco.

My love has a gun, and that gun he can use,
But he’s quit his gun fighting as well as the booze;
And he’s sold him his saddle, his spurs and his rope;
And there’s no more cow-punching, and that’s what I hope.

My love has a gun that has gone to the bad,
Which makes poor old Jimmy feel pretty damn sad;
For the gun it shoots high and the gun it shoots low,
And it wabbles about like a bucking bronco.


36. West, Ibid.
Now, all you young maidens, where’er you reside,
Beware the cowboy who swings the rawhide,
He’ll court you and lay you, and leave you and go
In the spring up the trail on his bucking bronco.\textsuperscript{37}

The “rider” referred to in this text is most likely Cole Younger, and the “poor old Jimmy” is most likely the guerilla rider Jim Reed, Belle Starr’s husband. Cole Younger met Belle Starr after she married Reed; the two had an affair that resulted in the birth of an illegitimate daughter, to whom Belle bequeathed the name Pearl “Younger”.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38} Glenn, 68-71.
II. “Bucking Bronco” Analysis

In analyzing the first movement of *Cowboy Songs*, the first consideration to pop off the page is the chant-like opening of “Bucking Bronco”. Larsen’s grade school educational experience with Gregorian chant helped established her sense of what she calls “motion”, or “timeless flow”, in rhythm:

“...I learned Gregorian Chant which is free of meter. The rhythm has everything to with the flow of the Chant, as it exists in the space in which it is being performed. So I had a very solid grounding in timeless flow... I became really fascinated with real theoretical questions derived from Western notation: How does time function in a finite section called a measure and given a meter? So I became fascinated with rhythm through a natural grounding in Chant.”

The first two and a half bars of the piece establish an acapella chant in D-flat major, in the time signature of 6/4 (see Musical Example 1).

39. Kessler.
Musical Example 1 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 1-3, Acapella chant)

The piece’s remaining melody derives its motion and intervallic structure from this chant.

The chant returns in measures 34-35 and 39-40, musically bookending the final verse:

Musical Example 2 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 34-35, Acapella chant returns)
As per the horizontal nature of chant, the initial bars establish the linear flow of the movement. In terms of intervalllic content and harmonic support, fourths and thirds make up the bulk of the movement, as per Larsen’s previously cited comments: “I choose the interval, I like Lydian fourths and major thirds – and develop the meaning of that interval musically throughout a piece.” Lydian mode is one of the common modes of chant; Lydian fourths materialize melodically in the bass line as augmented fourths from D-flat to G-natural, in combinations of octaves and thirds (see Musical Example 3):

![Musical Example 3](image)

Musical Example 3 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 3-4, Melodic Lydian fourths from D-flats to G-naturals)

To briefly recall, Larsen’s perception of “motion” (rhythm/meter) is twofold: 1) human culture is always in motion, never in strict time, and 2) motion is warped depending on cultural perception. The overarching meters in “Bucking Bronco” are constantly in motion, warping between 6/4, 3/4, and 4/4 time signatures every two to four measures throughout the piece. The third to last measure, measure 42, includes the only exception: a single 5/4 bar. While the quarter note is steady, the alternations between the free chant sections and the strict tempo sections form a rhythmic, architectural rondo: free
(m. 1-3) – strict (m. 3-23) – accelerando (m. 23-30) – strict (m. 31-33) – free (m. 34-35) – strict (m. 36-38) – free (m. 39-40) – strict (m. 41-end). Or, simplified: AB-CB-AB-AB.

There are many layers of motion working simultaneously: while the meters work in combination with the steady pulse, and the free chants alternates with strict tempos, the internal rhythm is also in flux, playing heavily with the triplet-duple juxtaposition. As Cowboy Songs was Larsen’s first deliberate foray into setting the subtleties of text, her rhythmic choices are largely based on the natural rhythms of the cowboy poetry (note: the symbols ‘ = stressed, and ‘ = unstressed):

```
My’ true’ love’ / is’ a’ ri’ der’ /
Wild’ bron’ / cos’ he’ breaks’ /
Though’ he’ pro’ / mised’ to’ quit’ / for’ my’ sake’ /
It’ s’ one’ foot’ / in’ the’ stir’ rup’ /
And’ the’ sad’ / dle’ put’ on’ /
With’ a’ swing’ / and’ a’ jump’ / he’ is’ moun’ / ted’ and’ gone’ /
```

In order to emphasize meaning, Larsen alters the rhythmic stress of certain words (for example, “my” in the third line). The general setting reflects the text’s natural cadence: even though the rhythmic articulation seems reversed on phrases such as “promised to quit”, both the placement of the syllable “pro-” on the downbeat and the release of “quit” before the eighth rest serve to preserve the stress.
Besides masterfully setting the textual cadence, Larsen also paints the text with a careful hand. Three notable examples emerge. The first is her setting of “with a swing and a jump”, which she fittingly writes with 16\textsuperscript{th} notes and an interval jump of a 7\textsuperscript{th}:

Musical Example 5 (Larsen, \textit{Cowboy Songs}, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 11-12, Text painting of “with a swing and a jump”)

The second text-painting example is her treatment of “a high-headed thing”, referring to the bronco her love is riding; here, the pitch sweeps up to the piece’s second highest note:
Musical Example 6 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 18-19, Text painting of “a high-headed thing”)

The third example is the emotional (or sexual, considering the suggestive original nature of the text) climax of the piece. It is painted via the stretched intervals on “far”, the naturalization of “heart”, the rising sequential tessitura, the crescendo to the fermata, and the occurrence of the word “heart” on the highest note of the piece:
Finally, Larsen’s accompanimental patterns are simple and yet highly detailed: most notes bear some instruction on preferred articulation. There are two main patterns. The first is a saddle tune pattern, which has a certain “Happy Trails” feel (i.e., an octave downbeat with a triplet feel and an arching structure; see Musical Example 8):

Musical Example 7 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 25-28, Text painting of the piece’s emotional and musical climax)
This motive repeats in variations throughout measures 3-15, then transitions to a new eighth note pattern in measures 16-28. This pattern occurs three times in succession, alternating articulations according to the emotional impact of the character: staccato during the excited “The first time I saw him” verse, legato during the seductive “The next time I saw him” verse, and erratically combined with the triplet figure from the saddle tune for the piece’s climax (see Musical Example 9). Measure 29 is acapella; however, at measure 30, the saddle tune recommences and continues until the end of the piece.

Musical Example 9 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 15-16, Pattern 2, eighth notes)

These two patterns function as cyclic unifiers in the remaining pieces. In particular, the saddle motive forms the basic accompanimental cell in “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly”; this document will now move to a discussion of that movement.
III. “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” (Text by Robert Creeley)

_Lift me into heaven slowly,_
_Cause my back’s sore and my mind’s thoughtful,_
_And I’m not even sure I want to go._  

The second movement of the set, “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly”, is Larsen’s “blues in six” characterization of a cowboy’s lament. The song is a re-titling of American poet Robert Creeley’s poem, “Sufi Sam Christian”. Creeley (1926 – 2005) was one of the leading figures in transitional poetry during the 20th century. He is now most remembered for his association with the Black Mountain Poets of Black Mountain College, North Carolina. This group pursued innovative poetical techniques, and Creeley in particular experimented with “projective verse”, or rather, free verse that takes form as the composition progresses. “Sufi Sam Christian” itself is a brief and poignant example of projective verse; of its origin, Creeley said the following:

“The poem itself was written in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, March 15 1976—and is an echoing sense of myself as generic Christian in this various Sufi/Buddhist world-or just this very different world, both culturally and religiously.”

On integrating this particular text into Cowboy Songs, Libby Larsen remarked:

“The text again presented itself as really part of the Cowboy set. It doesn’t

40. Larsen, _Cowboy Songs._
41. Larsen, _E-mail Interview with Ann G. Richardson._
say anything about being a cowboy but it does talk about the Sufi idea of being there and not there. It really presented itself as really appropriate for the "Cowboy Songs too."  

44. Ibid, 49.
IV. “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” Analysis

Robert Creeley himself was familiar with jazz and blues styles, and Larsen intelligently depicts this familiarity with the style by infusing the traditional cowboy’s lament with a blues-in-six feel. This lament is cyclically linked by a variation of the saddle tune motive found in “Bucking Bronco” (see Musical Examples 10 and 11):

Musical Example 10 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Bucking Bronco”, mm. 9-10, Saddle tune motive)

Musical Example 11 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Lift Me”, mm. 1-2, Cowboy’s lament motive)

The “Bucking Bronco” motive is in 3/4, whereas the “Lift Me” motive is in 6/4; in essence, Larsen simply elongates the rhythmic motion. They are both in D-flat major; both begin with a downbeat on D-flat; and both downbeats are followed by upward triplet gestures that are punctuated by thirds and Lydian fourths. In the case of “Lift Me”, the

45. Ekbert Faas and Maria Trombacco, Robert Creeley: A Biography (McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2001). Note: All remarks on Creeley’s biographical information are detailed in this source.
Lydian fourth is an augmented fourth from A-flat to D natural, and the third is from D-flat to F. The last note of both gestures is an A-flat, which leads back to the tonic.

Larsen carefully depicts the concept of space in this short piece. She emphasized the importance of utilizing space to communicate experience:

“Since my definition of composing is “making an order of sound in time and space in order to communicate what it is like to be alive”, I would not romanticize, rather I try to speak through what is alive in the subject matter.”

This text is very much alive, and spatially, the music gives it animation. Set at quarter = 52, the tempo has impulsion yet is languid, as though the music is pushing its way through an ethereal space in slow motion. The accompaniment wafts upwards, while in contrast, the melodic line most often drifts downward, illustrating deliberate spatial directions in reaction to the emotional impact/conflict of interest (“Lift me into heaven slowly…[but] I’m not even sure I want to go.”):

Musical Example 12 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Lift Me”, mm. 3, Contrasting directions of accompanimental and melodic lines)

46. Larsen, E-mail Interview with Ann G. Richardson.
Larsen’s treatment of space also extends to her choice of intervallic content. The preferred interval for this movement is that of the spatially open 6th. It occurs throughout in the accompaniment, and is established initially in the second two notes of the first measure (the A-flat to F), the chord immediately following (C to A-flat), and in the second measure in a semi-planing gesture (refer back to Musical Example 11). It appears in the vocal line in measure 3 (which outlines sixths in its descent; refer back to Musical Example 12), in measures 7 and 9 (which feature multiple G to E natural intervals), and once again in measure 15 (a re-statement of measure 3). Measure 9 also features the interval in the bass line of the accompaniment in full planing (see Musical Example 13).

Musical Example 13 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Lift Me”, mm. 9-10, Bass line planing of 6th intervals)

The final two bars of the piece find both the upward 6th planing motion in the accompaniment as well as the downward outlining of the 6th in the melody from measure 3. This synthesis, besides being musically satisfying, illustrates the emotional impact of the end of the piece. The musical directions are now no longer opposing, but integrated – both the spatial and emotional conflicts have been resolved (see Musical Example 14):
The other critical interval for this movement is that of the half step, and it functions in two ways. Firstly, it appears as a cross-relationship, further providing architectural and harmonic support for the emotional conflict. This occurs in the first measure (refer back to Musical Example 11) with a D-natural being immediately followed by a D-flat. The particular utilization of the half step as a cross-relationship is restricted to the accompaniment; it does not occur in the vocal line, or in the vocal line against the accompaniment.

The half step also takes on the function of a leading tone, which itself implies the necessity for a resolution. Larsen deliberately brings out the textual desires for release and a sense of indecisive yearning by utilizing the leading tone half step intervals on words such as “slowly, “cause my back’s sore” (two half step moves, one on “cause my” and one on “back’s sore”), “thoughtful”, and “want to go” (see Musical Example 15). As a point of interest, the lowest pitch in the piece is the F1 found in measure 12, which serves to illustrate the depth of feeling and the emotional state of the text “And I’m not even sure I want to go”:

Musical Example 14 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 19-20, Synthesis of melodic 6ths with accompanimental 6th planing)
Additionally, the architecture of the piece is a basic ABA’; the B section is in C major, a half step lower than the A sections, which are in D-flat major. Even in form, the middle section develops with a heightened tension and a yearning, unsettled emotional state; the half step resolution back up to D-flat major for the A’ section is thus highly soothing.

The B section features the thickest texture and the most active accompaniment, as well as the very specific articulation of a vocal *portamento*:

Musical Example 16 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me”, mm. 7-8, Thick texture, active accompaniment, vocal *portamento*)
In addition, the B section’s vocal line sits in a higher tessitura, which is fitting as it musically sets an unsettling sense of rising anxiety and conflict in the text. The text is repeated three times, once per section. Emotionally, then, Larsen’s musical arch communicates the emotional impact as follows: meditative and mildly curious → anxious and conflicted → peaceful and accepting.

As a self-stated “blues-in-six”, the traditional blues scale Db-E-Gb-G-Ab-B-Db is found in the combined horizontal wash of the accompaniment and vocal lines. The scale is found in a modified state throughout, though it is most fully represented in its transposed state in the C major section in measure 12 (see Musical Example 17).

Musical Example 17 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Lift Me”, mm. 12, Modified blues scale)

This movement is possibly the most interesting one of the set. It is set simply, yet brilliantly, and the result is highly effective and moving. In our correspondence, Larsen related a special anecdote that she recalled with regard to this movement:
“Some years after I composed these songs, I received a pleasant letter from Robert Creeley. I was relieved to be affirmed that my depiction of space – using tempo, texture and tessitura – seemed to intrigue him.”47

Robert Creeley said of Larsen’s art song setting of the poem:

“I remember the setting she gave several of my poems [among them “Sufi Sam Christian”] some years ago – fresh and good-natured, and far from the usual “art song” in character. I was grateful!”48

47. Larsen, E-mail Interview with Ann G. Richardson.

48. Secrest, 49.
V. “Billy the Kid” (Anonymous text)

Billy was a bad man, carried a big gun,
He was always after good folks and he kept them on the run.
He shot one ev’ry morning to make his morning meal,
Let a man sass him, he was sure to feel his steel.
He kept folks in hot water, stole from ev’ry stage,
When he was full of liquor he was always in a rage.
He kept things boilin’ over, he stayed out in the brush,
When he was full of deadeye, other folks ‘ld better hush.
Billy was a bad man!
But one day he met a man a whole lot bidder,
And now he’s dead, and we ain’t none the sadder.49

The final piece of the set is Larsen’s driving setting of an anonymous text entitled “Billy the Kid.” The song describes, in narrative form, the notorious Western gunslinger William Henry McCarty Jr. (aliases Henry Antrim and William H. Bonney) during his outlaw days. Born on November 23, 1859, and raised during his youth in New York City, Billy the Kid migrated west and soon inspired an outlaw legend that has been both revered and distorted through archival romanticism, cultural expectation, and oral tradition. Billy was in the unique situation of understanding exactly how to manipulate the phenomenon of mythical romanticization for his own purposes: he self-crafted a fearsome reputation, one heightened by the juxtaposition of his coldblooded viciousness onto the projected image of the clean-cut, staunchly dressed, artistically cultured, well-educated young man. Many embroidered versions of his death exist, but the agreed-upon fact is that his former friend, Sheriff Pat Garrett, gunned him down near Fort Sumner on July 14, 1881.50

49. Larsen, Cowboy Songs.

50. Charles A. Siringo, History of 'Billy the Kid' (University of New Mexico Press, 2000).
As Thorp and Lomax both sanitized the original language of Belle Star’s poem “Bucking Bronco” to make it fit for public consumption, likewise Libby Larsen has sanitized the original text of this anonymous poem. Recall the earlier discussion in Chapter 1 about the dissuasive roughness and the unsavory perception of cowboy culture. This particular poem is just such an example of a text that would have discouraged many a composer from attempting to set it into art song.

Billy was a bad man
And carried a big gun,
He was always after Greasers
And kept ’em on the run.

He shot one every morning
For to make his morning meal.
And let a white man sass him,
He was shore to feel his steel.

He kept folks in hot water,
And he stole from many a stage,
And when he was full of liquor
He was always in a rage.

But one day he met a man
Who was a whole lot badder
And now he’s dead
And we ain’t none the sadder.51

There are two versions of this text; the second integrates the following additional verse before “But one day he met a man”:

He kept things boilin’ over,
He stayed out in the brush,
And when he was full of deadeye,
T’other folkses better hush.

The primary questionable aspect of this poem is the overtly racist overtone, as illustrated in the expressions “Let a white man sass him”, and “He was always after Greasers”. “Greasers” was a term utilized in the Vagrancy Act of 1855, known also as the “Greaser Act”: this act discriminated against all persons associated with Spanish or Indian blood; in addition, it discouraged the public use of Spanish in most trading towns.\(^{52}\) By historical record, however, Billy the Kid specifically targeting neither demographic.\(^{53}\) Regardless of the details, Larsen smoothes the text, changing “greasers” to “good folks” and replacing the phrase “Let a white man sass him” to the generic and unspecific “Let a man sass him.” Other than a few minor alterations of words to fit her chosen rhythmic setting, Larsen leaves the rest of the poem untouched.

The poem as a whole is, naturally, highly romanticized: it is the tall tale, the legend, the archival rhetoric. The poem’s fictive, yet gripping, exaggeration that Billy the Kid killed “one [man] every morning for to make his morning meal” is the natural product of Billy’s own self-crafting; he claimed that he killed twenty-one men, one for every year of his short life. In reality, the record regarding Billy’s victims specifies five murders at the hand of Billy himself: Frank “Windy” Cahill, Sheriff William Brady, Joe “Texas Red” Grant, Deputy James William Bell, and Deputy Ameredith Robert B. “Pecos Bob” Olinger (deputy to Sheriff Pat Garrett).\(^{54}\)


\(^{53}\) Ibid, 17.

\(^{54}\) Siringo, Ibid.
VI. “Billy the Kid” Analysis

In this final movement of Cowboy Songs, Larsen carefully integrates the popular cowboy song “Goodbye Old Paint” (also known as “I’m Leaving Cheyenne”) into the main theme of the piece.55 “Goodbye Old Paint” may be heard in the 1937 film Sing Cowboy Sing; in the film it is sung by Tex Ritter, a noted cowboy balladeer (media link in footnote).56 Musical Example 18 provides the basic tune of “Goodbye Old Paint”, transcribed from the Alfred’s Basic Piano Library Lesson Book: Level 3.

Musical Example 18 (Alfred Basic Piano Library Lesson Book: Level 3: Goodbye Old Paint theme)

Compare the melodic line of “Goodbye Old Paint” to the opening two accompanimental bars of “Billy the Kid” (see Musical Example 19):


Architecturally, “Billy the Kid” is a clever example of Larsen’s use of invertible counterpoint: just as the Goodbye Old Paint melody becomes the *accompanimental* theme, the accompanimental line for Goodbye Old Paint likewise becomes the *melody*:

Musical Example 20 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 1-5, Goodbye Old Paint theme becomes “Billy the Kid” melody)
The themes continue to warp and invert throughout the piece. In addition, the vocal figure presented in measure 3 becomes the musical motive from which the rest of the melody is derived (refer back to Musical Example 20 for the original motive) and varied. In Musical Example 21, the melody has been modified in intervallic content, and the rhythm is altered; additionally, on “a whole lot badder”, the pitch content of the original motive is retrograded. Despite these variations, the sense of the original vocal figure in bar 3 is preserved and recognizable.

Musical Example 21 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 19, Melody derived from opening vocal figure in mm. 3)

There are two further examples of thematic architecture. Firstly, Larsen retrogrades the bass line figure of “Goodbye Old Paint” (see Musical Example 22). Secondly, the eighth note pattern from movement one of the set, “Bucking Bronco”, reappears within the internal motion of the accompaniment in “Billy the Kid”, functioning as a subtle, but present, cyclic unifier (see Musical Example 23).
Musical Example 22 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 20, Goodbye Old Paint bass line, retrograded in “Billy the Kid”)

Musical Example 23 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 19, Eighth note “Bucking Bronco” pattern, articulated in “Billy the Kid”)

Textually, Larsen sets the narrative as an emotionally excited pattern song: “I did want to set a character for each song (story song, blues in six, patter song).” She has a wealth of material to work with in this text: the poem has the same number of verses as Larsen’s adapted version of “Bucking Bronco”, and it is almost exactly five times the length of Creeley’s poem “Sufi Sam Christian.” Larsen’s decision to set the text in patter style accomplishes several results: 1) it increases the forward motion and rhythmic drive of the piece; 2) it declaims a large quantity of text quickly; and 3) it communicates a

57. Larsen, E-mail Interview with Ann G. Richardson.
sense of the rushing, frantic, and violent existence that the poem’s physical subject, Billy the Kid, must have undoubtedly lived out in reality when on the run from the law.

The rhythmic setting of the text follows the natural stress of the language, just as it does with “Bucking Bronco”. Though the text does not follow a strict poetic meter, the spoken stresses organize quite naturally (see Musical Example 24 for rhythmic comparison; note once again that the symbol ´ = stressed, and ¨ = unstressed):

Verse 3:

He´ / kept´ folks¨ in¨ hot¨ / wa` ter¨ /

Stole’ from¨ ev¨ ry¨ / stage´

When¨ / he’ was¨ full¨ of¨/ li` quor¨ He¨ was¨ / al¨ways¨ in¨ a¨ / rage´.
Musical Example 24 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 8-11, Rhythmic setting according to natural textural stress)

In the above example, the word “he” in bar 9 is naturally unstressed; Larsen preserves this unstressed quality by placing the word on the offbeat (on count two) rather than on the downbeat or count three. “Wa-” of “water” is set as a quick and high sixteenth note grace note. “Stole” is placed on the downbeat so as to receive emphasis despite its short duration, as is “he”. “Rage” receives both rhythmic and musical emphasis, sweeping up to the highest note in the whole set. Once again, Larsen’s organic treatment of the text shines through as a primary focus of *Cowboy Songs*:

“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.”

Larsen’s musical setting further reflects the unrest, distortion, and grandeur of its Western folk figure. The melodic conception is horizontal, with the harmonies arising as a result, much like Creeley’s subjective verse. The tonality itself is volatile: though initially the piece is clearly in F major, the key center morphs ambiguously throughout.

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58. Secrest, 59.
Musical Example 25 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 12-13, Ambiguous tonality in F major)

The bass pedal chords in those bars only serve to heighten the tonal ambiguity, as per Larsen’s compositional style (“My music is built around tonal areas that are vaguely modal and reinforced through pedal tones in the bass.”)\textsuperscript{59} It is only with the final accompanimental figure that the piece is confirmed to be in F major. Interestingly, while the first two movements were both in D-flat major, Larsen sets the final movement a third higher, a decision that remains consistent with her stated preference for third interval relationships.

The motion is in constant distortion. In a manner similar to her treatment of “Bucking Bronco”, Larsen plays with alternating meters. In the first three bars, the time signatures indicate 4/4, 3/4, and 4/4; meanwhile, the internal rhythms are in turn both steady and syncopated (see Musical Example 26). Unlike in “Bucking Bronco”, however, once the 4/4 is established in bar 4, it is retained until the end of the piece.

\textsuperscript{59} “On Music.”
The one section of the piece that utilizes neither the Goodbye Old Paint motive nor the main vocal motive is measure 7. Instead, this measure features a Lydian mode scale in E-flat, reflecting Larsen’s preference for the Lydian mode:

Musical Example 27 (Larsen, Cowboy Songs, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 6-7, Lydian mode scale on E-flat)

Larsen’s organic approaches to moldable pitch and emotional impact enhance the effect of the drama considerably; this is particularly evident in the finale of the cycle. Larsen develops the end of “Billy the Kid” in a series of three textual repetitions. The repetitions rise in pitch level, building a driving sense of excitement and tension; the
music achieves its climax at the middle of the second system...only to function as a cliffhanger with an immediate *meno mosso* (see Musical Example 28):

Musical Example 28 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 14-17, Three sequential repetitions of “Billy was a bad man”)

Thus far, the listener has received no indication that the singer may be invested in the narrative. However, the cheeky final line of text, the self-satisfied tone of the slow declamation, and the punctuated ending theme all hint strongly that the singer is, in fact, a most biased storyteller (see Musical Example 29):
Musical Example 29 (Larsen, *Cowboy Songs*, “Billy the Kid”, mm. 20-21, Final textual line, and Goodbye Old Paint fragment)

Perhaps, just perhaps, if the listener indulges the imagination, the final text becomes the words of the physical man who gunned down Billy the Kid: Sheriff Pat Garrett. Conversely, the clever setting also carries the much more impactful, and slightly disturbing, implication that the listener has been the man “a whole lot badder” all along.
CHAPTER IV – CONCLUSIONS

I. Additional Cowboy-Art Song Fusions

In addition to Libby Larsen’s *Cowboy Songs*, there are three other pieces that function particularly well as cowboy-art song fusions: Libby Larsen’s cycle *Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to her daughter Janey, 1880-1902* (1989), Charles Ives’ *Charlie Rutlage* (1920/21), and André Previn’s *Sallie Chisum Remembers Billy the Kid* (1994).

*Songs from Letters* itself is a “rough-tough”, contemporary art song setting of a series of letters penned by Martha Jane Canary Hickock – otherwise known as Calamity Jane – to her daughter Janey.⁶⁰ Janey was the daughter of Wild Bill Hickock; Calamity’s letters explain to Janey why she sent her away to live with father figure Jim O’Neil, her love for her daughter, and the difficult, hardened circumstances of her life.

*Charlie Rutlage* was composed by Charles Ives in 1920/1921, and tells the story of a cowboy’s tragic death as he is caught in the violent terror of a cattle stampede. Taken from Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs* collection, Carol Kimball recalls that it is known as “the greatest country-and-western number never to be performed at the Grand Ole Opry.”⁶¹ This piece is an icon in art song repertoire, however the compositional emphasis here is not on communication of culture or sentiment, but on shock and awe text painting. Studied primarily for Ives’ treatment of chord clusters and the piece’s place in the 20th century music theory classroom, *Charlie Rutlage* is a favorite, communicating with gritty effect the realistic danger of a working cowboy’s life.

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⁶¹ Kimball, 262.
Lastly, André Previn’s *Sallie Chisum Remembers Billy the Kid* is the most recent art song with cowboy connections to be popularized in standard repertoire. Sallie Chisum lived on Chisum Ranch in New Mexico, which was a sanctuary for Billy the Kid and his band of Regulators. This piece was commissioned by soprano Barbara Bonney, who claims a distant relationship to William Bonney; Previn took the broken references of Sallie Chisum (which were recorded originally by Walter Noble Burns and subsequently by Michael Ondaatje) and strung them together to create a narrative. Previn’s musical setting reflects both the double-edged personality that was William H. Bonney, as well as the removed yet sincere memories of Sallie.62

Ives, Previn, and Larsen are three of the most compelling compositional figures of the 20th and 21st centuries. Together, their products – *Cowboy Songs, Songs from Letters, Charlie Rutlage*, and *Sallie Chisum* – make up four of the most effective cowboy art song fusions to have been written in these past 100 years. These four gems stand as examples of the richness that can be achieved in the niche, given the composers’ willingness to delve into the source material. It is with hope that many such cowboy-art songs will be produced and accepted in the classical vocal canon in the future.

II. Concluding Remarks

Libby Larsen’s *Cowboy Songs* is one of the few sets that functions as soprano art song while itself remaining open to the breathable and refreshing nature of cowboy tunes; furthermore, it is one of the few sets that treats its subjects with such *sincerity*. When I remarked on this quality to Ms. Larsen, she wholeheartedly agreed:

**Me:** One of the reasons I’ve fallen in love with *Cowboy Songs* is because it captures the essence of the Old West without rendering it trite or romantic. There is a beautiful sense of honesty about the characters, the text, and the musical setting. Why did you gravitate towards these particular texts?

**Larsen:** I live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on the eastern edge of the prairie and the “West”. In many ways, the “old” west exists presently and is very real. I think that trite and romantic depictions of the “Old West” are creations of 150 years of commercial media content. The West I experience *is* honest and full of characters. Since my definition of composing is “making an order of sound in time and space in order to communicate what it is like to be alive”, I would not romanticize, rather I try to speak through what is alive in the subject matter.”

She accomplishes this goal beautifully, truly “communicating what it is like to be alive” in a culture touched by the lifestyle and culture of the North American cowboy.

The autobiographical story of Belle Star’s love affair with Cole Younger comes to life in the lariat-swing of a chant-based cowboy rondo; one does not perceive Belle Star the nefarious figure as pictured by dime novels, but rather the simple young woman in love with a man who would ultimately “pet her and leave her.” Larsen’s setting of

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63. Larsen, *E-mail Interview with Ann G. Richardson.*
Robert Creeley’s “Sufi Sam Christian” conjures the melancholy slow-motion picture of a lone, tired cowboy who is absentmindedly pondering, subsequently rebelling against, and peacefully accepting, the idea of his death. The bluesy treatment recalls such similar meditations as “The Streets of Laredo” and “Red River Valley”, and the piece’s lazily wistful, yet dependably plodding, soundscape places it firmly into the circle of the traditional cowboy’s lament. Lastly, Larsen’s energetic representation of Billy the Kid, one of the most feared and infamous figures of the American West, surprisingly does not inflate the grandeur of the outlaw, but rather musically grounds him: the piece is to the point, painting brief, gritty images of realism that fittingly describe such a gritty, realistic, and brief life. The piece’s lightly sardonic ending deflates any chance the outlaw had of being placed on an archival pedestal, tossing away the crafted persona and reminding the listener that the legend was actually, simply a man…and not a great one at that.

Libby Larsen’s use of non-traditional compositional philosophies allows for the reinterpretation of art song in a way that is fresh, inviting, and very much necessary. As Larsen said of her intent for these pieces:

“There is no need for the listener to know anything about the set. What I’m after is to engage the listener’s curiosity so that the second listening (that is the one in the listener’s head) is a reflective event.”64

This “reflective event” is where the magic of *Cowboy Songs* becomes apparent. For out of an art song vessel emerges the spirited life of a vibrant culture: voices long silent are reawakened today through their words, their experiences, and our continued celebration of their stories. *That* is the essence of “cowboy art song.”

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64. Ibid.
APPENDIX A – E-mail Interview with Libby Larsen

“Dear Ms. Richardson,

Thank you so much for your email. I would be very happy to work with you as you develop your dissertation. You certainly have my permission to analyze and write about the *Cowboy Songs*. I’ll expect your questions in email format.

All best,

Libby Larsen”
Interview

(Note: Questions (Q) from myself are bolded; Ms. Larsen’s answers (A) are not.)

**Q: What interests you most about the American musical vernacular?**

A: American English and the natural music it generates.

**Q: What do you consider to be “art song?”**

A: Art Song is a discreet, focused consideration of the quality and meaning of words by allowing music to interact with them. An art song is the product of one composer’s interaction with the words.

**Q: In terms of genre, how would you classify these three pieces?**

A: Definitely Art Song.

**Q: One of the reasons I’ve fallen in love with Cowboy Songs is because it captures the essence of the Old West without rendering it trite or romantic. There is a beautiful sense of honesty about the characters, the text, and the musical setting. Why did you gravitate towards these particular texts?**

A: I live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on the eastern edge of the prairie and the “West”. In many ways, the “old” west exists presently and is very real. I think that trite and romantic depictions of the “Old West” are creations of 150 years of commercial media content. The West I experience is honest and full of characters. Since my definition of composing is “making an order of sound in time and space in order to communicate what it is like to be alive”, I would not romanticize, rather I try to speak through what is alive in the subject matter.

**Q: Did you have a specific compositional result in mind? Did the pieces evolve accordingly, or did their evolution surprise you?**
A: The songs didn’t evolve. They came naturally from my work with the texts. I did want to set a character for each song (story song, blues in six, patter song) and enjoyed working this out.

Q: You conceive of music in terms of four compositional elements, which you define as “pitch, motion, architecture, and emotional impact.” Can you elaborate on these terms, and can you describe examples of how you utilized them when you were setting “Cowboy Songs?”

A: Actually, I would be interested in hearing you discuss how these terms are dealt with in the songs. I would think that your discussion would yield some interesting content for your thesis!

Q: You remarked in a 2011 interview with Katherine Strand in the Philosophy of Music Education journal that “music is emotionally expounded from within the abstract heart of a culture.” Can you further elaborate on what this means to you?

A: A culture evolves the music it needs in order to reflect itself immediately and across time.

Q: Thematically and musically, did you draw inspiration from works that you’d previously written? Can influences from this collection be found anywhere in your other Western themed works?

A: These songs are the first of my art songs to explore the music of text within its own context.

Q: My research has catalogued only 38 art songs with subject matter relating to the North American cowboy; of those 38, only those composed by Charles Ives, André Previn, and yourself are accepted and included in vocal literature anthologies for
study/performance. In your experience, is there something about Old West/cowboy themes that discourage composers from working with them?

A: Are you familiar with the genre of Cowboy poetry? It could be that it raises some challenges to a composer’s desires to look for texts associated with “the West”.

Q: For someone hearing this set for the very first time, what would you want the listener to know about it?

A: There is no need for the listener to know anything about the set. What I’m after is to engage the listener’s curiosity so that the second listening (that is the one in the listener’s head) is a reflective event.

Q: Are there any interesting tidbits associated with the compositional process of these songs that would be fun to know?

A: Some years after I composed these songs, I received a pleasant letter from Robert Creeley. I was relieved to be affirmed that my depiction of space -using tempo, texture and tessitura – seemed to intrigue him.
“Hi Gabrielle,

Thank you for your message! You are welcome to use excerpts from *Cowboy Songs* in your dissertation. Please include the following credit line in your dissertation: Copyright © 1994 by E. C. Schirmer Music Company, a division of ECS Publishing Group. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Best,

**Abi Enockson**, Manager of Publishing Rights & Marketing

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APPENDIX C - IRB Approval Letter

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Event Report Form.”
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 17111002
PROJECT TITLE: "Cowboy Art Song": A Thematic and Musical Analysis of Libby Larsen’s "Cowboy Songs"
PROJECT TYPE: Doctoral Dissertation
RESEARCHER(S): Gabrielle Richardson
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Arts and Letters
DEPARTMENT: Music
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IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expected Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 12/05/2017 to 12/04/2018

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board
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