

# Sonnets from the Portuguese

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The opening plenary address for the Phenomenon of Singing International Symposium III was delivered by American composer, Libby Larsen—the professional name of Elizabeth Brown Reece. Libby Larsen is one of the most important and celebrated composers working today. She has created an immense catalogue of works that spans virtually every genre and has established a permanent place in the concert repertory. Consistently sought-after as a leader in the generation of millennium thinkers, Larsen's music and ideas have refreshed the concert music tradition and the composer's role in it. Larsen is a vigorous, articulate advocate for the music and musicians of our time. In 1973 she co-founded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composer's Forum. The first woman to serve as a resident composer with a major orchestra, Larsen has held residencies with Minnesota Orchestra, the Charlotte Symphony and the Colorado Symphony. Larsen's awards and accolades are numerous; she was given a 1994 Grammy as a producer for the CD *The Art of Arlene Auger*. Her music has been commissioned and performed widely by the world's greatest artists. She studied composition under Dominick Argento and she cites the French Baroque composers, J. S. Bach, Mozart, Brahms, Berlioz, Stravinsky, Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine*, Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, Berg's *Wozzeck* as well as Chuck Berry and Big Ma Ma Thornton as having a strong influence on her work.

*Sonnets from the Portuguese* (Larsen, 1998), commissioned and premiered by the late soprano Arleen Auger in 1989, is scored for soprano, string quartet, bass, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, two horns, percussion and harp. The song cycle consists of six sonnets chosen by Larsen and Auger from a collection of forty-four sonnets of the same name by the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The juxtaposition of stylized Romantic poetry with a contemporary musical idiom results in a fascinating contextual dynamic.

Larsen wrote in the preface to the score:

Arleen spoke to me about her love of the art-song repertoire. She talked about love and life, and her desire that I compose a work which spoke about the finding of mature love, as opposed to the young girl's feeling for the promise of love in *Frauenliebe und Leben* (Robert Schumann). Wishing to create with me a song cycle on such a theme, Arleen told me that the poetry she loved most was Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. She admired the fact that within the stylized and romantic language lived a creative woman grappling with issues that continue to confront modern women. What part of a woman's voice must be sacrificed to the lover and the world? Will the sacrifice be reciprocated? Can her essence survive? Browning at times soars to the heights of daring, demanding the world take her as she is; at other moments her self confidence waivers. Ultimately she realizes, as we must, that love and death demand constant faith in the leaps life requires.

In Libby Larsen's own words:

I love poetry. Clearly, good writing always starts with the words. I learn them by heart, and I think about them very hard, until the music that is in the words becomes the music

that ends up in the melody. That way, the words are set in a way which they can be understood and the setting captures the spirit of the meaning of the words.

*Sonnets from the Portuguese* is lyrical in Larsen's uniquely individual style and somewhat exploratory, using new sound combinations to illuminate texts. Texts that reveal "strong, colorful, and fearless people, many times women, are especially attractive to me."

These sonnets record a journey of love from the feminine perspective; a struggle with and ultimate, hard-won victory over despair, self-doubt and fear. Libby's compositional credo, as expressed in her plenary address is "the arranging of sound in order in time and space." In this song cycle she recreates in musical terms the journey of love through the stylized romantic poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Victorian world, while staying in touch with her own contemporary American musical roots.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was thirty-nine at the time of her first meeting with Robert Browning and was already a highly regarded poet. She had suffered the deaths of her mother and brother and was a reclusive, bookish, contemplative intellectual. The love she experienced from her father was formal and cold, and now she faced accepting Browning's love, surrendering all and devoting herself to the risks and uncertainty of married life. Elizabeth secretly eloped with the poet Robert Browning in 1846. Her overly protective father never forgave her this marriage. Despite the title there is no Portuguese origin in these sonnets. Browning called Elizabeth "his little Portuguese," and Elizabeth purposely gave them this misleading title when these highly personal poems were published in 1850 to protect herself and their private lives. Robert described them as "the finest sonnets since Shakespeare." Two major issues appear to be explored in her poems of and about love: the question of woman's role in love relationships and the question of woman's voice in love poetry: that is, to assume an active role in the lyrical expression of the range of emotions in the experience of true, mature love.

Libby Larsen's song cycle consists of the following Barrett Browning sonnets: 1. *I thought once how Theocritus had sung*, 2. *My letters*, 3. *With the same heart, I said, I'll answer thee*, 4. *If I leave all for thee*, and 5. *Oh, Yes!* 6. *How do I love thee?* The opening musical material is direct, simple and serene. The unison F chords function as a *leitmotif*, signalling an important emotional event. (This *leitmotif* reappears in the final movement of the cycle, heralding musical and emotional closure). The soprano voice muses in recitative style as did ancient Greek pastoral poet Theocritus (c.270 B.C.), pondering the past years with melancholy. There is heightened anticipation in the shift to an *agitato* mood with the text "how a mystic shape did move behind me and drew me backward by the hair." This is a violent image of being physically grabbed by the hair and pulled backward. She presumes death has finally come to take over her spirit and body. Bell-like unison F announce arrival of that which she does fully recognize or comprehend.

The constant rhythmic motion in "My letters" represents her heart-palpitations, the breathless taking up and reading, re-reading of her love letters. One hears increased buoyancy and exuberance in tempo and tessitura in "he wished to have me in his sight." It is an epiphany moment of love's truth. There is an excited recollection of the time he touched her hand, weeping at this innocent gesture and its deeper significance. The emotional and musical intensity builds to the climatic moment "Dear I love Thee, I love Thee." Pulsating rhythmic heart-beats accompany the soaring soprano line. Consistently effervescent in its mood, this

songs concludes with great hope, daring to believe the implication of the words "If, what this said" in fact suggest: a marriage proposal. Celebratory bells conclude this song.

"With the same heart, I said, I'll answer thee" is an expression of full acceptance and commitment to the beloved. The childhood memory of love and feigned smiles with her father is musically expressed by abrupt shifts from the *ritard/recitativo* style to a *tempo/arioso* juxtapositions. Alternating between lyrical, forward moving phrases and sudden halting phrases mirrors her inner emotional state. Pure unbridled joy is heard in the euphoric phrases as she is certain that Robert's love is genuine.

"If I leave all for thee" poses the question all women must ask! In musical terms it explores the contractual marriage relationship. Spare texture, lines moving in contrary motion create phrases that are left in suspension, unresolved. Phrases are punctuated with question marks indicative of her doubts, fears of what she will lose and risk in such a relationship. Will he exchange? If she gives up everything for him, can he reciprocate and be all to her? Can she trust this? A mood of peace prevails in the image of a soft, brooding bird, "And fold within the wet wings of thy dove." Love is a shelter, a refuge of hope, not a place of grief. This state of mind is represented in musical terms in a simple harmonic progression and sustained chords.

"Oh, yes! they love through all this world of ours!" expresses the skepticism and bitterness of imperfect love as experienced with her father. The anger she feels toward her unfeeling father is heard in the brisk, angular musical lines. Perhaps another reason for her skepticism are not merely the fact that men and women do sometimes deliberately deceive each other, but also that most people very frequently deceive themselves about the nature of their own feelings and about the character and qualities of those whom they love. While Elizabeth never doubted Browning's integrity and sincerity, she repeatedly expressed the fear that he mistook his feelings of "compassionate chivalry" for love. She was also uneasy about his generous estimate of her as a writer. The music suddenly highlights this fearful emotional state in a passionate outburst; the vocal tessitura is elevated and breaks off into an *a cappella* section. (The following Greek words appear: "*Giaours*" is a disparaging term used by the Turks for Christians and other infidels. "*Polyphemus*," the Cyclops, was a one-eyed giant son of Neptune, who was in love with Galatea, the sea-nymph. She scoffed at his one eye and escaped away from him.)

"How do I love thee?" is the only triumphant declaration of love. It is a romance summed up in five famous words. She addresses her beloved in a voice that is safe, strong, and secure. The power of love has empowered her to take the lead in affirming to her beloved their joined lives. Influences jazz are heard in the accompanying rhythmic figures, and throughout the music in this closing movement is sweet and lyrical.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning lays bare her heart in these famous verses and Libby Larsen's powerful song cycle *Sonnets from the Portuguese* captures their honesty and drama. As *USA Today* acclaimed "Larsen is the only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively."

## Appendix

The following six sonnets are selected from Browning (1980) and Browning (1973).

I.

- I thought once how Theocritus had sung  
 Of the sweet years, the dear and wished for years,  
 Who each one in a gracious hand appears
- 4 To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:  
 And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,  
 I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,  
 The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
- 8 Those of my own life, who by turns had flung  
 A shadow across me. straightway I was 'ware,  
 So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move  
 Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair,
- 12 And a voice said in mastery while I strove, . . .  
 Guess, now who holds thee? "Death." I said. But there,  
 The silver answer rang . . . "Not Death, but Love."

XXVIII

- My letters! all dead paper, . . . mute and white!—  
 And yet they seem alive and quivering  
 Against my tremulous hands which loose the string
- 4 And let them drop down on my knee to-night.  
 This said, . . . he wished to have me in his sight  
 Once, as a friend: this fix'ed a day in spring  
 To come and touch my hand. . . a simple thing,
- 8 Yet I wept for it!— this, . . . the paper's light . . .  
 Said, *Dear, I love thee*; and I sank and quailed  
 As if God's future thundered on my past.  
 This said, *I am thine*—and so its ink has paled
- 12 With lying at my heart that beat too fast.  
 and this . . . O Love, thy words have ill availed  
 If, what this said, I dared repeat at last!

XXXIV

- With the same heart, I said, I'll answer thee  
 As those, when thou shalt call me by my name—  
 Lo, the vain promise! is the same, the same,
- 4 Perplexed and ruffled by life's strategy?  
 When called before, I told how hastily  
 I dropped my flowers or brake off from a game,  
 To run and answer with the smile that came
- 8 At play last moment, and went on with me  
 Through my obedience. When I answer now,  
 I drop a grave thought,—break from solitude;—

Yet still my heart goes to thee . . . ponder how . . .

- 12 Not as to a single good, but all my good!  
Lay thy hand on it, best one and allow  
That no child's foot could run fast as this blood.

## XXXV

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange  
And be all to me? Shall I never miss

- Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss  
4 That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,  
When I look up, to drop on a new range  
Of walls and floors . . . another home than this?  
Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is  
8 filled by dead eyes too tender to know change?  
That's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,  
To conquer grief, tries more . . . as all things prove;  
For grief indeed is love and grief beside.  
12 Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.  
Yet love me--wilt thou? Open thine heart wide,  
And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.

## XL

Oh, yes! they love through all this world of ours!  
I will not gainsay love, called love forsooth.  
I have heard love talked in my early youth,

- 4 And since, not so long back but that the flowers  
Then gathered, smell still. Musselmans and Giaours  
Throw kerchiefs at a smile, and have no ruth  
For any weeping. Polypheme's white tooth  
8 slips on the nut, if, after frequent showers,  
The shell is over-smooth,—and not so much  
Will turn the thing called love, aside to hate,  
Or else to oblivion. but thou art not such  
12 A lover, my Belovèd! thou canst wait  
Through sorrow and sickness, to bring souls to touch,  
And think it soon when others cry "Too late."

## XLIII

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

- 4 For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of everyday's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;  
8 I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.

- I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
 12 With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,  
 Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and if God choose,  
 I shall but love thee better after death.

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