

Song Cycles By Twentieth-Century Women Composers



Sharon Mabry

As the twentieth century draws to a close, the music of women composers is being studied, written about, and performed with more frequency. Prior to the last decade, it was rare to hear music by women included in the regular concert fare of major symphony orchestras, bands, choruses, or soloists. Happily, things are changing, and that is good news for composers, performers, and audiences alike. Now that we have had women win all of the great prizes in composition, from the Pulitzer to the Grawemeyer Award, we can say that they are truly being judged on an equal basis with their male counterparts and are faring quite well. As Mae West, that spunky film star of yesteryear, said, "Too much of a good thing can be wonderful." We hope that statement will apply to the frequency with which the music of women composers is being programmed in the next century. However, it will be a long time before we

can say that they have received too much attention.

Women have been writing music since ancient times and have written in all mediums. They have excelled at the miniature, and song is certainly in that category. When we think of song cycles, we immediately recall the famous ones which have become repertoire standards, such as *Winterreise*, *Dichterliebe*, *Songs of Travel*, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, *The Hermit Songs*, or *Chansons de Bilitis*. Each of these, and many others like them, have gripped us with their texts and expressive musical settings, and they were all written by men. What about titles like *Clarière dans le Ciel* (Lili Boulanger), *Four Epitaphs of Robert Burns* (Miriam Gideon), *Songs before an Adieu* (Barbara Kolb), *Songs from Letters* (Libby Larsen), *The White Amaryllis* (Rhian Samuel), *Songs for the Four Parts of Night* (Nancy Van de Vate), or *Irreveries from Sappho* (Elizabeth Vercoe)? All of these were written by women, and there are dozens more available for performance.

So, how do we get titles like these to the forefront of concert repertoire? First, we have to find the music. This requires the determination to spend a little time, research effort, and cash to add scores to our collection of teaching and singing library. More of this music is becoming available through publishing companies, desktop publishing by the composers themselves, or archival resources such as the American Composer's

Alliance, The Canadian Music Centre, The American Music Center, and the International Alliance of Women in Music. Composer phone numbers and addresses, as well as lists of works, can be obtained from these archival sources, if the music is not available from a published source.

The following list of song cycles, by a few women working in this century, may be helpful as you begin to expand your repertoire for concert performances or studio teaching. Additional suggestions will be given in the next issue of the *NATS Journal*.

Violet Archer (Canadian, b. 1913-) Large compositional output in numerous mediums and in several styles. Generally economical, lean textures, exploration of new sonorities, and use of folk tunes. *Moon Songs* (mez), *Two Songs of William Blake* (mez), *Primeval* (Native American Songs for tenor), *Northern Journey* (bar). Complete list available from Canadian Music Centre.

Marguerite Canal (French, 1890-1978) Won the Prix de Rome in 1920. Numerous cycles which reveal her feelings and experiences, some show passion for children or for Brittany and the sea. Principal publishers: Jamin, Lemoine. *Amours triste* (texts by Canal), *6 Chansons écossaises* (de Lisle), *Au*

jardin de l'infante (Samain), *Sept Poèmes* (Baudelaire).

Gloria Coates (American, b. 1934—) Prolific composer in traditional and experimental works. Highly dramatic, coloristic music. (3) *Ophelia Songs* (Shakespeare), (12) *Transcendental Songs* (E. Dickinson)

Emma Lou Diemer (American, b. 1927) A prodigy, wrote several piano concerti by age 13. Music encompasses many styles from neoclassical to 12-tone serialism and electronic music. *Four Chinese Love Poems* (med. v.), *The Four Seasons* (s/t), *Three Mystic Songs* (ancient Hindu) s, b. Publishers: Boosey and Hawkes, Elkan Vogel, C. Fisher, Seesaw.

Vivian Fine (American, b. 1913—) Her compositions are laced with dissonance and humor. Principal publishers: Catamount Facsimile Ed., Margun. *Four Lyric Songs* (Poems by Dickinson, Joyce, and Keats), *Four Elizabethan Songs* (Shakespeare, Donne, and others).

Jacqueline Fontyn (Belgian, b. 1930—) The premiere composer in Belgium. Won Prix de Rome (1959), Honnegger Prize (1987). Uses classical forms in early works. Experimented with atonality. After 1979, adopted modal language, aleatoric devices, and free rhythm. *Seven Galgenlieder* (s, ob, vc, pf), *Deux Ron-*

dels de Charles D'Orleans (mezzo, pf), *Pro & Antiverbe* (s, vn). Principal Publishers: Bote & Bock, Peer Southern, Perform Our Music, G. Schirmer.

Sharon Mabry first received national recognition in the 1980 National Public Radio "Art of Song" series, when she was a featured recitalist. She has performed at international music festivals and is in demand as a recitalist and master teacher of vocal techniques. Her three recordings on the Owl and Coronet labels have received outstanding critical acclaim and international air play on public radio. She will have two new CDs available in 1997-1998. One features music by American composers Persis Vohar and Christina Kuzmych, and the other includes works by Tennessee composers Kenton Coe, Jeffrey Wood, and Michael Rose.

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

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

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