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## A Performance Guide to Wallace Stevens' Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird as Set by Louise Talma

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A PERFORMANCE GUIDE TO WALLACE STEVENS' *THIRTEEN WAYS OF  
LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD* AS SET BY LOUISE TALMA

by

Meredith Melvin Johnson

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
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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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents a two-fold discourse, first to provide a contextual source for singers interested in 20<sup>th</sup> century composer Louise Talma, and second to provide an analytical guide to Talma's adaption of Wallace Stevens' poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* for voice, oboe, and piano. Though Talma's composition never became renowned, it is both a commendable achievement and a highly sophisticated work, interweaving musical creativity with the extra-musical stimuli borne from the personal experiences of the composer.

The body of the document will feature four main chapters. The first chapter will introduce composer Louise Talma, the second will introduce poet Wallace Stevens. The third chapter will discuss the connection between the two artists, and the fourth chapter will provide the analytical guide for *Thirteen Ways*. Supplementary appendices include interview transcripts, an IRB letter, a letter of permission from MacDowell Colony, and an engraved copy of the score. A list of musical examples is provided.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This author makes her first statement of appreciation concerning her degree to the School of Music at The University of Southern Mississippi, where the love of learning, singing, and teaching were nurtured and expanded.

More specifically, much gratitude is given to committee chair, Dr. Chris Goertzen, for his contributions and weariless encouragement. Likewise, this author is equally thankful for the support demonstrated by her other committee members: Dr. Jonathan Yarrington, Dr. Kimberley Davis, Dr. Maryann Kyle, and Dr. Douglas Rust.

The expert input of Dr. Kendra Preston Leonard and Mr. Paul Sperry greatly enriched this project, and many thanks are in order for their willingness to participate.

Also, this author acknowledges the unwavering support offered by her husband, John Anthony Johnson, for without it, this project would not exist. Individuals deserving of sincere gratitude for their contribution to this work include Dane DeCuir, Dr. Everette Scott Smith, Dr. Michael Bunchman, Dr. Nelda Moore, and Dr. Gabrielle Henning. Many thanks to the following friends for their continuous encouragement throughout the process: Rena Register, Kristie Reddoch, Dr. Jennifer Bruton, and Dr. Lori Guy.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my parents, Roger and Beverly Melvin, for the opportunity to pursue stage life at the age of two and the investment in many years of music lessons. Your love and support enabled me to reach for the highest level of academic achievement in my field of study. Without you, I am nothing and none of this would have been possible. This success belongs to you.

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## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Louise Talma was a highly talented composer whose intriguing works deserve exploration and appearance in today's recital programs. Talma's entire estate, including much of her music, was granted to the MacDowell Colony upon her death, and is now stored in the archives of the Library of Congress. Much of her work remains there, either unpublished or in manuscript form. Her work *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* was engraved specifically for this project; however, further efforts need to be made to commit her completed works to engravings in order to aid future musicians in researching and performing her music.

### NOTABLE PARTICIPANTS

Thanks to the work of musicologist and author Dr. Kendra Preston Leonard, Talma's life and music are beginning to resurface in academic circles. To date, Leonard has published two books on Talma (2014 and 2017), a biography entitled *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*,<sup>1</sup> and a College Music Society Sourcebook in American Music entitled *The Art Songs of Louise Talma*.<sup>2</sup> These books and the scholarly articles drawn from these texts contain the bulk of readily available information on Louise Talma; my own research relies heavily upon Leonard's. She graciously accepted my invitation to an interview, during which I inquired how she became aware of Talma:

"...I was doing the research for my first book, *The Conservatoire Américain de Fontainebleau: A History*. Talma studied at Fontainebleau and also taught there... I

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1. Kendra Preston Leonard, *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014).

2. Kendra Preston Leonard, *The Art Songs of Louise Talma* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

found that her work had been well-received during her lifetime and that she was thought to have been an important composer of her generation, but after her death her music was not performed very often and there was little written about it or her... It seemed that the time was right for an in-depth study of her life and music.”<sup>3</sup>

Another notable individual who actively worked with Talma was American tenor Paul Sperry, who commissioned Talma’s 1979 setting of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* as well as a second chamber work for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, tenor, and piano, entitled *Diadem*. In an interview, Sperry reasoned that he likely became aware of Talma through his position on the board of the American Music Center. He listed *Terre de France*, a French song cycle, as his first Talmian work to perform. Sperry enjoyed singing the cycle, and requested more repertoire, eventually premiering her last cycle, *Infanta Marina*, and recording several of her works:

“...my niece, Jennifer Sperry, was graduating getting a master’s at Temple in oboe and I thought it would be great fun to have a piece for her. And so, I commissioned Louise because I knew Louise loved the poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” She had done a choral setting of it... So, I commissioned the piece and then we drove down to Temple and she (Talma) played the piano and my niece and I did the rest and then we recorded it eventually. And then later a British oboist wanted to record it and contacted me. I said I would just love to do it again... one of the very few things where I recorded something twice.”<sup>4</sup>

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is threefold: first, it aims to introduce modern singers to American composer Louise Talma, specifically her small chamber work *Thirteen Ways of*

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3. Kendra Preston Leonard, E-mail Interview with author, December 5, 2018.

4. Paul Sperry, phone interview with author, December 7, 2018.

*Looking at a Blackbird*. Second, it offers teachers and singers a contextual guide to this piece, including poetic interpretations, rehearsal advice, and performance practice suggestions. And third, it supplies tools that make atonal music and abstract poetry more approachable for the singer, hopefully generating interest in the discovery and performance of lesser-known music.

Chapter 2 introduces Louise Talma, discussing her musical training and accomplishments, and taking into account how the world she lived in affected her compositional inclinations. Special attention is given to her life around the time of 1979, when she composed *Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Blackbird* to fulfill a commission by Paul Sperry. Chapter 3 briefly describes the life and stylistic tendencies of Wallace Stevens, an American modernist poet and author of the poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. Commonalities and differences found between composer and poet are explored in Chapter 4. Talma's original 1938 setting of the same poem for three voices and piano is also discussed, displaying evidence of her growth as a composer. Chapter 5 offers a detailed analysis of each of the thirteen verses or variations of the 1979 chamber work, offering rehearsal strategies and performance practice suggestions to accompany the work. Last come closing remarks, as well as interview transcripts, an IRB letter, a letter of permission from MacDowell Colony, and an engraved copy of the 1979 setting.

## CHAPTER II – THE COMPOSER: LOUISE TALMA

Louise Talma and her music are currently relatively unknown. Much confusion surrounds Talma's history, resulting in many inaccurate biographical accounts; fortunately, in 2012, Dr. Kendra Preston Leonard clarified the confusion in the *Journal of Historical Biography* with an article entitled "Origin Stories: Louise Talma's Early Life."<sup>5</sup> This enlightening research corrected misinformation published in multiple sources such as *Modern Music-Makers* by Madeline Goss,<sup>6</sup> and it supplied missing information that had been omitted from encyclopedic entries. One such confounding issue lies in Talma's birth records: The composer asserted she was born in France on October 31, 1906, making this a widely accepted fact. However, Dr. Leonard uncovered census and other public records claiming birth years 1905, 1906, and 1907, with birthplaces listed as both France and New York.

Obviously, Louise's mother provided inconsistent information concerning herself and Louise, leaving more questions than proven facts about the formative years of Louise. In 2014, Dr. Leonard published these findings in a biography entitled *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*, which currently supplies the most accurate and comprehensive study of Talma's personal history, career achievements, and musical contributions to the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Kendra Preston Leonard, "Origin Stories: Louise Talma's Early Life," *Journal of Historical Biography* 12 (Autumn 2012): 1-29.

6. Madeleine Goss, *Modern Music Makers: Contemporary American Composers* (New York: Dutton, 1952).

7. Kendra Preston Leonard, *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition* (England: Ashgate, 2014).

Yet another mystery exists in the biography of Talma's mother, Alma Cecile Garrigues, who was born in Copenhagen in 1872 or possibly 1875, 1879, or 1880. An opera singer, who apparently lied about her age, Alma took the name Mademoiselle Cecile Talma as her stage name before 1900, later switching to Madame Cecile Talma. When and why she changed her surname to Talma is unknown. Leonard's biography indicates Cecile Talma had much success as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* at London's Carl Rosa Opera company and that she also performed twenty-one times at the Met between 1904 and 1910.<sup>8</sup> Growing up with a singer as a mother would certainly play a significant role in a young composer's evolution. Although articles and biographical entries such as the one in *Notable American Women* refers to her as an only child<sup>9</sup>, there is evidence of a sister that may have died at a young age.<sup>10</sup> Though her father is often said to have been an American pianist who died young, Leonard has been unable to find any records proving this.

Talma began her musical training as a concert pianist, but credits Nadia Boulanger with helping her to realize her potential as a composer. Talma studied with Boulanger in France for fourteen consecutive summers, absorbing the French neoclassic sound which so heavily influenced Talma's style. Leonard posits that Talma's affection for Boulanger began while emulating her, eventually developing a romantic nuance,

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8. "Metopera Database," The Metropolitan Opera Archives, last modified October 21, 2019, [www.archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/frame.htm](http://www.archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/frame.htm).

9. Susan Ware, *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary Completing the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2004), 625.

10. Kendra Leonard, *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*, 21.

although Boulanger did not reciprocate.<sup>11</sup> Although their mentor/student relationship deteriorated in the 1940's, they would eventually reconcile enough to allow Talma occasional visits receiving guidance on new works until the time of Boulanger's death. Talma was a teacher at Hunter College for fifty-one years and wrote two harmony textbooks for her students. She refused to teach composition, saying:

“I’ve never taught composition because I don’t believe in teaching composition. I don’t think composition is something that CAN be taught! Just like writing, that can’t be taught either. You can be taught the tools of the trade, which is something else, but nobody is going to supply the imagination.”<sup>12</sup>

Although Talma often began compositions with a 12-tone row, she thought the matrix was too mechanical; she freely repeated pitch cells and often used the interval of a second to create a more melodious feel. This individual approach to a non-traditional technique seems to parallel her life in general. She spent her career carving out her place in the world between French tonal and German atonal approaches as a woman in a man's world of composition, as a teacher – not because she loved teaching – but likely because it seemed a more acceptable position for a woman than composing. Female composers of her time typically created smaller works, but Talma bravely wrote pieces for large chamber ensembles, orchestra, choir, and even opera. She never married, and she lived alone, but letters suggest she had romantic affairs with women. Dr. Preston Leonard states:

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11. Ibid., 42.

12. “Composer Louise Talma: A Conversation with Bruce Duffie,” March 1, 1986.  
<https://www.bruceduffie.com/talma.html>.



“Her public aloofness may have protected her emotionally, but also often led to students, performers, and colleagues branding her as “tough,” unfriendly, or difficult, something of which she was painfully aware but unable to change, if indeed she had ever wanted to.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite all this, Talma’s music does not evoke the feel of a hard woman unsure of her place in this world. She confidently and elegantly expressed herself in each and every measure she composed, giving so deeply from herself that she often claimed to fall ill after a work was done.<sup>14</sup> Several months before Talma’s eightieth birthday, radio personality and music lecturer Bruce Duffie interviewed her. She confessed that she labored over each sound and rhythm, writing only about four measures a day.<sup>15</sup> After such effort, Talma expected performers of her works to follow her instructions precisely. American tenor Paul Sperry knew the composer well — he premiered and recorded several of Talma’s works and commissioned the 1979 version of *Thirteen Ways*. He maintained a remarkable career and is best known for his interpretation of American vocal music, including world premieres of works by more than thirty American composers. He recalls working with Louise Talma:

“She was terribly demanding and precise. She’s the only one of two composers I’ve worked with who absolutely meant the metronome mark that was there. I learned this doing *Terre de France* with her and I wanted the first three songs to go like one tick faster...IMPOSSIBLE! I mean she just played it the way she played it. There was no budging the lady. A lot of people thought of her being sort of curmudgeonly. She could be very unpleasant to people, but I thought she was terrific and always enjoyed her.”

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13. Kendra Leonard, *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*, 10.

14. Kendra Leonard, *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*, 9.

15. “Composer Louise Talma: A Conversation with Bruce Duffie,” March 1, 1986. <https://www.bruceduffie.com/talma.html>.

Mr. Sperry also remembered a time when Talma snapped at a pianist in a rehearsal: “Why are you pedaling so much?” And the pianist answered, “It says *legatissimo*.” “Well, if you know anything about my music you know I’d never like pedal in a place like that.” Mr. Sperry reported that the pianist declared he never wished to see Talma again.<sup>16</sup> Yet there was another side of Talma from which the apparent sensitivity in her music might stem. Mr. Sperry shared that Louise wore a paisley scarf just like the one he had kept after his mother’s death. His mother’s scarf had been lost and when Louise heard this, she gave him hers.<sup>17</sup> With this selfless act, Talma revealed her softer side to Sperry.

Talma’s spectacular career achievements speak volumes of the talent and innovative spirit she possessed. She was the first woman to receive two consecutive Guggenheim Awards (in 1946 and 1947), to win the Sibelius Medal for composition, and to be elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. She was also the first American to teach harmony at the Conservatoire Américain in Fontainebleau, France. In another great feat, Talma’s opera *The Alcestiad* was the first opera by an American female composer premiered in Europe. *The Alcestiad* was based on the text by Thornton Wilder, a friend of Talma’s from the MacDowell Colony, and it boasted a world premiere in Frankfurt, Germany in 1962. Due to the sheer magnitude and expense of the production, the work has not yet been produced in the United States.

In 1983, Louise Talma was awarded an honorary doctorate from Hunter College. After retiring from teaching, she continued to compose, spending much time at the Yaddo

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16. Paul Sperry, phone interview by author, December 7, 2018.

17. Ibid.

and MacDowell Colony. Her last song cycle, *Infanta Marina*, also on a Wallace Stevens poem, was her final attempt competing for the Pulitzer Prize, which she never won. Talma surprised everyone when she left over a million dollars to the MacDowell Colony upon her death in 1996. According to Mr. Sperry, this shocked everyone who knew her because of the rather meager existence she had projected; e.g., wearing the same clothing day to day and living in a run-down apartment.<sup>18</sup>

Talma divided her own compositional life into three periods. The neoclassical early years spanned from 1925-1952, reflecting Boulanger's teaching and the French influence gained while at Fontainebleau. The serial period spanned from 1952 to 1967 and was inspired by her hearing Irving Fine's tonally-centered serial string quartet. Her final compositional period — from 1967 to her death — was labeled “non-serial atonal,” although Leonard traces serial ideas in most of Talma's music.<sup>19</sup> Despite the composer's own concise divisions and descriptions of her output, the music throughout her entire career comprises fluid interactions of neoclassicism, serialism, and atonality. Out of Talma's rich stylistic palette, two defining characteristics emerge that in particular dominate *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, and they explain Talma's choices related to meter, rhythm, melody, harmony, and texture.

The first of these defining characteristics in Talma's writing reaches throughout her entire compositional evolution: a sectional approach to writing similar to block style, termed by Dr. Leonard as “dis/continuity.”<sup>20</sup> This describes sudden shifts in meter,

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18. Ibid.

19. Kendra Preston Leonard, *The Art Songs of Louise Talma*, (New York: Rutledge, 2017), 3.

20. Kendra Leonard, *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*, 27.

tempo, texture, and rhythmic patterns intended to demarcate sections of the poetry, often giving it a block appearance. Variations aid her in this style which may be why she was drawn to the theme and variation form of Wallace Steven's *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. The second defining characteristic of Talma's writing can be found in her unique methods of setting text. She aims to maintain the flow of language rather than allowing the music to dominate the text. Percussive sounds, closing vowels, and elongated consonants appear often in her vocal works, including her opera *The Alcestiad*. When she employs the music to serve the text, the result is frequent meter changes and difficult rhythmic patterns which directly mimic speech. Although most composers aim to maintain the natural flow of language in their musical works, Talma depicts the rhythms with an unusual precision rather than an approximation, creating numerous dotted rhythms and asymmetrical triplet figures. These defining Talmian characteristics are further explored in Chapter V.

Based on her many successes during her lifetime, it is likely that Louise Talma's peers expected her to remain among the well-known and respected American composers. Dr. Leonard offers an explanation for why such a musical pioneer virtually disappeared: "Talma left no surviving relatives and after her death, because she believed that composition could not be taught, had no composition students to champion her works or her pedagogical methods in harmony and theory."<sup>21</sup> Through the efforts of Dr. Leonard and continued projects such as this performer's guide, perhaps Talma may soon enjoy a more popular presence in standard vocal and piano repertoire.

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21. Kendra Leonard, *The Art Songs of Louise Talma*, 4.

### CHAPTER III – THE POET: WALLACE STEVENS

Singers invest large amounts of time studying the lives and influences of the composers whose *music* they choose to perform, while often limiting their research on the composer of the *text*. By studying the literary side of the equation as well as the musical side, the performer can deepen their connection to the musical work as a whole, discovering interesting parallels and conflicts in the experiences and inspirational sources of both composer and author.

Wallace Stevens remains “one of America’s most respected 20<sup>th</sup> century poets”<sup>22</sup> as his writings continue to spark interest in the field of American modernist literature. Born October 2, 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, young Stevens was reared in the simple, industrious fashion of the Puritan way of life by a prominent lawyer and his wife, a former school teacher. Although his father was not an emotionally available or sensitive man,<sup>23</sup> Stevens’ mother Kate provided warmth and nurture through religious fervor, playing hymns every Sunday on the piano and reading aloud from the Bible before retiring to bed.<sup>24</sup> This Puritan upbringing and time spent on his grandfather’s farm later merged with his secular education at Harvard; this ultimately produced Steven’s complex poetic language that often summons religious elements and pastoral landscapes.

His three years at Harvard began in 1897 and brought about a questioning of the godly faith instilled in him by his mother; both the secular and sacred influences would

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22. “Wallace Stevens,” Poetry Foundation, accessed July 18, 2019, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wallace-stevens>.

23. Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years 1879-1923* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 44.

24. *Ibid.*, 40.

later appear in his works. Although his passion for composing poetry beckoned to him, after college he chose to pursue a path that would please his practical father. In the summer of 1900, young Wallace wrote in his journal, “I am going to New York, I think, to try my hand at journalism. If that does not pan out well, I am resolved to knock about the country – the world.”<sup>25</sup>

He slowly grew to love New York, but as his journalistic position at the *New York Tribune* began to dissolve, Stevens’ father encouraged him to follow in his attorney footsteps. In March 1901, Wallace recorded in his journal, “I had a good long talk with the old man in which he did most of the talking. One’s ideas don’t get much of a chance under such conditions. However, he’s a wise man. We talked about the law which he has been urging me to take up. I hesitated – because this literary life, as it is called, is the one I always had as an idea. I am not quite ready to give it up because it has not been all that I wanted it to be.”<sup>26</sup>

With poetry continuing to burn in his soul, Stevens attended law school in 1901, met his future wife, Elsie Kachel, in 1904, and married her in 1909.<sup>27</sup> After a failed private practice followed by positions with other law firms, he ultimately settled into

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25. Wallace Stevens, journal, June 2, 1900, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. by Holly Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 34.

26. Ibid., March 11, 1901, 52.

27. Considered by many as a lovely young woman, Kachel was the model for a bust which was rumored to be used as the silhouette that graced the American mercury dime. Zurski, Ken. “The Mercury Dime and the Mysterious Face Debate.” *Unremembered History* (blog), July 15, 2016, <https://unrememberedhistory.com/2016/07/15/the-mercury-dime-and-the-mysterious-face-debate/>

insurance law.<sup>28</sup> The year 1916 brought a career opportunity with Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, transplanting the couple to Connecticut where they would remain. The wealth earned from his career in insurance law allowed him to write freely, uninhibited by the need to sell his poetry.<sup>29</sup> Stevens continued to create poems into his final years; he was awarded the Bollingen Prize in 1950, the Robert Frost Medal and National Book Award for Poetry in 1951, and in 1955, the year of his death, both the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award.

In addition to researching the biographical information of a poet, a singer may easily identify the predominant style and common themes associated with the particular poet through the writings of literary scholars. Recognizing tendencies within the poet's works will further aid the singer in developing an emotional connection to the often abstract text. In the canon of Wallace Stevens, critics and academics expound upon multiple recurring themes and ideas, some of which include winter temperatures and icy views<sup>30</sup> (seen in Variations I, VI, and XIII of *Thirteen Ways*), the frequent presence of the sun<sup>31</sup> (the mention of shadow in VI and XI insinuate light), and "a conscious attempt to imitate musical structure"<sup>32</sup> (the use of theme and variation in the form). Another device typical of Stevens that reveals itself clearly in *Thirteen Ways* is his penchant for

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28. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 78.

29. Tony Sharpe, *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 95.

30. Richardson, 71.

31. Richardson, 75.

32. William Doeski, "Fictive Music: The Iridescent Notes of Wallace Stevens," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 20.1, (Spring 1996): 55.

repetitions or placing an object against an ever-changing background, thus offering multiple perspectives. In this case, the blackbird is the recurring theme which undergoes variations through thirteen different perspectives. Although poetry regularly marries with music, Stevens' style of writing seems to be particularly closely related to music, and it is often compared to music in terms of form and flow. Not only does Stevens frequently employ musical terms, instruments, and musicians in the lines of his works, it is suggested by literary scholars that his structure and form can be linked directly to the construction of music. English professor Dr. Veena Rani Prasad states, "Stevens is also a great master of repetitions; he uses themes and variation in the manner of a deft composer."<sup>33</sup>

Singers who develop highly personal poetic interpretations may deepen the expressive rendering of modern vocal songs. However, the more abstract the poetry, the greater the challenge posed to the singer. Stevens' works are admittedly quite difficult to interpret; however, this creates space for greater personalization. Mr. Sperry, who was the first to perform and record Talma's musical setting *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, candidly states, "Wallace Stevens is somebody who totally eludes me."<sup>34</sup> In further explanation, Dr. Prasad clarifies:

"...it is a different kind of poetry, always hard for easy understanding. A flow of poetic energy animates this poetry which is hard to grasp for the common reader. His poetic world is his secret private world where his vision oscillates between imagination and reality. The words, images and symbols are all very private; they

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33. Veena Rani Prasad, *Wallace Stevens: The Symbolic Dimensions of His Poetry* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1987), 161.

34. Paul Sperry, phone interview by author, December 7, 2018.



spring from a vast reservoir of poetic energy. They are never conventional or deliberate; hence, his poetry is never given to easy paraphrase.”<sup>35</sup>

Upon researching the poetic analysis, one could conclude that elusion stands as the defining feature of *Thirteen Ways*. When analyzing this poem specifically, Humanities Professor Bobby J. Leggett warns:

“Neither style nor convention (stanza or line lengths, rhythm, etc.) nor “theme” pulls these passages together into anything approaching sustained and coherent thought or feeling, although the stanzas have been made to form something closer to a traditionally structured poem by countless New Critical analyses operating under the assumption that a central poem by a major poet must have a formal coherence.”<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the confounding effect the poem has on the reader is precisely the point: a depiction of a world that is perpetually changing (reality) causing a continuous shift in mankind’s views and experiences (imagination). In the varying scenery and perspectives, the blackbird is the only constant. The bird could represent an unchanging experience like death, but to commit to such a rigid symbolism limits the poem’s potential; as Richard Allen Blessing says, “*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* has suffered from its critics’ tendency to fasten the blackbird to a single abstract meaning and make allegory of the entire poem. The primary association has been as one might expect, that of the blackbird and death.”<sup>37</sup> To fully understand life or death remains impossible, and these poems remind humankind of the futility in attempting such.

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35. Prasad, 181.

36. B.J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 171.

37. Richard Allen Blessing, *Wallace Stevens’ “Whole Harmonium”* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 25.

In much the same way that a singer crafts a live performance to affect the audience with a series of feelings, Stevens molds his poetry. Dr. Prasad offers a detailed explanation of this aspect of Stevens' style:

“Creating a style of his own, he crafts the dome of his art in his own typically individual way. His poetry is always concerned with particular occasions, with a particular response at a particular time. He emphasizes the unifying elements that exist in an observed thing—the part of the scene he is looking at and the sensations that the scene produces.”<sup>38</sup>

Prasad's use of the word “sensations” echoes Wallace Stevens' own explanation of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*: “This group of poems is not meant to be a collection of epigrams or of ideas, but of sensations.” If the work is not meant to be defined through symbolism, allegory, or other established literary devices, the singer must find an alternate way to connect emotionally to the text in order to effectively express each of the thirteen scenes. How does the singer express a group of complex poems that are meant to be felt or perceived as sensation?

One unique system of analysis for this non-traditional poem is the identification and exploitation of the opposites that pervade the scenes. The singer could attempt to highlight the visual and emotional contrasts and the shifts in perspective through the stressing of words and manipulation of vocal timbre. Although many inverses might be uncovered, four opposing pairs dominate the work and serve as the focus for this specific analysis: sparseness versus abundance, movement versus stillness, shifts in perspective from internal to external, and from imagination to reality. Focusing on the juxtaposition of these themes offers the singer a deeper emotional and intellectual connection to the text

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38. Prasad, 151.

since the competing pairs toggle within each individual stanza as well as throughout the over-arching structure of the poem.

**Sparseness against abundance** is most effective when deployed within each individual stanza: a single blackbird against a backdrop of twenty mountains (I), one person possessing three minds (II), three individuals becoming one (IV), the blackbird whistling versus the silence just after (V). Quantity of numbers is not the only use of this theme, but quality also shifts from needy to indulgent as in the contrast of thin men and golden birds.

**Movement against stillness** is perfectly portrayed in the first variation, which establishes the contrast between a dynamic bird and a motionless setting – “The only moving thing/ Was the eye of the blackbird.” Although movement dominates the individual verses, this theme offers the most powerful contrasts when compared across the unfolding of the text as a whole. For instance, Variation III upsets the tranquility of stillness in the opening verse with the whirling movement of the bird – “The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.” In seven verses, the blackbird is flying or walking, but in the remaining six he sits or simply exists. Although the poem began with stillness in nature and movement in the bird’s eye, Variation XIII inverts the theme as nature takes motion and the blackbird remains static.

An **external to internal** perspective shift exists in each scene. Variation I, for example, observes the stillness of the outside world, while the second variation is an internal realization with the statement “I am of three minds.” The final five stanzas close with external viewpoints, leaving only four scenes definitively introspective, although Variation VI complicates this otherwise obvious theme.

**Imagination versus reality** reigns supreme not only in this particular piece, but throughout the poet's entire canon. Dr. Prasad states, "The two most dominant counters which carve out and render a desired discipline to Steven's poetic world are imagination and reality."<sup>39</sup> As for the poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, he further specifies that it "offers thirteen variations on the theme of imagination and reality."<sup>40</sup> The performer might ask of each stanza, "Is this scene in my natural world or my mind's eye?" The transformations add variety in facial expression and timbre that then guide the audience in their own journey between imagination and reality. In his book *Wallace Stevens' "Whole Harmonium,"* author and scholar Richard Allen Blessings describes these fluctuations: "The poem suggests that life is a potentially infinite series of encounters between an external, phenomenal "reality" which is forever changing and an imagination which can never be satisfied."<sup>41</sup>

Through the use of a non-traditional analysis such as this one, a singer develops a deeper connection to the variety of sounds, sensations, and subtle moods of complex modern poetry. A unique experience is offered to the performer and listener of *Thirteen Ways* when one chooses to highlight the "unifying elements" through the shifting scenes of each verse while leaving the significance of the blackbird to each individual's perception. No other outcome seems more apropos for the poetry of such an inimitable and liberated poet as Wallace Stevens.

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39. Ibid., 1.

40. Ibid., 161.

41. Blessing, 24.

## CHAPTER IV – THE TALMA-WALLACE CONNECTION

There is no evidence that Louise Talma and Wallace Stevens met, or that he was aware of her musical career. As with most composers of art song, her love for the written word likely made her a voracious reader of poetry, and Stevens was well-known after the publishing of *Harmonium*. Talma must have found his words worthy of musical settings; she set three of his poems in five different musical works. Her first setting of a Stevens poem was for voice and piano in 1926. *On the Surface of Things* is her second complete work, written at the young age of 20. In 1938, she composed *14 Groundbass Variations on “13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”* for SSA and piano, but the work remains unpublished. The same poem became the text for the version that this project examines. Talma returned to yet a third Stevens poem in 1942 “Infanta Marina,” writing again for women’s voices. Although this piece is lost, the poem would be reworked into a published art song for soprano in 1988.

### THE BIRTH OF THE BLACKBIRD

Talma’s 1938 setting of *Thirteen Ways* demonstrates her affection for both the minor second and the use of a sectional approach. Set without a key signature for three voice parts and piano, a shift of pitch cells distinguishes each of the four sections. Talma took no liberties with Stevens’ text, quoting each variation exactly as he penned it. The music carefully supports the text without convoluting it, supporting the idea that “*Variations* seems to be, as Talma claimed of all her vocal works, strictly about her appreciation of the language of its sounds.”<sup>42</sup> This thirteen verse poem unfurls in

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42. Leonard, 70.

fourteen variations of a fourteen pitch ground bass pattern consisting of the pitch class {G F Eb Db C Ab Bb}.

In comparing the two settings, the most intriguing observation is the obvious increased freedom earned from years of composition experience. Writing at the young age of thirty-two, she took no liberties with Stevens' text initially, quoting each variation exactly as he penned it. Her second setting of *Thirteen Ways*, the 1979 version, although still faithful to the poem, makes a few concessions for musical presentation. At seventy-three years old she confidently molded the text to fit her musical ideas, repeating phrases for effect and shifting from past to present tense. An example of this can be seen in Variation II where she not only changes the tense, but also repeats "of three minds" rounding out the phrase and emphasizing the symbolism by thrice repeating the word "three." The opening melody underwent only minimal changes, most of which are half step adjustments. The cell {G Bb Ab D} is only slightly compromised when reworked in the newer piece as {G Bb A C Db}. The remainder of the melodies are not closely related. However, rhythmic patterns employed in the original vocal line often remain the same in the later version in order to maintain a speech-like inflection. Unlike the fifty-nine meter changes in the later version, the original work remains in quadruple meter.

Interesting intersections and departures exist between the lives of Wallace Stevens and Louise Talma. Both cherished a fondness for nature. Despite a rural upbringing which birthed a fondness for the countryside, Stevens' career required considerable time in the city. Stevens took walks outside and often used the tempo of his walking to write poems. Talma, a life-long city dweller, preferred to stay indoors appreciating the natural

world for its solitude and lack of interruptions.<sup>43</sup> However, she enjoyed spending much time at the McDowell Colony and seemed to flourish in the serene wooded setting. She wrote most of her music there.<sup>44</sup>

Neither quite fit the proverbial mold. “Stevens is a great intellectual poet. Many critics have assumed that he is a lyricist in the nineteenth century tradition. But a deeper study reveals that he creates for himself a new poetry, a refreshingly new idiom.”<sup>45</sup> Stevens wrote poetry in a unique way, not choosing to emulate the greats of the past, but instead looking to his contemporaries for inspiration while creating intensely personal poetry. Talma also credited her peers— like Stravinsky— as major influences, but she forged her own path to a unique style as discussed in Chapter 2.

Financial security likely offered both poet and composer artistic freedom. Despite much criticism, Stevens continued to create, suggesting he was freer to produce what he desired because of his substantial income from his insurance law position. In addition to her teaching income, Talma inherited a trust upon her mother’s death; this and her stable faculty position afforded her the opportunity to freely experiment with composing.

Both Stevens and Talma held reputations described as eccentric and prickly. According to Joan Richardson, Stevens had a particular way he wanted the public to see him and his work, “an almost obsessive concern with image,” painting his words in his

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43. Leonard, 203.

44. “Composer Louise Talma: A Conversation with Bruce Duffie,” March 1, 1986.  
<https://www.bruceDuffie.com/talma.html>.

45. Prasad, 182.

early years to cultivate this chosen air.<sup>46</sup> The masks he wore in life may be why he avoided fact for the abstract in his writing. Talma exuded a persona that hardened further as she aged: “Her public aloofness may have protected her emotionally, but also often led to students, performers, and colleagues branding her as “tough, unfriendly, or difficult, something of which she was painfully aware yet apparently unable to change, if indeed she had ever wanted to.”<sup>47</sup>

Both artists craved precision and exactness both in the commonalities of daily life and in their creations. On December 8, 1936, Wallace lectured at Harvard stating:

“You can compose in whatever form you like...It matters immensely. The slightest sound matters. The most momentary rhythm matters. You can do as you please, yet everything matters... You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound; and you do in fact know, without knowing how. What is true of sounds is true of everything: the feeling for words, without regard to their sound, for example. There is in short, an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning.”<sup>48</sup>

Talma struggled with perfectionism in much the same way:

“My rate of work is an average of four measures a day. That’s very little and that’s because I hunt around a long time before I get really, absolutely both the sounds and the rhythm that I want. But it takes an astonishingly long time, and it’s so frustrating and irritating because you go along, and you know that such-and-such a note is the wrong one! Don’t ask me how I know this, but I know this! You hunt and hunt and hunt, and you try absolutely every other note in the octave, and not any one of them seems to be the right one! Very frequently it depends upon the rhythmic element in it. It’s in the wrong place rhythmically, and once you have cleared that up, then the dratted note that you couldn’t stand is all right! I don’t understand this, either. In fact, that’s one of the reasons I would never teach

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46. Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years 1879-1923* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 73.

47. Leonard, 8.

48. Wallace Lecture, “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (lecture presented at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, December 8, 1936).



composition, because I can't begin to explain why I make the choices and changes that I do.”<sup>49</sup>

Faith and religion served as a prominent influence in the works of both artists. Stevens' upbringing was rooted in Christianity, but in his adult years his faith took a hard hit from philosophers and scientists such as Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud, ultimately shattering the religious rearing given by his mother. Talma's religious life evolved counter to this, coming to Catholicism only as a mature adult through the guidance of her mentor Nadia Boulanger. She would remain devoted throughout the rest of her life composing many sacred works despite her beginnings as a skeptic.

Several scholars agree that Stevens' poetry mirrors the world outside of him, and although deeply personal, his works are not considered autobiographical. “Stevens emerges not only as a poet aware of events taking place around him, but as a poet whose work was often inspired by them.”<sup>50</sup> Dr. Leonard confidently describes Talma's output as autobiographical, saying that many works trace her life events through the chosen text, style, and mood of her compositions.<sup>51</sup> Although many of Talma's writings expose an internal record, Stevens' works only confound the reader vainly attempting to trace his life story through his publications.

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49. “Composer Louise Talma: A Conversation with Bruce Duffie,” March 1, 1986. <https://www.bruceduffie.com/talma.html>. McDuffie Interview

50. James Logenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) v.

51. Leonard, 3.

## CHAPTER V – A PERFORMER’S GUIDE

Talma’s use of tonal ambiguity, quick meter changes, and complex rhythms can seem overwhelming initially; her compositional techniques require a high level of musicianship from the performer. A singer who does not possess perfect pitch may find atonality quite daunting as there is no pull of tonic upon which to rely. Text painting replaces adherence to a tonic key center. One approach to help navigate this challenge involves reading the text of the modern work aloud while listening carefully to the sound of the words, rather than reflecting upon their meaning. If the poetic sounds are pleasing and rhythmically agreeable, the lack of a key center becomes less important.

In the case of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, the dodecaphonic foundation is made up of small cells of pitches which are used in patterns, often repeated; these then become a lovely melody for the singer who is willing to invest the time parsing these pitch cells. How much time one should devote is dependent on the singer’s personal need. Mr. Paul Sperry does not possess perfect pitch yet has garnered great success with atonal works; his recommended regimen is to spend an hour each day singing through short sections until the correct notes are obtained.<sup>52</sup> With this committed repetition, the pitches become muscle memory associated with the text, able to withstand distractions from unusual dissonances created once the ensemble members join forces. The numerous meter changes and complex rhythmic motives become helpful when observed as tools rather than hindrances. Analysis of the text setting reveals that many of the rhythms are identical to speech; most of the meter shifts aid in keeping a speech-like flow and emphasis. For example, the sixteenth note triplet figure seen in Musical

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52. Paul Sperry, phone interview by author, December 7, 2018.

Example 1, taken from Variation 4, presents the text precisely as an orator would express them through spoken word.



Musical Example 1 mm. 42-44; Voice

As previously noted, Talma's output is dominated by a sectional or block approach that Dr. Leonard refers to as dis/continuity.<sup>53</sup> Usually the piano or oboe initiates the next poem; only Variation 7 leaves this responsibility to the singer:

**poco rit.** **A tempo**

O thin men of Haddam, Why

Musical Example 2 mm. 74-75; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

53. Leonard, *Louise Talma*, 27.

Talma often uses a tempo marking to indicate the beginning of a new verse, as in numbers 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 12. However, she also uses a complete change of musical character to effectively segment the thirteen variations. Talma employs three main devices to highlight the individuality of each section. First, a shift in rhythmic patterns foreshadows the coming text even when the tempo does not change. The most apparent examples of this appear in the repeated chordal pattern of Variation 5 (shown in Musical Example 3) and in the frenzied thirty-second notes of Variation 8 (Musical Example 4).



Musical Example 3 mm. 47-50; Piano



Musical Example 4 mm. 83-85; Piano

Second, she manipulates texture through varied layering patterns of the instruments. Special attention should be given to every entrance in order to highlight Talma's choice of a duet over a trio. The rare moments of solo demand an in-depth look

and an effort to accentuate. Although the oboe receives four solo moments, the piano stands alone only between Variations 5 and 6 as seen in Musical Example 5.

60 Tempo I ♩=58

Musical Example 5 mm. 58-60; Oboe/Flute, Piano

Only one solo moment is awarded to the singer in Variation 8, starkly painting the text as it declares the independent wisdom of the narrator (Musical Example 6).

♩=58

*mf* *p*

But I know, too, \_\_\_\_\_ That the

*mf* *sf*

Musical Example 6 mm. 93-95; Oboe/Flute, Voice, Piano

Changes in harmonic language serve as the third means by which Talma defines the blocks. She presents contrapuntal sections (like the beginning of Variation 2 as seen in the oboe and piano in Musical Example 7), and pointillism influences (like the piano

part shown in Musical Example 8 from Variation 4).

Musical Example 7 mm. 8-11; Oboe/Flute and Piano

Musical Example 8 mm. 38-40; Piano

A detailed analysis of basic elements of melody, rhythm, and harmony will guide the performer with greater ease through this chamber work. Despite all of the sectional distinctions, Talma gives the piece a cohesiveness through repetition. Although the verses will be presented here numerically, a suggested grouping for learning is in three segments. First, begin with Variations 1 and 13; both open with the same melodic pattern. Second, Variations 2, 3, 6, 8 unite through the reappearance of an F# based

recitative motive. Finally, the remaining variations possess more individualized character and may be undertaken as listed: 4 and 5, 7 and 12, 9 and 11, and finally 10.

I  
Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

In an interview with radio personality Bruce Duffie, Louise exposed the inspiration behind the opening notes of the oboe.

“Very often it’s nothing more than hearing even a sound that happens to take place in the kitchen. I remember that on *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, I happened to drop a knife and fork on top of a metal thing in my kitchen, and it made three sounds which instantly arrested my attention. I don’t know why those three did it rather than some other three some other place, but the face is that sparked the beginning, the opening phrase. If you listen to it, you will hear them in the oboe, which does them all alone. Those three were simply three sounds I heard in the kitchen. This is inexplicable. One never knows what fortuitous combination will do it.”<sup>54</sup>

The singer should listen intently to this opening melody and prepare to let the vocal line act as a continuation of the first sounds, although the fermata given over the quarter note rest should not be rushed (Musical Example 9). Allow time for the piano’s chord to meld with the sustained tone of the oboe and for the audience to experience the same stillness of the outside world as described in the forthcoming text. However, remain mindful of the oboist’s air supply as they must survive seventeen counts on one breath. As discussed in a previous chapter, Talma’s tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 58$  should be considered nonnegotiable.

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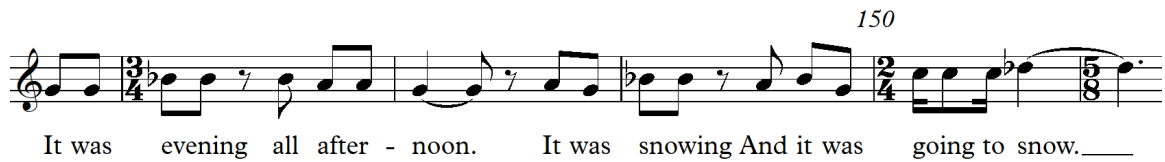
54. “Composer Louise Talma: A Conversation with Bruce Duffie,” March 1, 1986. <https://www.bruceduffie.com/talma.html>.





To honor Talma’s instruction of *non legato*, sing the words as if speaking them softly so as not to disturb the quiet surroundings, but in a concentrated effort to be clearly understood. This intention should create enough space between the words to deliver without a staccato articulation. The double asterisks on the final consonants in the word “thing” indicate that the singer should sustain on [ŋ], thus creating more of a closed sound-effect than an openly resonant tone. Dr. Leonard frees the singer to “dramatize the diction and enjoy the sounds of the words and how they feel in the mouth.”<sup>55</sup>

Talma unifies the entire work using this same pitch cell in the opening line of Variation 13 (Musical Example 11), offering symmetry to an asymmetrical group of thirteen short poems.



Musical Example 11 mm. 146-151; Voice

II  
I [am] of three minds,  
[of three minds]  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

The second block of *Thirteen Ways* seems to begin with the oboe’s call in measure 6, but the true spirit of indecisive and wandering thoughts caused by three minds introduces itself in the piano in measure 8 (Musical Example 12) where triple meter symbolizes “three minds.”

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55. Kendra Preston Leonard, E-mail Interview with author, December 5, 2018.



Musical Example 12 mm. 6-9; Oboe/Flute and Piano

Musical Example 13 displays the break in counterpoint between oboe and piano as the singer enters with the text of Variation 2.

Musical Example 13 mm. 15-18; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

Talma repeats “of three minds” so that the word “three” repeats three times, each on the downbeat of their respective measures. Since this is one of only three manipulations of the text, the vocalist should emphasize this symbolism. The treacherous leap of a tenth in measure 20, shown in Musical Example 14, could be approached in practice through octave displacement, singing the initial D in the same octave as the second until

familiarity of tune allows for the correct octave to be sung with ease.

20

*ominously*

Like a tree In which there are three blackbirds.

Musical Example 14 mm. 20-22; Voice

One should not assume the call for “ominous” singing in measure 21 suggests a slowing of tempo, but instead a timbre and expression choice. By indicating this, undoubtedly Talma wanted no tempo change to occur throughout the first three variations.

III  
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds,  
[whirled in the autumn winds]  
It was a small part of the pantomime.

Again, as in the opening, the oboe sets the change of scene with a melody reminiscent of a bird call, but of a different type. The repetitive triplets of the piano, seen in Musical Example 15, create the feel of whirling winds.

three blackbirds.

Musical Example 15 mm. 22-26; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

Talma reiterates “whirled in the autumn winds”, allowing one of the lovelier melodies more time to be pondered and enjoyed by the audience. Talma’s favoring of half steps is evident in this verse, as all three musicians navigate through several of them, with the singer given only a descending motion. This variation closes with an echoing of the plaintive ending on F# as from verse II (Musical Example 16).

***p* as before** **accel.**

It was a small part of the pantomime

Musical Example 16 mm. 35-37; Voice

IV  
A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

Opening with the first tempo change in the work, the pace of Variation IV increases by eleven beats per minute, bringing the quarter note to equal 69. This is one of the quickest tempos (only Variation X is faster) and lasts only 9 measures. An interesting feature of this verse is Talma’s use of meter to represent the symbolism in the text. As shown in Musical Example 17, the idea of man and woman as one is set with two beats per measure, shifting to triple meter when the blackbird is included.

accel. Più mosso ♩=69 40

Musical Example 17 mm. 37-46; Oboe/Flute and Voice

Although the oboe's bird call is centralized on C# and the singer's first phrase is written using Db, the second sentence brings the singer's line up a half step, focusing instead on D. The final two words of each sentence, although the same, possess different meanings. To highlight this, Talma uses a descending ninth in measures 40-41 (F-E) and an ascending seventh in measures 44-45 (F# E#), as seen in Musical Examples 18 and 19.

40

Musical Example 18 mm. 38-41; Voice

Musical Example 19 mm. 42-45; Voice

The singer's final interval is echoed by the oboe, closing out this verse with silence.

Talma works carefully to avoid silence until this point, thus effort should be made to revel in it. The *ritardando* on the rest, shown in Musical Example 20, supports this suggestion:

Musical Example 20 mm. 44-46; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

V  
I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

Progressing from the quicker tempo and *piu mosso* in the former verse, this text contrasts duple meter and *meno mosso* at fifty beats per minute. The lovely piano accompaniment plays two two-chord progressions three times, each with slight variance made by addition of coloristic embellishments (Musical Example 21).



Musical Example 21 mm. 47-52, Piano

The three-voice texture is one of few instances in which Talma chooses a trio rather than a duet. The combination of the slower tempo and the three voices distinguish Variation V as one of the loveliest and most melodious of all thirteen blocks. Each of the three lines seem to be stacked a whole step apart, the oboe centering around F#, the piano on E, and the singer on D (Musical Example 22).

Meno mosso  $\text{♩} = 50$

*p*

*p*

I do not know which

to prefer, The beauty of inflections Or the

Musical Example 22 mm. 47-54; Oboe/Flute, Voice, Piano

As the narrator contemplates their preference, lingering around D until the mention of the blackbird, the piano and oboe begin to shift upward by half step, increasing the tension. The ostinato bass line of the piano remains intact as measure 59 closes out Variation V and heralds the entrance of VI with the solo piano.

VI  
 Icicles filled the long window  
 With barbaric glass.  
 The shadow of the blackbird  
 Crossed it, to and fro.  
 The mood  
 Traced in the shadow  
 An indecipherable cause.



Pivoting suddenly from pianissimo to forte, VI begins with an E $\flat$  pickup in measure 59 and introduces the first troublesome rhythm for the singer:

60 **Tempo I** ♩ = 58

*pp* *f* *m.s.* *m.s.* *sf*

I-cicles filled the long

Musical Example 23 mm. 59-61; Voice and Piano

First, the triplets function simply to place those syllables in speech rhythms. Rather than micro-counting, try speaking the first line as it would naturally be recited, working only to fall in line with the piano where indicated. The second line of the verse is a return to the plaintive endings on F $\sharp$  seen previously in II and III (Musical Example 24). Shifts in meter are continuous in measures 67-70, but the singer should give the eighth note the beat throughout, ignoring barlines for ease of learning:

*p*

The shadow of the blackbird crossed it to and fro. The

mood Traced in the shadow An indecipherable cause.

70

Musical Example 24 mm. 65-70; Voice

## VII

O thin men of Haddam,  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

The argument could be made that the singer begins a section for the first time.

However, Talma is careful to allow no silence, as the piano's half note on C $\flat$  is tied over the barline. This is one of the few variations containing a constant trio texture:

The musical score for Variation VII, measures 74-77, is presented in three staves. The top staff is for Oboe/Flute, the middle for Voice, and the bottom for Piano. The tempo changes from 'poco rit.' to 'A tempo' at measure 75. The vocal line has lyrics: 'O thin men of Haddam, Why do you imagine golden birds?'. The piano accompaniment features a constant trio texture with a half note on C $\flat$  tied over the barline.

Musical Example 25 mm. 74-77; Oboe/Flute, Voice, Piano

In measure 74, the singer enters on an E $\flat$  pickup just as the piano did in the previous verse at measure 60. The first two vocal lines of Variation VII are a repetition of pitch cell {E $\flat$  D C G B $\flat$ }. The asymmetrical triplet rhythm indicated on the words “Haddam”<sup>56</sup> and “imagine” should not cause anguish, as they are only Talma’s rendering of the speed of those words when spoken. The rapid meter changes in measure 79 to the end, as depicted in Musical Example 26, can again be ignored as long as the eighth note pulse

56. Haddam is a town in Connecticut about thirty miles from Hartford where Stevens resided.

remains constant.

80

see how the blackbird Walks around the feet of the women about you?

Musical Example 26 mm. 79-82; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

VIII  
 I know noble accents  
 And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
 But I know, too,  
 That the blackbird is involved  
 In what I know.

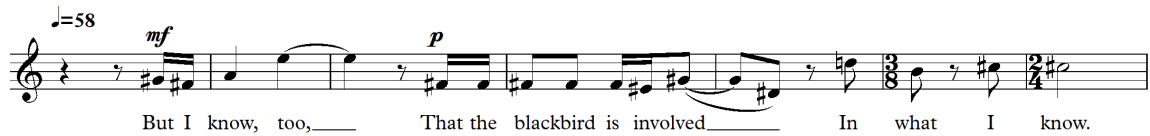
This section has a clear beginning in measure 83, heralding a new tempo of 66 beats per minute and a playful passing of musical motive between the trio voices. Pitch cell {G# A E D# F# C#} repeats twice, shaping the opening two lines as shown in Musical Example 27.

*mf* 90

I know no - ble accents And lu - cid in - es - capable\_ rhythms

Musical Example 27 mm. 87-91; Voice

Yet again, Talma employs the plaintive F#-centered closing (Musical Example 28).



Musical Example 28 mm. 93-99; Voice

IX  
 When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
 It marked the edge  
 Of one of many circles.  
 [When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
 It marked the edge of one of many circles  
 Of one of many, many circles  
 Of one of many circles.]

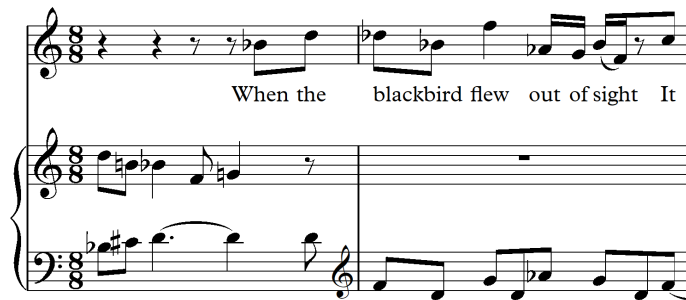
The end of Variation VIII and the opening of Variation IX overlap with a sustained E passed from piano to oboe. However, the mood and articulation change drastically in measure 102, therefore defining Variation IX.

Musical Example 29 mm. 99-102; Oboe/Flute and Piano

Variation IX features an interesting harmonic choice. The piano exists in a canon with the voice, alternating leadership at both iterations of the repeated text (see Musical Examples 30 and 31).

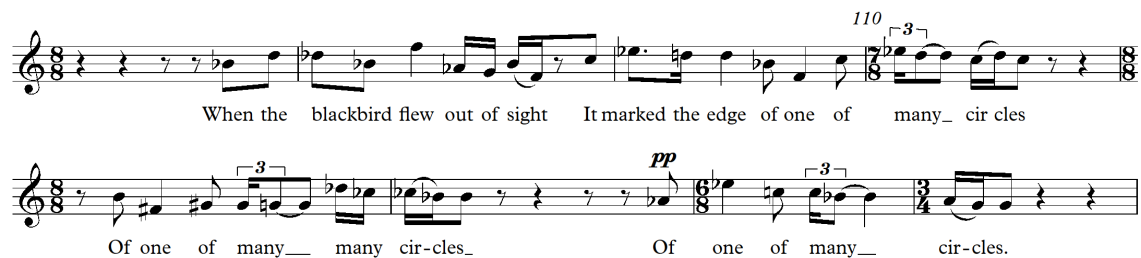


Musical Example 30 mm. 103-104; Voice and Piano



Musical Example 31 mm. 107-108; Voice and Piano

This is one of four verses in which Talma manipulated the text for musical exploitation. The repeated line in measure 107 modulates down a half step, sinking lower as the blackbird flies out of sight. She echoes the final line “of one of many circles” two more times to close, shifting the “key” lower still, to round out this hauntingly beautiful section (Musical Example 32). Echoes of past melodies can be heard in all parts, as familiar fragments exist in all three voices.



Musical Example 32 mm. 107-114; Voice

X

At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in the green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony  
Would cry out sharply.

Although the demand on the pianist is difficult here, no silence should be allowed between measures 114 and 115 (Musical Example 33). This is the quickest tempo of the entire work and may require the most rehearsal, particularly for pianist and vocalist.

Musical Example 33 mm. 113-116; Piano

The opening B in the chord before the singer begins leaves no doubt of the starting pitch. Attention should be paid to the diminished octave (enharmonically spelled 7<sup>th</sup>) in measure 120 in order to prevent the *portamento* from becoming a perfect octave.

Musical Example 34 mm. 118-120; Voice and Piano

XI  
 He rode over Connecticut  
 In a glass coach.  
 Once, a fear pierced him,  
 In that he mistook  
 The shadow of his equipage  
 For blackbirds.

For this, one of the two longest verses in the poem, Talma wastes no time presenting the text. XI is rich with words that are enjoyable to say and sing. She splits this verse into two contrasting parts, the first shown in Musical Example 35. Staccato articulation with accented consonants depict the rough ride in a ridiculous glass coach as all three layers of the trio sound simultaneously.

Musical Example 35 mm. 126-128; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

At measure 130, a moment of rare silence is allowed. Then the tempo change introduces a new mood with a repetitious play of pitch cell {F# A A#}. With the singer's F# simulating a modulation, Talma clearly emphasizes the mood shift in this verse. The unusual word “equipage” (see Musical Example 36) is defined as a vehicle with wheels drawn by one or more horses, or a coach, and should be pronounced as [ˈɛ.kwɪ.pɪdʒ].

130  $\text{♩} = 63$

mf

mf

p

3

Once a fear pierced him, In that he mistook The shadow of his equipage For

mf

p

Red

Musical Example 36 mm. 130-134; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

## XII

The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying.

This is the shortest of all thirteen variations. Talma successfully captures the flow of the river, the soar of the bird, and the sinister feel of the impending unknown. The bird call of the oboe in measure 135 connects XI to XII, but the latter formally begins with the piano's pickup note in measure 136 (Musical Example 37).



Poco meno mosso  $\text{♩} = 52$

*p* poco cresc. *cèder* *mf* *p* 3

*p* tranquillo

blackbirds. The

*legato, tranquillo* *p*

140 *poco rit.* *p*

riv - er is mov - ing. The blackbird must be fly - ing.

*dim.* *pp* *p*

Musical Example 37 mm. 135-143; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

The singer's *tranquillo* line is strangely set in the higher part of the work's total range, giving the high voice a chance to reveal a beautiful, legato tone at a piano dynamic. The pianist closes the variation, fading away like light on the surface of the river.

### XIII

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.

In the final refrain, Talma chooses to end just as she began the piece. The oboe and piano enter on a rare unison with the familiar bird call from the opening measures,

modulated down a whole step, but returning to the original tempo (Musical Example 38).

Musical Example 38 consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time. The top staff is marked 'A tempo' and 'p' (piano). It features a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures. The bottom staff shows a piano accompaniment with a similar rhythmic pattern, also marked 'A tempo' and 'p'.

Musical Example 38 mm. 143-145; Oboe/Flute and Piano

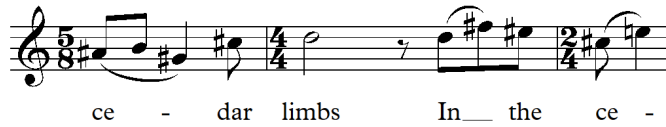
Next, the piano and singer reiterate the pitches from their original opening with the singer repeating the pitch cell {G B $\flat$  A C D $\flat$ } through the end of the second phrase:

Musical Example 39 is a musical score for voice and piano, starting at measure 150. The voice part has lyrics: "It was evening all after - noon. It was snowing And it was going to snow. The". The piano part features complex chords and a "Ped." (pedal) marking. The score includes various time signatures and musical notations.

Musical Example 39 mm. 146-151; Voice and Piano

For his final variation, Stevens used a near identical textual rhythm as occurred in the first “Among twenty snowy mountains / the only moving thing / was the eye of the blackbird.” However, he adds the final line “The blackbird sat in the cedar-limbs” to return the focus of the reader to the blackbird. As seen in Musical Example 40, Talma chooses to break from the first pitch set in order to reflect back on another previous idea

in the work with {A# B G# C# D F# E# C# E}. This is the same pitch class set as used in the final half of IV and also in X.



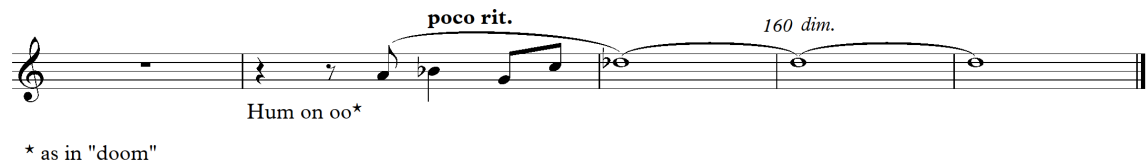
Musical Example 40 mm. 153-155; Voice

As in the first and eleventh stanzas, the singer is once again asked to manipulate diction as a sound effect using the final consonants in the phrase “black bird sat.” The singer gives each consonant the value of an eighth note, thus making it equal to the sung vowel. Each accented consonant sound falls precisely with the syncopation of the oboe and piano producing a crisp percussive effect (see Musical Example 41).

Musical Example 41 mm. 151-153; Oboe/Flute, Voice, and Piano

In only three other stanzas (II, III, and IX) does Talma choose to alter the text in any way, yet here she chooses to conclude the vocal sounds with a hum (Musical Example 42),

echoing the oboe's tune from the closing notes of variation I.



#### Musical Example 42 mm. 157-161; Voice

In order to produce the haunting sound of this afterthought, the singer must feel the resonance primarily in the sinus cavity rather than the throat or the back of the mouth. This will aid in maintaining balance between the ensemble as well as conserving air for the sustained diminuendo and the biting half step dissonance of E against the oboe's D $\flat$ .

## CHAPTER VI - CONCLUSION

In recent years, a burgeoning scholarly interest in twentieth century music has begun to uncover and champion the contributions of composers whose works previously had been overlooked, lost, or simply forgotten amidst the copious output of new, modern repertoire. During her lifetime, Talma was highly esteemed as one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century. Since her death in 1996, however, her name and music have faded into obscurity. Working in a male-dominated field, Talma's music fought for a niche against the highly acclaimed sounds of Samuel Barber, Igor Stravinsky, and Aaron Copland. Many of the unique and note-worthy musical contributions of Talma remain unpublished or have been produced in the original manuscript making her output not only difficult to obtain, but also problematic to decipher. Much work remains to be done in this area.

Although this project aims to bring awareness of Talma and her vocal music, the chief contribution lies in the creation and inclusion of an engraved copy of *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* which can be found in the following appendices. Since the original manuscript was overwhelmingly difficult to read and possessed errors, it is hoped that this engraving grants greater accessibility to singers and instrumentalists. In addition, the analytical approach offered in Chapter V attempts to de-mystify the frequent meter changes and unusual rhythms while also offering imaginative ways of interpreting the abstract poetry and expressing the thirteen variations therein.

*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* possesses several attractive and beneficial features. At many universities, D.M.A. programs require a chamber recital or collaboration credit, thus increasing the demand for chamber literature. However, much

of the standard literature requires several musicians, and the necessary rehearsal time puts a strain on the already busy students. Louise Talma's *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* possesses many qualities that make it a desirable choice for just such an occasion. First, with only three parts, rehearsals are easier to schedule, and no conductor is needed; the parts can be rehearsed alone or lacking any one of the three voices while remaining effective. Second, the instrumentation is flexible; the oboe can be replaced by flute or violin. Last, although the vocal line calls for tenor or soprano, the range spans only an eleventh and therefore could be sung by most voice types.

Though Talma's vocal compositions have yet to become renowned, many of her works are like *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* in that they are commendable achievements and highly sophisticated works, interweaving musical creativity with extra-musical stimuli. This dissertation wishes to encourage singers and teachers of singing to pursue further information regarding Louise Talma while also experimenting with analytical approaches and techniques for modern abstract poetry and atonal musical works. As in the words of Talma: "You can be taught the tools of the trade, which is something else, but nobody is going to supply the imagination."

## APPENDIX A–INTERVIEWS

Email Interview with Dr. Kendra Preston Leonard

(Note: Questions are bolded; Dr. Leonard’s answers are not.)

**Q: Why Talma? How did you discover her and what drew you in?**

A: I first became aware of Talma and her work while I was doing the research for my first book, *The Conservatoire Américain de Fontainebleau: A History*. Talma studied at Fontainebleau and also taught there and composed many of her works while she was in residence there during the summers. I found that her work had been well-received during her lifetime and that she was thought to have been an important composer of her generation, but after her death her music was not performed very often and there was little written about it or her. I discovered that she wrote a lot about her compositional process and had left behind all sorts of archival material related to her life and works. It seemed that the time was right for an in-depth study of her life and music.

**Q: In your book you state that “Talma is a pioneering figure in the history of women in music.” Compositionally speaking, what would you say is her greatest contribution to vocal music?**

A: Her song cycles are masterpieces. I’m repeatedly impressed by the way she brings together disparate texts and compositional textures to create songs that fit together within a single concept. In her piece *Terre de France*, she uses very different source materials for the lyrics but creates a singular portrait of a mythical France that has disappeared with the Second World War but which she remembers and celebrates and

mourns. Her late song cycle *Infanta Marina* sets a selection of poems by Wallace Stevens, Talma's favorite poet and the author of *13 Ways of Looking at Blackbird*, that all have different textures and tones and points of view, and she makes a sonic world for them in which they co-exist with humor and sorrow and beauty all at once.

**Q: I agree precisely with the list of reasons you give for the lack of performance of Talma's music. My project is an effort to make *Thirteen Ways* more approachable to singers through a performance guide. What is something you would like to see me pursue or perform to aid in the increased awareness of Talma?**

A: I'd love it if your performance guide included a recording of the piece and if it was free for other performers to access, maybe by putting it on a free website or archiving the full text of the guide on Humanities Commons. To increase awareness of Talma and her music in general, her music needs to be programmed more often, and recorded. Only a tiny amount of her music has ever been recorded, and what recordings do exist of her vocal music are difficult to find and generally of poor quality.

**Q: As a musical theatre and classical singer, I find her sound effect-like setting of consonants to be quite fun and a bit dramatic. One example is the setting of the consonants on "Black Bird Sat" in the final variation. You state that we might refer to her nowadays as a drama queen. Do you think this flair of her personality gives permission to the singer to freely dramatize those dictations or should one make it subtle while simply ensuring the words are clearly understood?**



A: Oh, I think you can go as over the top as you want with those consonant articulations and her other effect-like requests. She knew very well that writing for voice and emphasizing consonants, especially at the ends of words, was unusual, and she was deliberately asking for singers to do something relatively new and difficult as far as non-*avant garde* new music went. She asks for the same technique of word-end consonant articulation in other vocal works as well. In her grand opera *The Alcestiad*, she frequently has the singers sustain the last consonant of a word, and she was very careful when the libretto was translated into German for the premiere in Frankfurt that the replacement words were treated the same way. Also, Talma wrote more than once that she was sometimes more drawn to the sounds of words than their meanings when she chose texts to set, so I think it's entirely appropriate to dramatize the diction and enjoy the sounds of the words and how they feel in the mouth.

**Q: In my analyzations of each variation, I plan to point out the Talmian feature that you refer to as “dis/continuity.” For instance, the shifts from variation 1 to 2 affect meter, range, texture, articulation, and tempo. These sudden changes make this piece a playground for an expressive singer. What is your advice in navigating through and comparing these blocks?**

A: Make the differences and the similarities as clear as possible for the audience. In the measures leading up to each change, emphasize the things that Talma retains in the new block, and continue to emphasize them for a measure or two following the shift. At the same time, exaggerate slightly the dramatic changes made between blocks. The audience should be able to hear at least some of the discontinuous and

continuous elements. Even body language and breathing among all of the performers can help signal what's happening compositionally to the audience.

**Q: From your extensive experience with the evolution of Talma's style, how does "Thirteen Ways" fit into the overall growth of this composer?**

A: *Thirteen Ways* is unique in Talma's output in that she had already set some of the text of it in a much earlier work, a shorter piece for women's voices and piano that she composed in 1938. The later version, commissioned by Paul Sperry and completed in 1979, revisits aspects of the early piece but also very much reflects the changes Talma's compositional process had undergone in the forty years in between the two pieces. She had adopted serialism and then moved away from it, although she still worked with serial elements and based much of her work on tone rows that she developed at the beginning of working on a new piece. In fact, her preliminary materials for the 1979 *Thirteen Ways* includes her typical working-out of the tone rows she would use, including notes on which permutations went together well for contrapuntal or structural purposes. *Thirteen Ways* is preceded by several works in which Talma is experimenting some with instrumentation and small, non-standard ensembles, and is followed by additional pieces with similar scoring. She composed *Diadem* immediately after or even partially during her work on *Thirteen Ways*, and it too is a work for voice, winds, strings, and piano, and has multiple movements in which Talma seeks to create differing musical environments. *Thirteen Ways* also necessarily cites nature, and Talma was interested in nature despite her strong dislike of being out in it and experiencing it personally, and in that way, and in her use of a thrush call in it, is related to her 1976 chamber opera *Have You Heard? Do You*

*Know?* in which characters frequently daydream about, idealize, and converse about the natural world.

**Q: What else do you think I should ask about this piece and your experience with it, and how would you answer?**

A: This is an excellent question! Talma returned to the variation form again and again, so some questions would be: how do these variations function in comparison with other variations? (Answer: As with much of her work, they are non-developmental but offer shifting foci for the audience through changes in texture, rhythm, and dialogue between the instruments.) How strict is her use of rows here and how might that influence how it is performed? (Talma uses the row relatively loosely, and there's a lot of repetition and fragmentation of it. Should the audience necessarily be aware of these things? No, but the performers should make repetition and fragmentations as clear as they can, which will provide structural and phrasing clarity for the performers as they play.) How did the qualities of the commissioning performer(s) contribute to aspects of the piece? (I would say that knowing that her work was going to be performed by really technically accomplished musicians encouraged Talma to use a fairly wide range for the singer in *Thirteen Ways* and to create more complex rhythmic combinations.) How might this piece be read autobiographically, given Talma's tendency to compose in an autobiographical manner? (I think we can read the 1979 *Thirteen Ways* as a look back to Talma's earlier self and also read it as a work in which she felt that her recognition by other musicians was finally at a level where she thought it should be—that she was getting commissions like this one was significant to her—and that it also represents some

personal tidying-up and improving on works from an earlier period. She composed it at the end of her teaching career, and I wonder if she thought of it as a bit of a book-end for part of her career. She'd go on to compose a lot more pieces, but this was performed early and often after she completed it, including at the recital honoring her retirement. So, we might see it a bit elegiacally in addition to everything else.)

### **Phone Interview with Paul Sperry**

(Again, questions and comments from me are bolded. Mr. Sperry's replies are not.)

#### **M: How did you become aware of Louise Talma and her works?**

P: I'll try to remember how I first met her. I think... I was on the board of the American Music Center which was a composer's organization and I believe that I met Louise that way. But, I'm not exactly sure. I mean I was always curious and looking around for composers and I was doing a lot of new music and... so she may have come across me then, I don't remember that. But I do remember I sang some of her songs. I think the first ones I sang was her French cycle called *Terre de France* and I thought they were wonderful and, that, I know was back in the early 70s. So, I must have met her sometime around then. I asked her for other songs and I sang some of her other songs, ones that I thought I could do a decent job on. And then when my niece, Jennifer Sperry, who was graduating getting a master's at Temple in oboe and I thought it would be great fun to have a piece for her. And so, I commissioned Louise because I knew Louise loved the poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." She had done a choral setting of it. And I asked if she would do a piece. So, I commissioned the piece and then we drove down to Temple and she played the piano and my niece and I did the rest and then we

recorded it eventually. And then later a British oboist wanted to record it and contacted me. I said I would just love to do it again, so I went over there and recorded it again. One of the very few things where I recorded something twice.

**M: Is that the one that is Ambient Air? The recording that is on Naxos?**

P: Probably. Who are the other players?

**M: Diana Ambasche is the oboist.**

P: Yeah. That's right. The other recording is probably on CRI and out of print. If I can find the original one with Louise at the piano, if I have it on a cd, it'd be easy. I'll just take it off and send you the mp3.

{discussion of sending me a recording as he looked for it}

**M: So, you did request the text. "The 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" was your choice?**

P: Yes

**M: A fan of Wallace Stevens?**

P: No, I just had a feeling that that was a good piece for an oboe. The oboe would sound convincing. {he continues to look for record in order to send to me}

**M: When you were rehearsing with her, did she give you any verbal feedback about your...?**

P: Oh, yes, of course. She was terribly demanding and precise. She's the only one of two composers I've worked with who absolutely meant the metronome mark that was there. I learned this doing *Terre de France* with her and I wanted the first three songs to go like one tick faster...Impossible! I mean she just played it the way she played it. There was no budging the lady. A lot of people thought of her being sort of curmudgeonly. She could

be very unpleasant to people, but I thought she was terrific and always enjoyed her. She lived in a place at 103<sup>rd</sup> and Central Park West. I don't know if you've ever been here, but at the time it was a very run-down neighborhood. She was living obviously in a rent control apartment and she always seemed to be in the same clothes or something very similar. When we recorded *Diadem with Orchestra 2001*, they asked all the composers to put up one thousand dollars. I didn't know if Louise had a thousand dollars so I offered if she didn't have it I would do it. Apparently, she did. And then when she died, she left a million and a half dollars to MacDowell Colony!

**M: (chuckles) Oh, that's so great.**

P: Yeah. I mean she fooled everybody. She lived so simply. She was never married she didn't have any family. She didn't have any obligations. I think her closest friend was Mariam Gideon who lived across the street.

**M: And she was saving half of every dollar she made probably.**

P: I guess. She didn't have a lot to spend it on. I was so startled by that. I think everybody was. And particularly the people in Yaddo which she also spent a great deal of time and wondered why they didn't come in for some of it.

**M: Specifically, on *Thirteen Ways*, what was your favorite part or element of it and what as your least favorite?**

P: I'd have to listen again to be able to answer that. {side conversation about perfect pitch and how age affects it.}

**M: When you learn these pieces, how do you go about it, these atonal works like this? In these variation cycles, do you learn it by variation or does it come naturally to you?**

P: No, it doesn't come naturally at all. I sit at the piano and I sing a phrase. If I get to the end of it and I'm on the wrong note I go back and I break it up and see where I'm going off and why I'm going off. In a piece like that that's 10 minutes, the first time I sit there and try to go through it so that I finally get every phrase right at least once or twice, that could take an hour or an hour and a half. When you do that every day for a while eventually you come to a time when things begin...like.. "Ok, I've got it now." There are sometimes when I feel I never got it. I remember I was doing a piece by Bill Bolcom and it had the phrase "I could love a duck." I could get the bottom and the top, but I never knew what I was singing in between. I called him up and I spent a lot of time trying to get it right and I finally called him up and I said "Look, I have no idea if I'm in the right pitches when it's going that fast," and he said, "Well don't worry about it. I had to write something down." I could have killed him. All he had to do was put an X on the line and it would have been easy.

**M: Louise would never do such.**

P: No. Louise was very precise. Always. I premiered her last cycle *Infanta Marina* which was her last hope at getting a Pulitzer which she never did. Somehow by then I had learned something about her style and how she did things so maybe that wasn't as hard as some of the other things.

**M: How was the piece received at the premiere at Temple University?**

P: I have no idea. I have no recollection. I don't even know if there was much of an audience. This was a master's recital. How many people come to those?

**M: Do you have any suggestions for a singer as they tackle this piece?**

P: The same kind of thing I would think of with any piece I was doing. What's the

situation? How do I feel about each of these little poems? I should really pull the piece out and look at it. She had to tell me how to pronounce “equipage.” It was not a word I’d ever said.

**M: I didn’t know that word either.**

P: When I’m looking at this, where she says *non legato* for the very first line. My reaction would be (He speaks line), that kind of speech. I always try to think of how the person is talking when I’m singing. “I am of three minds, three minds...” Ya know that’s a puzzler, so I’d be sort of concerned or something. “The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.” Now that has its own energy. I don’t confess to have any idea about what this means. Wallace Stevens is somebody who totally alludes me. “With barbaric glass..” I like “barbaric glass.” And to do things for contrast so that after doing “the shadow of a blackbird,” which is sort of spooky, then I’d do something very legato. “The mood traced in the shadow.” I guess. I don’t remember if I did. I like the one about the coach. (he reads thru a couple of lines)

P: I remember Louise being very nasty to John Musgrove. We were doing *Infanta Marina*. I asked him to play it. We were doing a recital and we had *Dichterliebe* on one half and *Infanta Marina* on the other, I guess. There’s a place that says *legatissimo* and so he’s playing and it’s moving 16ths and all that and he has his foot on the pedal. And she snaps at him, “Why are you pedaling so much?” He said, “It says *legatissimo*.” And she says, “If you know anything about my music, you’d know I never like pedal in a place like that.” How was he supposed to know that? He never wanted to see her again. EVER. I remember also, on the other hand, she had a scarf...a paisley kind of thing



which was exactly the same scarf that my mother had had that I took when she died and somehow it disappeared. And I tell this to Louise and one day she just gave me hers. She said she was writing a new piece and she was hoping it would get a Pulitzer and it was blah blah blah and I said “Who’s gonna sing it?” And she said, “You are.” Ok!

**M: Sounds like you were her favorite.**

P: Well I was maybe one of them. I loved the association with her. It’s exciting to encounter people who have absolute standards and insist on them. So, it was always a treat to be with her. I just enjoyed it. And I miss her among others. She and Jacob Druckman were probably my favorite composers who are no longer alive that I worked with anyway. Can’t say anything about Schubert and Poulenc. I didn’t work with them. (chuckles)

**M: Is there anything I didn’t ask about this piece or your experience that you think I should know?**

P: No, not really. When Diana Ambasche called me to ask about this piece, I really wanted to do it. They were planning to do it with someone local, but I said I’ve got lots of frequent flyer miles and I’ll come over and do it at my expense which I did because I really cared about the piece. It just felt like I ought to do that. Otherwise I can’t remember anything else specific about it. It was nice that it got included on a Talma recording along with that opera. I don’t think it’s much of a piece but the four of us recorded it. I think it’s with piano. I think Louise was playing it. I will try to find a recording. But, you could also investigate where has the CRI catalogue gone.

{begins to search info about CRI and who has the catalogue}

**M: Were you the performer at Hunter's College concert at her retirement in 1983?**

**They performed "Thirteen Ways" there also.**

P: I guess I was. I don't remember. {reading from internet as he tries to locate publisher}

You want a phone number?

**M: Oh sure.**

P: 212-290-1680. If they've got everything out, I should find out too. I'd love to have the CD of that thing. And also *Diadem*, they had that too, maybe even two different recordings. Apparently, I did that one twice too...Oh, wait a minute, here's another.

Now, New World Records gives another number. 646-442-7939. And I'll try to find out about it too. I'd like to have some of those things. I have the *Diadem* one, but I don't have this one.

Do not hesitate to call me back if there is anything I can be helpful about.

**M: I may take you up on that. Thank you so much, Mr. Sperry.**

P: I will look forward to hearing from you again and if I find out anything about New World, I'll let you know.

## APPENDIX B – ENGRAVED COPY

An updated and engraved copy of Louise Talma's *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is located on pages 66-81. The full score has been provided to increase accessibility for future performances and is not to be used for commercial/for-profit ventures.

For Paul Sperry and Jennifer Sperry  
**Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird**

Wallace Stevens\*

Louise Talma

♩ = 58

Oboe/Flute *p* *non legato*

Tenor/Soprano *p* Among twenty snowy mountains, The

Piano *p* *Red.*

Ob./Fl. T.S. Pno.

only— moving— thing\*\* was the eye of the black bird.

Ob./Fl. *poco cresc.* *mf dim.* *pp* *p*

Pno. *senza pedale*

\*\* Sustain on "ng"

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10

Ob./Fl.

Pno. *sempre uguale*

Ob./Fl.

Pno.

20

Ob./Fl.

T./S.

I am of three minds, of three minds, Like a

Pno.

Ob./Fl.

T./S.

*ominously*

tree In which there are three blackbirds.

Pno.

Ob./Fl.

Pno.

Ob./Fl.

T./S.

Pno.

*poco cresc.*

*mf*

*mf*

*poco cresc.*

*mf*

The blackbird\_\_ whited

Ob./Fl.

T./S.

Pno.

\_\_ in the autumn winds whited\_\_ in the autumn winds.

Ob./Fl. *pp* *accel.* *p*

T./S. *p as before*

Pno. *p* *pp*

It was a small part of the pantomime

**Più mosso** ♩=69

Ob./Fl. 40

T./S. A man and a woman Are one.

Pno. *p*

Ob./Fl.

T./S. A man and a woman and a blackbird Are

Pno. *mf*

Ob./Fl. *f* **rit.**

T./S. *f* one.

Pno. *f*

Ob./Fl. **Meno mosso** ♩=50 *p* 50

T./S. *p* I do not Know which

Pno. *p*

Ob./Fl. *b*

T./S. 3 to prefer, The beauty of in -

Pno.



Ob./Fl. *mf* *mp* *mf*

T./S. flections Or the beauty of innu- endoes, The blackbird whistling

Pno.

Ob./Fl. *mp cresc.*

T./S. or just after.

Pno. *pp* *f*

60 **Tempo I** ♩=58

T./S. *f* I - cicles filled the long windows With bar

Pno. *m.s.* *m.s.* *f*

*m.d.* 1 2 1 4 5

Reo 7

Ob./Fl. *f* *p*

T./S. *p*  
baric glass. The shadow of the blackbird crossed it

Pno. *p*

Ob./Fl.

T./S.  
to and fro. The mood Traced in the

Pno.

70

Ob./Fl. *3* *3* *3* \*

T./S.  
shadow An indecipherable cause.


Pno.

\*When performed by the flute, these four notes are to be played one octave higher.

**poco rit.** **A tempo**

Ob./Fl. 

T./S.   
O thin men of Haddam, Why


Pno. 

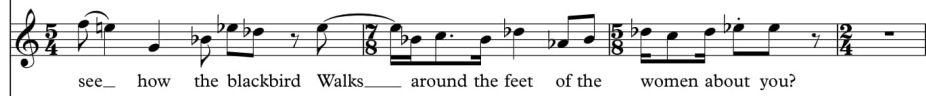
Ob./Fl. 


T./S.   
do you imagine golden birds? Do you not

Pno. 

80

Ob./Fl. 

T./S.   
see how the blackbird Walks around the feet of the women about you?

Pno. 

Ob./Fl.  $\text{♩} = 66$  9

*mf* *mf*

Pno. *mf* *mf* *mp* *poco cresc.*

Ob./Fl. *mf* *mp*

T./S. *mf*

I know no - ble accents And

Pno. *dim.* *mp*

Ob./Fl. 90 *mf*

T./S. *mf*

lu - cid in - es - capable rhythms

Pno. *mf*

10

Ob./Fl.  $\text{♩} = 58$

T./S. *mf* *p*  
But I know, too, \_\_\_\_\_ That the

Pno. *sf* *mf*

T./S. blackbird is involved \_\_\_\_\_ In what I know.

Pno. *p* *p*

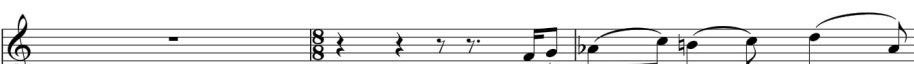
Ob./Fl. *p* *3*

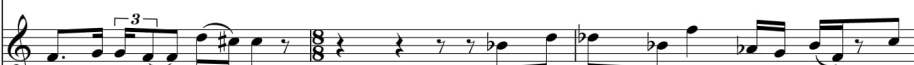
Pno. *legato senza pedale*


Ob./Fl. 

T./S.   
When the blackbird flew out of sight, It marked the edge of

Pno. 

Ob./Fl. 

T./S.   
one of many cir- cles. When the blackbird flew out of sight It

Pno. 

Ob./Fl.   
110

T./S.   
marked the edge of one of many cir- cles. Of one of many many

Pno. 

Ob./Fl.

T./S.

Pno.

*pp*

*pp*

*f*

cir- cles\_ Of one of many\_ cir- cles\_

Ob./Fl.

Pno.

*Più mosso* ♩=72

*f*

*energico*

Ob./Fl.

T./S.

Pno.

*f*

120

At the sight of blackbirds Fly - ing in a green light, Even the

T./S. *bawds* of *euphony* Would cry out

Pno.

Ob./Fl. *dim. céder*

T./S. *sharp* - - - - - *ly.*

Pno.

**A tempo**

Ob./Fl. *mp* *cresc.*

T./S. *mp* *poco cresc.*  
He ro - de over\_ Connecticut In a glass coa - ch.

Pno. *mp* *cresc.*



130 ♩=63

Ob./Fl. *mf*

T./S. *mf* *p*  
Once a fear pierced him, In—

Pno. *mf* *p*

Ob./Fl. *p* *poco cresc. céder* *mf* *p*

T./S. *p*  
that he mistook The shadow of his equipage For blackbirds.

Pno. *p*

Poco meno mosso ♩=52

140

Ob./Fl. *p* *3*

T./S. *p* *tranquillo*  
The riv - er is mov - ing. The

Pno. *legato, tranquillo*

15

*poco rit.* *A tempo*

Ob./Fl. *p*

T./S. blackbird must be fly - ing.

Pno. *dim.* *pp* *p*

Ob./Fl.

T./S. It was evening all after - noon. It was

Pno.

150

Ob./Fl. *pp*<sup>3</sup>

T./S. snowing And it was going to snow. The

Pno.

Ob./Fl. *p*

T./S. bla - ck bir - d sa - t In the ce - dar limbs In the

Pno.

Ob./Fl.

T./S. ce - dar limbs.

Pno.

*poco rit.* 160

Ob./Fl. *pp dim.*

T./S. Hum on oo\* *dim.*

Pno.

\* as in "doom"

## APPENDIX C – PERMISSION TO ENGRAVE

### Board of Directors

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David Macy  
*Resident Director*



November 18, 2019

Dear MacDowell Colony:

My name is Meredith Johnson and I am a graduate student at the University of Southern Mississippi. My final project is a performer's guide on Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" as set by Louise Talma in 1979 for voice, oboe, and piano. I performed the trio on my recital and quickly fell in love with the work.

For ease of reading the score, which existed only as manuscript, I engraved a copy of Talma's "Blackbird" for myself and my colleagues. I would like to request your permission to include this complete engraved copy in the appendix of my dissertation to further promote the exploration and performance of Talma's worthy music. The engraved copy will not be used for commercial/for-profit ventures as my publication is of an academic nature only. Four or less hard copies of the dissertation will be printed as well as one digital copy to be entered into the scholarly dissertation database.

Thank you for your kind consideration in this matter.

Sincerely Yours,

Meredith M. Johnson

  
Approved by the Executive Director

APPENDIX D – IRB LETTER



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Nov. 28, 2018

To Whom It May Concern,

Acting on behalf of 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 regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines, I have reviewed the following project and have determined that review by USM's IRB is not necessary.

Principal Investigator: Meredith M. Johnson

Title: "A performance guide to Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" as set by Louise Talma."

Date Submitted: Nov. 27, 2018

Formal IRB review is not required in this instance, as the project does not meet federal or institutional definitions of "human subjects research."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Samuel V. Bruton", is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Samuel V. Bruton

Director of the Office of Research Integrity

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