

Libby Larsen's *Margaret Songs*:
A Musical Portrait Of Willa Cather's
Margaret Elliot

by

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A Research Paper Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Musical Arts

Approved April 2013 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2013

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ABSTRACT

Libby Larsen is one of the most performed and acclaimed composers today. She is a spirited, compelling, and sensitive composer whose music enhances the poetry of America's most prominent authors. Notable among her works are song cycles for soprano based on the poetry of female writers, among them novelist and poet Willa Cather (1873-1947). Larsen has produced two song cycles on works from Cather's substantial output of fiction: one based on Cather's short story, "Eric Hermansson's Soul," titled *Margaret Songs: Three Songs from Willa Cather* (1996); and later, *My Antonia* (2000), based on Cather's novel of the same title.

In *Margaret Songs*, Cather's poetry and short stories—specifically the character of Margaret Elliot—combine with Larsen's unique compositional style to create a surprising collaboration. This study explores how Larsen in these songs delves into the emotional and psychological depths of Margaret's character, not fully formed by Cather. It is only through Larsen's music and Cather's poetry that Margaret's journey through self-discovery and love become fully realized. This song cycle is a glimpse through the eyes of two prominent female artists on the societal pressures placed upon Margaret's character, many of which still resonate with women in today's culture.

This study examines the work *Margaret Songs* by discussing Willa Cather, her musical influences, and the conditions surrounding the writing of "Eric Hermansson's Soul." It looks also into Cather's influence on Libby Larsen and the commission leading to *Margaret Songs*. Finally, a description of the musical, dramatic, and textual content of the songs completes this interpretation of the interactions of Willa Cather, Libby Larsen, and the character of Margaret Elliot.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer sincerest gratitude to my doctoral committee members for their support and encouragement throughout the duration of my degree. Particularly, I would like to acknowledge Carole FitzPatrick and Dr. Amy Holbrook, the former for her gracious advice, guidance, unyielding support, and both personal and professional development throughout my degree and the latter for her countless hours of instruction, supervision, and direction. Without the development of my musicianship and interpretive skills by Russell Ryan and Dale Dreyfoos, I would not have possessed the ability to take on the analysis of Willa Cather's character and to understand completely the depths revealed within the colors of Libby Larsen's music.

To my family and friends for their constant support and love, for which and whom I am so grateful. Most specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Jennifer Allen for providing assistance, tough love, and honesty. I would also like to send my gratitude to Professors Ariel Bybee and James Ford at the University of Nebraska, for without their introduction to the musical world of Willa Cather, I would not have discovered my passion for Cather's writings and life. Finally, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my cheerleader throughout, Jerron Jorgensen. Without his support, assurance, and patience I would not have progressed as gracefully through this degree.

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CHAPTER ONE

WILLA CATHER

Biography

Willa Cather (1874-1947) was born to a Virginia farming family on January 22, 1874. Through much of her life, she claimed to have been born in 1876 in hopes of shaving a couple of years off her age.¹ She spent the first years of her childhood on the family farm before her parents, Charles and Mary Cather, moved their young family to a small ranch in the precinct of Catherton, in Nebraska, in 1883.² Cather was nine years old when she first encountered the Great Plains of Nebraska and the people of this region. Edith Lewis, Cather's long-time friend and companion, describes Cather's time as a child in Nebraska:

Willa Cather spent a great deal of her time on horseback, riding about through the thinly-settled countryside, visiting the Bohemians and Danes and Norwegians who were their nearest neighbours, tasting the wild plum wine the old women made, eating watermelons with the little herd girls, who wore men's hats, and coolly killed rattlesnakes with clods of earth.³

At a young age, Cather immersed herself in the culture of what was then known as the Nebraska Divide. The Nebraska Divide—a unique patch of land where the Nebraska farmland meets the sand hills—was a beautiful landscape of high prairie land surrounded by the Little Blue River and the Republican River. Cather found true beauty in the Great Plains and she experienced firsthand the strong bond Nebraskans held with

¹ Janis P. Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville:

² Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

the land of the Divide, ultimately inspiring her and her writing. In her memoir, *Willa Cather Living*, Edith Lewis states that Cather “...gave herself with passion to the country and the people; became at heart their champion, made their struggle her own.”⁴ Her time in Nebraska remained a fond memory for the duration of her life. However far away she moved from the Cather ranch, she always carried the experience of the Divide with her. Subsequently, themes of community, love, the wild country of the Divide, and one’s soulful connection to the land are echoed throughout her writings.

As a small child, Cather did not receive a formal early education. She managed to find old copies of literary classics—among them plays by Shakespeare and Byron—and used these as her tutors.⁵ Astonishingly enough, Cather was self-taught, reading the classics aloud to her grandmothers in the evenings. Cather’s family moved from the ranch to the town of Red Cloud in 1884, where her father began selling farm loans and insurance. Upon moving to Red Cloud, Cather was finally able to receive an institutional education, graduating from high school and then continuing her education in 1890 at the University of Nebraska, where her passion for the arts flourished. During her time at the University, Cather began writing for numerous local publications, including the *Hesperian*, the *Nebraska State Journal*, and the *Sombrero*.⁶ Most notably, the *Lincoln Courier* became a catalyst for Cather’s love affair with music.

⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert Thacker, “About Willa Cather-The University of Nebraska, 1890-1895,” Willa Cather Foundation, <http://www.willacather.org/about-willa-cather/willa-cather?start=2> (accessed July 27, 2012).

Importance of Music in Cather's Life

At the *Lincoln Courier*, Cather contributed to a column of dramatic criticism, for which she would review plays, operas, concerts, and recitals. Through her attendance at these events, Cather began to revere music as a device for human expression in its highest form, rather than as simple entertainment. Discussing the lasting effect of music on Cather's life, Edith Lewis says:

Music, for Willa Cather, was hardly at all, I think, an intellectual interest. It was an emotional experience that had a potent influence on her own imaginative processes—quickening the flow of her ideas, suggesting new forms and associations, translating itself into parallel movements of thought and feeling.⁷

Cather had an unfaltering fascination with music. Apart from rudimentary piano lessons as a young child, she lacked formal musical training. In her heart, however, Cather was a musician. Music was her constant companion throughout life. She spent her time in Lincoln absorbing the local artistic culture. She had never experienced music in such a live and personal way before. After graduating from the University in 1895, Cather moved to the Northeast, where she spent a brief time in Pittsburgh with the *Home Monthly* and *Pittsburgh Daily Leader* publications, writing reviews of local arts and drama productions.⁸ Shortly thereafter, Cather relocated to New York City, where she took a post at *McClure's*, composing magazine articles by day and attending Metropolitan Opera productions by night.⁹

⁷ Lewis, *Willa Cather Living*, 47-48.

⁸ Thacker, "About Willa Cather—Journalist and Teacher, Writer and Poet, 1895-1912."

⁹ Lewis, *Willa Cather Living*, 89.

Cather experienced opera in New York City during a time when the legends of the operatic world were only just beginning to make names for themselves. On any given evening, Cather's program held such names as Enrico Caruso, Louise Homer, Luisa Tetrazzini, and Arturo Toscanini.¹⁰ As Cather immersed herself in New York City's arts and culture, she also began to develop close friendships with such idols as Olive Fremstad and Geraldine Farrar. Consequently, as music infiltrated her personal life, it would begin to permeate her literary career as well.

Musical Influences in Cather's Fictional Works

The music that surrounded Cather strongly influenced her writing and often the plots and characters of her works. Cather even drew inspiration from music for her compositional style. Edith Lewis described Cather's love affair with music, and how it was manifested in her writing:

I think no critic has sufficiently emphasized, or possibly recognized, how much musical forms influenced her composition and how her style, her beauty of cadence and rhythm, were the result of a sort of transposed musical feeling, and were arrived at almost unconsciously, instead of being a conscious effort to produce definite effects with words.¹¹

Music also innately affected the plots and characters of Cather's stories, and it became a primary theme even in her most fledgling works. For example, her first story, *Peter* (1892), is about an aged violinist in Prague, reminiscing on his days in the Prague Orchestra.¹² Music continued to play an integral role in her writing throughout her career,

¹⁰ Lewis, *Willa Cather Living*, 90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹² Willa Cather, "On the Divide: Peter," in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction*, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 541-543.

including in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and her Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *One of Ours* (1922).¹³ Not only did the great artists of Cather's time act as muses for her plot points, the works of Richard Wagner, Franz Schubert, and Pietro Mascagni—among others—resonated deeply with her.

Cather consistently used music as a metaphor for the inner spirit of her characters. One can find the music that so moved her in the concert halls entwined in the very souls of her characters. In Cather's novel, *Lucy Gayheart*, Lucy attends a performance of Schubert's *Die Winterreise*, which despairingly foreshadows Lucy's ultimate demise in the novel. Often Cather's earliest works used music not only as a plot device, but also as a complex and expressive vehicle to reveal emotions that her own words could not convey. For example, in the short story, "Eric Hermannson's Soul" (1900), Cather creates a captivating scene in which the "Intermezzo" from Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* alludes to Eric's inner struggle and turmoil.

A young Willa Cather was enthralled after attending a performance of *Cavalleria rusticana* in 1895. She felt the despair and yearning that she later imagined Eric Hermannson to feel one night in the Lockharts' parlor. Cather heard the vibrating "bass that labors and fails and struggles, that suffers and protests in its black despair; its treble that never yields, never falters, dips sometimes toward the lower octaves like a bird that

¹³ The Willa Cather Foundation, "Works of Willa Cather," <http://www.willacather.org/about-willa-cather/works-of-willa-cather> (accessed Nov 15).

is faint with its death wound, and then flies on, flies on.”¹⁴ Eric Hermansson’s soul was dead, yearning for the music of his youth, the music that—to his current religion—represented sin. When hearing the music flow from the old organ in the Lockharts’ parlor, Eric found hope in Margaret. Of the “Intermezzo,” Cather continues, “. . . that treble that sees the hopelessness of all things and yet never wavers, love betrayed that still loves on, hope deferred that still hopes on.”¹⁵ To Cather, the intermezzo was a meeting of two emotional dissonances, not unlike those encountered by Eric that evening.

Since Cather never experienced formal music training, music was not methodological or even scholarly to her. Despite this, Cather seemed to possess an innate understanding of music. Her years of attending concerts were spent truly immersed in the music as an audience member, just as the composers intended their music to be experienced.

“Eric Hermansson’s Soul”

After Cather resigned from her first job in Pittsburgh as the editor of *The Home Monthly*, she lived with her cousin, Howard Gore, in Washington, D.C, for the winter of 1900-1901. She spent that winter immersing herself in music and literature. Gore’s wife, Lillian Thekla Brandthall, the daughter of a Norwegian ambassador, would sing Grieg’s songs and read Ibsen to Cather.¹⁶ That winter, Cather published seven stories in

¹⁴ Willa Cather, *Lincoln Courier* (September 7, 1895): 7. Collected in *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 162.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 162-163.

¹⁶ Mildred R Bennett, “Willa Cather in Pittsburgh,” *Prairie Schooner* 33, no.1 (1959): 72-74.

magazines throughout the United States.¹⁷ By 1900, national magazines had become a lucrative business for short fiction writers.¹⁸ Cather's stories were being published in some of the nation's most widely circulated magazines, including *The Cosmopolitan*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Scribner's Magazine*.¹⁹

First published in the April 1900 issue of *The Cosmopolitan*, "Eric Hermansson's Soul" was the most successful of her short stories. This piece of fiction illuminated an intriguing conflict for Cather and reveals much about her life. The East Coast's cultural bounty and the yearning for the wild abandon she felt as a child in the West created a polarizing effect for Cather. Indeed, many of her letters describe both her homesickness for the Nebraska Divide, and her escapades in the arts and cultural milieu of the East coast.

Inspiration for "Eric Hermansson's Soul"

In a letter to her friend, Mariel Gere, Cather reveals her homesickness for Nebraska. She wrote about how she nearly acted upon an impulse to jump off the train and run back to Lincoln, and of the depression the wind coming from the West gave her.²⁰ "Eric Hermansson's Soul" is set in the land Cather knew so well as a child: the Nebraska Divide. It was the land on which she rode wild across the plains and visited the

¹⁷ Willa Cather, "Bibliography of Willa Cather's Short Fiction, 1892-1912," in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction*, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 592-593.

¹⁹ Andrew Jewell, ed., "Cather as a Short Story Writer," Willa Cather Archive, http://cather.unl.edu/index.ss_title.html (accessed 3/1/13).

²⁰ Bennett, "Willa Cather in Pittsburgh," 70.

Scandinavian women to drink their wine. Her homesickness and emptiness in the story are manifested in the title character, Eric. Margaret, on the other hand, represents everything the East was to Cather: arts, beauty, culture, knowledge; one could argue the character was molded, in part, after Lillian Thekla Brandthall, her cousin's wife. Margaret refers to and quotes poetry often in the story, and she plays Grieg on the organ for Eric, just as Lillian did for Cather.

A review of "Eric Hermansson's Soul" in the publication *Poet-lore* from the winter of 1903 describes the story as "a study of the effect of western climatic conditions on the Scandinavian temperament."²¹ Cather composed the short story in three distinct sections. The first reveals the emotional demise of Eric Hermansson, his conversion to Free Gospellism, and the loss of music and his soul. The ensuing two sections reveal the effect a young girl from the East, Margaret Elliot, has on Eric's soul, as she brings arts, beauty, culture, and knowledge with her to the Nebraska Divide. It is Eric and Margaret's discovery of love that challenges all of their beliefs and convictions.

Synopsis of "Eric Hermansson's Soul"

Part I: The story begins in Lone Star, along the Divide of Nebraska, as Eric Hermansson, a young Norwegian violinist, converts to Free Gospellism. Known throughout the Divide, Eric lives a tumultuous lifestyle of musical indulgences, dancing, and women. One afternoon, while drinking beer at Lena Hanson's²² place, Lena sings and

²¹ *Poet-Lore*, "Glimpses of Present-Day Poets: Willa Sibert Cather," (Winter 1903). Collected in *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, ed. L. Brent Bohlke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 4.

²² Cather describes Lena Hanson in "Eric Hermansson's Soul:" "...Lena Hanson, whose name was a reproach through all the Divide country...on such occasions Lena,

plays the guitar for Eric, “a song which made his cheeks burn.”²³ A rattlesnake then suddenly appears at the door of Lena’s home. Eric is convinced the snake is an omen from God. The next evening, Eric attends a Free Gospeller meeting with his mother and it is here that he feels the power of persuasion and charisma, converting his life to the fundamentalist views of the Free Gospellers. One last worldly possession stands between Eric and the beliefs of Gospellism:

The final barrier between Eric and his mother’s faith was his violin, and to that he clung as a man sometimes will cling to his dearest sin, to the weakness more precious to him than all his strength.²⁴

Eric, inveigled by the minister, Asa Skinner, stands and breaks his violin across his knee, repudiating music as sinful.

Part II: Two years later, Eric has kept his faith in God and Free Gospellism. During this time, he has not heard a single strain of music. He is a lost and broken man. Then a young woman from the East arrives with her brother, Wyllis, to the Nebraska Divide. Wyllis has brought Margaret from New York City to purchase cheap land and revisit his childhood memories of this place. Margaret, cooped up all winter from an ice skating injury, was growing restless for adventure. The two siblings then travel throughout the Divide, discovering the Dakotas and prairies like a pair of gypsies:

attired in a pink wrapper and silk stockings and tiny pink slippers, would sing to him, accompanying herself on a battered guitar. . .[she] had lived in big cities and knew the ways of town folk, who had never worked in the fields and had kept her hands white and soft, her throat fair and tender,” 360.

²³ Cather, “On the Divide: Eric Hermansson’s Soul,” 361.

²⁴ Ibid.,

They had slept in sod houses on the Platte River, made the acquaintance of the personnel of a third-rate opera company on the train to Deadwood, dined in a camp of railroad constructors at the world's end beyond New Castle, gone through the Black Hills on horseback, fished for trout in Dome Lake, watched a dance at Cripple Creek, where lost souls who hide in the hills gathered for their besotted revelry.²⁵

Margaret and Wyllis make their way to the Nebraska Divide for one final adventure before returning home to New York City. The two are returning to the place of their childhood to stay with their friends, the Lockharts. The Nebraska Divide is wild country, and is occupied by Scandinavians and Native Americans. During their week on the Divide, Wyllis hires Eric Hermansson as a travel companion for his adventurous sister.

One evening, as Eric is tending to the Lockharts' broken front porch, Margaret delights herself in playing the old organ in the parlor, reminding Eric of his passionate love of music. He has never heard this kind of music, that of Grieg, Mascagni, and Schubert. The sound of the music Margaret plays suddenly breathes life into him. Afterward Margaret discloses the unusual encounter to Wyllis. She says, "I can't tell you what music means to that man. I never saw any one so susceptible to it. It gave him speech, he became alive."²⁶

The next evening, as Eric accompanies Margaret to retrieve a letter from the post office in town, the two encounter a herd of wild ponies. When the wild ponies spook Margaret's horse, Eric comes to her rescue. He is terrified at the thought of losing Margaret and confused by his feelings for her:

²⁵ Ibid., 363.

²⁶ Ibid., 366.

You are the only beautiful thing that has ever come close to me... You are like the music you sing, you are like the stars and the snow on the mountains where I played when I was a little boy. You are like all that I wanted once and never had, you are all that they have killed in me... I love you more than Christ who died for me.²⁷

As Margaret lies in bed that evening she begins to read the letter she received earlier that day from her fiancé. Margaret, torn between two worlds, questions her happiness in the city and wonders if she will ever find love and experience “that one great moment.”²⁸

Part III: On the eve of Margaret and Wyllis’ departure, the Lockharts gather the Norwegians for a dance. Eric arrives at the dance; the Norwegian music and the fiddles captivate him. While Margaret watches from afar, Eric begins to play and she sees him come alive with the violin in his hands. Drawn into Eric’s emotion and the infectious melodies of Nordic folk songs, Margaret invites Eric out into the crisp night to view the moon. The two climb the windmill tower together to get a closer look at the world beyond the Divide. As Eric and Margaret cling to one another in the cold night air, the two share a kiss. “I will not forget,” are Margaret’s last words to Eric.²⁹ At last, she had found her “one great moment,” atop the windmill tower with Eric Hermansson.

Almost one hundred years after Cather wrote about Margaret Elliot, composer Libby Larsen saw a character full of musical promise. The central themes of community, belonging, and the frightening truth of love resonated with Larsen. Margaret Elliot would bind Willa Cather and Libby Larsen together.

²⁷ Ibid., 372.

²⁸ Ibid., 374

²⁹ Ibid., 378.

CHAPTER TWO

LIBBY LARSEN

Biography

Elizabeth “Libby” Larsen was born on Christmas Eve in 1950 in Wilmington, Delaware. When she was three years old, her family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, a city with a burgeoning arts scene.³⁰ Larsen describes her first musical experience in which, at three years old, she patiently watched her sister play the piano. “I was holding on to the piano and I think even gnawing on it a little,” states Larsen, “I remember feeling the whole piano vibrating and moving and I knew that somehow her fingers were making that sound and vibration.”³¹ Once Larsen received her turn on the family piano, she pulled herself atop the bench and composed her first piece: “It was just a series of clusters that I came up with.” Upon completion, Larsen immediately searched for her mother to comment on her creation.

For Larsen, music is how she communicates; even as a little girl, she sang—rather than spoke—anything she felt was important. It did not matter where she was—getting someone’s attention in a crowd, the dinner table, school, or at home—singing was her form of expression. Much like Willa Cather, the human voice enticed Larsen, in particular the singing voice. To Larsen, the voice envelops the human spirit: “It seems to

³⁰ Libby Larsen, “Frequently Asked Questions: Influences,” <http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=232> (accessed March 2, 2013).

³¹ *Ibid.*

me that the human voice raised in song carries our spirit on its breath in a way that is essential, timeless, deeply mysterious and completely honest.”³²

Larsen learned piano during childhood, as well as sight-reading and singing Gregorian chant from the nuns at Christ the King School. Sister Colette, Larsen’s piano teacher, introduced her to the world of musical sounds and colors. From an early age, she played the music of Mozart, Bartók, and Stravinsky, and even Japanese music and boogie. Larsen continued to cultivate her musical skills and knowledge beyond childhood and into young adulthood. She sang in the chorus in high school, and would listen attentively to her father playing the clarinet in a Dixieland band, as well as her mother playing boogie-woogie records in their home.

Larsen continued her musical studies at the University of Minnesota, where she received her bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees in music. Larsen had the privilege of studying under the tutelage of such notable composers as Dominick Argento, Paul Felter, and Eric Stokes. During her time at the University of Minnesota, she blossomed as a young composer. For Larsen, education did not come only through academia, but also from unexpected places and people. “They have been poets, architects, painters and philosophers. The other way I really learn is by reading scores voraciously, from Chuck Berry to Witold Lutoslawski.”³³

As Larsen continued to climb the ranks of American composers, she faced the challenges of being a woman in a field dominated by men. Raised in a family of mostly

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

females, gender roles were never an issue for her. Yet, a rude awakening in graduate school introduced her to societally imposed “rules.” “It never really entered my mind, that there might be issues surrounding the fact that I was a woman and the fact that I was a composer...until a graduate school class, when a male colleague pointed out to me that I would be unable to compose in large forms because I was a woman...That women couldn’t think in large, logical structures.”³⁴ Larsen, a strong and unapologetic woman, pushed to make her voice heard. She composed her first opera as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota and continued to compose music, with over 500 pieces in the repertoire. *USA Today* called Larsen “the only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively.”³⁵

Larsen continues to add to an ever-burgeoning list of compositions. She is a strong advocate for American music and musicians. In 1973, she co-founded the American Composer’s Forum. She was the first woman to hold a composer-in-residence position with a professional orchestra, the Minnesota Orchestra, and has also held this post with the Charlotte Symphony and the Colorado Symphony.³⁶ Predominantly, Larsen centers her career on commissions from patrons. When asked why she prefers to have a career based on commissions, she states, “I require the entire process of commission,

³⁴Cynthia Green, “Interview with Composer Libby Larsen,” *International League of Women Composers Journal* (June 1992): 25.

³⁵ Libby Larsen, “Media,” <http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=219> (accessed March 2, 2013).

³⁶ Libby Larsen, “Biography,” <http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=216> (accessed March 2, 2013).

creating, performing and communicating, which is the very heart and soul of the classical concert tradition.”³⁷ For Larsen, music is about the performance—the process of

bringing her music to life:

Music exists in infinity of sound. I think of all music as existing in the substance of the air itself. It is the composer’s task to order and make sense of sound, in time and space, to communicate something about being alive through music.³⁸

Musical Influences

For Larsen, growing up in Minnesota provided its fair share of inspiration; especially the urban setting of Minneapolis, with its unique landscape of lakes and creeks amongst the city streets. She recalls growing up in a concentrated urban environment, yet was able to walk down the street to canoe or sail out on the water. Growing up in this setting, much like Cather, Larsen found a connection to the land, though in a different sense. “What has found its way into the music is a sense of movement from ground to water, and a movement from civilized energy to nature.”³⁹ In an interview with Nebraska Educational Television (NETV), Larsen discussed how the Great Plains affected her:

I grew up in Minnesota, on the Great Plains, and if you grow up in this area you are influenced by nature. You know we’re subject to the weather, the sky, the winds; everything about the drama in nature is influential in our lives.⁴⁰

³⁷ Larsen, “Frequently Asked Questions: Influences.”

³⁸ Larsen, “Biography.”

³⁹ Larsen, “Frequently Asked Questions: Influences.”

⁴⁰ Charles M. Smith, “Eric Hermansson’s Soul: Comparing and Contrasting Two Musical Adaptations of the Willa Cather Short Story” (DMA diss., University of Nebraska, 2006), 21.

Larsen believes that music is naturally within the heart of a culture.⁴¹ Speech patterns fascinate her; when hearing a person speak, she takes mental rhythmic dictation to establish the pulse and pattern of the language.⁴² This rhythm and pulse are what motivate Larsen's compositions: "...our own American language has beautiful rhythms in it; it is this American vernacular and the rhythm of our American life that is the language of my music."⁴³ Due to her fascination with the American language, vocal music has naturally become a major part of her compositional output.

Larsen has composed a large number of vocal works, including operas, song cycles, one mass, and numerous choral works. The vast majority of her vocal repertoire has been settings of texts written by women, including such distinguished poets as Mary Shelley, Emily Dickinson, Brenda Ueland, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and even Calamity Jane. Larsen finds a "direct musical connection in really fine texts by women."⁴⁴

I am drawn to first-person texts, and a certain expression of spiritual struggle. When I study texts for men to sing, it's very difficult to find the raw struggle towards honesty that interests me in first-person female texts. There's a distancing that I often find in male texts. Almost all of the emotions are held at arm's length to be extracted and examined objectively through technique and is a particular kind of language. In many texts written by women, the language is

⁴¹ Libby Larsen and Katherine Strand, "A Socratic Dialogue with Libby Larsen: On Music, Musical Experience in American Culture, and Music Education," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 19, no. 1 (2011): 57, <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed March 2, 2013).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Larsen, "Frequently Asked Questions: On Music," <http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=230> (accessed March 2, 2013).

⁴⁴ Linell Gray Moss, "Composer's Corner: An Interview with Composer Libby Larsen," *International Alliance for Women in Music* 5 (1999): 9.

subjective and very personal. The author risks exposing herself directly to the reader.⁴⁵

Female authors and even artists, such as Mary Cassatt and Georgia O’Keefe, inspire Larsen.⁴⁶ She reads the texts of these women voraciously and they resonate with her, creating a spiritual connection between herself and the author.⁴⁷ Interestingly, Larsen was moved to set the words of Willa Cather three separate times. Her introduction came in a commission from Opera Omaha.

Eric Hermannson’s Soul, the Chamber Opera

Commission

In 1994, during her eleven-day residency at the University of Nebraska, the administrators at Opera Omaha—Nebraska’s regional opera company—met with Larsen to commission a piece commemorating their fortieth season.⁴⁸ Larsen first offered the 1962 novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury; however, Opera Omaha instead suggested the work of Willa Cather, due to Cather’s connection to opera and her Nebraska heritage. Larsen was skeptical that a work by Cather could be successful as an opera.

Larsen had read only a few of Cather’s novels—which is very little when compared to the sheer breadth of Cather’s output—so Larsen went home and engrossed

⁴⁵ Susan Chastain, “A Conversation with Libby Larsen,” *International League of Women Composers Journal* 2 (February 1996): 5.

⁴⁶ Moss, “Composer’s Corner: An Interview with Composer Libby Larsen,” 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Smith, “Eric Hermannson’s Soul,” 33.

herself in Cather's texts.⁴⁹ After reading *The Song of the Lark*, *O Pioneers*, and *My Antonia*, she felt that setting these stories to music would only melodramatize them. She went back to Cather's works and this time focused on her short story fiction. Larsen eventually found *Eric Hermannson's Soul* and felt the story was not just simply a plot, but contained complicated themes and characters, which she saw as an opportunity to expand upon. Consequently, Larsen set Cather's *Eric Hermannson's Soul* as a chamber opera.⁵⁰

In 1994, as part of her collaboration with the University of Nebraska, Larsen began composing *Eric Hermannson's Soul* as a forty-five minute workshop opera for performance in colleges. Larsen invited Chas Rader-Sheiber, the Resident Stage Director at the Curtis Institute of Music, to direct the workshop version of *Eric Hermannson's Soul*. As Larsen began to develop the full-length opera for Opera Omaha, Rader-Sheiber helped Larsen to complete the libretto for the piece. Larsen was careful to hold true to Cather's words: "I didn't add many words—I made one aria, but I tried to stay close to her story."⁵¹ Instead, Larsen incorporated Cather's poetry, along with direct quotes from the short story, to further enhance the characters as well as to preserve Cather's words; however, the poetry and direct quotations began to move beyond Cather's characters. With Larsen's interest in first-person female texts, the character of Margaret Elliot captivated her more so than that of Eric Hermannson.

⁴⁹ Moss, "Composer's Corner: An Interview with Composer Libby Larsen," 9.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Larsen begins with the shell of Cather's character development, but significantly expands and explores new interpretations of the characters, most notably that of Margaret. She turns Cather's emphasis on Eric Hermannson into an exploration of the psychological and spiritual journey of Margaret. Larsen stays true to the short story, yet her libretto adds a new depth and spirit to Margaret not quite captured by Willa Cather. The final libretto by Larsen and Rader-Shieber adapts Cather's *Eric Hermannson's Soul* into a well-developed story about a woman's soul and spirit, awakened by true love.

Libretto

Though based on Willa Cather's short story, "Eric Hermannson's Soul," the libretto of Larsen's chamber opera appears to focus on themes Cather introduces within her story, rather than the story itself. The opera opens with a prologue that introduces the three main themes.⁵² Larsen expands and develops Cather's themes of not belonging to one's community, the struggle to find a sense of self, and the significance of selfless love.⁵³ In addition, Larsen makes subtle yet necessary changes to Cather's story to better suit the restrictions of the stage, actors, and music.

The biggest change to Cather's story is the structure of the plot. Cather's story takes place in three parts, while Larsen develops the story over two acts, combining and eliminating scenes from the original story. Larsen also more explicitly details the relationship between Eric and Margaret in the opera, most specifically Margaret's feelings towards Eric. Cather reveals Eric's love for Margaret; however, Cather only

⁵² Moss, "Composer's Corner: An Interview with Composer Libby Larsen," 9.

⁵³ Libby Larsen and Chaz Rader-Shieber, *Eric Hermannson's Soul: Opera in Two Acts*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

alludes to Margaret's feelings for Eric. Larsen details Margaret's love for Eric and her intentions to stay on the Nebraska Divide. Yet, in the opera Wyllis convinces Margaret it would be a mistake, and out of duty, Margaret returns to New York.

The central scene in Cather's short story, the parlor scene, in which Margaret plays and sings for Eric, offers an obstacle for Larsen's libretto and staging. Instead of Margaret's singing and playing the organ for Eric, Larsen uses the "Intermezzo" from *Cavalleria rusticana* as incidental music, employing a glass cylinder phonograph as a prop to play the "Intermezzo" on stage as Margaret and Eric listen.

One final and significant change by Larsen is the scene in which Eric saves Margaret, and in so doing, discloses his love for her. In Cather's "Eric Hermansson's Soul," Eric saves Margaret from a pack of wild ponies that have frightened her horse. In Larsen's stage version, greatly hindered by the limits of live theatre, Eric protects Margaret from a storm that has quickly rolled in while the two are in a field together.⁵⁴

Premiere

Eric Hermansson's Soul premiered on November 11, 1998, with Opera Omaha at The Rose Blumkin Performing Arts Center in Omaha, Nebraska, under the baton of Hal France.⁵⁵ As part of a preview concert for *Eric Hermansson's Soul*, Libby Larsen composed a set of three songs entitled *Margaret Songs: Three Songs from Willa Cather*

⁵⁴ Ibid., v-vi.

⁵⁵ Libby Larsen, "Eric Hermansson's Soul," <http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=235&profileID=1536&startRange=> (accessed March 2, 2013).

for soprano Karen Wicklund, a professor of voice at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.⁵⁶

Wicklund premiered *Margaret Songs* at a preview concert for *Eric Hermannson's Soul* at Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska, on October 17, 1996, two years before the opera premiered. At this time, Larsen was already in the midst of her workshop version of the opera. Two of the three songs are direct excerpts from the opera, while the third is an entirely new composition by Larsen. The songs follow Margaret's emotional and spiritual journey on the Nebraska Divide.

⁵⁶ Libby Larsen, "Margaret Songs," <http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=241&profileID=1354&startRange=> (accessed March 2, 2013).

CHAPTER THREE

MARGARET SONGS

Inspiration

Libby Larsen adapted Willa Cather's *Eric Hermannson's Soul* with the intent of focusing on the heroine, Margaret Elliot. Intrigued by the themes found in "Eric Hermannson's Soul," Larsen was captivated also by Margaret's spirit and her connection to the land. Regarding texts with feminine voices, Larsen states, "I am drawn to... a certain expression of spiritual struggle... in most texts by women, the language is subjective and very personal."⁵⁷ Her spiritual connection to female authors is very similar to her special connection to the land and nature. Music, nature, and the human spirit represent more than literary devices for Larsen, similar to both Margaret and Cather. "I know nature speaks to me all the time as I compose. I visualize as I compose... to me nature and human situations are inseparable... both panorama and distance, combined with the details of a particular situation suggest music."⁵⁸

Poetry

Text

Larsen based the texts for *Margaret Songs* on the libretto of *Eric Hermannson's Soul*. The songs follow Margaret's journey along the Nebraska Divide through three profoundly personal vignettes. The song cycle begins as Margaret opens her journey on the train; her excitement over the ensuing adventure has overcome her. After arriving on

⁵⁷ Susan Chastain, "A Conversation with Libby Larsen," *International League of Women Composers Journal* 2 (February 1996): 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the Divide, in the second vignette, the people and land transform Margaret. She begins to question her happiness with life in the city and the very meaning of life. In the final vignette, Margaret follows her heart and finds the one great moment for which she is destined.

The spirit of Margaret drew Larsen to Cather's poetry. Larsen excerpts two of the song texts from Cather's *April Twilights* (1903) rather than from her short story "Eric Hermansson's Soul."⁵⁹ In the first and third songs of the song cycle, through her musical adaptations, Larsen creates beautiful imagery of the Nebraska landscape, and the connection between the land and Margaret's spirit, with the poems "Going Home," and "The Hawthorn Tree."

Larsen chose to write her own text for the second song to facilitate a better understanding of Margaret's transformation. She is able to capture Margaret's frustrations with life in the city and expand upon the emotional transformation found within Cather's character. By creating her own text for the second song Larsen is able to bring about a better understanding of Margaret's emotional journey, which Cather left in a more ambiguous state.

In her setting of *April Twilights*, a series of poems collected and published as Cather's first book, Larsen presents an intriguing connection between Margaret and Cather. Cather wrote *April Twilights* at a time of exploration and discovery in her own life. Much like Margaret, Cather was looking to find her way in a complicated and impersonal world. Cather had recently left her home in Nebraska to pursue her career as a

⁵⁹ Willa Cather, *April Twilights*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), xi.

writer in Pittsburgh. The arts and culture Pittsburgh had to offer invigorated her spirit, but her longing for the Nebraska Divide consistently induced homesickness.

April Twilights

Cather wrote *April Twilights* in 1903 after traveling to Europe for the first time. Her life was in transition, as she had recently accepted a new position to teach at Central High School in Pittsburgh. According to Janis P. Stout, Cather was unbalanced in her life; due to the constraints of teaching, she was unable to devote time to her true passion of writing.⁶⁰ In this way, she was much like Margaret in “Eric Hermansson’s Soul,” who found her world of New York’s high society unsatisfying, unproductive, and fruitless. It was during this unsettling time that Cather traveled to Europe for the first of many times in her life. Cather likely projected herself onto Margaret, who left New York for the Nebraska Divide, seeking to find truth and to discover herself through the adventure.

In “Eric Hermansson’s Soul,” Cather describes Margaret as a young woman not of her time. Cather’s own frustration with everyday life led her to crave new adventures, a trait visible in the character of Margaret. Cather describes Margaret as “a girl of other manners and conditions...Margaret Elliot was one of those women of whom there are so many in this day, when old order, passing, giveth place to new; beautiful, talented, critical, unsatisfied, tired of the world at twenty-four.”⁶¹ Cather thus portrayed Margaret

⁶⁰ Janis P. Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 54-55.

⁶¹ Willa Cather, “On the Divide: Eric Hermansson’s Soul,” in *Willa Cather’s Collected Short Fiction*, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 363.

as the new and emerging modern woman at the turn of the century, a portrayal that might have described Cather herself as well.

In 1901, while Cather was in the midst of writing the poetry for *April Twilights*, she began a deep and passionate friendship⁶² with Isabelle McClung during a stay with the McClung family in Pittsburgh. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant describes Cather's state of mind at the time: "...Willa herself had the poet's response to life, including the typical sense of the lyric poet that youth and the emotions of youth, because of their great intensity and simplicity, surpass all other emotions."⁶³ The poems of *April Twilights* are in a way a study of one's journey of the heart—leaving home, discovering new worlds and new loves, and searching for the truer self—all of which reflect upon the character of Margaret Elliot.

Cather felt such a fervent connection to the collection that she was compelled to revise *April Twilights* three times over the next two decades, first in 1923 and again in 1933 and 1937.⁶⁴ In a 1925 letter to Alice Hunt Bartlett, the American editor of the

⁶² In the March 21, 2013 *New York Times* article, "O Revelations! Letters, Once Banned, Flesh Out Willa Cather," by Jennifer Schuessler, leading Cather scholar Janis P. Stout describes Isabelle McClung as the love of Cather's life. The two shared a bedroom for nearly five years. In a recently released letter—excerpted from "The Selected Letters of Willa Cather," edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis P. Stout—from Cather to her brother Roscoe on Nov. 6, 1938, Cather discusses Isabelle's death: "You cannot imagine what her death means to me...No other living person cared as much about my work, through thirty-eight years, as she did...Isabelle watched me every step of the way."

⁶³ Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1953), 182-183.

⁶⁴ Stout, *Willa Cather*, 88.

Poetry Review, Cather describes “Going Home” as one of her best poems.⁶⁵ In her introduction to *April Twilights*, Bernice Slote suggests that the works of such greats as Richard Wagner, William Shakespeare, and Oscar Wilde inspired this poetry.⁶⁶ The August 12, 1903, *Boston Evening Transcript* claims, “One could quote indefinitely the sheer music and beauty of these poems.” Perhaps Cather’s quest for perfection, the poetry’s musicality, and Cather’s own personal journey during the composition are what spoke to Libby Larsen, who found “Going Home” and “The Hawthorn Tree” so relatable to the character of Margaret.

Textual and Musical Adaptations

I. “Bright Rails”

Text

Larsen made significant changes to the text of “Going Home.” She replaced the title “Going Home” with “Bright Rails,” which successfully alters the context of the poem from that of a woman’s returning home to a woman’s journey on a train. Cather’s poem is in three stanzas, but Larsen chose to set only the final stanza, to omit certain words, and to repeat the opening lines at the close. Below is the final stanza of Cather’s poem, with brackets containing Larsen’s omitted words and her additions to the poem italicized.

¹How smoothly the train[s] runs beyond the Missouri;
²in my sleep I know when I have crossed the river.
³[The wheels turn as if they were glad to go;]

⁶⁵ Andrew Jewell and Janis P. Stout, eds. *A Calendar of Letters of Willa Cather: An Extended Digital Edition*, (The Willa Cather Archive, 2010), <http://cather.unl.edu/index.calendar.html>.

⁶⁶ Cather, *April Twilights*, ed. Slote, xi-xvii.

⁴They run like running water,
⁵Like Youth, running away...
⁶They spin [bright] along the bright rails,
⁷Singing and humming,
⁸Singing and humming.
⁹They run remembering,
¹⁰They run rejoicing,
¹¹As if they, too, were going home.
¹²*How smoothly the train runs beyond the Missouri;*
¹³*Even in my sleep I know when I have crossed the river.*⁶⁷

Larsen's subtle text changes alter the context and character of the poem to fit Margaret's situation. Larsen states in her introduction to the score of *Margaret Songs*: "While the train takes its passengers to their homes, it is also a metaphor for Margaret's journey of the heart."⁶⁸ Curiously, Cather's poem includes no mention of passengers; it is quite simply a descriptive poem of one person's experience on a train. Larsen's omission of "The wheels turn as if they were glad to go" alters the meaning of the pronoun "they" throughout the remainder of the poem. The pronoun no longer has context since "trains" has become singular, removing the reference to the wheels. Although "they" has no antecedent, it becomes clear in the remainder of the poem that it refers to the wheels. Therefore, despite the initial ambiguity, Larsen depicts the motion of the wheels in the piano accompaniment, thus maintaining the original focus of Cather's poem.

Larsen attaches a poetic and musical return of the opening lines of the poem. Larsen's use of this convention makes cyclical Margaret's physical state. In the opening of the song, Margaret slowly awakens from a state of sleepiness, lulled by the

⁶⁷ Libby Larsen, *Margaret Songs: Three Songs from Willa Cather for Soprano Solo and Piano* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

monotonous vibrations from the train's wheels. As the song progresses, Margaret moves into a complete awareness of her surroundings. At the end, Margaret reiterates the opening lines, "How smoothly the train runs beyond the Missouri; Even in my sleep I know when I have crossed the river," suggesting that the train lulls her back to sleep.

The stanza of Cather's poem is divided into sections that present a succession of three topics. Lines 1-3 serve as an introduction to the train and its sleeping passenger. These lines also appear in the opening of the complete poem "Going Home." Lines 4-8 are a description of the wheels. Cather's short, repetitive lines and the onomatopoeic use of the letter "r" evokes the sound of the train's wheels gliding over the steel rails. Lines 9-11 create a personification of the wheels—"they remember, they rejoice, as if they, too, were going home"—in which the wheels take on traits of the narrator. The progression of these topics demonstrates the evolution of the narrator's emotional states, from awakening to anticipation or excitement, then to elation.

Larsen's addition of a recapitulation of the opening text alters the meaning of the poem that significantly links it to the character of Margaret as she journeys closer to her new adventure on the Nebraska Divide. This addition also de-emphasizes the idea of "going home" in line 2, which does not suit Margaret's situation of traveling somewhere new.

"Bright Rails," as adapted by Larsen, is a musical vignette of an evening on the train with Margaret. The musical adaptation creates a scene in which the vibration of the train awakens her. As she becomes fully aware of her surroundings, her anticipation and excitement for the journey ahead become apparent. Her elation grows as she is beginning

her journey, yet the train's wheels return her to her original state as they lull her back to sleep.

Music

Larsen uses multiple compositional techniques to paint the imagery of the train's wheels, Margaret's states of sleep and awareness, and even the expansiveness of the land as the train enters the Great Plains. "Bright Rails" introduces the significance of Margaret's journey both spiritually and physically. A combination of motives in the piano accompaniment evoke the motion of the train's wheels gliding over the steel rails as well as the vast prairie land in the distance, which Cather so intently created in the text of "Going Home." A syncopated ostinato in the treble accompaniment, the "train" motive, is the framework of the piece, which induces a constant forward motion throughout (Example 1). Layered with the treble ostinato, a pedal E-flat in the bass of the accompaniment represents the land, while the wheels glide above it. The large range between the treble ostinato and the E-flat pedal point suggests the expansiveness of the land. The pedal point also adds to the depth and richness of the song's overall color, helping to establish the imagery of the prairie land.

$\text{♩} = 120$ rhythmically, like a train

f *decresc.*

f

How smooth - ly the train runs be - yond the Mis - sou - ri;

mp

Example 1: Train Motive, “Bright Rails” mm. 1-8.

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Margaret is introduced when the vocal line joins the ostinato with a diatonic melody in even rhythm. Larsen composes Margaret’s entrance as though she is awakening from a deep sleep; her words flow evenly over the vibration of the wheels gliding over the steel rails. She fits into the “train” ostinato with a melody whose E-flat focus and diatonic pitch collection suggest E-flat Dorian mode.

As the song evolves, so does Margaret’s state of awareness. The E-flat pedal point continues to focus the tonality, along with the ostinato of the train’s wheels, but Margaret’s vocal line becomes repetitive and then begins to expand and break away from the E-flat mode. In mm. 11-17, Margaret’s vocal line is limited to the pitches B-flat – C –

D-flat – E-flat as she describes her sleep (Example 2).

11

in my sleep I know when I have

15

crossed the riv - er.

mp *f*

Example 2: Train Ostinato, “Bright Rails” mm. 11-17.

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This dissonance between the D-flat centered melody and the E-flat pedal tone portrays the conflict between Margaret’s solitude and the activity of the train’s wheels, and the more tumultuous state of her own thoughts. As this dissonance continues to develop, Margaret comes to a complete realization of the adventure that lies before her.

The piano interlude in measures 18-21 has a similar but thinner layering and rhythm that more clearly express the 9/8 meter. The top and middle layers form a new ostinato while the bass descends in dotted quarter notes through the E-flat scale. A new

piano ostinato in measures 22-28, based on the same pitch collection as before, and with a bass that keeps reiterating B-flat up to E-flat, continues to reinforce the E-flat tonal center. Where the voice earlier made the same leap of B-flat up to E-flat (measures 5 and 10), this new phrase begins with an expansive B-flat up to G-flat. The second time (measures 25-26), the G-flat pushes up a step to the highest note of the song, A-flat. Also in this section, the voice breaks out of its dotted-half and dotted-quarter rhythms and introduces a much quicker dotted-eighth-note rhythm that creates a two-against-three cross rhythm with the piano. This new rhythm is with the word “running,” and will soon come back with the word “singing.” The voice’s three-measure phrases (measures 22-24 and 26-28) reflect the short choppy clauses of the text. All of these elements—short text phrases, large intervals, and quicker rhythms—serve to illustrate Margaret’s excitement over her pending adventure.

With lines 6-8 of the text, “They spin ... along the bright rails, Singing and humming,” Larsen develops this figure used with “running” back in measure 23 (Example 3). This “singing and humming” motive creates a jubilant rhythmic complexity in Margaret’s vocal line; its rapid dotted-eighth-note rhythm depicts the “singing and humming” wheels as they glide over the steel rails. The motive further developed in the piano in measures 34-38. This migration of the “singing and humming” motive from the voice to the piano reflects Margaret’s imagination running forward as she anticipates the adventure that lies ahead of her.

30 *f*
They spin... a - long the bright rails

34
sing - ing and hum - ming, sing - ing and

Example 3: Singing and Humming Motive, “Bright Rails” mm. 30-36.

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Finally, as Margaret begins to feel the wheels lull her back into sleepiness, Larsen returns to the opening ostinato representing the monotony of the movement of the wheels (Example 1 above, measures 1-3). Margaret’s vocal line, once again, returns to the opening melody (measures 4-8) as well. Margaret has been lulled back to sleep and in the piano postlude the train’s wheels continue to glide over the steel rail (Example 4). The land’s vastness, represented by the E-flat pedal point, is again brought into focus. Larsen indicates *poco a poco decrescendo* as the train continues to fade away until the final

pianissimo chord in measure 60, marking the disappearance of the train into the dark prairie night.



Example 4: Fading Train Imagery “Bright Rails” mm. 56-60.

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II. “So Little There”

Text

This second song of the cycle acts as an anchor for the set as a whole, revealing the tension in Margaret’s character as well as her emotional depth, understanding, and compassion. Larsen wrote the text of “So Little There,” basing it on part II of “Eric Hermansson’s Soul.” Larsen’s interpretation compresses Margaret’s transformation into one coherent scene, where Cather depicts Margaret as enduring a much slower and much more subtle transformation. This “spiritual transformation” refers to Margaret’s realization that the life she is leading does not bring her happiness or fulfillment.

In writing her own text, Larsen delves into the depths of Margaret’s psyche, which Cather so particularly avoided. Cather only alludes to Margaret’s emotional state

over a series of scenes; conversely, Larsen creates an in-depth look at Margaret's spiritual transformation with this single musical setting.

Larsen, unable to find a piece of Cather's poetry that would fully capture her image of the character, wrote her own text to suit Margaret; nonetheless, Larsen honors Cather's story, her words, and her compositional techniques. Larsen discusses the impression Cather's writing techniques had on her, most particularly the way Cather utilizes light to manifest transformation in her characters: "Often in her descriptions of a change of heart or a psychological shift in one of her characters, the light in her actual settings changes. It may be at sunset or at dawn—those are two very common times for her characters to come to realizations—but it's always with a changing of light."⁶⁹

Larsen combines two scenes from "Eric Hermansson's Soul" in this song. It is in the first scene, under the afternoon sunlight, that Margaret begins her transformation and enlightenment. In this scene, Margaret and Wyllis rest together on the porch of an old ranch. The two siblings have been traveling for weeks; the terrain and weather have taken their toll. Despite her travel fatigue, the people and the land Margaret encounters have invigorated and awakened her spirit. In Cather's description of the setting, "Wyllis and his sister were sitting on the wide piazza of the ranch house, staring out into the afternoon sunlight and protesting against the gust of hot wind that blew up from the sandy riverbottom..."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Linell Gray Moss, "Composer's Corner: An Interview with Composer Libby Larsen," *International Alliance for Women in Music* 5, no. 1 (1999): 9.

⁷⁰ Willa Cather, "On the Divide: Eric Hermansson's Soul," in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction*, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 364.

Margaret tells her brother of her encounter with Eric as she played the old organ in Mrs. Lockhart's parlor. Margaret describes how Eric listened to her sing as if he had never heard music before: "He shuffled his feet and twisted his big hands up into knots and blurted out that he didn't know there was any music like that in the world. Why, there were tears in his voice, Wyllis!"⁷¹ Eric's sudden emotional reaction stirs Margaret; she is astonished that he could live life without ever hearing the music to which she is so accustomed. As Margaret and Wyllis sit in the afternoon sunlight, she begins to realize her feelings for Eric are much deeper than mere curiosity.

Larsen bases the latter part of the song "So Little There" on a second scene in which Margaret awakens in the middle of the night after a fall from a horse. Eric had come to her rescue that evening, saving her from a pack of wild horses, and soon after he reveals to Margaret his fear of losing her. Eric states:

But if they had hurt you, I would beat their brains out with my hands, I would kill them all. I was never afraid before. You are the only beautiful thing that has ever come close to me. You came like an angel out of the sky. You are like the music you sing, you are like the stars and the snow on the mountains where I played when I was a little boy.⁷²

Margaret arrives home exhausted and confused by the incident. Exhaustion has drawn her to sleep, but she is awakened some hours later by the power of Eric's words. She remembers a letter she had received earlier that day from her fiancé. Filled with talk of actors and plays, artists and paintings—nothing of love or devotion—the letter is

⁷¹ Ibid., 366.

⁷² Ibid., 372.

simply about superficial life in the city. Without even reading the entire letter, Margaret is absorbed by the night sky just outside her window. She states:

“Oh, it is all so little, so little there,” she murmured. “When everything else is so dwarfed, why should one expect love to be great? Why should one try to read highly colored suggestions into a life like that? If only I could find one thing in it all that mattered greatly, one thing that would warm me when I am alone! Will life never give me that one great moment?”⁷³

Larsen brings these two significant scenes together effectively. She sets the scene of the song at dusk; the afternoon sunlight and the night sky are a melding of light and dark. Larsen’s use of light shows Margaret’s change and enlightenment, even through her many questions.

Larsen composes the poetry of “So Little There” in a fluid and free form. If spoken, the metrical patterns of the text closely resemble those of an operatic recitative. As shown below, Larsen arranges the poem into five distinct stanzas. The first fifteen lines depict Margaret’s excitement and renewed spirit of life, then move to her frustrations with living in the city. Margaret experiences a significant self-realization in lines 16-25, when she witnesses the sunset and it reminds her of the beauty of the world. This beauty is what countless artists desperately strive to portray, yet it cannot be fully captured in words or pictures. Understanding the essence of what artists have strived to capture brings Margaret to greater self-understanding and gives her renewed purpose. In the final stanza, Margaret comes to the realization that the love shared with her fiancé is based on a meeting of minds, not of hearts, and is as small as the other concerns of life in the city.

⁷³ Ibid., 374.

¹I haven't been so happy since we were children together
²Discovering the ruins of Troy
³And here we are! Just like when we were children, together!
⁴Away from New York City and its endless details.
⁵So many small things in the city!

⁶Teas and dances.
⁷Invitations.
⁸Thank you notes.
⁹Gloves and gossip.
¹⁰Small Things.
¹¹Oh it all is so little there!
¹²Minutes filled to the brim with detail.
¹³Hours enslaved by fashion.
¹⁴Days, months and years—
¹⁵A calendar of manners. Always manners!

¹⁶The wind has swept all that away.
¹⁷Here at the edge of the world, when I lift my foot
¹⁸I feel I could step through the sunset into heaven.

¹⁹Artists in the galleries of New York portend to paint the mystery of clouds
²⁰Writers and poets have only words to tell us about the light of dawn and dusk,
²¹The smell of May,
²²The sound of summer,
²³The silence of snow.
²⁴Actors and singers play the stage.
²⁵They make believe that love finds itself in words,
²⁶—I used to think it natural that two minds could love,
²⁷Even if the hearts do not.

²⁸When everything else is so small,
²⁹Why should I expect love to be great!⁷⁴

While Larsen takes many freedoms for the purposes of character development, her poetry remains heavily steeped in the spirit of Cather's words from "Eric Hermansson's Soul." When speaking of *The Margaret Songs*, Larsen states, "I was very faithful to Cather's words. I didn't add many words—I made one aria ["So Little There"],

⁷⁴ Larsen, *Margaret Songs*, 2.

but I tried to stay close to her story.”⁷⁵ Larsen effectively produced a text that demonstrates Margaret’s exasperation with life in the city and with her fiancé, and her longing for something greater.

Music

Larsen believes that when her vocal music is performed, “the words and phrases should flow quite naturally, almost conversationally.”⁷⁶ She composes music in a linear, horizontal fashion, based on the shape, contour, and timbre of the text. For Larsen, “... the color of [timbral] space ... is much more important than the tonality. It is meant to have so much air around it that you aren’t really feeling as though one thing is leading to another.”⁷⁷ When Larsen wrote the text of “So Little There,” she had the opportunity to construct it based upon the colors, contours, and emotions that she felt were connected to Margaret. Her musical setting creates a whimsical atmosphere, as if the listener has just stepped onto the Nebraska Divide.

“So Little There” jumps right into the text, with no introduction. It is immediately apparent that the rhythm of the vocal line fits the natural speech rhythms (Example 5). Often, Larsen notates the natural speech rhythm first, and then later adds bar lines, resulting in abrupt meter changes.⁷⁸ Here the impression is created that Margaret is

⁷⁵ Moss, “Composer’s Corner,” 9.

⁷⁶ Cynthia Green. “Interview with Composer Libby Larsen,” *International League of Women Composers Journal* (June 1992): 26.

⁷⁷ Tina Milhorn Stallard, “Libby Larsen (1950–),” *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music: Nine American Composers*, edited by Michael K. Slayton (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 196.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

simply speaking, her words pouring out of her as she reveals the annoyances of everyday life in the city.

recitativo ♩ = 80
mf
 I have-n't been so hap - py since we were child - dren to - geth - er dis - cov - er - ing the
mf brightly
lightly
 3
 poco meno mosso
 ruins of Troy and here we are! Just like when we were child - ren, To

Example 5: Speech Rhythms in “So Little There” mm. 1-4.

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In contrast, the piano accompaniment in measures 1-2 forms a legato and expansive idea. The treble reaches into the upper extremities then dips down into the octaves below, where the staccato sixteenth notes suddenly turn capricious. This contrast creates a whimsical character, as if Margaret, sitting in the bright evening sun, feels gusts of hot wind blow up from the river bottom. Just as abruptly, the piano drops out and

Margaret’s unaccompanied, recitative-like passage suggests the freedom and solitude she has found on the Nebraska Divide.

As the song continues, when Margaret begins to list the “many small things in the city,” the rhythm becomes more uniform, and the piano inserts little gestures between items in the list (Example 6). The first insertion, measure 9, is a variation of the sixteenth-note figures in measures 2, 4, 5, and 7, which suggested gusts of wind. Ascending in eighths, staccato (measure 9), then descending in quarters, legato (measure 10), this figure links this section of the song to its opening. The second insertion, measure 11, is a figure labeled “bell-like.”

The musical score for Example 6 consists of two staves. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked "poco meno mosso". The vocal line begins at measure 9 with the lyrics "Thank you notes. Gloves and gossip. Small things Oh, it all is so lit-tle there!". The piano accompaniment features dynamic markings of *p* (piano) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). Performance instructions include "very lightly" and "bell-like". The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and triplets.

Example 6: Piano Insertions, “So Little There” mm. 9-11

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This “bell” figure, high in the treble, injects a new timbre and lightness into the song, much like Cather’s compositional technique of shifting the light to reveal a change in a character. Larsen continues to employ this “bell” figure as a signal of Margaret’s

realization that her life in the city and her pending marriage may not be what she ultimately desires.

Margaret continues with lines 12-15 as she considers the tedium of “small things” in the city. She exclaims one last annoyance, “always manners” (Example 7). Larsen sets this last exasperated expression without accompaniment, suggesting Margaret’s loneliness in the city, even with her fiancé by her side.

18 *(exasperated)* *a tempo* *subito* ♩ = 52, *rubato*
 cal-en - dar of man-ners. Al - ways man-ners! The wind has swept that all a-
 way.
mf *sub pp*
leggero *mf*
ped *ped*

Example 7: Wind Figure, “So Little There” mm. 18-24.

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When the piano re-enters (Example 7 above, measure 20), the “wind” figure gusts once again, leading to a sudden change in emotion in measures 21-24. The trill in the accompaniment supports Margaret’s now fluid and melismatic setting of “the wind has swept it all away.” The descending octave scale of measure 22 is a variation of the sixteenth-note “wind” figure (Example 7, above). With this statement, Margaret dismisses her petty concerns from life in New York and gives herself over to the grandeur of “the edge of the world.” The eruption of wind in measure 23, topped off by the “bell” figure, is an expansive four-octave ascending scale, as sweeping and vast as the prairie land, and it carries away Margaret’s former self. The return of the “bell” figure and its persistence through measures 24-28 signal Margaret’s new understanding of life. Margaret’s climactic pause on a high G with the word “heaven,” measure 28, is a version of this figure.

The second part of “So Little There,” measures 29-56, follows the same general plan as the first, moving from recitation of the annoyances of New York to a grand epiphany about life on the Divide. In a syllabic, patter style, measures 29-35 complain of the artists, writers, and poets in New York who cannot capture “the mystery of the clouds” or “the light of dawn and dusk.” As Margaret cites each of these phenomena of nature, the music slows, and she comes to pensive pauses in measures 36-38 with “the smell of May, the sound of summer, the silence of snow.” The “wind” figure and trill make a comeback as she lingers on the word “snow” in measure 38, a reminder of her view of the landscape.

The patter resumes in measure 40, now concerning actors and singers who “make believe that love finds itself in words.” Margaret’s final realization is that love, like all the

small things in New York, could not be great, despite what actors and singers try to convey. Larsen's text for this song does not directly state the corollary, that life on the Divide is made up of grand things—the beautiful and spacious landscape, the forces of nature, the community of the people—and so, by extension, love must also be grand. Rather, Larsen expresses this idea musically by surrounding Margaret's final words with the “wind” and “bell” figures that have evoked the Nebraska setting (Example 8). A big gust of wind in measure 47 precedes Margaret's soliloquy, “when ev'rything else is so small, why should I expect love to be great!” and the piano postlude following is a collection of delicate “wind” and “bell” figures. This postlude recalls the trills of the wind, the gusts of the ascending scales, and the expansiveness of the land with the octave A's in the bass. Larsen sets each additional motive in a continual decrescendo, leaving the dénouement with a trill to waft away as the wind carries the last of Margaret's former self with it.

49 *(as if far away)*

When ev-'ry-thing else ___ is so small, why should I ex-pect love to be great!... *bell-like*

53 *pp* *tr* *p* *ppp*

Example 8: Conclusion, “So Little There” mm. 49-56.

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The tension in “So Little There” marks this movement as the apex of the song cycle. Margaret is now a changed woman due to her exposure to the land, the sky, and the elements. Both Cather and Larsen were influenced by the Great Plains; both were intrigued by the land’s effect on the human spirit. Similarly, Margaret’s spirit is transformed as she too experiences the Prairie. Larsen’s use of the piano to represent the elements and to interact with Margaret’s vocal line signifies the effect of the Divide on Margaret’s spirit.

III. “Beneath the Hawthorne Tree”

Text

For the final song, “Beneath the Hawthorne Tree,” Larsen returns to the poetry of *April Twilights*. Here Margaret has reached her full maturity after the revelations she experienced in “So Little There.” Larsen’s return to *April Twilights* recalls Cather’s personal connection to the character of Margaret. Just as in the poem “Going Home,” Cather’s unhappiness with life and her own search for meaning are alluded to in “The Hawthorn Tree.”

Cather had first published her poem under the title “The Hawthorn Tree,” which describes a woman’s encounter with a man under such a tree. Larsen preserves the integrity of Cather’s poem by setting the text as written, save for the minor alteration of the title.

“The Hawthorn Tree” is divided into three stanzas, each with six lines. The first stanza describes the evening as it was in the springtime, on the meadows with the starlight above. Next, the poem reenacts the moment in which the narrator’s love comes to her. Finally, as she recalls the encounter, she says to ask nothing of what he said to her or what happened, only the of world they existed in for that brief instant.

¹Across the shimmering meadows—

²Ah, when he came to me!

³In the spring-time,

⁴In the night-time,

⁵In the starlight,

⁶Beneath the hawthorne tree.

⁷Up from the misty marsh-land—

⁸Ah, when he climbed to me!

⁹To my white bower,

¹⁰To my sweet rest,

¹¹To my warm breast,
¹²Beneath the hawthorne tree.

¹³Ask of me what the birds sang,
¹⁴High in the hawthorne tree;
¹⁵What the breeze tells,
¹⁶What the rose smells,
¹⁷What the stars shine—
¹⁸Not what he said to me!⁷⁹

Larsen uses this poetry to depict Margaret's final revelation, which appears in part III of "Eric Hermansson's Soul." Here, Margaret reveals to Wyllis her encounter with Eric and confides that her newly discovered spirit and her questions of love are consuming her.

At the fall of darkness, on the eve of her departure, Margaret and Eric are enchanted with the Norwegian music and dances. Eric, inspired by Margaret's music, plays his violin again that evening. Afterwards, Eric asks Margaret to join him atop the windmill tower for one last gaze over the Nebraska Divide before she returns to New York. Margaret, knowing she will never be back to the Divide and motivated by Eric's newfound euphoria, accompanies him. As Margaret and Eric sit atop the windmill tower, night surrounds them. Cather describes the setting in "Eric Hermansson's Soul:"

Above them stretched the great Western sky, serenely blue, even in the night, with its big, burning stars, never so cold and dead and far away as in denser atmospheres. The moon would not be up for twenty minutes yet, and all about the horizon, that wide horizon, which seemed to reach around the world, lingered a pale, white light, as of a universal dawn. The weary wind brought up to them the heavy odors of the cornfields. The music of the dance sounded faintly from below.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Larsen, *Margaret Songs*, 2.

⁸⁰ Cather, "On the Divide: Eric Hermansson's Soul," 376.

After quietly sitting next to each other—experiencing their final moments of this world together—Eric breaks the silence with a hesitant question to Margaret, wondering if she will forget about the Divide once she leaves. Margaret, unsure of the life that lies ahead of her, knows that Eric and the Divide will never be far from her thoughts. As the moon rises and the music fills the air once again, Margaret and Eric descend from the lofty tower. As Eric helps Margaret down, she feels the steadiness of his arms around her. Knowing she will never have another experience like this in her life, Margaret recognizes this as her one great moment and unapologetically kisses Eric. “And the drunken stars up yonder seemed reeling to some appointed doom as she clung to the rounds of the ladder. All that she was to know of love she had left upon his lips.”⁸¹

Margaret leaves the Divide before dawn that morning without another word to Eric except, “I will not forget.” As Margaret and Wyllis begin their journey to the city, Margaret divulges to her brother her final moments with Eric. Margaret is aware she will never again have another moment in her life as she had that night with Eric. Larsen musically—through textures and colors—portrays the night sky filled with shimmering stars that hover above the boundless land just as Margaret experienced. In Cather’s poem the hawthorn tree takes the place of the windmill tower.

Music

In the song “Beneath the Hawthorne Tree,” Larsen replicates the ambiance and atmosphere of the tower scene in Cather’s short story. The previous song, “So Little There,” is driven by natural speech patterns, while “Beneath the Hawthorne Tree” is composed in a series of colors, contours, and melodic motives. Larsen imbues this final

⁸¹ Ibid., 376.

song with a delicate and airy texture, indicating “rapturously” in the score. The flow of the cycle as a whole slows down in this final song, seemingly as if suspended in time.

In the piano introduction, two newly introduced motives evoke the scene and will recur throughout the song (Example 9). These motives are delicate text painting of Margaret’s description in lines 1-6 of the world surrounding her. The first of the two motives emerges immediately in the piano as a pattern of sixteenth notes, which creates an ethereal and minimalistic texture. This “stars” motive continues as an ostinato throughout the piece, which evokes the shimmering colors of the evening stars over the horizon.

The second motive unfolds impulsively in the treble accompaniment, seemingly without motivation, expressive of Margaret’s feelings for Eric. The thirty-second-note motive wafts above the “stars” sixteenths, as well as above a recurring “land” figure—first found in “Bright Rails”—a low A in the bass; this pedal symbolizes the vast prairieland as the stars gleam above. The rapid motive could be heard as illustrating Margaret’s heart flickering to life.

♩ = 50, *rapturously* *breathlessly*

very lightly

p

Rit. *sim.*

4

cross the shim-mer-ing mea-dows

Example 9: Motives, “Beneath the Hawthorne Tree” mm. 1-5.

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Larsen compounds the ethereal effect of the piano accompaniment with a subtle and understated vocal line. A new rhythmic motive—centered on duple patterns—is the basis for the contour of the vocal line and somewhat contradicts the natural speech accents of the text (Example 9 above, measures 4-5). A new cross rhythm exists between these duples and the steady sixteenth notes of the piano. As the song continues, Larsen develops and extends this duple figure into the piano accompaniment. The setting of the first stanza is a complex intermingling of these three figures.

As the narrator (Margaret) begins to describe the moment her lover (Eric) climbed to her, the vocal line becomes more melismatic and expansive, spanning an octave in measure 18 alone (Example 10). The duple rhythm first introduced in the opening section is absent from the passage, and the contour more closely resembles that of the opening “heart” figure of thirty-second notes. As it is treated here, the figure depicts Margaret’s heart racing with excitement as she watches Eric climb towards her.

The image shows a musical score for two systems. The first system starts at measure 18. The vocal line (treble clef) has a melismatic passage in measure 18, with lyrics: "when he climbed to me, To my white bower,". The piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs) features a duple rhythm. Dynamic markings *mf* and *mp* are present. The second system starts at measure 21. The vocal line has lyrics: "To my sweet rest, To my warm breast, Be -". The piano accompaniment continues with a similar duple rhythm.

Example 10, Heightened Expression, “Beneath the Hawthorne Tree” mm. 18-24.

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The piano accompaniment expands along with the voice line in the second stanza. The contour of the sixteenth-note motive now broadens, suggesting the excitement of the moment as well as the onset of the night sky; the stars are in full view and the moon brightly shines. The bass is another element of the heightened expression of this stanza. For the first time within the song cycle, Larsen plummets the piano accompaniment into the lowest extremities of the instrument. The low A \flat is struck, twice within every measure (Example 10 above, measures 20-24). The expansiveness that pedal points lend has been taken to denote the Nebraska landscape in the other songs, and here the reference is very strong. These lines in the second stanza are the densest in texture of the entire song cycle. The passage fully portrays the intensity of Margaret's feelings as Eric climbs toward her. The music prior to this moment, including the entirety of the previous two songs, serves as a mere prologue; however, just as quickly as the passion appears in the music, it ends, with a brief pause only three measures later. The apex is, as Cather describes Margaret's encounter with Eric, but a moment.

As the piano winds down from the peak, measures 26-28, the thirty-second-note "heart" figure returns in its original form (Example 11). After this brief transition into the final stanza of the poem, the narrator (Margaret), as if describing the encounter to her brother (Wyllis), avoids speaking directly of the lover (Eric), but defers to the elements of nature. The only lasting impressions are those of the heightened sense she has of the world that surrounds her, not impressions specifically of Eric.

26

mf

f

29

Ask me of what the birds sang, High in the haw-thorne tree;

mp

2

Example 11, Transition to the Final Stanza, “Beneath the Hawthorne Tree” mm. 26-32.

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To signify this newfound bliss in Margaret’s heart, Larsen thins out the texture. At first Margaret sings alone and the piano interjects the “heart” figure (Example 11 above, measures 29-32). The unaccompanied voice here reflects the intensely personal nature of what Margaret is revealing. In this final stanza, Larsen once again reiterates the duple pattern; however, it now serves as a completion by the voice of the “heart” figure in the piano, integrating the two.

When Margaret says, “[ask] not what he said to me!” all of the motives of the song return, and the ending recalls the beginning through the sixteenth-note “star” ostinato (Example 12). The duple pattern, first introduced as a conflicting rhythm, now migrates from the vocal line into the piano accompaniment, signifying Margaret’s new harmony with the universe.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system, starting at measure 37, is marked 'a tempo'. It features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: 'Not what he said to me! Not what he said'. The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The right hand has a melodic line with a sixteenth-note ostinato pattern, and the left hand has a similar pattern. Dynamic markings include *p* (piano) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The second system, starting at measure 40, is marked 'ritard' (ritardando). The vocal line continues with the lyrics 'to me.' and ends with a long note. The piano accompaniment continues with the ostinato pattern, ending with a fermata and a double bar line.

Example 12: Final Return of the Motives, “Beneath the Hawthorne Tree” mm. 37-

43.

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The final setting of line 18, "...not what he said to me," gives way to the postlude, which offers one last musical depiction of the connection between Margaret's emotions and the elements of nature. In measure 41 (Example 12, above), Margaret sustains the word "me" above the "star" ostinato. In measure 42, the pitches of the sixteenth-note "star" figure become the thirty-second notes of the "heart" figure, thus integrating the motives associated with the natural setting and with Margaret's emotions. Whether or not Margaret marries her betrothed once she returns to the city remains undetermined. To a certain degree, it does not matter. After witnessing her emotional growth and journey through this song cycle, the listener (and the reader of Cather's short story) can only speculate about Margaret's future.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Willa Cather was the essence of a modern woman at the turn of the twentieth century: free-thinking, craving knowledge and art, motivated to see and learn of the world outside of her own, and yet unsatisfied with what she found. Cather seemingly molded Margaret out of her own spirit and experiences; she successfully formed a beautiful, resilient, and intelligent woman with a life filled with themes that still resonate with women of the twenty-first century.

Libby Larsen, too, found personal inspiration in the themes of Cather's writing. Through the character of Margaret Elliot, Larsen was able to draw upon universally relatable themes, such as not belonging in one's community, the struggle to find a sense of self, and the significance of selfless love.

Willa Cather's musical and life experiences resulted in an incredible body of work that, on its own, would stand the test of time. It is of no small coincidence that in the twenty-first century, a prominent female composer of Libby Larsen's stature would—even upon first introduction—immediately connect to and be inspired by Cather's works. Cather's way of incorporating her own life experiences with the musicians she personally knew and the trials she endured place her works in a prime position to be set to music. The subject material Cather incorporates into her stories is not only important to women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but still echoes throughout modern society today. Cather's novels primarily tell tales of women who are at conflict over pursuing their own dreams and desires, or fulfilling their societal expectations. Perhaps because of Larsen's career as a preeminent female composer, in a time that arguably still places

domestic expectations upon its women, Larsen has clearly connected with Cather on a very personal level. Throughout *Margaret Songs*, one can truly get a sense of Larsen's connection not only to Cather's texts but to Cather's personality in the ways Larsen has painted the character of Margaret. While Cather laid the groundwork for the intelligent and compassionate character that is Margaret, it was Larsen who probed further into Margaret's psyche to reveal the passionate, independent, and strong-minded Margaret who only becomes known through the enhancement of music.

Cather, Larsen, and Margaret all carry strong and emotional themes that bind these three women to one another: a passion for music, a connection to the Great Plains, and a strong pioneering spirit. *Margaret Songs* wholly embodies these themes. This song cycle stands as a prime model of what can happen when a female composer sets the words of a female author, based on a woman's spiritual journey, composed for a soprano. It is a celebration of the unique and sensitive artistry of a female that only the collaboration of these women's talents could produce.

Larsen's passion for strong feminine texts and their influence on her musical choices combined with Cather's musically inspired texts offer a perfect marriage for this cycle. Perhaps Larsen's settings might have moved and inspired even Cather herself. Larsen is able to make Margaret's journey relevant to women of the twenty-first century. Through her textual and musical adaptation of Margaret, she has revealed a woman who questions her societal duties, follows her heart, and decides her own fate, all of which reverberate in today's society.

One final question remains in Margaret's journey. How will this journey affect her life once she returns to the city? This is a question left unanswered by both Cather

and Larsen. Perhaps the final note of the song cycle reveals Larsen's answer to this question. Larsen ends the final song "Beneath the Hawthorne Tree" with an ultimate and deciding D². This low and grounded accompaniment figure has been indicative of the land throughout the song cycle and may be a subtle declaration of the land's lasting impact on Margaret. Whether or not Margaret returns to the city to be married out of duty is uncertain. Margaret's connection to the land, her journey to the Nebraska Divide, and the changes these things effected in her are well defined.

Margaret, much like both Cather and Larsen, holds inordinate reverence for the land and its lasting effect on the human spirit. One could presume that both Cather and Larsen envisioned a final path for Margaret; however, the listener ultimately must adopt a resolution for him- or herself. Regardless of the outcome, Margaret's journey—both originally told by Cather and enhanced by Larsen—ought to act as a lesson for modern society, especially in its admiration for beauty, defiance against the expected, and veneration of the power of love and its role in the human condition.

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APPENDIX A
PERMISSIONS

RE: Cather Text Permission Request

Kimberly Bilder [kbilder@nufoundation.org]

To: Christi McLain (Student)

Monday, March 18, 2013 7:09 AM

Dear Christi,

On behalf of the Willa Cather Literary Trust, I grant you permission to use the poems noted below in your dissertation. Best of luck to you!

Kimberly

Kimberly Peschka Bilder
Associate General Counsel

University of Nebraska Foundation
1010 Lincoln Mall, Suite 300
Lincoln, NE 68508

402-458-1173
kbilder@nufoundation.org
nufoundation.org



Unlimited Possibilities at campaignfornebraska.org

RE: Cather Text Permission Request

Kimberly Bilder [kbilder@nufoundation.org]

To: Christi McLain (Student)

Monday, March 18, 2013 7:09 AM

From: Christi McLain (Student) [mailto:Christi.Mclain@asu.edu]

Sent: Thursday, March 14, 2013 12:29 PM

To: Kimberly Bilder

Subject: Cather Text Permission Request

Hello Ms. Kimberlery Peschka Bilder,

I was referred to you by Oxford University Press to obtain permission for the poems "Going Home" and "The Hawthorn Tree" from Willa Cather's *April Twilights*. I am writing my dissertation on the song cycle "Margaret Songs: Three Songs from Willa Cather" by Libby Larsen. I have received permission to use musical examples, however, they have asked me to write you in regards to receiving permission for the Cather text. The use will be for educational purposes only and will be available on ProQuest. The edition of *April Twilights* I will be quoting is as follows:

Cather, Willa. *April Twilights and Other Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951.

I am seeking a letter of permission to submit with my dissertation. I would greatly appreciate any information on how to obtain a letter of permission from the correct correspondent.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Best,

Christi McLain, Soprano

RE: Permission for Dissertation Examples

Leif Milliken [lmilliken2@unl.edu]

To: Christi McLain (Student)

Tuesday, February 26, 2013 9:30 AM

Dear Christi,

The story "Eric Hermannson's Soul" was published in 1900 and so is in the public domain, and you may use the original version as you wish with no need for permission.

If you want to specifically use the version of the story as edited for our volume, permission is granted, but please use the following credit line: Reproduced from *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction: 1892-1912* edited by Virginia Faulkner by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 1965, 1970 by the University of Nebraska Press.

Our permission covers usage in your dissertation. If your dissertation is revised for publication, further permission will be required.

Best,

Leif

Leif Milliken
Rights and Contracts
University of Nebraska Press
1111 Lincoln Mall
Lincoln, NE 68588-0630
lmilliken2@unl.edu
Ph: 402.472.7702

RE: Permission for Dissertation Examples

Leif Milliken [lmilliken2@unl.edu]

To: Christi McLain (Student)

Tuesday, February 26, 2013 9:30 AM

To: Leif Milliken

Subject: Permission for Dissertation Examples

Hello Mr Milliken,

I am writing you in regards to receiving permission to use extensive examples from Willa Cather's short story "Eric Hermannson's Soul." The piece is published in the following book:

Cather, Willa. "On the Divide: Eric Hermannson's Soul." in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction*, edited by Virginia Faulkner, 359-379. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1970.

I need to obtain a letter of permission to submit with my dissertation for electronic publication on ProQuest.

I would greatly appreciate any information on how to obtain a letter of permission from the University of Nebraska Press.

Best,

Christi McLain, Soprano

COPYCAT MUSIC LICENSING, LLC
on behalf of Oxford University Press
3730 Mormon Coulee Road
La Crosse, WI 54601

REPRINT PERMISSION

April 3, 2013

CHRISTI MCLAIN
818 W. 3rd St.
Apt. #204
Tempe, AZ 85281

Re: "Margaret Songs" by Libby Larsen
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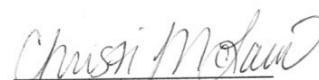
Our signatures will constitute a binding agreement between us.

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Accepted and Agreed:

COPYCAT MUSIC LICENSING, LLC


Dustin Oldenburg
Licensing Administrator

CHRISTI MCLAIN


Date: 4/3/2013