Extramusical Elements in Selected Viola Music of Libby Larsen: Representation, Suggestion, and Abstraction

by

Katherine Jean Lewis

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE Doctor of Musical Arts

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ABSTRACT

Extramusical Elements in Selected Viola Music by Libby Larsen:
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Throughout her career, American composer Libby Larsen has drawn on a wide variety of extramusical influences in both her texted and non-texted compositions. This thesis focuses on the manner in which Larsen has incorporated these extramusical influences into selected chamber works with viola. It traces the progression from representational and programmatic works written at the beginning of Larsen’s career through a middle period of “suggestive” compositions (roughly coinciding with an important residency with the Minnesota Orchestra in the mid 1980’s), to abstract compositions written in recent years. Additionally, it illustrates that while the way in which Larsen has incorporated outside sources in her works has changed, her compositional interests continue to be heavily drawn from American musics, the rhythm and pitch contour of American English, and American landscapes.

To demonstrate this progression, four works from Larsen’s catalog, Black Roller (1981), Cajun Set (1980), Black Birds, Red Hills (1987/1996), and the Viola Sonata (2001) have been identified and analyzed with reference to her use of extramusical elements. General features of Larsen’s style are highlighted and compositional
connections are drawn between these works and other chamber pieces by Larsen.
Additionally Larsen's compositional philosophy and influences are outlined along with relevant biographical information, as each work is presented within the framework of Larsen's career. Appendixes containing errors in the published scores and selected viola fingerings used by James Dunham in the premiere of the Viola Sonata are also included as a resource for musicians interested in performing these works.
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Kate Lewis
Normal, IL
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As any student learning how to draw, act, or play an instrument knows, being an artist is not a vocation but a lifelong process. True artists in all genres and mediums seek to develop their own individual style or voice over the course of their career, and in this endeavor, often unconsciously, they produce a body of work that relates sequentially, yet is often wide ranging and diverse in subject and scope when examined as a whole.

Over centuries musicologists and music lovers have studied the musical evolution of individual composers, delving into the social, political, and personal events of the artists’ lives and analyzing how these events may have triggered certain changes in a compositional technique or philosophy. Traditionally this is done retrospectively, when a body of work can be approached completely, from the first student pieces to the final, mature works.

This study of selected chamber music by Libby Larsen (b. December 24, 1950, Wilmington, Delaware) does not in any way attempt to be a retrospective of the entirety of the composer’s career to date. However, after more than thirty prolific years as a composer, Larsen has created a substantial body of work in which two gradual but discernible changes of style can be identified, roughly concurrent with a significant residency with the Minnesota Orchestra (1983-1987) and the turn of the Millennium. Although, as with any composer, there are several elements of Larsen’s compositional language that evolve, this document focuses on her use and incorporation of extramusical material throughout her career, and it highlights a trend beginning in the representational and programmatic pieces of her early years, continuing with the suggestive works of the
late 1980’s and 1990’s, and leading finally to her most recent and more abstract compositions influenced by her interest in and study of the American vernacular.

In addition to placing musical works in the context of Larsen’s career, and discussing how the composer incorporates extramusical ideas in the pieces, this study outlines the connections between four of her major works with viola: *Black Roller*, *Cajun Set*, *Black Birds*, *Red Hills*, and Viola Sonata. Reference is also made to several other instrumental works by Larsen.
INTRODUCTION

Catchphrases such as “American vernacular” or “vigorous American contemporary spirit,”\(^1\) appear in almost every biography, review and article of Larsen’s works, yet there has been relatively little study of how the composer’s music actually embodies these qualities. One part of Larsen’s “Americanism” has to do with how the composer perceives herself and her environment. Early in her career she adopted the publishing name “Libby” because of its American sound,\(^2\) and it is a name that certainly seems to suit the slender, petite, and very energetic composer. A life-long resident of Minnesota, she has great respect for the vastness of the United States and attempts to find a “oneness” in its culture through her music.\(^3\) She is quick to point out the challenge of finding unity in the culture of the American people, especially when compared to European countries which are smaller both physically and demographically, but throughout her career she has tried to look for the “detail in relationship to a vast array”\(^4\) and study the elements which unite the American culture as a whole.

Larsen’s interest in creating a uniquely American sound in her music comes not only from the eclectic group of American composers whom she has studied and admired throughout her life, including Aaron Copland, James Brown, Louis Armstrong, Philip

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1 In light of the numerous biographies of Larsen available, relevant biographical material will be incorporated throughout this document. For a full biography, please see Appendix A.


3 Libby Larsen, interview by the author, audio recording, Minneapolis, MN, 10 August 2008.

4 Ibid.
Glass, and Leonard Bernstein, but also, and perhaps more importantly, from her own observations of the sonic culture around her. The later takes many forms: from the auctioneer, preacher, or president whose speech patterns she has meticulously transcribed and incorporated into texted and un-texted compositions, to the images of the natural world around her. These are evoked in various ways as the subjects of operas, choral works, song cycles, and instrumental works that recall the life or writing of both ordinary and famous Americans.

Throughout her catalog of over 300 works, Larsen’s curiosity with and interest in art, literature, poetry, drama, history, nature, and popular culture is evident. She explains, “In my music I try to communicate something about what it is like to be alive now by arranging sound in space and time, for that’s what composing is. I am intensely committed to living in my own times.”\(^5\) For Larsen the world around her is filled with musical possibilities, which she has been translating into her compositions since her grade school years. She notes: “I hear the whole sound, dynamically balanced, and I can switch it around to think about what I’m going to do two movements ahead, all in the fraction of a second.”\(^6\)

This document will explore the manner in which Larsen has taken elements of her world and transformed them into musical sound and the evolution of the way in which she has done so. Uniting all the works in this study is the composer’s energy and enthusiasm for the entire commissioning process: composing, rehearsing, and

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performing. She has created a career that allows her both to match her musical and extramusical ideas with the instruments and performers who will premiere a new work, and to be mindful of *who* her audience will be. She explains:

> I try to actually visualize what the piece will look like to the audience member. In other words, you come in and you sit down and you are facing forward in a proscenium hall. With each one of my pieces I imagine, ‘and what will you see? And when will you see? And what will that mean to how you perceive the piece?’

What changes throughout her career is not her mindful approach to composition, or the diverse range of extramusical material, but *how* she uses and incorporates this extramusical material into the instrumental works she writes. This progression or evolution will be the subject of this study.

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CHAPTER 1: NARRATIVE, REPRESENTATIONAL, AND PROGRAMMATIC ELEMENTS IN THE EARLY CHAMBER MUSIC OF LIBBY LARSEN

Early Career

In the 1970’s and early 80’s there was no shortage of musicians in the Minneapolis area and beyond interested in playing the chamber music of the young composer Libby Larsen. Performers such as flutist Eugenia Zukerman, trombonist William McGlaughlin, clarinetist Robert Spring, bassoonist Lynn Moran Riccardo, cellist Ruth Dreier, violist Robert Levine, and guitarist Jeffrey Van were instrumental in commissioning, performing and promoting her new works for their instruments between the time of Larsen’s graduation from the University of Minnesota in 1978 and the beginning of her residency with the Minnesota Orchestra in 1983.

Her popularity was due in part to her involvement at the time with the Minnesota Composer’s Forum, an advocacy group that she and fellow composer Stephen Paulus had co-founded in 1973 while still graduate students. The goal of this organization, now called the American Composer’s Forum, is to “enrich lives by nurturing the creative spirit of composers and communities. [To] provide new opportunities for composers and their music to flourish, and engage communities in the creation, performance and enjoyment of new music.” Now the largest group of its kind in the United States, this was and continues to be a vital resource for young composers.

In more practical terms, the Composer’s Forum provided Larsen with a community or network away from the traditional academic setting where most contemporary American composers work, and in part allowed her to create a full time career as a composer. She explains:

We wanted to create an organization which could support us in our old age. Meaning that, as life went on, the organization would be there as a touchstone. One could come there for advice, or one could come to give advice. So that there was a community that existed outside the political system for composers. We both saw that the political system for composers in this country had created a situation in the concert hall that was making what we love, which was to compose, extinct.  

The years between graduation and the Minnesota Orchestra residency marked a period of exploration and experimentation for Larsen. Still armed with the advice and encouragement of her principal composition teachers Paul Fetler, Eric Stokes, and Dominick Argento, she searched in this early part of her career to find her voice among the diverse landscape of contemporary American composers. Her teachers and the performers who championed her early works helped to shape her style. From Fetler she recalls:

He was able to give his students complete confidence that they could make pieces of music from beginning to end…Young composers so often say, “I don’t know where to go from here.” You have to know where you are going to end at the beginning. It has to be in the first four measures…or forget it!

Stokes assured her that listening, studying and enjoying a diverse range of music would not compromise her unique voice. In addition, she “acknowledges Stokes as the instructor who brought out the sense of humor and unique sense of the absurd in her writing.”

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2 Boyer, 17-18.
3 Ibid., 18.
4 Ibid.
Argento, who was her doctoral advisor, helped to instill in her “confidence in orchestration, the longevity of lyricism, and the knowledge that lyricism is a concept and not an act.”

With the help of the musicians who performed her earliest works, she polished her technical knowledge of various instruments and began to understand the difference between the way composers and performers approach music. She credits artists like Zuckerman and clarinetist Caroline Hartig as instrumental in helping her to develop her style by “being challenging and engaging [not with her, but] with the music itself.”

Larsen explains that when working with Zuckerman on \textit{Ulloa's Ring} for flute and piano, Zuckerman’s questioning of the relationship between rhythm and flow in the piece enabled her to search for her own answer to the larger question “where does rhythm come from?” Larsen recalls:

\begin{quote}
[Zuckerman] looked at the sketches and she said: ‘you have two things going here. You have this flowing thing, and then you have this rhythmic thing. What’s the relationship of the two?’...And I thought, they’re opposed, they could be opposed, that would be traditional contrapuntal, or they could be unified and I began to be very frustrated with bar lines at that point, but not particularly interested in mathematical workings of rhythm in the Carter Style. I wasn’t interested in Carter or Babbitt, in the mathematical approach to rhythmic complexity...I was very frustrated compositionally, because I’d come through pitch-based theoretical training, which really culminated in the late ’70s. Pitch-based theoretical training began to wane at that point; it [had] waxed to its maximum right at that point. But if not harmonic exploration, then what?
\end{quote}

These questions, which Larsen began to tackle head on during the first phase of her

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 19.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Libby Larsen, interview by the author, audio recording, Minneapolis, MN, 14 July 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ulloa's Ring} was premiered in 1981, the same year as the works discussed in this chapter.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
\end{itemize}
career, eventually led to the realization that rhythm comes from the body. This allowed her to make connections between the natural flow of American English and music, which has become a defining element of her style. It was not until the next phase in her career, during her residency with the Minnesota Orchestra from 1983 to 1987, that this aspect of her style solidified. Her early works nonetheless show the influences of her teachers and the musicians who performed them, and they also demonstrate her awareness of larger elements such as her audience and the role of her music in American society.

With one exception, the titles of all of her chamber music dating from the early years of Larsen’s career suggest some sort of extramusical inspiration. Larsen’s background as a singer offers a clue as to why she was predisposed to connect text and narrative with music, but it was also her fascination with both the natural and musical worlds around her that provided inspiration for several chamber works. *Cajun Set* and *Black Roller* were composed within months of each other, and although the compositional style of the pieces is quite different, they share many similar features. Both chamber works are derived from extramusical material and incorporate this material in a representational manner. In *Black Roller*, she created a narrative that tells the story of the interaction between a group of people and a “black roller” or dust storm. Using the natural world as the main inspiration, Larsen attempts in *Black Roller* to capture the feeling and sounds of living through the storm itself, using a variety of compositional techniques.

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9 See Appendix B for listing of Larsen’s chamber music organized by date.
10 Larsen entered college as a vocal major but switched to composition while still an undergraduate.
Although *Cajun Set* is not based on a narrative, its source material is derived directly from Cajun folk music. Each movement of this piece is based directly on an Acadian folk tune and its dance custom.\(^{11}\) In this work, Larsen takes to heart the advice of Stokes, "What you listen to can’t hurt you!" \(^{12}\) and incorporates the musical sounds and rhythms of Cajun music in a fresh way.

Both works discussed in this chapter have clear programmatic elements provided through the evocative titles, the instructions in the score, and the detailed notes that accompany each piece. Larsen’s goal in these pieces and throughout her career has been to “present a sound organization as an offering to communicate something about how we live physically and spiritually.” \(^{13}\) She continues: “I wanted to be a composer because I love sound. By giving order to sound, a composer reveals some new understanding of what sound means to us and our lives. Music is a special way of perceiving the world around us in our quiet, private moments.” \(^{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) Boyer, 27.


\(^{14}\) Ibid.
Black Roller

Background

*Black Roller* dates from Larsen’s postgraduate years and is one of the earliest instrumental works in her catalogue. Robert Levine, former principal viola in the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, commissioned the piece, and the premiere took place at the Grand Teton Music Festival in June of 1981. It was Levine’s first commission, although several other commissions with Minneapolis composers followed this one. He had very little input during the compositional process, but remembers the origins of the piece:

[Larsen] was trying to write a piece that would sound like a concerto yet would be practical. We didn’t talk a lot about it, but agreed on it at a party and she came back with an idea. It was not really in my mind that it would be a themed piece, although she’s the composer, so I’m not going to tell her what to do!\(^\text{16}\)

*Black Roller* is scored for a small chamber ensemble that includes flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, violin, viola, cello, and piano. Larsen admits that although commissioned by a violist, she did not create a concertino work showcasing the violist, but rather a chamber work with many exposed viola passages.\(^\text{17}\) The score indicates that the viola is the “featured” instrument, and while the viola is generally the most important of the strings, it is only exposed as a solo instrument in a handful of passages. Figure 1

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\(^{15}\) Levine knew Larsen because the Minnesota Composer’s Forum, which had been founded just a few years earlier, had a small office in the Landmark Center in downtown St. Paul. During this period, the chamber orchestra (of which he was a member at the time) was also based in this building. Levine is now is principal viola of the Milwaukee Symphony.

\(^{16}\) Robert Levine, interview by the author, phone transcript, 7 November 2009.

\(^{17}\) Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
outlines the various roles of the viola throughout the twelve sections of the piece.

Figure 1: Viola's Role in *Black Roller*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Viola's Role</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>tacet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>featured</td>
<td>with wind quartet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>featured</td>
<td>with wind chorale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>not featured</td>
<td>part of string chorale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>not featured</td>
<td>duo with violin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>some important solos</td>
<td>mm. 57, 60-63, 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>tacet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>not featured</td>
<td>two statements of motive a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>tacet</td>
<td>piano cadenza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>some important solos</td>
<td>mm. 100-108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>tutti aleatoric section</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>featured</td>
<td>mm. 112-end</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The program note that accompanies the score to *Black Roller* provides details about the background of the work:

A burning wind, dust storm in the Western United States. Stories of black rollers tell of men and women driven to desperation by the parching of their skin, throats and noses. A legend is told of a tribe which declared war on the wind and marched into the desert chanting incantations until they disappeared forever into a cloud of whirling sand.\(^{18}\)

This note is mostly a description of the "black roller" weather phenomenon itself, but it does provide a clue to the musical structure of the piece. On her website, Larsen provides an expanded scenario. This explanation is narrative in style, and follows the contour of the music quite closely:

A black roller is a burning wind and dust storm often experienced in the western United States. Stories of black rollers tell of men and women driven to desperation by the parching of their skin, throats and noses. The music for this composition takes the point of view of a group of people watching the approach of a black roller, feeling the deathly stillness, then the light rippling wind, then the storm which engulfs them as they struggle to hold themselves and their possessions against the wind, and finally the

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aftermath of the storm.\textsuperscript{19}

The piece itself lasts about twelve minutes and it generally follows the sequence of events described above. It begins calmly, builds up tension through gradual motivic and textural changes, sustains this tension throughout a 25 second aleatoric section, and releases the tension suddenly into a short but calm ending. Larsen’s experience with and interest in tornados led her to choose a storm for the subject of this work. She explains that with \textit{Black Roller}, her related compositional intention was to explore the building and releasing of tension on a large scale.\textsuperscript{20}

As part of her interest in and appreciation of the natural world, she admits: “I’ve had a lot of tornado experiences. I’ve had them on the water, I’ve been driving through them...”\textsuperscript{21} Larsen is not afraid of large storms, and throughout her life she has actively sought them out for their energy and chaos:

\begin{quote}
KJL: So you’re a storm chaser?
LL: Kind of, yeah. Even my daughter would tell you that; she was a baby and there would be a tornado, and we’d go in the car...
KJL: So you’d seek them?
LL: Yes! We got stuck in one once. We did! We got stuck in one, on the road, and the car was bouncing up and down, and I was just kind of singing...
KJL: So it doesn’t scare you?
LL: No, not at all. But there’s a kind of energy... \textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

In \textit{Black Roller}, Larsen uses her first-hand experience with tornados to create the image of a storm brewing in the Great Plains states or in Texas and in the music tries to capture the energy and power of the storm. She sets out to evoke the feeling of a group of

\textsuperscript{20} Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
people watching a storm approach over the course of a day. It is clear that she had the narrative in mind before the work was begun, since she selected the instrumentation for its programmatic potential:

I chose the flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon because of the color of clouds right before a tornado. Somehow, the chord structures in the piece they represent... and the violin and cello, yes, because of what happens in the overtones when you combine strings and winds.\(^{23}\)

In more practical terms, Larsen knew that this piece would have both limited rehearsal time and personnel available for its first performance, so she chose an ensemble that would create the sound of a concerted piece with as few musicians as possible.

In retrospect, Larsen considers the viola, not the ensemble as a whole, as the observer in the work, although that image was not in her mind when she wrote it.\(^{24}\) *Black Roller* also has some very conversational qualities, especially in the imitative way the woodwind parts are scored. Considering the subject matter, the program notes, and the structure of the piece, it is clear that Larsen created a distinct musical story or narrative in this work.

**Analysis**

In Larsen’s description of *Black Roller*, five events are outlined: 1) a group of people watching the approach of the storm, 2) the feeling of deathly stillness, 3) the light rippling wind, 4) the storm, and 5) the aftermath. While the score gives no indication as to where the sections begin, this is for the most part discernible through the use of

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) Ibid.
motives and textural changes.

The scenario suggests a large ABA form, and while this is true in general terms, the formal structure is best described as through-composed. The five main events are further divided into twelve smaller sections. These twelve smaller sections are delineated not by cadence points or pauses, but by significant textural or motivic changes. Rehearsal letters are conveniently placed so that they indicate the arrival of each of the smaller sections. Within each of these twelve parts there is localized development of rhythmic and melodic motives.

With one exception, the duration of all the motives used in this piece is a single beat. The three most significant motives in this work appear in the opening section—from \( \text{[A]} \) (m. 1) to \( \text{[B]} \) (m. 12). The first of these motives, \( x \), is a five-note series of descending perfect fourths followed by a major seventh.\(^{25} \) This motive is significant because, unlike the other main motives, it has several melodic and rhythmic permutations both in this section and in its later occurrences in the work. The other two motives in the opening section are both rhythmic reiterations of a repeated pitch. The \( y \) motive is made up of three repeated pitches separated by a short rest. In later sections a variant of this motive echoes only the last two notes. The \( z \) motive copies the five-note grouping of motive \( x \) and the repeated pitch content of motive \( y \) and is used occasionally throughout the movement. All three motives are introduced in the opening four measures, and are shown in Example 1.1.

\(^{25} \) For a complete list of motives, please refer to Figure 2.
Example 1.1: *Black Roller*, Opening motives, mm. 1-4

Most of the motivic development is confined to the opening of the piece. In the first twelve measures, motive x is presented six times, inverted once, permeated in three different ways, and presented as an embellished variant at [B]. Example 1.2 outlines the various methods used to develop this motive.

Example 1.2: Motive x development in *Black Roller*

A musical expectation of frequent use and variation of motive x is set up in the opening, and although it occurs more frequently than any other motive, it is abandoned for large sections of the piece. Figure 2 identifies the most important motives in the work and illustrates how they are used throughout the piece.
Figure 2: *Black Roller* Motive Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Sections Used</th>
<th>Variant(s)</th>
<th>Variant Sections Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motive x</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Motive Example" /></td>
<td>A, B, E, 1*, J, L</td>
<td>See example 1.2</td>
<td>C, F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motive y</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Motive Example" /></td>
<td>A, B*</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Variant" /></td>
<td>C, D, E, H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motive z</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Motive Example" /></td>
<td>A, B, F, L</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Variant" /></td>
<td>A*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motive a</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Motive Example" /></td>
<td>E, F*, G*, H, J, L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motive b</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Motive Example" /></td>
<td>G, L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motive c</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Motive Example" /></td>
<td>B*, C, G</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motive d</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Motive Example" /></td>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates the motive appears only one time in the section

Figure 2 also highlights the overall lack of motivic development: only the x and y motives appear in varied forms (the z motive appears once in the opening section as a written out variant of the quintuple grouping). Additionally it reveals the lack of overlap between the early motives (x, y, z) and motives introduced in the middle of the piece (a, b, c, d).

The piece begins with an eight-measure flute and clarinet duo marked “very freely, very fluidly,” which starts calmly in unison but pulls away to parallel minor seconds in
the third measure. Though the pitch content varies as the duet unfolds, the instruments continue essentially in rhythmic unison throughout this opening statement.

The quasi-rhythmic unison established in the opening measures continues as the bassoon and oboe join the flute/clarinet duet in m. 8. The winds carry on in this fashion until D (m. 54), sometimes expanding into pairs of complementing rhythmic ideas. There is a conversational feeling to this opening both in terms of timbre and texture. The contrasting colors of the wind instruments provide the feeling of several different people watching the storm approach. There is rarely more than one event happening at a time—when a new instrument or instrument pair enters with a melodic or motivic idea, the other instrument(s) either drop out or sustain a pitch. Although the score looks rather dense, this alternation of short motives creates the impression that there are just four people watching the storm approach while carrying on some sort of routine conversation—perhaps remarking on the weather!

The viola, Larsen’s observer, enters at B and reiterates the x, y, and z motives throughout its contrasting melodic line. By repeating the motives the winds had previously introduced, it seems to be commenting on the conversation(s) of the opening. A new glissando figure, motive c is also introduced briefly. Although not significant in this section, this motive previews a large glissando that will mark the eventual arrival of the storm. This first viola melody is largely tonal, yet the wind responses are less diatonic. The top and bottom notes of the viola melody outline separate descending scales, a compound line shown below in Example 1.13. This voice leading along with the indication “warmly, with freedom” creates a longer and more lyrical phrase, setting it apart from the shorter one-beat motives that the winds introduced. This lends support to
the notion that the viola is the observer, telling the story in more complete statements than the earlier banter or “conversation” of the winds.

**Example 1.3: Black Roller, Viola melody and voice leading, mm. 13-16**

![Musical notation]

The sections between \( \text{s} \) and \( \text{g} \) all evoke stillness in some way. A woodwind chorale signals a texture change at \( \text{C} \), allowing the viola line to stand out from the rest of the ensemble in a more pronounced manner. In this section, the viola melody occasionally reiterates the melodic and rhythmic motives \( x, y, \) and \( c \), and the passage culminates with two more statements of motive \( c \) in the upper range of the instrument. The accompanying woodwind chorale is made up of open intervals that possibly signify the stillness that Larsen describes, though the following sections share this character to an extent. At \( \text{C} \) there are several short tutti rests that contribute to the motionlessness, and the word *shimmering* is indicated in the fourth bar of this section, perhaps adding to the atmosphere of “deathly stillness.”

Several major changes happen in the section beginning at \( \text{D} \) (m. 34), yet there is some ambiguity as to where this section falls within the narrative. Here, the meter changes to \( 5/4 \) and the viola line subsides as the other strings make their initial entrances. Like the woodwinds in the opening, the violin and cello play in rhythmic unison. Throughout \( \text{D} \), the open intervals between the violin and cello, marked *legato, dolce,*
recall the peaceful and calm qualities found in Copland's slow movements.\(^{26}\) The viola, no longer the featured instrument, joins this chorale almost unnoticed in m. 42.

Throughout this section, motive y is used both by the violin/cello and clarinet/bassoon duos as an ending punctuation for short unconnected rhythmic and melodic ideas. This clarinet/bassoon duo (along with one figure in the flute), interjects short *wafing*\(^{27}\) trills and runs, also suggestive of "light rippling wind." However, it is difficult to tell if the storm has moved any closer. The relaxed character of the string chorale and the instructions to the musicians to play *very lightly* (m. 44), *legato* (m. 45), and *gently* (m. 47) suggest that this could also be a continued representation of "deathly stillness."

The texture remains rather thin, and the feeling of stillness continues through the section beginning at $\equiv$ (m. 50), despite the fact that all the instruments except the piano are used together for the first time in the work. The winds and cello hold long tone clusters suggesting the texture of clouds to which Larsen referred, and the upper strings have a duo made up of short chromatic fragments. One of these fragments, motive a, is used several times later in the piece. This new motive first appears in the violin part in mm. 51 and 52 and the viola plays it in the following measure. This very fast ascending and descending chromatic flourish has a range of either a tritone or a fourth, and is similar to motives x, y, and z in its short duration. In m. 56 and m. 60 motive x is reintroduced, first by the violin/viola duo and later augmented rhythmically in the viola part.

$\equiv$ (m. 57) falls about halfway through the piece, and marks a transition away from

\(^{26}\) Larsen often credits Copland as being one of her major influences.
\(^{27}\) Larsen's use of this term will be further explored in Chapter 3.
the wind-like chromatic figures and slow, still chorales that had begun at \[C\]. This section starts with a slow dolce unison between the flute and viola, followed with material similar to the previous sections. However, beginning in m. 61, motive z is reintroduced, leading to a gradual thickening of the texture as this motive is passed (mostly in pairs) among the seven musicians. The term "darkly" appears in the score as foreboding indication that after a long wait, something might be about to happen.

This "something," in musical terms, is the arrival of the piano. After being absent for over half of the piece, the piano enters in m. 66, sneaking into the texture with a variant of motive x followed immediately by motive z. However the piano does not remain in the background for long. The next section is dominated by the piano's loud marcato outbursts, and at long last it seems that the storm has arrived.

The energy of the piece increases considerably at \[G\] (m. 67) due in large part to a significant tempo change and the addition of the piano. Here all of the previous motives (except the newer motive a) are abandoned temporarily and two quite aggressive motives are introduced. The piano's rhythmic marcato gestures make up the first of these: motive b. It is a quick four note accented chromatic outburst spanning a minor third, and is repeated continuously by the piano through this section. Motive b alternates with several fp notes from the winds and violent Bartok pizzicati and glissandi figures in the cello. This glissando figure, a more intense variant of motive c, spans a minor ninth and is marked "violently." Between mm. 71 and 75 the violin is in the forefront playing motives a, b, and c, yet despite the building chaos, the viola remains tacet throughout this entire section. Although the tempo, dynamics, and the overall energy of the piece is increased, the texture still is rather thin. There are no overlapping motives, and the winds continue
to play mostly in unison, sustaining long notes in moments where the piano, violin, and cello have important motives.

All of these new events suggest the storm has evolved into something more than “light rippling wind,” yet the following section makes the narrative unclear. The sudden burst of energy at |G| is short lived; at |H| (m. 76), the texture becomes quite thin again, the new motives are abandoned, and there is an unexpected drop in dynamics. Marked “suddenly quiet, very still, expectant,” this section seems to embody the idea of “deathly stillness” more than material heard earlier in the work. Here, the piano has an irregular vamping figure made up of a variant of motive y, while the strings and winds have a sparse klangfarbenmelodie against it. Because of the sudden stillness and drop in dynamics, all of the string and wind entrances are surprises, creating the feeling that the storm could hit at any moment. At m. 82 the piano is asked to play “very lightly—with suspense” and two measures after this there is an unprecedented three beat tutti silence.

This underlying tension continues to build throughout |H| and its release comes with a dense three measure chromatic cluster in m. 85, culminating with an expanded version of motive c: a string glissando to registral extremes. This segues into a short yet frantic piano cadenza where all new material is introduced. If |H| is indeed the “deathly stillness,” Larsen jumps right into the “storm which engulfs them,” skipping the idea of “light rippling wind.” There is no question that the chaotic piano cadenza with its changing meters, registrar extremes, continuous 32\textsuperscript{nd} notes, irregular accents, and low percussive notes represents the pandemonium of the storm itself.

The piano cadenza is quite short and as the other instruments reenter after |J| (m. 94), the piano continues to provide the frantic rhythmic backbone of the storm. It begins a
series of repeated rhythmic figures marked “mechanically, monotonously” which persist until the ultimate climax of the piece at [K] (m. 109). The first of these, at [H], is voiced closely together in the same register that the m. 85 tone cluster appeared. This regular rhythmic pattern gives the impression of increasingly strong yet steady rain, especially when the pattern changes in m. 99 to a lower register.

At the same time, the winds have a hocket-like melody made up of fragments of motive x, as well as variants of motive b. These outbursts of short motives gradually increase in volume and intensity suggesting approaching thunder and lightening. In m. 102 the upper three winds introduce a new motive that repeats three more times before the climax. This motive, motive d, is different from all of the other motives because it spans three beats instead of one. Each time the winds reenter with this descending and ascending chromatic arpeggio the pitch is higher, creating a feeling of urgency or perhaps cries from the people “struggling to hold themselves and their possessions against the wind” of the storm. During this time, the strings trade harsh sul ponticello trills, suggesting the “parching of skin, throats, and noses.”

Amidst all of the chaos of this section, the viola has a few brief measures of prominence from mm.100-105. Buried in the middle of the instrument’s range, in addition to the ff dynamic marking, the violist is twice asked to play “furiously.” It is unclear whether this solo, primarily made up of motives x and d, is an “observation” of what is unfolding, or whether in it the viola becomes part of the storm itself. Regardless of the exact interpretation of this solo, it seems curious to assign arguably the softest instrument in the ensemble to such a prominent role within the buildup of the storm.

The climax of the piece is a twenty-five-second aleatoric section occurring at letter
(m. 109). Here the entire ensemble is instructed to:

Make as much dissonant racket as loudly as you possibly can—be as imaginative as you can. Don’t stop—just forge on-trill, articulate, glissandi, clusters—whatever. Remember, you are the tornado. From time to time, call out as if in a windstorm where you cannot be heard no matter how loudly you call. Stomp on the floor, shout. Watch the piano for que [sic] to end. When you see the que, don’t stop abruptly, fade away.  

Altogether the storm spans about two minutes of the piece. The stomping, shouting, and “dissonant racket” of this aleatoric climax fades away into the “aftermath” of the storm, section (m. 109), the last section of the piece. In this section, the viola recalls most of the motives from earlier in the piece including motives x, z, b, c, and d. The piano emerges by itself out of the storm with repeated rhythmic material for three measures (mm. 109-111), similar to , but with a softer dynamic. Suggesting a much gentler rain with the indication “very lightly,” this figure is echoed one final time in m. 113. In m. 112, a tempo change indicates a return to the slower tempo from the opening of the piece and the viola returns as the ‘featured’ instrument. The violin and cello overlap during the viola’s half note in m. 114 and m. 115, the violin with a variant of motive x and the cello with a echoes of the sul ponticello tremolo from m. 103 and a softer version of motive c marked “warmly.” In the final measures, the winds sustain a soft chord with a major sonority suggesting the emergence of the sun, while the viola finishes its “observation” of the events that have taken place with one last repetition of motive b.

Conclusions

Larsen, Black Roller, 17.
Although written three years after completion of her doctorate, Larsen considers *Black Roller* a student piece. Regardless of the flaws she perceives in the composition, she uses many of the conceptual and stylistic elements from this work in her later, mature chamber works with viola. Conceptually, the idea of presenting a natural event as a narrative paves the way for pieces such as *Black Birds, Red Hills*. Although this later work does not intend to narrate a specific event as *Black Roller* does, she nonetheless attempts in both pieces to capture the feeling of the natural world with musical sound. Stylistically, the way in which Larsen builds and uses motives is consistent with her later works. In general she prefers building main melodic ideas out of thirds and fourths, and there is typically very little variation when she reuses her initial motives later in the work.

Although Larsen’s use of extramusical material and motives is indicative of her more mature and frequently performed later works, *Black Roller*’s weaknesses lie in the disconnected nature of the overall structure and the lack of cohesion between the melodic and the rhythmic aspects of the piece. For example, two main motives introduced in the opening (x and z) recur in many sections of the piece. One of these motives, x is a melodic idea, the other, z, a rhythmic idea. By creating this disconnect between the elements of melody and rhythm, Larsen admits that she’s “foiled [her] own architecture immediately by not connecting rhythm and flow,” much as she had done in her work for Zuckerman, *Ulloa’s Ring*.

In terms of the architecture or overall structure, a set of expectations is created in the first four sections (beginning to D), built on the use of repeated motives, instrument pairs, and the contrasting, mostly lyrical, viola line. All of this is suspended suddenly at

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29 Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
where a whole new set of motives is introduced and the previous motives are completely abandoned in favor of a static texture. The effect of this is that the narrative of the piece stops abruptly, and the tension which has slowly been building is released long before the climax of the work.

In consideration of the link between the narrative and the music, sections $\text{C-G}$ are ambiguous. Figure 3 illustrates one possible interpretation along with musical rationale behind this analysis. While of the five events from the program note, the “people watching,” the “storm,” and the “aftermath” are very clear musically, there are several sections that musically suggest either “stillness” or “light rippling wind” or both.

**Figure 3: Black Roller Possible Narrative**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Elapsed Time</th>
<th>Probable Event</th>
<th>Musical Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>:00</td>
<td>Group of people watching</td>
<td>Alternation of short motives among winds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1:30</td>
<td>Watching continues/ Observation of the scene</td>
<td>Viola enters, reiterates wind motives Woodwind material continues from opening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2:45</td>
<td>Watching continues/ Cloud buildup</td>
<td>ww chorales suggest layering of clouds No new motives/ instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>3:35</td>
<td>Stillness</td>
<td>String chorale (recalls Copland) Open intervals Dolce, legato indications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>5:27</td>
<td>Stillness</td>
<td>Sustained clusters in winds and cello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>6:30</td>
<td>Increasing wind</td>
<td>Continuous passing of motive $z$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>7:40</td>
<td>Approach of storm</td>
<td>New motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>7:58</td>
<td>Stillness</td>
<td>Marked “suddenly quiet, very still, expectant”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>8:45</td>
<td>Arrival of storm</td>
<td>Intense piano cadenza $fff$ dynamic Faster tempo Extreme registers Marked “furiously”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>9:05</td>
<td>Growing intensity of storm</td>
<td>Tutti $sul$ pont. Marked “furiously” Motive d (screaming/crying motive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>9:52</td>
<td>Climax of storm</td>
<td>Aleatoric section Marked “dissonant racket” Extreme dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>10:35</td>
<td>Aftermath of storm</td>
<td>Dissipating rain figure in piano Return to original tempo Marked “lightly” Repetition of motives from earlier in the piece Major sonority suggesting the sun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Larsen herself points out some of these flaws, particularly in the sections between \[\text{D}\] and m. 65 (after \[\text{E}\]) where motive \(z\) returns. She notes that she did not have the technique to recognize the architecture she had set up in order to continue it:

The first measure of \(D\) still works, using rests and anticipation and not giving—setting up musical expectation. But then, right at \[\text{E}\], when I introduce 5/4 and reduce the rhythm down to half notes and quarter notes, I suddenly apply meter, a meter that doesn’t really belong to the pulse. Then your brain—there’s enough material in the opening so that the listener—you have a set of expectations, and you’re ready to explore those expectations, but then when I apply meter that doesn’t belong to the pulse, your brain just doesn’t tilt.\(^{30}\)

In retrospect, Larsen feels as if this section should have been cut, and replaced by a more effective transition that reused and developed her earlier motives. Similarly, she is dissatisfied with the climax of the piece, the aleatoric section at \[\text{K}\]. Although she still occasionally uses aleatoric elements in her works,\(^ {31}\) she feels that in *Black Roller* it was not an effective tool to capture the arrival of the tornado and its ensuing chaos. Section \[\text{K}\] attempts to depict a certain type of chaos, and Larsen has a rather specific idea in her head of what it should sound like. When she wrote the work, Larsen assumed that the musicians would incorporate the motives and material from the work into their improvisations. However, because she did not specify this, it generally does not happen in performance.

The other questionable aspect of *Black Roller* lies in its instrumentation. Technically the piece is well suited for the instruments, yet the concept of the *role* of

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Larsen notes, “In my latest orchestra piece [*Bach 358*] I used aleatoric [elements]. It’s a piece that revolves around a theme from Bach’s Musical Offering, and that’s a piece we all know so well, that I could use chaos, aleatoric chaos, in a way that would allow the performers to be very inventive.” (Larsen interview 2009).
each instrument was not solidified at the time of conception, even though this piece as a whole was conceived from a narrative. As mentioned earlier, Larsen now sees the viola as the observer of the black roller, although she confesses that she “didn’t even know that when I wrote it. I know now there is an observer, [but] it’s very under-realized in my mind.” Larsen also points out that in any natural phenomenon, the observer is part of the event, making the viola’s role two-sided.

In this aspect, Larsen is more successful than she perhaps admits. The viola part, although featured quite extensively in the opening sections, becomes an equal partner in the ensemble as the piece (and the storm) progresses. In this respect the viola joins the other instruments in becoming part of the event itself. The viola returns at the end with the last melodic material perhaps to “assess the damage” or comment on the events that have unfolded. As Larsen remarks, at the end of the piece, “the air changes, and the adrenaline at least flows into another part of your body, and you know it’s not fight or flight any more, and you just remain. That’s what the viola is.” Thus, the narrative as Larsen now conceives it is driven by the viola, though it took her years after composing the work to come to this.

Similarly, the role and function of the wind instruments became clearer to Larsen after Black Roller was completed. In general much of the woodwind writing in the opening sections can be seen as more conversational in nature, with short one-beat motives passed among the flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon, suggesting simple chatting among a group of people. However, at the first chorale is introduced by the winds,

\[\text{footnotes}\]

32 Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
suggestive of, as Larsen points out, the atmosphere and clouds. Most of the tension in the work is generated from the increasingly dissonant harmonies of the wind duos, trios, and quartets.

The scoring for the piano is perhaps the most unusual feature of this piece. Larsen does not use the piano at all until two thirds of the way through the work. Therefore, when it does enter, it seems very foreign and out of place within the established timbre. Notwithstanding the short chaotic piano cadenza passage at $\underline{\text{III}}$, the piano is used mainly to repeat short rhythmic motives suggestive of the regular patterns of various intensities of rainfall. Upon reflection, Larsen used the instrument because she “didn’t know how to create a black roller, a tornado, without the piano.” She continues: “I actually don’t know why I chose piano. I don’t think I would, now. It provided a kind of rhythmic drive that I knew how to accomplish on piano, but didn’t know how to accomplish [on other instruments].”

In assessing the place of this piece in her catalogue, Larsen does not seem concerned that Black Roller is not often performed, but rather regards the work as a step towards the development of her current compositional philosophy. She offers the analogy of a seasoned performer who regards a recording from the earliest part of his or her

\[ 35 \text{ Ibid.} \]
\[ 36 \text{ Ibid.} \]
\[ 37 \text{ Ibid.} \]
\[ 38 \text{ Black Roller was recorded to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Minnesota Contemporary Ensemble in 1997. (Larsen, Libby, 180 Degrees from Ordinary, Minnesota Contemporary Ensemble, Innova 513, 1998, CD).} \]
career, not as a representation of their current ability, but as a step in the process to becoming the musician they are now.\textsuperscript{39} Larsen reflects:

It is very young compositional technique. It works fine for the instruments, you know, and it’s fun, but the architecture’s wrong. The viola writing is not anything worth spending your time on—it’s fine, but it’s not what Rob wanted. I think what he wanted was more of a concertino, he wanted more of a feature piece, a piece that featured viola, and I gave him a chamber piece. So I don’t think he was very pleased with it, which wouldn’t have bothered me at all except that I’m not pleased with the piece!\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} In looking back on the process of commissioning the work, Levine has a similar attitude: “I wasn’t thinking I’d commission an epic viola piece. I just wanted an interesting experience. I learned a lot from that experience!” Since its initial performances he has not returned to the work, and although he admits he’d probably not go out of the way to organize a repeat performance of the work, he would be happy to perform it again should the opportunity arise. (Levine interview 2009).

\textsuperscript{40} Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
Cajun Set

Origins

_Cajun Set’s_ origins date to a trip Larsen took to Louisiana to attend a traditional Cajun wedding. At the time she enjoyed and was familiar with Zydeco music,\(^{41}\) which also emerged from southwestern Louisiana, but this was her first experience with an older traditional Cajun genre. Although in Louisiana for a short time, Larsen immersed herself in the Cajun culture, visiting Preservation Hall in New Orleans and attending church services in more rural areas. She was struck with how genuine and heartfelt the music was, and upon returning to Minnesota, she decided to write a composition using some of the melodies from this culture.\(^{42}\) She turned to a collection of Cajun Songs\(^{43}\) from which she found source material for _Cajun Set_.\(^{44}\)

Cajun music’s diverse range of influences appealed to Larsen. Originally brought to Louisiana by the French speaking Acadians of Canada, it has been described as “a collision of French European, Afro-Caribbean, and Mississippi Indian influences.”\(^{45}\) The

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\(^{41}\) Zydeco was an offshoot of Creole music and gained widespread popularity in the 1950’s.

\(^{42}\) Larsen found great joy in listening to and working with Cajun melodies and still jokes that this music is “so not Midwest! [It is] a complete joy! The bayou is the bayou!” (Libby Larsen, interview by the author, phone transcript, 3 December 2009).

\(^{43}\) Irène T. Whitfield, _Louisiana French Folk Songs_ (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1939).

\(^{44}\) Larsen doesn’t remember the name of the book she found; however, Whitfield’s collection has all three songs within 25 pages of each other, and is the only published collection of its kind. Whitfield’s study of French, Cajun, and Creole songs was initially a masters thesis for Louisiana State University (Robert Santelli and others, eds., _American Roots Music_, New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 2001, 114).

music, played on European instruments including the violin (fiddle) and accordion, has strong rhythmic qualities and an African-influenced beat. Because this music would often be performed to accompany dancers, the songs were usually repeated many times "until they ran on and on and on like the flat country of the southern part of the state which developed them." Prior to 1908, when accordions became available in the region, two fiddlers performed together, one with a high melody and the other with a chord accompaniment or lower melody.

Guitarist Jeffrey Van was influential in the choice of instrumentation (guitar, violin, viola, and cello) for Larsen’s Cajun music study. Some of the earliest published instrumental works in Larsen’s catalog include guitar because of Van’s enthusiasm for collaboration and performance with young composers. Larsen credits Van for her interest in the instrument and recalls that he explained to her the possibilities of the guitar and encouraged her to write this and several other works for his instrument. In 2000, Larsen sent Van a letter thanking him for “challenging her to compose well for guitar, teaching her how to do [it], and playing all of her music for guitar.”

*Cajun Set* was also one of Larsen’s earliest chamber works for bowed stringed instruments. Her first string quartet, *Alauda*, was written for the Lark String Quartet in 1986, six years after the premiere of *Cajun Set*. Larsen regards both pieces as important

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46 Whitfield, 68.
48 Van is the guitar professor at the University of Minnesota.
51 An alauda is a genus of larks.
steps in the evolution of her style, remarking that "[Alauda] had bad form but good writing, and [Cajun Set] had good form and okay writing."\(^{52}\)

The Walker Arts Center commissioned *Cajun Set*, and the Center Chamber Players premiered it there on May 4, 1980. This ensemble included Van, Kensley Rosen, violin, Clyn Dee Barrus, viola, and Marcia Peck, cello.\(^{53}\) A second performance with the same personnel took place eleven days later at the Bakken Museum, also in Minneapolis.\(^{54}\)

Analysis

Unlike *Black Roller*, which is made up of short motives layered on top of one another, *Cajun Set* is a study in longer melodies, diverse textures, simpler rhythms, and rich harmonic language. In each movement Larsen begins with the melody of the source song and then repeats it several times, as would be the custom if performed by a Cajun band, adding more of her own material with each repetition. The result is a mixture of the original song, harmonized with Larsen's largely atonal harmonies, and newly composed interludes and responses.

The folk songs themselves, *Gringalet*, *French Blues*, and *Joe Férail* share many features typical of Cajun music. All have a limited melodic range, pentatonic tendencies (in fact the first and last songs contain only five pitches), and a rather symmetrical phrase structure. All three songs are made up of four lines of text: \(^{55}\) the first and second songs

\(^{52}\) Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
\(^{53}\) All of these musicians were members of the Minnesota Orchestra at the time.
\(^{54}\) Jeffrey Van, email message to the author, December 15, 2009.
\(^{55}\) Whitfield provides many different versions of text for *Gringalet*, some which have an additional two lines.
have four measure lines and the third song has two measure lines.

Irène Whitfield, from whose book Larsen most likely chose her folksongs, describes the composers and performers of this music as "simple folks who live close to the earth, who are rather elemental in their passions and feelings, and yet who have inherited all the romantic tendencies of the 19th century." The subjects of the songs Whitfield collected in the 1930's are purely secular, although the Cajun culture on a whole is predominately Catholic. In reviewing her collection, Whitfield remarks: "There is in many of these folk songs no semblance of scientific rules of composition, nor of development according to a plan of preconceived ideas...[this music] grew from spontaneous outbursts of emotions and varies with them. Even the same song may be quite different before and after a dance." Larsen's adaptation of these songs is quite similar. She does not follow any specific formal plan, but rather uses a modified strophic song form adding her own harmonies and variations to each movement.

First Movement: *Gringalet*

Judge Félix Voorhies of St. Martinvelle is credited as the composer of the song used in the first movement of *Cajun Set. Gringalet*, also called *Grand Galère*, dates from 1894, when it was "used with others of his own composition in comedies which he wrote and presented." Whitfield's source for her transcription was a man named Arthur

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56 Whitfield, 73.
57 Ibid., 69.
58 Ibid., 124.
Guidry of Lafayette, Louisiana. This tune is unique among the songs in Whitfield's collection in that it is made up of two contrasting musical sections: a sixteen measure waltz in triple meter followed by a six measure Allegretto. The text Whitfield provides has four variants, only two of which have the added two lines (the Allegretto section) at the end.

**Example 1.4: Gringalet**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tempo di valse} \\
\text{Je suis Grand Galere, le fils à mon oncle Pierre ce - la qui res - ta - du bois.} \\
\text{En voy - age pour la pre - mière fois, et je ne pense pas que ça sera la derni - ère.} \\
\text{Diable! c'était beau, Diable! c'était beau, Diable! c'était beau.}
\end{align*}
\]

A loose translation of the first stanza of text is as follows: 59

I am Grand Galere, the son of my uncle Pierre,  
He who stayed in the dark woods.  
I am traveling for the first time,  
And I don't think it will be the last.  
Devil! It was beautiful,  
Devil! it was beautiful,  
Devil! it was beautiful.

In Larsen's adaptation, she incorporates the form of a stop-waltz, which is intended to create rather unexpected alternations between the sections. "The stop-waltz customarily is a joke piece in which a couple waltzes slowly. The music changes and the male dancer makes up a solo step at random until the waltz begins again. The changes in

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59 Translation by Daphne Gerling.
Larsen’s stop waltz alternates between the triple meter waltz from the main *Gringalet* tune and material from the *Allegretto* section used for the more “random” interludes.

The form of this movement is quite straightforward. All the melodic material from the Cajun song is used, though the two sections are initially presented in reversed order. The A section, based on the *Allegretto* of *Gringalet* is marked *furiously.* In Larsen’s adaptation the bowed strings play it alone and it is characterized by a large range in dynamics, sudden dynamic changes, increased chromaticism, and abrupt endings. An accented chromatic tone cluster marked *ff* begins the piece, and throughout the first section the harmony is quite compressed. Like the original version, a two measure descending fragment is repeated three times, now complemented by contrary motion in the cello. Each statement of this A section ends differently. In its first iteration, it concludes with a measure long contrary motion glissando (see Example 1.5) akin to the arrival of the storm in *Black Roller.*

**Example 1.5: Cajun Set, First mvt., mm. 1-9**

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The solo guitar presents the first verse of the waltz melody, the B section as shown

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61 Though not indicated in the last statement in m. 143, the mood is clearly the same.
62 This occurs in m. 87 of *Black Roller.*
in Example 1.6. Larsen’s score indicates that this be played at a slower tempo than the opening, “simply, as a country waltz.” The sixteen bar melody is transposed up a fifth (in G as opposed to C), but otherwise notated as it appears in the Whitfield transcription. Here the texture is quite thin, compared to the A section; however there is some interesting voice leading and harmonies in Larsen’s version, including a somewhat modal inflection to the harmony with the inclusion of lowered scale degree 7 at significant moments.63

**Example 1.6: Cajun Set, First mvt., mm. 10-26**

The A and B sections continue alternating with one another, and each time a section returns, there is added complexity. Figure 4 illustrates the variations between the sections.

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63 Van recalls that during the rehearsal process, he suggested thickening the guitar texture by adding additional notes to the chords. (Van, email to the author).
### Figure 4: *Gringalet* Formal Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>mm</th>
<th>Instrumentation</th>
<th>Special Instructions</th>
<th>Significant Musical Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1-9</td>
<td>violin, viola, cello (all arco)</td>
<td>Quarter=144</td>
<td>Narrow range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marked “furiously”</td>
<td>Close harmonies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>p-fff</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contrary motion glissando at end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>10-26</td>
<td>solo guitar</td>
<td>Quarter=112-120</td>
<td>Complete 16 bar transcription of <em>Gringalet</em> waltz melody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marked “simply, as a country waltz”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>27-35</td>
<td>violin, viola, cello (all arco)</td>
<td>Quarter=144</td>
<td>Similar pitch content to A with expanded range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marked “furiously, as if interrupting”</td>
<td><em>ppp-fff</em> subito dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>36-51</td>
<td>tutti (all pizz)</td>
<td>Quarter=112-120</td>
<td>Guitar waltz theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marked “again, as a country waltz”</td>
<td>Accompaniment in violin, viola, cello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cello has downbeat pizz, like waltz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No resolution at end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>52-60</td>
<td>violin, viola, cello (all arco)</td>
<td>Quarter=144</td>
<td>Double bows and trills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marked “furiously, as if interrupting”</td>
<td>Theme in canon between viola, cello and violin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In original register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>61-77</td>
<td>tutti: violon <em>con sord</em></td>
<td>Quarter=62</td>
<td>New material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>viola pizz</td>
<td>Marked “waltz”</td>
<td>Melody in guitar mm. 61-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cello <em>non vib</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Melody in violin mm. 70-77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cello and viola maintain waltz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ostinato throughout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>78-81</td>
<td>solo guitar</td>
<td></td>
<td>Four bar fragment of waltz theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>82-89</td>
<td>violin, viola, cello (all arco)</td>
<td>Quarter=144</td>
<td>Double bows and trills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expanded range like A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>90-108</td>
<td>violin, viola, cello (mostly arco)</td>
<td>Quarter=72</td>
<td>More of a variant than previous B sections and new intervals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Added measure in sextuple meter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Violin melody 90-100, viola melody 101-104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cello maintains emphasis on downbeats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>110-125</td>
<td>tutti</td>
<td></td>
<td>Guitar melody 110-117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Violin melody 118-125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>126-142</td>
<td>tutti</td>
<td></td>
<td>Guitar melody exactly the same as B section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vln/Vla/VC sustain unison E-flat in mm. 133-140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ends with three measure contrary motion glissando</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>142-152</td>
<td>violin, viola, cello (all arco)</td>
<td>Quarter=144</td>
<td>Similar to A3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ends <em>pp</em> on GM chord</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

There is a misprint in the score here. The indication in the table is correct.
By repeating the same material with small variations, Larsen is mirroring the way the original song would be performed. The melodies of the A and B sections are made up of borrowed material, but a short C section added midway through the piece contains all original material. This short melody was created as a "classical answer" to the *Gringalet* tune, added by the composer for variation in the later part of the piece.

Second Movement: *French Blues*

Larsen chose a song titled *French Blues* as the source material for the second movement of *Cajun Set*. She notes that this song "is a slow, sensuous tune, preferably performed a cappella in the parlando style." The only information that Whitfield provides with her transcription is that her source was an Alan Lomax recording. The song itself is quite simple: it is sixteen measures long, in d dorian, and in triple meter. The fourth line repeats the melody of the third.

**Example 1.7: French Blues**

\[\text{Example 1.7: French Blues}\]

65 Libby Larsen, interview with the author, phone transcript, 3 December 2009.
66 *Larsen, Cajun Set*, preface.
67 Ethnomusicologists Alan Lomax (1915-2002) and his father, John (1867-1948) collected, transcribed, and recorded American folk songs. Their work aided and inspired Whitfield’s study of Louisiana French Folk Songs.
A general translation of the first verse is as follows:68

I'm going to sleep, I'm going to sleep, and I'm thirsty and I'm hungry.
The sun has set; you come far from the house.
What do you have, beautiful blonde? What do you have, beautiful brunette?
It's all for the blonde and none for the brunette.

In many ways this movement is much simpler than the outer movements. There are no contrasting sections, and aside from periodic rubato, this movement maintains a consistent tempo. Similar to the previous movement, Larsen begins with an extended solo statement of the Cajun song, but in this movement each instrument takes a turn at the solo. The cello begins, instructed to play freely, flowing, breathing, and presents the melody in its entirety with simple open fifth chordal embellishments. In the fourth line there is one change in pitch from the original folk song melody, as indicated in Example 1.8, but otherwise it is an exact transcription.

Example 1.8: Cajun Set, Second mvt., mm. 13-16

Unlike the previous movement, which alternated between an A and B section, a short simple bridge consisting solely of the pitch A connects the cello solo to the next entrance of the melody. In this bridge, the cello sustains a low A, and the guitar alternates between its open and harmonic A. This pattern continues as an ostinato for the duration of the next statement of the French Blues tune. In this second stanza the viola has a much simpler version of the melody without double stops and an octave higher than the cello. Again, there is a subtle variation of pitch content in the last line, shown in Example 1.9.

68 Translation by Daphne Gerling.
Example 1.9: *Cajun Set*, Second mvt., mm. 32-35, (viola only)

Throughout the entire second statement the violin has a simple counter melody or descant suggestive of the role of the fiddle in a Cajun band. Following the viola melody, another bridge marks the transition into the next section. Instead of another complete verse of the *French Blues* song, fragments or echoes of the melody are passed between the instruments. The viola begins this section, not with a fragment from the beginning of the melody, but with an altered and truncated cadence figure as shown in Example 1.10.

**Example 1.10: Cajun Set, Second mvt., m. 39, (viola only)**

The guitar follows with an altered version of the first line:

**Example 1.11: Cajun Set, Second mvt., mm. 41-44, (guitar only)**

The echoes and fragments continue in this fashion, becoming more and more chromatic. In m. 71 a tone cluster in rhythmic unison and acceleration that bears resemblance to figures found in Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* and Bartok’s *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* stands out from the gentle waltz, as shown in Example 1.12.
Example 1.12: Cajun Set, Second mvt., mm.71-77

This motive is unique, due in part to the sudden unison texture, abrupt dynamic changes, and accents. It has no relation to the Cajun song, and other than the contrary motion glissando in m. 74, there are no hints of material from earlier in the movement. Nonetheless, this motive gains further significance because it appears as an important motive in Larsen’s next chamber work for strings, Alauda: Concert Piece for String Quartet (1986) as shown in Example 1.13.

Example 1.13: Alauda, Mvt. 1, mm. 10-12

Following a pause after the rhythmic acceleration gesture, the violin melody returns to the French Blues material, hinting at the cadence gesture, shown in Example 1.14.

Example 1.14: Cajun Set, Second mvt., mm. 78-80 (violin only)

A second iteration of the accelerated rhythmic motive follows in m. 83-88, fading into a chord of open fifths. The movement concludes with a lightly accompanied guitar
solo. Here the chords are rolled upward from the melody, giving the impression of octave displacement in the melodic line.

Third Movement: Joe Férail

The third movement of Cajun Set is based on the song Joe Férail est un Petit Nègre. This tune, described by Whitfield as a “characteristically Cajun melody,” was also transcribed from a Lomax record. In the liner notes accompanying his record, Lomax notes that it is a “contemporary white imitation of the ‘Cajun’ Negro blues style, giving a portrait of the legendary Joe Férail, who sold his wife for a bushel of potatoes.”

Whitfield’s translation of the lyric is as follows: “Joe Férail is a little pickaninny whom Madame Joe is rocking. Regina, the mulattress, sold him to me for a song.” The melody is quite a bit shorter than the other two songs and simpler in many respects. It is divided into two identical lines, each made up of a call and response. Only five notes are used, and the range is exactly one octave. The most interesting feature of the song is the alternating dotted rhythms.

69 Whitfield, 125.
70 Alan Lomax, ed.: Bahaman Songs, French Ballads and Dance Tunes, Spanish Religious Songs and Game Songs, original recordings, Library of Congress Recording Library AAFS L5, 1956, LP.
71 Whitfield, 125.
Example 1.15: *Joe Férail*

![Musical notation]

In Larsen’s adaptation, melodic and rhythmic materials are not the only elements borrowed from Cajun and blues music. The score calls for foot stomping and vocal interjections, common in live performances of Cajun music, and the formal structure of Larsen’s movement is built around the idea of call and response, like the original tune.

Larsen notes:

> The Cajun tradition of whooping is a long-standing one. At any given time during a dance or song, anyone may whoop loudly and the rest of the revelers respond with a loud stomp. I’ve adopted this technique in this movement, asking the performers to whoop and stomp ‘raucously.’ The tune *Joe Férail* is an old French tune, transplanted and interpolated to a jaunty Cajun dance tune.\(^{72}\)

Instead of beginning with a complete repetition of the melody as in the previous movements, in this movement the first two measures (the call) are directly quoted from the Cajun *Joe Férail*, but the response is newly composed material as shown in Example 1.16.

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\(^{72}\) Larsen, *Cajun Set*, preface.
There are several interesting features in this opening call and response that continue throughout the movement. The call, marked "raucously," is paired with a response by the violin, viola and cello much longer than the one found in the original *Joe Ferail*. This four-measure excerpt has several Cajun-style features including a unison foot stomp and a scoop into the last note, suggesting the less refined, more raucous manner of Cajun fiddling. However, it also has elements typical of Larsen's style including the sudden and extreme dynamic changes, shorter rhythmic motives, and a great deal of harmonic chromaticism.

There is no preconceived formal structure in this movement, yet this pattern of call and response, made up of both the *Joe Ferail* song and original material, occurs several times in the opening of the movement. For example, in m. 6, the entire *Joe Ferail* song is quoted almost directly. The only difference from the Whitfield version (other than the atonal harmonization) is that the response is in the same octave as the call.

In m. 22 a sudden change of texture and motives signals a new section. The
following twenty measures have no direct quotes from the source material, only occasional dotted rhythms or fragments from Joe Féraul. Instead, the bulk of this section is made up of material from the first response (mm. 2-6). This includes motive x, the five note rising third pattern first used in m. 4, and a new motive of overlapping chromatic scales, motive y, both shown in Example 1.17. Motive x is built on a five-note sixteenth note sequence of stacked major and minor thirds, and becomes the most important motive in the movement.

Example 1.17: Cajun Set, Third mvt., mm. 26-28

Each of the chamber works in this study contain motives built of major and minor thirds which are a major hallmark of Larsen’s style. She first became fascinated with the interval when she was assigned by Paul Fetler in graduate school to write a one hundred-page paper on the history of the third. For her study, she looked at various tuning systems from around the world and came to the conclusion that “a culture defines itself in

73 Larsen relates from this experience: “I learned a lot, galaxies of knowledge, sociological, political, and all kinds of things about the third, and from then on the third has had a lot of meaning to me.” (Bezerra, 22).
its third." Furthermore, from this study she came to the conclusion that the clash between the classical culture and folk culture in many societies is largely over the tuning and use of this interval. An example of an assigned role of the interval appears in the work *How It Thrills Us*, (1990) for SATB chorus, where she uses the interval of a tritone to represent "chaos" and the third to represent "non existence of chaos." While there is no such association here, the prevalence of thirds, both major and minor, throughout this study demonstrates the significance of this interval in Larsen’s music.

The texture in the section at m.27 alternates between the mostly unison x and y motives and a two or three voice homophonic texture. Two or three instruments are continuously assigned to play repeated rhythmic figures, not unlike the rhythm section in a band, although here all four instruments take turns with the melody.

The x motive evolves into patterns of alternating sixteenth note thirds in the violin that, along with the guitar and cello, accompany a three-measure viola solo of extreme dynamics, shown in Example 1.18. Although this solo (which is continued by the cello) is rather abstract, it references the dotted rhythms of *Joe Férail*.

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74 Larsen, interview, 8/2008. This specific claim is difficult to substantiate though Larsen’s fascination with the interval is undeniable.
75 Larsen takes this notion of the culture clash over the interval of a third even further: “almost all of the culture wars are over the third…people burned at the stake over a third! So I use the third very deliberately, all the time, in all of my music. (Larsen, interview, 8/2008).
76 Boyer, 44.
Example 1.18: *Cajun Set*, Third mvt., mm. 32-34

Following this solo, a short *poco piu mosso* section features a new statement of the Cajun Joe Ferail in the guitar, preceded and accompanied by an ostinato of syncopated quarter notes by the other instruments. Foot stomping in m. 59 leads into a short but rather virtuosic violin cadenza. Throughout this cadenza the other instruments accompany with unison foot stomps and shouts of “hey,” “hah,” and “hoo.” Although the harmonic language is quite different than that of typical Cajun music, in this section Larsen has attempted to capture the energy and improvisatory element of the folk music.

The remainder of the movement is interspersed with one or two measure solos from Joe Ferail, unison statements of the x and y motives, and many tutti foot stomps and shouts. As with the previous movements, Larsen brings back the original melody in its entirety near the end. This last statement is a call and response between the violin and cello, with the viola and guitar serving as the rhythm section. The last five measures have quick energetic alternations of the x and y motives, stomping, and shouting, all at a *ff* dynamic.
Conclusions

Although Larsen's experience in Louisiana generated just two works, *Cajun Set* and *The Silver Fox* (1979), a one act opera for the young, her early exploration of indigenous American music influenced the trajectory of her career and made its way both directly and indirectly into a large number of her compositions. A later example of this influence is in her 2001 work, *Barn Dances* for flute, clarinet, and piano. The titles of these movements, *Forward Six and Fall Back Eight, Divide the Ring, Varsouvianna,* and *Rattlesnake Twist,* are taken from various dance steps used in cowboy dances, and although there are no musical quotations in this piece, her objective in the work was to generate the "musical equivalent of a character drawing." It also led to her thinking about Cajun influence in more mainstream American popular music, leading directly to singer Little Richard, whom she credits as a major influence. Thirty years later, Larsen still regards her trip to Louisiana and her musical experiences there as a major turning point in her career:

That trip in 1980 was pivotal. You can't hear the music without the language. I think what happened was I had been searching for a long time to understand where my creative center sat in relationship to that question 'where does music come from?' I'd been trained in chant where the music is the language and the language is the music, and then matriculated into the western music education system [where this is not the case]. Then landing in the center of that same definition where the music is the language of the people, I think I heard rock 'n' roll in the backwoods Cajun music, the origins of what I knew to be rock 'n' roll, which didn’t come from the western tradition.

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77 Libby Larsen, “Barn Dances”
78 Larsen, interview, 12/2009.
79 Ibid.
Although it can be argued that music (both classical and popular) from the western tradition did play a major role in the origins of rock 'n' roll, Larsen regards rock 'n' roll as a genuinely American musical tradition. In the last decade, Larsen has incorporated the language of Americana, both in terms of spoken English and the musical elements of early rock 'n' roll and country/western music, into many concert works. These include her 2001 Viola Sonata, discussed in Chapter 3, and the more recent Concert Piece for Bassoon and Piano (2008). In these works she does not quote any specific songs as she does in *Cajun Set*, but rather uses elements from the style of popular music, like swung notes, slides, harmonies and the rhythms of American English. As she has assimilated these influences, her focus now is less on borrowing material directly, than in studying how the pitch, rhythm, emotion, and architecture relate to each other in these genres.

Larsen's interest in American "roots" music and other folk music has led her to study other genres in addition to Cajun music. She has studied and listened to Norwegian folk music, as she is somewhat surrounded by it in Minnesota. This influence led her to compose the opera *Eric Hermannson's Soul* (1998) using the distinct Norwegian melodic modes. She also has studied bluegrass, but has not embraced it as she has done with other folk music due to what she perceives as its racist origins.

Larsen recalls feeling very bold when she wrote *Cajun Set*. Although written at the same time as *Black Roller*, she does not regard this work as a student piece in the way she does *Black Roller*. Yet she is quick to point out: "I know so much more now. On the

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80 An expanded discussion of Larsen's incorporation of American English into her works appears in Chapter 3.
81 Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
other hand, I might write a piece that’s way too hard. This is an ensemble piece."\footnote{82}

Compositinally this is a simpler and more simplistic piece than \textit{Black Roller}. Each movement is basically strophic, with a bit of variation and added material as the movement progresses. In her entry on Larsen in \textit{Contemporary Composers}, Pamela Collins offers the following summary of her music:

\begin{quote}
Underlying her work is a strong interest in American popular musics, an interest she combines with elements of freely deployed atonal harmony and the kinds of repetitive structure often associated with so-called minimalism but which in her work have an altogether more folkish and less doctrinaire quality.\footnote{83}
\end{quote}

This statement is perhaps best applied to Larsen’s music from her Minnesota Orchestra residency period (1983-1987) onward, yet every assertion Collins makes, especially “freely deployed atonal harmony” and “repetitive structure” seem to describe \textit{Cajun Set} directly.

From a performance standpoint, the most difficult element in the work is not the notes, rhythms, or ensemble issues which are more straightforward than \textit{Black Roller}, but rather the choreography of the stomping and shouting in the last movement, \textit{Joe Férail}. Larsen describes performances she has heard of this movement as “scary,” and goes on to say: “I have always thought maybe it just takes much more practicing.”\footnote{84} Larsen also regards the sudden character changes of the stop waltz in the first movement, \textit{Gringalet}, as “confounding to string quartets.”\footnote{85} Part of the difficulty here stems from the fact that the work attempts to coordinate precisely a practice that was largely extemporized or ad-libbed in the folk context.

\footnote{82} Ibid.\footnote{83} Pamela Collins, ed., \textit{Contemporary Composers} (Chicago: St. James Press, 1992), 538.\footnote{84} Ibid.\footnote{85} Ibid.
Besides the aleatoric shouting which accompanies the climax of *Black Roller*, Larsen uses stomping and shouting in just one other piece, the choral work "*The Settling Years*" (1988). Although composed in the year following her residency with the Minnesota Orchestra, this piece shares many characteristics with *Cajun Set*. The third movement, *A Hoopla*, has words taken from the *1907 Song Primer*, a collection of American songs like the Whitfield collection. Instead of assimilating the sound of Cajun music and dance, this movement captures the energy of American folk music by depicting "a barn dance [where] vocalists circle 'round the instruments, stomp, clap, and generally perform with abandon, vigor and boisterousness."\(^8^6\) Between the verses the nonsense syllables "Zzoon," "Zah," and "D.g.dah," punctuate the piece, and throughout the choir is instructed to stomp and shout "with abandon, boisterously."\(^8^7\)

Her sense of humor and willingness to experiment with unconventional ideas and gestures in her music, inherited from her teacher Eric Stokes, is taken a step further in the choral work, "Cheap Thrill" from *A Creeley Collection*. Composed in 1984, the score contains the following instruction:

A solo voice steps forward and says: "Cheap thrill." (pause) "Write in the air with flourishes."

The soloist should stand still. The chorus members, conductor, and instrumentalists, on cue, should each make one dramatically wild flourish with hands and arms, all at the same time. Stop. The soloist should step back into the ranks of the chorus.\(^8^8\)

\(^8^7\) Alicia Cook, "The Evolving Style of Libby Larsen" (Master Thesis, Butler University), 42.
Early Career Reflections

In retrospect, Larsen looks back on some of her first compositions like *Black Roller* and *Cajun Set* with mixed feelings. On the one hand, her earliest experiences led her to develop a mature technique and philosophy; on the other, she now knows what works and does not work from a compositional and performance standpoint. Larsen compares *Black Roller* to early works of other composers:

> It’s young: it’s like young Mendelssohn, or young Mozart. You can hear in early Mendelssohn and early Mozart where they compose themselves into a corner, and then their teacher composes them out again, and then they go back! 89

Although Larsen’s main criticism of *Black Roller* is its architecture, she does regard several pieces from this period as architecturally successful. These include *Pinions*, a violin concerto also composed in 1981 for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra with Romuald Tecco as soloist, and *Cajun Set*. There is quite a bit of experimentation for Larsen in these early works as well. Both the shouting and stomping in *Cajun Set* and the aleatoric section in *Black Roller* (which also happens to include shouting) are rare elements that the composer has returned to in only one or two pieces, and they have not become a hallmark of her music. In general though, both the harmonic language and rhythmic complexity in her current works is much more developed than these early pieces. She adds:

> It’s all sort of bad Stravinsky and looking at Britten and trying to understand Schoenberg, you know, which is exactly what you should be doing in grad school, is really trying to figure out what it is you actually have to say. But then I was done with grad school, and also beginning to try to connect with an abstract audience, which is part of the process that

89 Larsen, interview 7/2009.
many composers never deal with: how to connect with an abstract audience. Performers deal with it all the time.\textsuperscript{90}

Throughout this early part of her career, Larsen was very aware that her audience had become an “unknown” in certain respects, no longer made up of fellow students and professors. By connecting her music with tangible extramusical images, stories, and sounds, she was reaching out to an unfamiliar population, and providing them with a concrete concept as a starting point. Thirty years after these first pieces were written she has the advantage of hindsight and remarks, “It really takes mature experience to get what’s there other than just technique,”\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
Transition to a New Phase

During Larsen’s residency with the Minnesota Orchestra from 1983-1987, her compositional style began to evolve. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this evolution in style was a new approach to outside sources. Rather than using extramusical material to create programmatic music like Black Roller and Cajun Set, she began to use extramusical material as a general guide or inspiration in her instrumental compositions. This is a subtle and gradual change, but it is evident in many of her chamber works from this period, including Black Birds, Red Hills, a trio for clarinet, viola, and piano.

In 1985, two years prior to the composition of Black Birds, Red Hills, Larsen completed her first symphony for the Minnesota Orchestra, Symphony: Water Music. This piece, which Larsen describes as a “poetic symphony in four movements,”¹ is accompanied by a lengthy program note in which she discusses the various sound combinations she employed to evoke the motion of water. Her desire to recreate her feeling of the subject, rather than providing the audience with a narrative, is explained in an article she wrote at the time: “In [the] music I want to give the listener not the sound

of a bird as much as the feeling of flying; not the footsteps on a mountain so much as the
sense of climbing; not the boat on water so much as the water itself.”

In this article Larsen is very clear that it is not her intention in her newer
compositions to create a narrative, no matter how much detail about the origins and
sources of inspiration she provides through evocative titles or program notes. In
addressing this issue within her compositional philosophy, she recalls a specific
conversation with an audience member:

But do I have to listen to this music the way you want me to? asked a
perturbed Houston concertgoer. He had just heard my *Pinions* (1981), a
violin concerto in three parts avowedly about the motion of birds in flight.
The movements are labeled: the fast first “Windhover”; the slow,
nocturnal second “Nighthawks”; and the third (presto) “Flock Flight,”
shifting, chaotic, like a pre-storm swarm of blackbirds. The man who
asked the question wanted to listen to the piece purely as music, abstractly,
without a “narrative.” Fine. I’ll always be grateful that anyone wants to
listen to my music at all, in any way. But a name needn’t make a narrative,
and presenting the original inspiration of a piece doesn’t, I hope, make it
anything other or less satisfying than music.3

Although offering the story, picture or ideas which led to the genesis of a particular
piece was and continues to be important to Larsen, she is also mindful that listening to
music can and should be an individual experience:4 “It’s impossible to listen without
mentally referring to other music, or without thinking about what else has gone on during
your day.”5 By coming to terms with the infinite ways in which people listen to and
perceive music, she was able to begin using her source material in new ways, focusing on

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3 Ibid.
4 It is important to consider that this debate about the aesthetic of instrumental music
dates to the early 19th century when composers such as Beethoven and Berlioz first
started composing programmatic music.
the emotional and referential aspects of composing for an abstract audience instead of storytelling.  

Larsen’s residency with the Minnesota Orchestra also helped her to mature as a composer and gain confidence in her abilities. She recalls:

During that residency, I felt responsible—rightly or wrongly—for making sure that having a composer with the orchestra would be remembered as a pleasant experience and one that would be valued and repeated. [Prior to the residency], I was not feeling responsible for my own creative voice, and my [newer] music was colored by this feeling of responsibility.  

Larsen wrote several other works for the Minnesota Orchestra in addition to *Water Music*. In looking back on this period of her career, she acknowledges that not only did the residency give her more confidence as a composer, but it also in some fashion led her to discover a new musical language based on the rhythms, scales, and textures found in vernacular American music. Departing from the “Pseudo-Stravinsky and post-graduate school music” she had been writing, her new style incorporated the sounds of various types of American music more freely than in earlier works such as *Cajun Set*, which was based on an adaptation of original songs. By the mid 1980’s Larsen had begun exploring the rhythm of American English, first in her song cycles and later in her instrumental works. *Black Birds, Red Hills* represents a transition of sorts, as it was originally conceived and composed as a song cycle, yet published as a trio for clarinet, viola, and piano. Composed at the end of her Minnesota Orchestra residency, it has programmatic

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Other works written for the Minnesota Orchestra during Larsen’s residency include *Deep Summer Music*, Piano Concerto, *Overture Fanfare to the Star Spangled Banner*, and *Coriolis*.
9 El-Hai, 127.
10 Ibid.
elements indicative of her earlier music, yet the incorporation of the source material is more abstract in nature.
Black Birds, Red Hills

Background

The first version of Black Birds, Red Hills was composed in 1987, the last year of Larsen’s four-year Minnesota Orchestra residency. Commissioned by The University of Alabama for soprano Thea Engelson and clarinetist Scott Bridges, it was originally conceived as a song cycle for soprano, clarinet, and piano based on six Georgia O’Keeffe paintings and their accompanying narrative.11 The only stipulation of the commission, requested by Engelson, was that the piece have some connection to female artists.

A 1996 recording project with clarinetist Caroline Hartig led Larsen to revise the piece as an instrumental trio for clarinet, viola, and piano. Besides the obvious timbre change, no significant adjustments were made structurally, melodically, or harmonically to the piece; only a few small modifications were made to adapt the vocal line to the viola. Larsen chose the viola over the violin to replace the soprano because of the color of the instrument and the fact that none of the vocal writing was particularly high.12 She was attracted to the richer and rounder sound of the viola and believes that the viola has many more color possibilities than the violin.13

12 Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
13 Ibid.
O'Keeffe seems like a natural subject for Larsen to choose for many reasons. Larsen already had explored the relationship between visual art and sound earlier in her career when she used the artwork of another American artist, Morris Louis, as the source material for a work called *Bronze Veils* for trombone and two percussionists. Premiered in 1979, this work is more programmatic and representational than *Black Birds, Red Hills*. In the music she is literally trying to emulate the technique Morris used in applying layers of color by creating layers of sound. Larsen writes:

> The paintings are created by layering soft tints on canvas so that the effect is that of gazing through, or not gazing through, several veils of color. That effect inspires the combination of instruments in this work. The combinations of color should give the idea of penetrating audibly several veils of sound.\(^{14}\)

The timbres of the various percussion instruments in *Bronze Veils* including vibraphone, cymbals, tam-tam, wind chimes, and triangle capture the mood of these peaceful and ethereal paintings. The piece begins calmly, marked “slowly, languorously” and seems to have a sort of beckoning quality that draws the listener into the piece through its various “veils” of sound colors. There are many alternations between percussion instruments so the effect is similar to these paintings which study the variations, and shading possibilities of the color bronze.

For *Black Birds, Red Hills*, Larsen began by choosing six of O'Keeffe’s paintings drawn from a retrospective collection published by Viking Press.\(^{15}\) This “comprehensive volume” contains 108 color plates of O'Keeffe’s artwork from throughout her career. It includes her famous close-ups of flowers, cityscapes, and other paintings from her life in


Wisconsin, Texas, New York, and New Mexico. Larsen deliberately chose six paintings from New Mexico for the trio, five of which are images of the Pedernal Hills located around O’Keeffe’s property at Ghost Ranch, outside of Santa Fe. There is much significance to Larsen’s choice of both O’Keeffe and these particular paintings. In choosing a collection of O’Keeffe’s New Mexico paintings as the starting point for her piece, Larsen is able to incorporate many of her favorite subjects in this composition: the influences of nature, strong female subjects, and the American West.

Larsen’s objective in this trio, subtitled *A Portrait of Six Paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe*, was to “create a portrait of her. Not a full portrait, just the portrait of whatever it was that drew her to New Mexico.” Originally conceived as a multi-media song cycle with slides, the libretto was fashioned from the narrative O’Keeffe wrote to accompany the paintings in the Viking collection. In this first version there were also short narrations between many of the songs made up of additional excerpts from the Viking text. These interludes were intended to accompany the changing of the slides and create a more complete portrait of the artist for the audience.

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16 Larsen, interview, 8/2008. In 1994 Larsen composed a set of seven songs for mezzo-soprano, solo trombone, and orchestra called *Mary Cassatt*. In her program note of this piece, she refers to this work as a portrait of Cassatt. Larsen writes: “I have combined the mezzo-soprano as the embodied character of Cassatt with the trombone as Cassatt’s spirit to create a fuller understanding of the artist.” (Libby Larsen “Mary Cassatt” http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=241&resourceID=1217, accessed 5 February 2010).

17 Larsen includes the titles of the paintings in the revised score, as it was her initial intention to have slides of each work shown during live performances. Her opinion has changed over the years and now she has mixed feelings about their use in live performance: “What’s going through my mind is visual attention, aural attention. Here’s how I think [it] would be cool: yes, to see the painting, but then take the painting away, and let the color remain. Personally, I would not show the paintings. However, people perceive in so many ways.” (Larsen, interview 7/2009).
In its initial form, the work was available for rental from Oxford Press for just a few years, and withdrawn in 1996 because Larsen could not secure permission to use the text from the O'Keeffe estate. When the work was revised nine years later, the idea of a multimedia presentation was abandoned. The piece no longer exists in its original form.

Similarities Between Larsen and O'Keeffe

Larsen is one of many composers who have used Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings as a source for inspiration in their compositions. Contemporary artists from all genres have been drawn to O'Keeffe for her diverse collection of work, achievements, individualism, and stature in the art world: her legacy is vast.

Three significant elements connect the lives and work of these two women. The first is their shared affinity for the Southwest and its natural beauty. Although Larsen has lived almost exclusively in Minnesota, she has traveled to New Mexico several times, and is drawn to its history, topography, and character. She wanted to study with composer William Woods at the University of New Mexico in graduate school, but

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18 Larsen believes that it is unlikely that it was performed much if at all during this time because of the rental fees. (Larsen, interview 7/2009).
19 John Harbison wrote a piano quartet in 1981 that “emulates the clarity and open spaces of [O’Keeffe’s] images.” Other composers who have written O’Keeffe inspired works include Jeff McCune, James Newton, Ronald Perera, Tobias Picker, Marga Richter and Dan Welcher, as well as a handful of rock artists. (Gary Evans, Music Inspired by Art, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002, 185).
20 Larsen spent the first three years of her life in Delaware but has lived in Minneapolis ever since.
21 Larsen remarks: “I love New Mexico. If, had it not been for financial circumstances and graduate school, I probably would be living in New Mexico. I would love nothing more than to live in a very small dusty old town in New Mexico” (Larsen, interview 8/2008).
financial circumstances led her to return to the University of Minnesota (where she had also completed her undergraduate degree).

O'Keeffe did not visit New Mexico until she was in her early forties, but immediately fell in love with its landscape. By the time she was fifty she had purchased a house on Ghost Ranch, a little over an hour northwest of Santa Fe. She painted the landscapes she saw there throughout the rest of her life and, after her husband's death, moved there permanently, continuing to paint into her nineties. For O'Keeffe, this was "real" America, a place where she was able to find renewed inspiration for her art. In 1967 she said: "When I think of death I only regret that I will not be able to see this beautiful country anymore, unless the Indians are right and my spirit will walk here after I'm gone."22

The natural contrasts of this region seem to appeal to both artists. New Mexico's climate presents many of them: hot/cold, mountain/desert, wet/dry, dark/light.23 O'Keeffe uses these contrasts in a series of paintings of New Mexico's Pedernal Hills, created during her time at Ghost Ranch. The paintings present views of the hills at different times of day, in different seasons, from different perspectives, and with different detail, yet the hills themselves never change. As a composer, the variety of images that a single scene could produce appealed to Larsen, and when examining the whole collection in the Viking book, it becomes evident that she chose images for Black Birds, Red Hills based on both their connection to each other and the contrasts they provided.

23 Ibid., 78.
Both artists also seem to have spent their very productive careers working away from the mainstream of American artists. Originally O'Keeffe's plan was to become an art teacher. She took classes at such prestigious schools as The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Art Students League of New York, University of Virginia, and Teachers College of Columbia University. After teaching in Virginia, Texas, and South Carolina, her drawings came to the attention of Alfred Stieglitz, an important promoter of modern art and a well-known photographer. The two would eventually marry, and with Stieglitz's support and promotion in his gallery, O'Keeffe's career as a painter was established.

Despite the fact that her husband was at the center of the New York art world, and that her paintings soon became sought after and admired throughout America and Europe, O'Keeffe would often spend months away from her husband and New York, studying and painting images of nature. In a 1926 letter to novelist Jean Toomer, she described looking down "the winding road that would end in the red rock country of northern New Mexico and saw 'aloneness—not because I wish it so but because there seems no other way.'"24 In New Mexico, O'Keeffe was described as "a woman apart,"25 somewhat involved in the Chamber Music Festival, but otherwise not part of the social or cultural scene around her.

Larsen is distinguished among her colleagues in that she is one of a small handful of composers working in America today who is not affiliated with a college or university. Her home in Minneapolis, situated in the Lake of the Isles neighborhood, is a block from a series of lakes, and she takes advantage of the trails along the water to run and train for marathons. Although a major metropolitan area with two first-rate orchestras, the Twin Cities area is known for its smaller size and the close-knit community of its musicians.

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24 Ibid., 112.
25 Ibid., 111.
Cities are geographically isolated from the coastal avant-garde music scenes, but Larsen enjoys the proximity to nature that her location affords her, as well as the fact that she can choose when she travels, teaches, and composes. Although she has completed residencies at various universities over the years, and is an active advocate for music education, she relates: “I have been lucky enough to have the kind of musical life I wanted, and so I never felt the need to be attached to an academic institution.”

All of Larsen’s works are composed on commission so she always knows exactly for whom she is writing the music, and the circumstances of the first performance: “Plain and simple: I compose on commission because I require the entire process of commission, creating, performing and communicating, which is the very heart and soul of the classical concert tradition. I have always felt that music can’t live unless it is performed.” Larsen likes the musical and personal flexibility that her location and career affords her, but much like O’Keeffe, she works “apart” from the mainstream, able to maintain a successful career on her own terms.

Perhaps the most important similarity between the two artists is their quest to create art that is unique, meaningful, and American. Both women work in mediums that were developed in Europe, yet O’Keeffe and Larsen have found inspiration in American culture, which makes their work unique and distinctly non-European.

O’Keeffe achieves this with the subject matter she chooses and the ways in which she presents her subjects. Her paintings, aside from a number of cityscapes she completed during her life in New York prior to 1929, are almost exclusively scenes taken from

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27 Ibid.
nature "distilled to their essential colors, shapes, and designs." Perhaps the quintessential 'American' painting by O'Keeffe is the famous *Cow's Skull: Red, White and Blue* (1931) which now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. One of many images of bones collected during her summers in New Mexico, this skull has a striped background that uses the colors of the American flag. This painting appears in the Viking collection with the following musing by the artist:

In my Amarillo days cows had been so much a part of the country I couldn't think of it without them. As I was working I thought of the city men I had been seeing in the East. They talked so often of writing the Great American Novel—the Great American Play—the Great American Poetry. I am not sure that they aspired to the Great American Painting. Cézanne was so much in the air that I think the Great American Painting didn't even seem a possible dream. I knew the middle of the country—knew quite a bit of the South—I knew the cattle country—and I know that our country was lush and rich. I had driven across the country many times. I was quite excited over our country and I knew that at that time almost any one of those great minds would have been living in Europe if it had been possible for them. They didn't even want to live in New York—how was the Great American Thing going to happen? So as I painted along on my cow's skull on blue I thought to myself, "I'll make it an American painting. They will not think it great with the red stripes down the sides—Red, White and Blue—but they will notice it."

This painting has become an icon of twentieth century American art, but at the time it was unique. During the 1930's many artists, musicians, and writers were interested in developing an indigenous American art form; however most of these artists were much more literal than O'Keeffe in their portrayal of agricultural landscapes and urban life.

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29. O'Keeffe, 58.
O'Keeffe’s “Great American Painting” uses symbolism and humor, setting her apart from the mainstream art world of the time.

Although working in a different era from O'Keeffe’s, Larsen also regards this quest to represent the spirit of America in her work as a priority in her music. As discussed above, Larsen cites a long list of American composers, songwriters, and performers in a diverse range of genres as her musical influences. In *Black Birds, Red Hills* Larsen has chosen an artist who shares her wonder for the culture and vastness of America as source material, and has thereby added another layer of meaning to the work.

O'Keeffe’s Musical Influence

*Black Birds, Red Hills* is a piece that captures the spirit of O'Keeffe and her artwork in musical sound. Before examining the music in detail, it is instructive to consider that O'Keeffe was fascinated in doing the opposite: turning musical sound into visual art. Thus, in addition to the similarities outlined above, Larsen was drawn to O'Keeffe because of the musicality and flow in her painting.

Several of O'Keeffe’s most famous paintings, like *Blue and Green Music*, and *Music—Pink and Blue*, both from 1919, refer directly to the inspiration of music in their titles. Among O'Keeffe’s many influences and interests, she was a follower of the Romantic and Symbolist movements of the nineteenth century, and an admirer of Nietzsche. Nietzsche often referred to music and dance in his writing and believed that music, more so than the visual image, was capable of symbolizing the natural order. He suggested that art is seen as wiser or more philosophical than philosophy, and music
wiser or more philosophical than language. O’Keeffe must have been considering this when she said in 1922, “Singing has always seemed to me the most perfect means of expression. It is so spontaneous. And after singing, I think the violin. Since I cannot sing, I paint.”

O’Keeffe was a student at Columbia when she first considered the connection between musical sound and visual art. She recalled late in her life:

I never took one of [Alon] Bement’s classes at Columbia University, but one day walking down the hall I heard music from his classroom. Being curious I opened the door and went in. A low-toned record was being played and the students were asked to make a drawing from what they heard. So I sat down and made a drawing too. Then he played a very different kind of record—a sort of high soprano piece—for another quick drawing. This gave me an idea that I was very interested to follow later—the idea that music could be translated into something for the eye.

Larsen points out that although O’Keeffe talks about musicality and how she wanted to paint music, “she’s not painting figurative music: there are no notes, no clefs.” However, there is a flow to her paintings that reflects the artist’s careful consideration of the musical sound in the world around her.

Compositional Process

33 Bement taught her about the revolutionary ideas of artist and art educator Arthur Wesley Dow, who became a major influence in O’Keeffe’s work. Dow is widely recognized as one of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement in American art and believed that paintings should be made up of elements of composition rather than copying nature.
34 O’Keeffe, 14.
35 Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
In addition to considering the paintings, Larsen carefully studied the text that O'Keeffe wrote to accompany the paintings in the Viking collection. O'Keeffe summarizes her own relation to the written word at the beginning of the volume: "The meaning of a word—to me—is not as exact as the meaning of a color...I write this because such odd things have been done about me with words." Indeed it is evident from the informal and almost chatty nature of O'Keeffe's text, that she is uncomfortable with the notion of "explaining" her paintings and would not have put together this volume had it not been for the urging of several friends.

Larsen goes one step further to connect the way O'Keeffe talked with the way she painted: "I don’t think she probably crafted her words, but I’m guessing she painted also the way she talked. I’m looking for lyricism, for her lyricism, and I’m thinking—language." Larsen's interest in the connections between language and music originated with her vocal music, but has since been incorporated into her instrumental music as well. In Black Birds, Red Hills, she takes the words, melodic qualities, syntax, and rhythm of O'Keeffe’s written language and builds her melodies and rhythmic motives around what seems to flow naturally. Because this was originally a vocal piece, this layer is still evident in the viola part of the revised instrumental version.

Larsen composed the work with all of the paintings arranged side by side on a clipboard so that she could look at them both individually and as a group. The order in which she arranged the paintings has a great deal of significance, as they connect to one another in terms of perspective and subject matter in a meaningful way. Although the

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36 O'Keeffe, preface.
37 Ibid., acknowledgements.
38 Larsen, interview 8/2008.
39 Ibid.
paintings span thirty-six years of O'Keeffe's life, Larsen does not arrange them chronologically. Five of the paintings are of the Pedernal Hills, and the sixth is a close up of a black rock. In her preface to the score, Larsen writes:

Georgia O'Keeffe found the flow of time and color in music inspiring to her work as a painter. Black Birds, Red Hills is inspired by six O'Keeffe paintings, each exploring the flow of time and color on her beloved red hills of New Mexico. In each painting O'Keeffe reveals perspective, beauty, and meaning through the magnification of objects, specifically the horizon line, the black rock, and the black bird. The first, third, and fourth movements reflect the “V shape” of the hills just outside O'Keeffe’s window. She describes this shape as the arms of two great hills which reach out to the sky and hold it, suggesting to me an abstract cradle. In the second movement, I liken the music to O'Keeffe’s image of the black rocks that O'Keeffe found on her walks to the Glen Canyon dam. She became fascinated with the effect of time on rocks, noting that time has turned them into objects that are precious to look at and hold. Finally, to paint the black birds that lived in the hills near her, O'Keeffe covered the red hills with snow and focused on the bird as a metaphor for time, always there and always moving away.

In all six paintings there are three main color areas that might conceivably correspond to particular instruments in the trio. Although Larsen states that this was not part of her conception of the piece, nonetheless she often assigns a particular (non color based) role to the various instruments. For instance, the movement of a bird, or the concept of air are both roles assigned to the clarinet at various points throughout the piece, and in several spots the piano’s role is to create grounding in the music.

Throughout Black Birds, Red Hills this dichotomy between Larsen’s compositional process and the way she conceives of the music and the experience of the listener is evident. On the one hand, she is adamant that her music is more suggestive than narrative in nature; however, there are also many programmatic elements in the music. She uses the extramusical material to create the work, yet wants it to be conceived more abstractly,

40 Libby Larsen, Black Birds, Red Hills, preface.
evoking the feeling of O’Keeffe and her works instead of providing a narrative of the artist’s life and direct representation of the paintings. Two years after the premiere of the revised version of the piece Larsen remarked, “Many musical works demand extramusical context to make them more communicative but what lives on in that part of us which is universal and perhaps timeless is the music.”

First Movement: *Pedernal Hills*

The first movement of *Black Birds, Red Hills* is based on O’Keeffe’s *Pedernal and Red Hills* (1936), the earliest painting in the set Larsen chose, and one that was completed a few years after O’Keeffe began spending her summers in New Mexico. The Pedernal Hills are sacred to both the Navajo and Jicarilla people and figure in both tribes’ creation stories. O’Keeffe was surrounded by these hills in her home at Ghost Ranch, and painted them numerous times throughout her life. Standing between 6,900 and 7,565 feet tall, the hills have no trails to their summit, the last 20 feet a vertical scramble through loose rock. O’Keeffe spent many days on the hill near her house and later recalled, “It’s my private mountain...It belongs to me. God told me if I painted it enough I could have it.”

The title of the painting describes the work very well. In the foreground we see the red hills with all of their trees removed; the subtle contour and folds in the landscape are

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42 Lynes, 80.
43 Ibid., 77.
44 Ibid., 80.
shown with careful shading. There are several trees shown out of proportion behind, and off to the side of the red hills, and in the background we see the flowing shape of the Pedernal in purple and blue hues. This work is typical of O'Keeffe's landscape paintings from this period. Larsen notes, "It is clear that O'Keeffe almost literally transcribed the contours of the forms she saw, but it is equally clear that she freely changed their sizes."\(^{45}\)

As Larsen was conceiving the piece, she began with what she considers the two most significant musical elements: color and form. These words can be misleading, because she is not using them in ways one might expect:

> It's impossible for me to perceive music without context. When I hear color, I then try to understand 'in what context is that color memorable?' That generally is form. By form I don't mean harmonic form, I don't mean rondo form, or sonata allegro form. I mean the context in which the color can be recognized, perceived, transformed, and finally remembered.\(^{46}\)

Larsen turned to O'Keeffe's words to create a sense of the color and form she wanted the first movement of the trio to take. In the Viking book, O'Keeffe wrote the following statement to accompany her painting:

> The unexplainable thing in nature that makes me feel the world is big far beyond my understanding—to understand maybe by trying to put it into form. To find the feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill.\(^{47}\)

O'Keeffe wrote this statement at the end of her life, though the painting dates from much earlier, and Larsen reflected on the differences between the words O'Keeffe uses to explain her works, and the paintings themselves:

> To try to understand her sense of miracle, musically, it's best to work with her direct words, her syntax, her choice of syllables: she uses words with

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\(^{45}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{47}\) O'Keeffe, 100.
very few syllables. It's as if she's doing exactly the same thing in her speech that she does in her paintings. For instance, if you take all the one-syllable words, 'that' 'makes' 'me' 'feel' 'that' 'the' 'world' 'is' 'big,' 'far' beyond 'my' understanding, you have the horizon line. But 'unexplainable,' and 'understanding' those become the objects. Not grammatically: we're talking about objects of interest. [In real life] these Pedernal Hills are huge in relationship to these trees, and yet she paints the trees almost the same height as the Pedernal Hills, which is a perspective that is quite unusual. If you think of the Hudson Valley painters, where everything would be in some understandable perspective, she's painting a world that really is NOT understandable, far beyond our understanding.  

The first movement of *Black Birds, Red Hills* uses musical timing to capture these adjustments in perspective. Although notated in triple meter, the movement begins without any clear sense of pulse or grounding. In this opening section, Larsen is trying to create "a kind of time and space that is not human."\(^{49}\) The piano, with its *ppp* half step trill is just 'there' at the beginning. Marked 56 to the quarter note, the opening conveys an extremely gentle and free atmosphere. A quiet flourish, first introduced by the piano, occurs throughout the movement, but is most characteristic as a clarinet motive. The motive in the second measure of Example 2.1 has a hill-like contour. When it reoccurs as a clarinet motive it also suggests the movement of air through the hills. In the third measure, a variant of this flourish appears in the clarinet, marked *shadow, wafting.*

\(^{48}\) Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
\(^{49}\) Ibid.
Example 2.1: *Black Birds, Red Hills*, First mvt., mm. 1-4

This mood is established by the clarinet and piano duo over the first twelve measures, and when the viola finally enters the texture, it has a very simple, free, chant-like melody. The viola line replaced the soprano voice, and thus it is reasonable to suppose how all the simple one-syllable words that O'Keeffe uses in her narrative fit into the contour of the line. Indeed, reinserting O'Keeffe's text on top of the viola melody as shown in Example 2.2, reveals some text painting, as the melody oscillates between the pitches g, a-flat and b-flat until it rises up to an e natural on the word "big" as the clarinet and piano re-enter.

Example 2.2: *Black Birds, Red Hills*, First mvt., mm. 13-17 with “Supposed” text setting
In this example, Larsen adheres to the natural rhythm of American English, using a duple and triple rhythm for the phrase “the unexplainable,” and returns to the lower starting pitch on the syllable “plain” to follow the manner in which and American would emphasize this syllable in ordinary conversation. According to Larsen, this introduction should be played without any sense of meter or bar lines. She reflected that if she were writing the piece today she would not include bar lines in the score because she does not want performers to be tempted to make the rhythm too strict. As a child, Larsen sang Gregorian chant at Christ the King School in Minneapolis, the Catholic school she attended, and found a chant-like melody a useful vehicle to suggest O’Keeffe’s adjustments in size, shape, contour, simplification, and reduction of the hills. Larsen recalls that she had not used a chant-like melody deliberately before encountering O’Keeffe’s paintings, but was drawn to it as a way to create a sense of flow without using meter.  

According to Larsen, a notated meter is appropriate to the middle part of the piece, shown in Example 2.3. A layer of significance is added to this when one resets O’Keeffe’s text to Larsen’s viola line. Here the words “to understand” match up with the expressive rising octave motive in m. 23 and 27. Thus, with “understanding” comes a more regular quarter note pulse in the piano. In addition, although the viola and clarinet appear to have separate roles throughout the piece (the clarinet often represents the air or the sense of infinity, and the viola line was originally intended for O’Keeffe’s words),

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50 Larsen later recalled: “In my elementary school years, I learned to read and sing Gregorian chant, which is unified, non-metric and non-western music. There was no question of who sang well and who didn’t. This made a very strong impression on me personally and musically.” Libby Larsen, “For Kids,” http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=280 (accessed 5 February, 2010).

51 Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
there is some imitation in the middle section, as the clarinet echoes the rising octave figure in m. 28, reaffirming this “understanding:”

Example 2.3: *Black Birds, Red Hills*, First mvt., mm. 23-29

With the exception of one or two measures that were most likely rewritten for the viola when the work was revised (m. 33-34), the viola range is very limited, never going beyond a major tenth. This small ambitus is consistent with Larsen’s philosophies on turning the speech patterns of American English into musical sound, something she became increasingly interested in during this period of her life, and continues to explore in her most recent instrumental works:

The rhythm of American English is like the rhythm of no other language. The phrases are uneven. There is a choppy flow from one sentence to the next. Emphatic statements are made by pitch variation. Generally, however, the pitch of American English falls within the interval of a fifth.... In my music I generally let the rhythm of the words, the varying length of phrases and the word emphasis dictate specific rhythm, phrase structure and melodic material. When my music is performed, the words and phrases should flow quite naturally, almost conversationally.  

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Because *Black Birds, Red Hills* was first a song cycle, the viola melody follows these principals closely. Indeed, in this movement and throughout the piece, the phrase structure is derived from the text, and thus is in no way even or symmetrical.

Another formal carry-over from the vocal version is the absence of the viola line at the beginning and end of the piece. Like the opening, the final part or coda of the movement does not use the viola, and includes a cadenza-like passage for the clarinet that echoes the opening piano gesture. The last chord is also exactly the same as the opening chord, expanded an octave in each direction. Although not a tonic chord in the traditional sense, it creates a rounded and completed feeling to the movement by returning to the opening harmonies. This too can be interpreted through O’Keeffe’s notion of infinity, or a reference to the ‘V-shape’ in the hills. By framing the movement with the same chord and pianissimo dynamic, the listener has the feeling that the music extends into infinity in both directions.

**Second Movement: Black Rock**

The second movement of *Black Birds, Red Hills*, is based on O’Keeffe’s *Black Rock with Blue Sky and White Clouds*. Painted in 1972, it is the only image chosen for the trio from the later part of O’Keeffe’s life, and the only one in the set that does not use the Pedernal Hills as its subject. Akin to the close up views of flowers for which O’Keeffe is famous, this image highlights an intimate perspective: looking at an ordinarily small and overlooked object from a magnified and seemingly exalted viewpoint. The painting is overwhelmed by a giant rock with only a hint of a cheerful cloudy sky appearing in the
upper corners of work. The rock seems to be sitting on some sort of pedestal, imparting a sense of significance to the object.

In the Viking collection, the narrative that O’Keeffe wrote to accompany this painting is as follows:

The black rocks from the road to the Glen Canyon dam seem to have become a symbol to me—of the wideness and wonder of the sky and the world. They have lain there for a long time with the sun and wind and the blowing sand making them into something that is precious to the eye and hand—to find with excitement, to treasure and love.53

There are two main themes from the painting adapted in the musical setting: the perspective of the rock which dominates the painting, and the idea that the blowing sand has worn away at the rock for so many years that it now appears smooth and shiny. The articulate opening gesture, marked forte and deliberately resonates with the first of these themes in O’Keeffe’s painting. The music, shown in Example 2.4, begins in an almost pretentious manner, a sharp contrast following the slow and seemingly meter-less first movement. In this way the work echoes O’Keeffe’s perspective: this black rock is remarkable and singular, not simply one of millions along a path. The use of a regular meter, accents, louder dynamics, faster tempo, and more rhythmic motives in the opening measures of the piece creates an aggressive atmosphere, perhaps signifying the detailed close-up perspective in O’Keeffe’s painting or the idea that the rock began as a rough object millions of years ago.54 The double stops in m. 5 and 7, inserted in the work’s revision, add to the detailed texture of this section.

53 O’Keeffe, 107.
54 Furthermore, when coaching the piece, Larsen asked the author: “How aggressive can you make it?” Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
The opening also features contrasting descending legato gestures, first in the piano in m. 3 and later in the clarinet in m. 7, that function as previews to the contrasting middle section of the movement. In m. 11 the mood shifts to a lyrical section marked legato and the viola replaces the clarinet as the dominant melodic instrument. Larsen regards this part as her representation of the black rock in time. The painting’s perspective is critical here: “She paints it as if it’s really huge, but it only can be held in the palm of my hand.”\textsuperscript{55} In the original version O’Keeffe’s monosyllabic words “They have lain there for a long time…” were set with the pitches of the viola’s melody, the word ‘time’ falling on the half note—the longest note in the phrase. This chromatic and

\textsuperscript{55} Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
lyrical line falls within the range on a tritone, a confined range even for a vocal melody, and again a reference to the limited melodic range of American English. This melody is built on the alternation of a minor third, which in this case can be seen to represent the “ticking of time” and provides another example of Larsen’s use of the interval.

**Example 2.5: Black Birds, Red Hills, Second mvt., mm. 11-14, (senza clarinet)**

This interpretation is strikingly literal for Larsen here: the thirds are the rock lying there being worked upon over time by “sand and stuff, and in this case by chromatics, by half steps, and back to the third,” and the piano chords, also in thirds, are the melodic and harmonic grounding. Again the clarinet functions as the air surrounding the rock, with long trills alternating with quick scalar gestures as shown in Example 2.6.

**Example 2.6: Black Birds, Red Hills, Second mvt., mm. 12-18, (clarinet only)**

The contrasts between the aggressive opening and the smooth, legato second half perhaps represent the transition the rock has been through from rough to smooth over time. This contrast, like the contrast in the first movement between the free opening and

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56 Ibid.
57 Shoemaker, 30.
the metric middle, relates to the contrasts and extremes of the climate and landscape of New Mexico. Larsen indicates that she does not mean for this piece to be programmatic or to have a narrative like *Black Roller*; nonetheless the chart in Figure 5 illustrates several of the musical gestures both implied and explained by Larsen in this section which directly connect to O’Keeffe’s words and painting.

**Figure 5: Significance of Musical Material in *Black Rock***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure(s)</th>
<th>Musical Material</th>
<th>What the Music Signifies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11, 18, 22</td>
<td>Repetition of triads</td>
<td>The rock lying there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-14, 22+</td>
<td>Chromatic alternation</td>
<td>The sand working away at the rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11+</td>
<td>Pulsation</td>
<td>Time passing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11+</td>
<td>Piano ostinato in thirds</td>
<td>The grounding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12+</td>
<td>Clarinet gestures</td>
<td>The air surrounding the rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small viola range</td>
<td>Smallness of the rock but in skewed prospective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these general gestures, there are some specific instances of text painting. When resetting O’Keeffe’s words to Larsen’s viola line, one can suppose that the swirling clarinet gesture in m. 14 occurs after the words “blowing sand.” Also, it is likely that Larsen twice used the words “They have lain there for a long time,” once in m.18 and again four bars later when the gesture repeats itself, amplifying the passage of time.

**Third Movement: *Red Hills and Sky***

The third movement of *Black Birds, Red Hills*, is based on two paintings. The first one, *Red and Orange Hills*, (1938) returns to the Pedernal Hills as its subject. However, unlike *Pedernal and Red Hills*, this painting is an extreme close up, similar to *Black Rock with Blue Sky and Red Clouds*. The trees are in scale, but O’Keeffe removes the brush
and takes out the purple and grey colors that were prevalent in the first painting. There is a slight hint of a deep V-shape fold in the hills and there is a great deal of surface texture giving the impression that the hills almost seem to move or flow. Thus, as concerns perspective, it follows *Black Rock with Blue Sky and Red Clouds* very well.

It also serves as a transition image for the second painting chosen for this movement, *Red Hills and Sky*, (1945). Also a study of the Pedernal Hills, this painting has far less detail than the previous one, and the image is dominated by the clear blue sky with small suggestions of the mountains in the lower left and right hand corners which create a deep and profound V shape in the picture.

It seems odd that Larsen chose to represent two paintings with the same subject but very different viewpoints in this movement. When asked about this, Larsen admits that in retrospect *Red and Orange* hills now seems like a sort of “transition image” to her in terms of the flow and order of the artwork. “Really I was interested more in the close-up and the red... I wasn’t interested in the detail.”\(^5^8\) She was however drawn to the hint of the V shape in the painting, and although she admits it is not the most successful of transitions, she now feels that the music is more representative of the second painting, *Red Hills and Sky*.

O’Keeffe’s narrative for this painting is as follows:

> A little way out beyond my kitchen window at the Ranch is a V shape in the red hills. I passed the V many times—sometimes stopping to look as it spoke to me quietly. I one day carried my canvas out and made a drawing of it. The shapes of the drawing were so simple that it scarcely seemed worthwhile to bother any further. But I did a painting—just the arms of two red hills reaching out to the sky and holding it.\(^5^9\)

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\(^{58}\) Larsen, interview, 8/2008.

\(^{59}\) O’Keeffe, 85.
Red Hills and Sky is the simplest painting of the six in this collection, and the music resonates strongly with this image. Throughout the movement, the piano has a gentle ostinato rhythm not unlike a barcarole, which gives the feeling of a lullaby, as shown in Example 2.7.

Example 2.7: Black Birds, Red Hills, Third mvt., mm. 1-5 (piano only)

![Example 2.7: Black Birds, Red Hills, Third mvt., mm. 1-5 (piano only)](image)

Debussy’s influence has been suggested, due to the piano’s “contrast of color between the extreme registers of the piano and the sustained quality created by the piano pedal.” In a study of the text setting techniques used in Libby Larsen’s vocal works, Bezerra writes, “ostinatos in Larsen’s music are often used for text painting, depicting the action or object of the text.” In examination of O’Keeffe’s text, this ostinato could be emphasizing the word “simple” or “quietly.” Additionally, Larsen has pointed out the significance of O’Keeffe contemplating the hills through her kitchen window, a frame through which women have traditionally viewed the world. The barcarole ostinato rhythm creates a feeling of gentle rocking that might accompany a lullaby a mother would sing to her child in her arms, relating to the “arms” of the hills as they hold up the sky.

60 Shoemaker, 31.
61 Bezerra, 28.
62 Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
The viola again carries the melody throughout the movement with a simple tune that spans less than an octave and pulls gently against the 6/8 time signature as shown in Example 2.8.

**Example 2.8: Black Birds, Red Hills, Third mvt., mm. 3-7, (viola only)**

If the roles of the viola and clarinet in the previous two movements were independent, here they are united. In this movement, Larsen sees the clarinet as the “grounding” instrument, and when she uses the instruments in octaves, she keeps the clarinet in the lower octave as shown in Example 2.9.

**Example 2.9: Black Birds, Red Hills, Third mvt., mm. 16-18, unification of viola and clarinet**

The mood is unchanging throughout, and the only other hint of text painting is the bass line of the clarinet that builds upwards then comes away from the main climax of the piece symbolizing the ‘V’ shape of the hills in *Red Hills and Sky*, shown in Example 2.10.

**Example 2.10: Black Birds, Red Hills, Third mvt., mm 23-29, (clarinet only)**
There is another unison towards the end. This time the viola is in unison with the right hand of the piano for its *bell-like* barcarole theme from the opening, and the Debussy-like displacement between octaves is again evident in Example 2.11.

**Example 2.11: Black Birds, Red Hills, Third mvt., mm. 29-32 (senza clarinet)**

Unlike the other movements, the instruments all end simply together, suggesting the unity or connection between of the hills and sky or the mother and child.

**Fourth Movement: A Black Bird with Snow-Covered Hills**

The fourth and fifth movements of *Black Birds, Red Hills* are connected without pause and are based on two very different representations of the same scene. Although they are related musically, here they will be discussed separately. The fourth movement uses O’Keeffe’s *Black Bird with Snow-Covered Red Hills* (1946) and the fifth is based on a more abstract rendering of the same scene, *Black Bird Series (In the Patio IX)* (1950). O’Keeffe’s narrative for the first painting is as follows:

One morning the world was covered in snow. As I walked past the V of the red hills, I was startled to see them white. It was a beautiful early-morning—black crows flying over the white. It became another painting—
the snow-covered hills holding up the sky, a black bird flying, always there, always going away.\textsuperscript{63}

The original vocal version of the piece did not use these words in the music, rather they were spoken before the movement began. During the movement the soprano sang a vocalise on the syllable ‘ah,’ perhaps as a reflection of the wonder of the snow-covered hills. The painting \textit{Black Bird with Snow-Covered Red Hills} is similar to \textit{Red Hills and Sky}, but with two significant differences: the hills and the sky are all covered in snow, and there is a large black bird soaring over the hills, rendered out of scale with the size of the hills.

Beginning in m. 6, the piano has a continuous pattern of “fluttering” sixteenth notes shown in Example 2.12, suggesting the movement of the bird and the wind.

\textbf{Example 2.12: Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth mvt., mm. 6-8, (piano only)}

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{example212.png}
\end{center}

This pattern changes several times during the movement, sometimes to triplet figures, sometimes to septuplet arpeggios, but a rapid pattern is always present in the piano. Several times in the score this figure is marked “lightly.”

In 2000, Larsen wrote a piece for violin and orchestra premiered by Pamela Frank and the Rochester Philharmonic called \textit{Still Life with Violin} where she assigned the violin the role of a bird. In discussing the piece, Larsen suggested a possible connection between this violin work and the trio. In the trio she remarked, “you’re seeing the detail

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{63} O’Keeffe, 86.
\end{footnotes}
through the bird's perspective." However, though she was quick to think of the viola as the bird, she seemed less convinced as she thought about it: "The viola is definitely the bird...well, actually the soaring, it's not really the bird, there's no flapping." Although it seems that in principal Larsen wants the listener to have the feeling of flying, she is in fact very clear about the image she has in mind. This conflicted reaction well reflects Larsen's ambiguous feelings on these issues.

After the introduction of bird-like trills in the clarinet, shown in Example 2.13, the viola might well represent the soaring of the bird with its long legato phrases in Example 2.14, despite the lack of "flapping."

**Example 2.13: Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth mvt., mm. 1-5 (clarinet only)**

![Example 2.13: Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth mvt., mm. 1-5 (clarinet only)](attachment:clarinet_example)

**Example 2.14: Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth mvt., mm. 8-15 (viola only)**

![Example 2.14: Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth mvt., mm. 8-15 (viola only)](attachment:viola_example)

As in the earlier movements, Larsen again uses the clarinet in an 'air-like' manner. In Example 2.15, the clarinet, marked *floating*, mimics the arpeggiated movement of the piano:

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64 Larsen, interview, 8/2008.

65 Ibid.
Example 2.15: *Black Birds, Red Hills*, Fourth mvt., mm. 27-29

Again there are unisons between the viola and clarinet. Here, however, they pull away quickly as shown in Example 2.16, suggesting the changing motion of the air and the bird. Larsen writes: “I love the contrast: that the bird is always there and always flying—always coming and always going. And I placed MY vision in the bird, that the bird sees the vastness and IS the detail.”

Example 2.16: *Black Birds, Red Hills*, Fourth mvt., mm. 17-22

The clarinet and viola also have the soaring melody in canon, shown in Example 2.17, perhaps further representing the interplay between the bird and the wind.

Ibid.
Example 2.17: *Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth mvt., mm. 36-44*

In general the range of the viola line has stayed in the lower to mid regions of the soprano vocal range throughout the piece, but the ending of this movement is an exception. The soaring melodic lines of the viola reach higher and higher, ending on its highest note in the piece, B-flats, suggesting the increasing altitude of the bird. Following the release of this pitch there are two additional solo measures of the piano ostinato that end abruptly as the movement concludes. An *attacca* marking leads into the final movement.

Fifth Movement: *Looking...*

The last movement, which is only seven measures long, is dissimilar to the previous movements both in size and scope. In the original version, the pause in the second measure contained the following O'Keeffe quotation from the Viking collection: “I find I
have painted my life, things happening in my life, without even knowing." In both versions, prior to the pause, the piano has two loud repeated chords that are a clear reference back to the main sonority of the first movement (see Example 2.1). Perhaps this is an allusion to O’Keeffe looking back over her lifetime of paintings. In the revision, a fermata takes the place of the narrative and is followed by a quiet repetition of the piano ostinato from the end of the previous movement as shown in Example 2.18. This creates a feeling of continuation, causing the listener to be unaware that a new movement has actually begun. With the omission of the text, the function of the movement in the instrumental version is entirely different and causes the piece to end in a much more cryptic manner.

Example 2.18: Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth/Fifth mvt., mm. 93-99

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67 O’Keeffe, 52.
Larsen titles this movement *Looking...*, an open-ended title to correspond with O'Keeffe's abstract image of the black bird painting, *Black Bird Series (In the Patio IX)* (1950). Larsen noted that, outside the context of the previous work, the painting is much harder to comprehend due to its abstractness, yet it does suggest many "v-shaped" images. 68

The music is also abstract, due to the lack of new melodic material, the absence of the viola, the confusing transition from the previous movement, and its short length. Even the notion that this is a separate movement is questionable from the listener's perspective, since it continues *attacca* from the previous movement and contains similar motivic material. Larsen's intention was to capture the same sense of wonder and questioning in the music that she had for the painting. According to her, if the viola was there it would complete whatever narrative the audience member had going on in his or her mind. Even by its title, Larsen keeps it more abstract... just 'looking.' Not 'looking at' or 'looking for' anything in particular.

Larsen sees the birds in the two paintings as the same being, 69 and unites the movements through the piano ostinato. Comparing the musical qualities of the two paintings, Larsen remarked:

> [In the first painting the] music has a conjunct line, melismatic flow, and multi-linearly melismatic flow to it. The other has [a] much more angular line, which suggests a certain kind of—something a little heavier, a little weightier, and yet light at the same time. And in both paintings, the line of

68 Without the context of *A Black Bird with Snow-Covered Red Hills* Larsen remarks: “I would look and look at [*Black Bird Series (In the Patio IX)*] to try to understand. I would spend hours with it sorting through it. I’m not sure I would ever assign any figure to it. There are so many other things it could be. It could be staring up at a corner of a room [or] an envelope with a blue flap. I could just look and look and look. How do you look at a painting?” (Larsen, interview, 8/2008).

69 Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
—the representation of the bird, and the sky, and the V, those lines extend infinitely.\textsuperscript{70}

However similar the paintings are in terms of subject matter and color, it is not clear how Larsen captured the angular nature of the more abstract In the Patio IX image in this movement. Aside from the two chords which begin the movement, the sustained B-flat\textsubscript{3} and legato piano arpeggios seem to suggest sometime more melismatic than the painting provides. Larsen believes that the opposite is true, that by continuing the same motivic material she is removing the concept of narrative from the movement and purposefully leaving it more abstract. She remarks: “Every time you work with a motive you create narrative because you create expectation and then as a composer you have to reward it or not reward it.”\textsuperscript{71} Since O’Keeffe takes the narrative away in her painting, Larsen mirrors this by not rewarding the expectation of a melodic line paired with the piano ostinato that was set up in the fourth movement.

Throughout this final movement the clarinet sustains a low B-flat that gradually and gently dies away with the piano’s tone cluster in the last measure. This soft sustained note seems like a more concrete reference to O’Keeffe’s horizons, mirroring the almost imperceptible piano trill that began the first movement. By removing the viola and the set of expectations the audience has for it, Larsen feels that she removed the sense of the narrative in the music. She remarks, “We’re hard wired for narrative. We want to see ourselves reflected in the music. In composition you create narrative, in this case, how do

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
you take the narrative away as [O'Keeffe] did. It's not satisfying as a performer, but it is a better portrait of the painting."\textsuperscript{72}
Conclusion

The obvious discrepancy between the numerous literal evocations contained in *Black Birds, Red Hills* and Larsen’s desire to communicate simply the idea or *feelings* of her source material is important to consider. There is a dichotomy in the way she works and the way she conceives of music, the listener, and the process of composing evident in this phase of her career. It is quite possible that although this piece has numerous examples of literal depictions of the text and paintings, Larsen really would prefer that the audience listen for the general mood she is trying to capture.

Larsen offers many subtle clues in the score of *Black Birds, Red Hills* about the ways in which she translated O’Keeffe’s images into the trio, but very few of them would be obvious to the first time listener. In fact, many of the elements discussed in this section were only brought to the attention of this performer after discussing the piece with the composer. However, once one begins to look closely at the score and compare it to the paintings and the text that was set in the original version, it is clear that the music resonates with the images and vice versa. Although many of these connections were lost when the text was removed, by reconnecting the text and music both the audience and performers can find heightened meaning in a performance of the piece in its revised format. Depending on the intentions of the performers, it could be revealing for the audience to have the text and images included as a program note, allowing each individual listener to make their own decision about how they want to listen to the piece.
During this phase of her career, it is clear that Larsen has become more interested in representing her feelings about her source material than musically transcribing extramusical material into her scores. Thus, the abstract or figurative connections such as the V shaped bass-line of the clarinet in the third movement, or the idea that by using repeated thirds, the composer is suggesting the passage of time wearing a small rock smooth will remain indiscernible to an audience. However, some aspects of the piece, like the clarinet trills at the opening of the fourth movement, literally evoke a bird song. Larsen addresses her intentions in an article discussing the influence of the natural world in her music, written two years into her Minnesota Orchestra residency, and two years before *Black Birds, Red Hills*:

The *response* to nature matters more in music than the *thing* in nature... That place is not to reproduce nature in musical form, to imitate bird calls or rain drops like a kind of musical taxidermist, but to convey in my own voice the *feelings* that certain natural phenomena [or other source material] evoke for me.\(^{73}\)

Indeed, in *Black Birds, Red Hills* Larsen does capture or suggest the feelings of O'Keeffe, her artwork, and New Mexico, and in doing so occasionally is more explicit than perhaps she intends. What is quite clear is that both artists have conveyed in their own voices and separate media their feelings and impressions of the Southwest. In doing so have they have left their audience with an insight into how they perceive the balance of nature and art.

Black Birds, Red Hills began as a song cycle, with a set of words and images that inspired and guided Libby Larsen in the compositional process. Although she revised it as a piece of instrumental chamber music, a trio, it retains both the titles, which reference her source material, and the original descriptive program notes, giving it a programmatic element regardless of whether or not the images which inspired it are shown to the audience.

As Larsen’s style has evolved and matured, she has moved away from feeling “overwhelmed” by the abstract nature of instrumental music, towards embracing music without any program notes or descriptive titles. This transformation was gradual, but prior to the later half of the 1990’s, only a handful of works in Larsen’s instrumental catalogue lack evocative titles.\(^1\) Of these few compositions without programmatic titles, often there is a subtitle or other note tracing the work’s genesis. This is the case in Larsen’s Sonata in One Movement for organ, which is based on the troubadour song Kalenda Maya;\(^2\) however a few pieces, like her Concert Piece for Tuba and Piano (1993) do indeed appear to be rare examples of absolute music from her early period.

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\(^1\) See Appendix B for a complete listing of Larsen’s chamber music organized by date.

In contrast, beginning around 2000, Larsen’s instrumental catalogue has grown to include many “absolute” works, including the Viola Sonata (2001). In the preface to its score Larsen states that this piece is “about the viola and piano, nothing more, nothing less.”\(^3\) There is no story or specific extramusical material attached to this work, and by choosing to title the work “sonata,” she has eliminated any initial ties to outside references.

This piece is just one example of Larsen’s relatively recent interest in composing abstract instrumental works. As she approaches her 60th year, she seems to be entering a new compositional phase, and her ideas about music and the concert tradition in American society are solidifying. She now accepts and embraces the infinite possibilities for individual interpretation and abstract qualities that are inherent in the musical endeavor. Earlier in her career she did not comprehend how a listener could clear his mind and listen to music absolutely. This seems to have changed for Larsen around the turn of the millennium.

Larsen attributes some of her early anxiety about the abstract nature of absolute music to a more general childhood apprehension of “infinity.” She traces this fear directly to her Catholic upbringing, clearly remembering lying awake at night as a small child, and worrying about the concept of infinity and “being damned forever to hell.”\(^4\) To Larsen, absolute music is infinite in subject and scope, and by using tangible subjects or concepts, she was able to impose order and reason on her music.

The questions about the abstract nature of infinity lingered with her throughout her early career, but by the time she wrote her opera *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*


(1990), she was more actively studying the issues of human action and consequence and was willing to take a risk on an intangible subject. Her lengthy program note for that work delves into weighty issues, among them a comparison of the late eighteenth century conflict between the church and alchemy and the present day division between church and medical research. Larsen recalled that during the time she was composing the opera her mantra for herself was, “if I’m going down, I’m going down in flames!” This statement relates to both her choice of the intangible or abstract subject, and the consequent issues Frankenstein delves into. Although the opera is programmatic, the choice of a monster or non-human subject and the intangible moral issues the work raises was a departure from the “safe” subjects on which her operas (and other vocal works) are typically based. In part, this decision enabled her to accept the vastness of infinity and the unknown, and to embrace it musically. Today, Larsen’s official biography prominently features the following quote by the composer:

Music exists in an 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.

This philosophy is central to the way in which Larsen has been working for the past decade, and her Viola Sonata is among many recent works that explore this notion of an “infinity of sound.” The quote also addresses what Larsen is currently trying to

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5 Larsen, interview 7/2009.
6 Larsen’s many operas include subjects such as Jenny Lind and P.T. Barnum, adaptations of plays such as William Inge’s Picnic, and collaborations with children and their writing in Dreaming Blue.
communicate with her music: not a particular story or theme, but a more abstract notion of life and the world around her.

The Viola Sonata is not the only instrumental work from the past decade that Larsen has written without a story or influence. Many critics recognize her String Symphony (1999) as a defining piece in Larsen’s “new” style. When the Minnesota Orchestra commissioned it, the only parameter was that it was to “signal her next phase as she headed into her 50th year.”8 Asadour Santourian and Eiji Oue9 both felt that her work had matured since her original residency with the orchestra, and “wanted a piece that reflected her inward life rather than her outward, socially conscious concerns.”10

With her String Symphony the composer broke new ground. Although she uses evocative and arguably programmatic titles for the movements (Elegance, Beauty Alone, and Ferocious Rhythm), her program notes for this piece are much more philosophical in nature than those of previous chamber works. In them she asks questions such as if and how orchestral strings can capture the essence of American language and describes her desire that the piece be “a way to express beauty.”11 Santourian, who was involved in the commissioning process, remarked:

The work that she turned in is an extremely personal and vulnerable work. We have, in the 20 minutes, someone exposing her vulnerabilities to the world. I think it’s a remarkable achievement and I really think it signals what Libby is about now; it’s a vary mature work in her oeuvre.12

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9 Santourian was director of artistic planning and Oue was the music director of the Minnesota Orchestra at the time.
10 Barbaeri, 71.
12 Barbaeri, 71.
No one is more aware of this change in philosophy then the composer herself. Although she has always been prolific, she now feels that she has found her compositional voice and discovered how to incorporate her interest in American language and sound within a musical custom inherited from European traditions. Thus, she is no longer bound to the titles and subjects she had for so long utilized as a starting point:

For a quite a while I couldn’t approach music without having a concept or a word or an idea, some way to organize infinity, that felt concrete. That was happening mostly in the eighties. For about the last eight years I've been moving more and more towards [the] abstract, like the String Symphony I wrote last year. While it has conceptual names to the movements the sound is about abstract string sound.  

In addition to the String Symphony and Viola Sonata, Larsen recently completed a Trio in Four Movements for Flute, Viola, and Harp (2006) and a Concert Piece for Bassoon and Piano (2008). The trio lacks movement titles and program notes, and its only hint of extramusical material appears in the second movement in the form of three boxed birdcall sets to be played by the flute and viola “in random order, improvising a tree brimming with chatter.” In her Concert Piece, the bassoonist is placed in the role of a minstrel/poet, not to present a narrative, but to “Tell about our culture’s expressiveness.” Indeed, there is still a unique and creative concept behind both pieces, but the musical directions or accompanying program notes are quite abstract.

Larsen attributes this move away from the external to “finding her language.” She admits that in the past she began a new piece with a title to guide her, but now says: “I think really hard, ‘what can I call this piece’ which is not the way I’ve worked for almost

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13 Erdmann, 7.
15 Libby Larsen, Concert Piece for Bassoon and Piano (Minneapolis: Libby Larsen Publishing, 2008), preface.
16 Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
20, 25 years. I’d like to make all my pieces Untitled 1, 2, 3, 4.” While the latter has not happened yet, her confession “I came to college as a contextual being and I’ve been growing out if it ever since” rings true in several of her instrumental works from the twenty-first century. Opera and vocal music still makes up a large portion of her output, but when she does focus on instrumental writing, her music seems much more about rhythm, sound, infinity, and life as an American artist and much less about storytelling. In thinking about her compositional process from the early part of her career, she relates:

I did not see how someone could clear their mind and listen just for the abstract quality of music. I really could not see that, although theoretically I believed it. Physically I did not believe it. And I suppose that the journey that I’m on is of understanding and now experiencing that in fact it is possible and beautiful.
Introduction to Viola Sonata

On first glance, Larsen's Viola Sonata has many of the elements one might expect from a work bearing this title. It is in three movements of alternating speeds and offers demanding yet balanced parts for the instruments. Larsen works with motives as she did in her earlier pieces, repeating a handful of important gestures several times within each movement. Yet, for Larsen, the idea of a "Sonata" is simply a vessel or mechanism to hold her music, not a piece that follows a particular set of compositional rules. In this sense it goes back to the original meaning of the word "sonata:" to be sounded or played, as opposed to "cantata," to be sung. However, by working with and repeating motives, Larsen creates a formal structure that in many ways fulfills the expectation of a traditional sonata.

It is obvious that Larsen is not comfortable with having this work (or any of her compositions) analyzed for its formal or harmonic structure because she herself does not conceive of it in this manner. She is adamant that this work is "not to be listened to for its form. It's to be listened to for its flow." 20 In fact, just two years before the sonata was penned, Larsen was quoted in Strings magazine as saying that aside from her violin concerto Pinions, she has not "written the traditional repertoire for strings, [and, more specifically feels that] the constraints of the traditional sonata form would be frustrating to her." 21

20 Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
21 Barbieri, 77.
Interestingly, Oxford University Press, which publishes the work, describes the Viola Sonata as “A Classical layout with long lyrical lines suitable for conservatory students.” Indeed, the technique required for both musicians is challenging, but aside from a few demanding passages, the piece is manageable for advanced pianists and violists. However, Oxford’s description does raise the question of what a “classical layout” means in a twenty first century context. The phrase “long lyrical lines” is also somewhat ambiguous in the context of this piece. Both of these issues are central in any analysis of the work.

The composer herself is more interested in combining her philosophy about the infinite nature of music with her desire to create a work that is unique and “American.”

I don’t really plan out tonal centricity, and I don’t pre-compose, because if I did, then I wouldn’t be in service of my instincts. You know, and all the hard work that I do is so that I can put all the techniques in the service of instinct, and let instinct write the piece.

As in her earlier works, Larsen is consciously creating an “American” sounding piece, yet in the Viola Sonata she does not begin with any particular story or scenario. However, Larsen does concede that American music (mostly early rock ‘n’ roll and jazz) plays a large role throughout the work and is quick to name the music of Les Paul, Mary Ford, Wes Montgomery, and Ella Fitzgerald in particular as general influences in the composition of this work. While she was writing the sonata, Larsen was beginning work on her opera, *Picnic*, set in 1950’s America, and had the music of this era on her mind.

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24 This opera was adapted from the play by William Inge and premiered in 2009.
Larsen’s primary method of creating an American atmosphere without any extramusical material is her use of rhythm. In her hierarchy of musical elements, this is more important to her than melodies and harmonic structure: “I do have a style, but the style is not recognized in the consistent use of a harmonic language...My style can be recognized by its rhythm more than anything else.”25 When asked about her influences, she further expands on the importance of rhythmic energy:

Yes, I look for color, first and foremost, which is why I can play a CD of Debussy, followed by James Brown, followed by Hank Williams...Secondly, I look for a healthy struggle for rhythm to get out...I am very much a child of rhythm, and less a child of melody, even though I grew up as a singer...I am much more interested in the parameter of rhythm and its emergence, really, over the parameter of melody in this century. And so...I look at Berlioz, I look at Debussy. I look at Stravinsky too, of course.26

In fact, Larsen has spent her entire life listening to and playing a widely diverse repertoire of music. Many of the various styles that she grew up playing and listening to factor into the Viola Sonata:

My piano teacher, Sister Colette, was extraordinary in the kinds of repertoire she gave me. I played very unusual repertoire—Mozart, Bartok, Stravinsky, Japanese music and boogie right away. That variety was very important in introducing so many different musical sounds and colors to me.27

As a child, she especially enjoyed listening to Broadway musicals and stride boogie piano recordings with her family. Throughout her career, she has incorporated specific American musical styles in many of her works including the orchestral work *The Ring of*

Fire, which uses Johnny Cash’s song *I Fell into a Burning Ring of Fire* as an image, and the early work *Jazz Variations for Solo Bassoon* (1977).

Throughout her life, Larsen has struggled with the divide between popular and classical music.

Part of my personal journey has been to understand how much I value all that repertoire (Broadway musicals, stride boogie, jazz, and rock 'n' roll) and to get over the enormous hurt of having it shunted aside...It is important to me to understand this music since it is a predominant part of American culture. It is our culture. The experience is to understand what you value and then to make a choice.”

Larsen’s Viola Sonata bridges this divide in its own way. It is clearly a concert work with a title firmly planting it in the classical music world, yet much of the rhythmic and melodic material, especially in the outer movements, is heavily influenced by twentieth century American popular music.

Larsen as an Instrumental Composer

Three years after the completion of Viola Sonata, Larsen offered the following reflection:

I am into my fifties now, and I feel that for the first time in my musical life I am beginning to understand how the instruments work. Oh, I had made them sound, and I had understood technique, and the physics of them and what have you. But I am now beginning to understand metaphysically, why the instruments work. For the voice, it is possible to write piece after piece, which sounds well, and is successful....The instruments must be taken beyond the traditional idiom in a way that makes evolutionary sense.

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28 Boyer, 17-18.
This quote signifies not only a change of Larsen's approach towards the use of extramusical elements, but also addresses her mounting confidence with the instruments themselves. By choosing the viola, the composer embraces an instrument that just two years earlier she had dismissed as having no role in American culture.\(^{30}\)

Larsen is fascinated with the history of orchestration, and finds it significant that in every century a new family of instruments—and with it a new timbre—has been added to the orchestra. In the simplest overview: the strings dominated the baroque orchestra, woodwinds were added during the 1700's, brass in the 1800's, and in the twentieth century a wide variety of new percussive instruments were incorporated by various composers. Thus, the "masterpieces" of the twentieth century, such as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, use stringed instruments in a percussive manner, supporting the innovative rhythms and complex harmonies that contemporary works employ.

Although in recent years Larsen has written several large orchestral pieces and a handful of string chamber works, she still finds herself looking for a better method of using strings both in the orchestral setting and on their own. She admits:

> Many of us contemporary composers have found a way that orchestral strings speak, but it's not lyric and it's not melodic. It's in sweeps and colors and splashes and timbre and sound effects, but not the bulk of the melody. That tends to go toward the brass and the percussion.\(^{31}\)

Her continued focus on the language of American culture led her to question if and how string instruments, with their wide ranges and melodic capability, could in fact capture the more rhythmical aspects of the English language.

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\(^{30}\)"The violin has, to some extent [a place in American musical culture]...and the string bass is used as a percussive instrument in jazz. But the cello and viola don’t seem to have much of a place." (Barbieri, 72).

\(^{31}\) Barbieri, 72.
Larsen explores this question in her work, *Bid Call*, (2003) originally for
violoncello and saxophone, but arranged by the composer for viola and saxophone.\[^{32}\] In
the work, she takes a highly specialized form of American language, the sound of an
auctioneer’s call, and transcribes or translates it into music. The focus on rhythm instead
of melody is evident from the very opening, shown in Example 3.1. This example also
bears resemblance to the accelerated rhythm motive that Larsen used *Cajun Set* and
*Alauda* (see Example 1.12 and 1.13).

**Example 3.1: Bid Call, mm. 1-10**

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\begin{align*}
&\text{\textit{f}} \\
&\text{\textit{f}p - f}f
\end{align*}
\]

To fully understand and be able to recreate the voice of an American auctioneer,
Larsen attended, recorded, and transcribed the voice of auctioneers Fred Ratty and his
son. She incorporated these transcriptions into her work, alternating them with excursions
that “look into the rhythmic patterns and their developments of the bid call patterns.”\[^{33}\]
Larsen notes that auctioneer’s harmonic language is very simple: “it’s a I 6/4 chord with
a varying third [that is] sort of flattish, sort of equal. Depending on how the bidding is
going, the third varies.” This is an effective and interesting study of a specific speech

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\[^{32}\] Violist Tim Deighton asked Larsen to arrange this piece for his duo, “The Irrelevants.” 
Although playable on the viola, some of the most exposed and important parts of the
piece do not lie naturally on the instrument.

\[^{33}\] Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
pattern, resulting in a highly specialized work stemming from her collaboration with
saxophonist Paul Bro.\textsuperscript{34}

The small percentage of Larsen’s music for strings points to an interesting
dichotomy. On the one hand she wishes that she played a stringed instrument herself:
“Stringed instruments are intimate…when one is played, it resonates throughout the
body, soul, and spirit.”\textsuperscript{35} She also recognizes the acoustical perfection of the instruments
and the rich history of their evolution over the past 1000 years.\textsuperscript{36} Yet, just two years
before the Viola Sonata was written, Larsen was quoted in \textit{Strings} magazine as stating:

\textit{…the cello and viola don’t seem to have much of a place [in American culture]…Cultures everywhere in the world evolved the musical instruments that they needed in order to express themselves. And I believe that the stringed instruments that make up the heart and the soul of our symphony orchestras evolved in order to speak both the verbal language and the language of the soul of their [European] culture. But I don’t see the orchestral stringed instruments finding their way into any of the ensembles that American culture has evolved.}\textsuperscript{37}

Larsen admits that there are a few American string players (most notably violinist/
fiddler Mark O’Connor) who are successfully finding a place for their instruments in this
culture. However she is critical of the conservatory culture in our country, which she sees
as training young musicians in a one-dimensional way to imitate European music.\textsuperscript{38} In

\textsuperscript{34} This partnership earlier produced the work \textit{Holy Roller} for saxophone and piano. This work also transcribes the sound of a revivalist preacher’s another distinct type of American language.  
\textsuperscript{35} Barbieri, 72.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{38} Larsen notes: “Conservatory training is by its very nature and definition training in a certain repertoire to replicate a certain job. And non-conservatory training is so piecemeal. Now, Mark O’Connor is doing a yeoman’s job in trying to create a way other than a conservatory approach to string playing. Still, I don’t think that we actually yet have an authentic way of speaking on our bowed string instruments.” (Larsen, interview 8/2008).
another interview she is even more specific on her reservations about the future of
stringed instruments in American music, stating:

> With the exception of the violin becoming a fiddle and the contrabass
> becoming a plucked bass, I see that the core of the orchestra (the strings)
> are instruments which have not naturally, [sic] found their way into the
> ensembles that have developed American Musics (..ragtime, gospel, big-
> band, country-western, rock 'n' roll ...).\(^{39}\) And these are the ensembles
> that accompany the singing of words in American English. And so I'm
> wondering what, if anything, a string orchestra has to do with American
> English? American English is more rhythmic than melodic. It’s truncated
> and full of body language punctuation. I’m not sure that we have a sense
> of what is lyrical in this culture we’re forming other than moments of
> nostalgia.\(^{40}\)

Despite her musing on the place of strings in American culture, she has repeatedly
written works that feature the orchestral string section, such as her *String Symphony*,
written in part to address her questions head on. She has also collaborated closely with
some of the foremost American string players, writing works for The Lark Quartet
(*Alauda: Concert Piece for String Quartet, 1986*), The Cassatt String Quartet (*Quartet:
*She Wrote, 2008*), The Weilerstein Trio (*Three for the Road, 2000*), and The Cleveland
Quartet (*String Quartet: Schoenberg, Schenker and Schillinger, 1991*) among others.

It was Larsen's collaboration with the Cleveland Quartet in 1991 that first brought
her into contact with violist James Dunham. *String Quartet: Schoenberg, Schenker and
Schillinger* was commissioned by the University of Iowa’s Hancher Auditorium for the
Cleveland Quartet. In this work, Larsen drew on the music and writings of three
composer/theorists who had a huge impact on the music of the twentieth century. The

\(^{39}\) It is important to consider that fiddle music did not originate in America. Long before
it was used in American folk music, the fiddle was associated with all manners of
European folk music.

\(^{40}\) Fred P. Kessler, "Libby Larsen Interview," *New Music Box: The Web Magazine of the
American Music Center* II, 2.5 (June 2002):1.
work itself shows Larsen’s interest in the shift from pitch-dominated music (Schoenberg and Schenker) to the rhythm-dominated music of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{41}

The last movement of the quartet, influenced by Joseph Schillinger, incorporates the sounds of some of his most famous students including George Gershwin, Glen Miller, Benny Goodman and John Barry.\textsuperscript{42} While rehearsing the movement, James Dunham, the Cleveland Quartet violist at the time, recalled: “there were a couple of licks that felt to me like some of the licks that jazz players scat along while they are playing...so I practiced liked that. The guys [in the quartet] made me do it for her,”\textsuperscript{43} and Larsen was so pleased with Dunham’s scat singing abilities that she requested that he scat along with the viola part in the performance. The admiration that Dunham and Larsen have for each other is palpable. Larsen later recalled:

The first time I heard James play—it was [\textit{String Quartet: Schoenberg, Schenker and Schillinger}] with the Cleveland Quartet. And I just thought, ‘There it is!’ That was my first experience with the viola, knowing who—what—who—yeah. I don’t know why. I knew Pinchas Zukerman, and [many other] viola players, but when James played, there was and is with him, a sense of “I belong,” of being completely centered. I heard him speak American English with his viola.\textsuperscript{44}

In the score of the sonata, Larsen goes on to remark:

James Dunham and I met while I was working on a commission for the Cleveland String Quartet. We liked each other’s energy and had compatible views about music. I was dazzled by his musicianship—especially his gift for supporting a lyric line with deep, strong rhythm, while at the same time never letting you know that—and by his genial and generous ways. I knew right away that I wanted to compose a viola sonata

\textsuperscript{41} Crockett, Hrtke, Steiger, and Larsen, \textit{Für Wolfgang Amadeus}, Cri 669, 1994, CD.

\textsuperscript{42} Schillinger (1895-1943) was an influential composition teacher who drew students from both the classical and popular musical worlds.

\textsuperscript{43} James Dunham, interview by author, 7 July, 2009.

\textsuperscript{44} Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
for him. In fact, the sonata came into my head almost full-blown right after I met him.\textsuperscript{45}

When asked about her earlier statement that there was no place for the viola in American culture, Larsen justifies her use of the viola by pointing out the similarity in range between the viola and electric guitar, a genuinely “American” instrument. She believes that Americans’ tolerance for hearing the high pitches that the violin produces is slowly diminishing, and that there is an overall preference in our society for melodies in a lower range, as well as an increased role for bass enhancement or bass boost in popular music.\textsuperscript{46}

Larsen also makes the case that the viola was overlooked during her student years:

I believe what I said at the time, that I couldn’t find a place for the viola [in American culture]. I’m still looking for the cello. I couldn’t find a place for the viola in American culture—except in the joke books! I mean compositionally. It’s ignored, pretty much, in training composers; when we take orchestration, we’re very much focused on the individual—the Michael Phelps approach to life. That will be the violin; cello kind of, but really violin. And then bass, of course, defines jazz and defines rock ‘n’ roll; it’s everywhere. But viola—it’s not focused on. Mostly we’re taught that it’s got mid to low range, it’s infinitely balancing the chords, and it—[laughs] if you can’t play the violin, you play the viola. It’s terrible, the stereotypes! I’m a little person, so I’m used to hearing stereotypical things in a culture that values gigundo.\textsuperscript{47}

Larsen’s new appreciation and understanding of the viola was catalyzed to a large degree by James Dunham, without whom the Viola Sonata would most likely not exist. Larsen composes solely on commission, to allow her to write for a specific performer and performance, so she kept the idea of a viola sonata for Dunham in her head for nine years until she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy of Arts

\textsuperscript{45} Larsen, Viola Sonata, preface.
\textsuperscript{46} Erdmann, 6.
\textsuperscript{47} Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
and Letters, which she used to compose the Viola Sonata and pay for the recording sessions.\textsuperscript{48} The piece was premiered on July 7, 2001 at the Aspen Music Festival. \textsuperscript{49}

Dunham recalls, prior to the first performance:

Libby sent both Judy Gordon, my pianist, and me scores and parts ahead of time. Judy came out to Aspen to rehearse and then we all met here a few days before the performance to go over the piece. Libby was excited as always and had roughly a zillion ideas, which were implemented for the premiere. I thought she had made notes of the changes, but as you noticed, many didn't make it into the final score.\textsuperscript{50}

During the rehearsal process, Larsen added many small details and Dunham suggested some minor changes to the viola part including different bowings and added double stops in a few passages. For Larsen, the most unexpected aspect of Dunham’s interpretation was his tendency to use the higher positions of the viola to create a wider variety of colors. She recalls: “James, he would play in the upper registers, and he would say, “listen to this” And suddenly...my viola [sonata]: it’s going up, and up!”\textsuperscript{51}

Overview of Viola Sonata and its Connections with Earlier Works

Larsen’s focus in the sonata was not to fulfill any formal or theoretical expectations one might have of sonata form. As is her style, this piece is largely tonal, though a harmonic analysis does not reveal any particularly obvious elements of traditional

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesize
\begin{footnotes}
\footnotesuperscript{49} Larsen and Dunham collaborated again in 2005 for a song cycle with Susanne Mentzer titled \textit{Sifting Through the Ruins}. This deeply emotional work uses texts that Mentzer collected at an exhibit of public memorials found throughout New York City following the events of September 11, 2001.
\footnotesuperscript{50} James Dunham, email message to the author, 20 July, 2009. Changes from these sessions and mistakes in the published score are noted in Appendix C.
\footnotesuperscript{51} Larsen, interview 8/2008. Appendix D contains selected examples of Dunham’s fingerings and bowings.
\end{footnotes}
\end{footnotesize}
functional harmony. Larsen has addressed the question of how she perceives the harmonic content of her music with the following statement:

My music is built around tonal areas that are vaguely modal and reinforced through pedal tones in the bass. The key to my music is to hear tones that aren't articulated and to be able to listen to low tones. My approach is NOT four-part voice-leading functional keyboard harmony; however I would describe tonality for me as pools of 'comfort' around a fundamental. The way I conceive tonality is horizontal, not vertical, meaning that the line comes first and the harmonies result. Intervals generally have a particular significance in my music — I choose the interval, I like Lydian fourths and major thirds — and develop the meaning of that interval musically throughout a piece.\(^ {52}\)

Similarly, Larsen approaches the formal structure of this piece from the less defined context of the twentieth century. Like all of the works in this study, the sonata is sectional, built around a series of contrasting motives that do not generally develop melodically or harmonically but recur throughout each movement, occasionally in a fragmented form. Thus, it is not difficult to discern a formal layout within each movement, especially the first. Its motives are arranged in such a way that one can observe the outline of a eighteenth or nineteenth sonata form movement with an exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda. This is mostly likely an unconscious or unintended coincidence, for Larsen writes in the preface of the sonata: "I adopted the formality of the sonata much in the same way an architect accepts the shell of a building and rehabilitates the interior."\(^ {53}\)

The "shell" in this case would be the fast-slow-fast movement layout, which Larsen does deliberately re-use, naming her movements Flow, Drift, and Breathless in place of


\(^ {53}\) Larsen, Viola Sonata, preface.
the more traditional Italian markings. The manner in which Larsen “rehabilitates” the form or structure of the individual movements is more complex and will be addressed in the individual analysis of each movement.

A second unconscious or unintended coincidence in the construction of the sonata is its connection to Black Birds, Red Hills. It is not uncommon to find similar motives appearing in various pieces by Larsen, especially in works from the same time period. For example, two pieces from 2008, Over, Easy, a quartet for violin, viola, cello, and piano and Quartet: She Wrote, a string quartet, have extended similar or even exact passages like the excerpts in Example 3.2, taken from the opening of the last movement of Quartet: She Wrote and the beginning of the first movement of Over, Easy.

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54 Several of Larsen’s works from this time period use similar titles.
Example 3.2: Comparison of *Quartet: She Wrote* and *Over, Easy*

a. *Quartet: She Wrote*, Fourth mvt., mm. 1-12

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Vln
Vla/Vc
Piano
```

b. *Over, Easy*, First mvt., mm. 9-20

```
Violin 1
Vln2/Vl
Cello
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This is an extreme example of the composer quoting herself. In *Blue Third Pieces* \(^5\)

(2000) for flute (or B-flat clarinet) and guitar Larsen uses a short motive throughout the

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\(^5\) Larsen introduces this piece as an exploration of the third and its harmonic and melodic place in the blues.
(http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=242&profileID=1241&startRange=) In the second movement of *Blue Third Pieces* titled *Salt Peanuts*, Larsen deliberately incorporates the rhythm of the famous “salt PEA-nuts, salt PEA-nuts,” gesture from Dizzy Gillespie’s bebop composition of the same name.
second movement, *Salt Peanuts*, that bears resemblance to the above passages from her 2008 string works.

**Example 3.3: Blue Third Pieces, Second mvt., m. 62**

Furthermore, this movement of *Blue Third Pieces* is based on Dizzy Gillespie and Kenny Clarke’s *Salt Peanuts* (1942), and it openly and frequently borrows the famous “Salt Peanuts, Salt Peanuts!” exclamation from the jazz standard. Example 3.4 reveals how Larsen takes the original version of the Gillespie’s tune A, reuses it in her own *Salt Peanuts* B, and then changes it slightly at the end of her Viola Sonata for a similar sounding, but not directly quoted gesture C.

**Example 3.4: Motive Comparison of *Salt Peanuts* (Gillespie), mm. 23-24; *Salt Peanuts* (Larsen), Second mvt., mm. 51-52; Viola Sonata (Larsen), Third mvt., mm. 140-142**

Similarly, Larsen’s Viola Sonata and her trio *Black Birds, Red Hills* have two small but significant shared motives. The chart in Figure 6 outlines both motives, and the way in which relatively minor melodic figures in an early piece reappeared fourteen years later as major structural motives.  

56 Although Larsen did not deliberately reuse the trio motives in the sonata, the revision of the trio is chronologically closer to the sonata, and thus the trio may have been on her mind as she was conceiving of her Viola Sonata.
Figure 6: Motivic Connections Between *Black Birds, Red Hills* and Viola Sonata

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th><em>Black Birds, Red Hills</em></th>
<th><em>Viola Sonata</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Motive 1" /></td>
<td>I. mm.23, 27</td>
<td>I. mm.7, 64, 74, 75, 79, 80, 98, 100, 117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II. mm.4, 9, 10, 36, 40, 42, 44, (45), 49, 64, 66, 69, 70</td>
<td>ILI. mm. 13, 41, 115, 116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Motive 2" /></td>
<td>II. mm.11, 18, 22</td>
<td>II. mm. 2, 14, 16, 21, 38-39, 43-44, 67-68, 84 (piano)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>III. mm. 45, 54, 60, 70, 126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While both motives seem natural to Larsen’s language, it is interesting that they are not figures Larsen seems to have used in other chamber works. The first motive, listed in Figure 6, is a simple four note rising octave figure which emphasizes the final and longest note of the motive through its placement on the downbeat. Larsen uses this motive only twice in the first movement of *Black Birds*, but in the sonata it is a structurally defining motive, unifying all three movements. It generally appears as a preface to a new melodic idea, and is always preceded by a rest.

The other motive that Larsen uses prominently in both pieces is a series of three alternating minor thirds. This specific pattern occurs only three times in the second movement of the trio, *Black Rock*, but is frequently found in the second movement of the sonata. Adding to the significance of this connection between the two slow movements is the general mood and subject matter of the music. *Black Rock* suggests the image or feeling of sand wearing a small stone smooth over hundreds or even thousands of years, and *Drift* is a study of motion acting on non-motion. This relationship will be examined in detail below.

A final connection between the trio and the sonata is the manner in which Larsen repeats or develops motivic and melodic material. In general the melodic structure or
pitch content of motives and melodies are not changed when motives or melodic lines are repeated in Larsen’s music. This applies to both the trio and sonata, but what is unique to these pieces is her employment of various string techniques such as tremolo, double stops, and trills for restatements of motives. The following examples show both an original motive and a restatement from later in the movement.

Example 3.5: Repetition of motives using tremolo: Viola Sonata First mvt., mm. 3-4 and mm. 17-18

Example 3.6: Repetition of motive using double stops: Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth mvt. mm. 17-22 and mm. 23-28

Example 3.7: Repetition of motive using trills: Black Birds, Red Hills, Fourth mvt., mm. 10-11 and mm. 47-48

Though it shares motivic content and compositional techniques with Black Birds, Red Hills, the sonata is clearly tailored to the viola in a way the trio (which was not originally conceived for the viola) does not. Throughout the movements of the Viola Sonata Larsen continually returns to the open string pitches, and resonant tones of the

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57 See also Black Birds, Red Hills, Mvt. 4, mm. 36-44/73-81, Viola Sonata Mvt. 3, mm. 19-21/ 64-66, and mm. 120-122.
58 See also Viola Sonata m. 97/82 (6ths).
instrument (C₄, G₄, D₅, and A₅). In many instances there are specific indications that the violist use the unstopped string for selected notes that a performer would typically play in position in order to use vibrato. In addition to the open strings, resonant tones (stopped pitches with the same pitch class as the open strings) are emphasized throughout the piece with the use of harmonics, articulation markings, agogic accents and repetition.⁵⁹ These compositional decisions help to make the work idiomatic for the viola and its particular color.

First Movement: Flow

The two most interesting aspects of the first movement of Larsen’s Viola Sonata are its seemingly improvisatory sounding passages and its formal structure. The improvisatory elements are all drawn directly from the composer’s interest in a variety of American popular musics. The formal structure, despite the composer’s own perception of this piece, follows the expectations of a sonata form movement quite closely. Although the phrases and larger sections are often “irregular, not symmetrical, recognizable, [and] in places very abstract,”⁶⁰ the manner in which melodic ideas are presented and reintroduced creates an identifiable formal structure.

Figure 7 illustrates the division of motivic ideas into three large sections and a coda (ABA¹ Coda), remarkably similar in length and order of appearance to a standard sonata form movement. The first section (A), is itself a small ternary form, suggesting an

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⁵⁹ The viola part in second movement is comprised of more than fifty percent resonant tones.
exposition of sorts with two main thematic areas. It begins lyrically (x and y motives), becomes more animated in m. 19 (mambo theme), and returns to the lyrical motives in m. 43. Swing rhythms that alternate with the earlier lyrical lines dominate the B section. Although this section does not "develop" material from the A section in the traditional sense, it could be seen as a development section in that it has several rising octave figures relating it to those in the A section and also contrasts in texture to the opening. The first gesture (y+x) is recapitulated in mm. 101, although the mambo material from the A section is represented as early as m. 71. A coda, beginning in m. 112, has two features of a traditional "classical" coda: it is mostly made up of new ideas, and reintroduces a fairly insignificant figure from the movement, motive z, first found in the piano part in m. 51 and 54.

**Figure 7: Viola Sonata First mvt., Formal Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A (Exposition)</th>
<th>B (Development)</th>
<th>A1 (Recapitulation)</th>
<th>Coda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>y+x</td>
<td>Mambo</td>
<td>x+z</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm.1-18</td>
<td>mm. 19-42</td>
<td>mm. 43-54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 43-54</td>
<td>mm. 55-70</td>
<td>mm. 71-100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 71-100</td>
<td>mm. 101-112</td>
<td>mm. 112-120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The A and A\(^1\) sections are unified by a three-measure motive that spans almost two octaves. Presented in m.3 for the first time, this motive (x) is made up of five-note descending scale fragments that change pitch collection every half measure, as shown in Example 3.8.
Example 3.8: Viola Sonata, First mvt., mm 3-5, motive x

Although this motive is a descending figure, its character is reminiscent of the ascending y motive used in the last movement of *Cajun Set*:

Example 3.9: *Cajun Set*, Third mvt., m. 28

Both of these motives have scalar movement with chromatic alteration that creates forward energy. In the case of motive x, within each half measure there are two three-note groups and a two note group that create a rhythmic “groove” mimicking the loose but edgy feel of early rock 'n' roll, without however using any directly borrowed pitch content or rhythm. Until the last four notes, a sound similar to the early rock 'n' roll guitar solos of Les Paul is established. The articulation indications on these last four pitches, combined with their “push” rhythm (a characteristic anticipation of the downbeat) create an aggressive gesture which Larsen explains looks ahead to the more percussive style of later rock 'n' roll.\(^\text{61}\)

The influence of 1950’s jazz piano is also evident in the harmonic accompaniment of this motive. Three-note chords built on fourths and tritones accompany the x motive

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\(^{61}\) Larsen, interview 8/2008.
and appear throughout the movement. Stacked thirds are avoided in this voicing, and the open sound of the fourths provides an ambiguity about tonality. The trichord (016) lies comfortably on the piano in this voicing and is used throughout the third movement of the sonata, unifying the piece as a whole. In general Larsen does not transpose motives in this piece; however motive x and its variant are unique in that the starting pitches alternate between B, E-flat, and F as shown in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Ibid., Motive x Transpositions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Starting Pitch</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-11</td>
<td>E-flat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-19</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>tremolo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-37 (variant)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>tremolo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43-45</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91-92 (variant)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>tremolo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>102-104</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107-109</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variant of motive x (shown in Example 3.10) features faster-moving harmony and tremolo. The range is expanded another octave, and the pitch collections in the viola part change every beat like Example 3.9 from *Cajun Set*. A percussive effect is created by the accents over the last grouping of notes.

**Example 3.10: Viola Sonata, First mvt., mm. 36-37, viola only, x variant**
Although motive x is the most prevalent motive in the movement, partly due to its frequent fragmented appearances, it is never presented in its entirety in the piano part. This is not the case for the opening gesture (motive y), which is initially presented by the viola, but developed later in the movement by both instruments. This two-part figure, shown in Example 3.11, begins with alternating major thirds and tritones (y₁) and ends with an ascending scale (y₂).

Example 3.11: Viola Sonata, First mvt., mm. 1-2, viola only, motive y

![Example 3.11](image)

Motive y is often used as an introduction to motive x, sometimes appearing in a fragmented form as shown below in Example 3.12. Here, the viola and the right hand of the piano reiterate motive y₁ while simultaneously the left hand of the piano echoes the modal ascending scale, y₂.

Example 3.12: Viola Sonata, First mvt., mm. 7-8, overlapping of motive y

![Example 3.12](image)

Figure 9 outlines the reoccurrences of motive y throughout the movement:

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62 This fragment is made up of the last four notes of motive x and occurs in the viola part in m. 20, 31, 34, 38, 39, 40, 93, 94, and 95 and the piano part in m. 11, 32, 34-35, 37, 45, 87, 89, and 92.
The other main musical idea in the A section draws on the influence of the mambo, a musical form that peaked in popularity in the 1950's. The piano, marked “mambo!” in m. 9 and elsewhere, is in the forefront with its simple (016) trichords from the x motive accompaniment, now displaced by several octaves, creating a stride-piano-like effect. Marked poco animato, the piano figure alternates with short fragments of motives x and y and chromatic scales in the viola and includes many sudden dynamic changes to emulate this lively Cuban dance.

The large B section does not fulfill any traditional expectations of sonata form development, mostly because the motives from the A section are abandoned temporarily. This section has an easy improvisatory sound reminiscent of early rock ‘n’ roll and country music guitar solos. In m. 51 and 54 a swung pentatonic scale in octaves in the piano part marks the transition into the B section (see Example 3.13). This figure is accompanied with the instructions “country swing, not jazz swing,” a potentially puzzling instruction for classically trained musicians. Both Larsen and Dunham choose to describe this difference with musical examples. Larsen likens it to the song Don’t Fence Me In by Gene Autry, one of the most famous “singing cowboys” in the history of film.

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63 Larsen, Viola Sonata, 7.
This song, which climbed to #4 on the US country charts in 1945, has an easygoing lilt to it and prominently features a relaxed style of fiddle playing in between the verses. Dunham, who spent the early part of his career playing a variety of genres in recording sessions for film and records in various Los Angeles studios, calls on the aural history of both country music and jazz to differentiate between the two styles. As he puts it, you need to have a sense of the American vernacular to feel the difference between country and jazz.  

Example 3.13: Viola Sonata, First mvt., m. 51

Throughout the B section there are variations of the pentatonic guitar-riff passages. Larsen does not directly use any material from artists such as Les Paul and Leo Fender, whom she cites as influences, but you can hear elements of their sound in the music. In particular, the layout of ascending fourths and thirds is more idiomatic to the guitar (which is tuned in fourths with one third) than the viola. The improvisatory feel also comes from the alternation of sustained pitches and swung sixteenth notes between the viola and piano, which is heightened with occasional bent pitches and “scooped” notes, as demonstrated in Example 3.14. Throughout the B section, none of the melodic material is derived from the motives of the opening section; however, the harmony in the piano continues to be largely comprised of the (016) trichords from the opening.

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Example 3.14: Viola Sonata, First mvt., mm. 55-58

An exact repeat of the second half of the mambo section (mm. 29-40) occurs between m. 84 and 95, serving as a bridge to the return of the A section. This is the only instance in the sonata where Larsen repeats a large section from earlier in the work, and though it is not made up of the opening x and y motive material, it nonetheless comes from the larger A section and suggests a recapitulation of sorts. This is followed by a short restatement of the y and x motives in m. 101. The argument could be made that this restatement of the opening motives is the real recapitulation; however, it is quite short and the two main statements of the x motive are separated by a new two-measure bridge made up of overlapping chromatic scales. Marked *lightly, mysteriously*, this new idea is very calm, and the minor third from the x motive becomes more simplified as it leads into the “breathing” figure in m. 109. The use of the low register for both instruments and slower harmonic movement stands in contrast to the rest of the movement. The piano’s contrary motion sixteenth note hemiola arpeggios recall the jazz influences of the x and y motives earlier in the movement, as shown in Example 3.15.
Example 3.15: Viola Sonata, First mvt., mm. 109-111

The “breathing” figure marks the transition into the coda. In this final section, the pace quickens slightly with a repetition of the piano’s “country swing” material from m. 51 and 54 marked very lightly, and swiftly to the end in the score. Although the figure was used twice earlier in the movement (see Example 3.13), it seems new here, starting out with a fragment and then restarting for a more complete version of the motive, as shown in Example 3.16.

Example 3.16: Viola Sonata, First mvt., m. 112

Except for the rising octave motive, echoed twice in the closing measures, the viola has all new, almost entirely pentatonic material that sounds like it could have been influenced by Dunham’s scat-singing in String Quartet: Schoenberg, Schenker, and Schillinger. Although the passagework lies rather awkwardly in the viola, its function again seems to be to capture the improvisatory feeling that has reappeared with several different melodic
figures throughout the movement. The close of the movement has echoes of the x motive mixed with the swing rhythms from the middle section of the movement.

Second Movement: *Drift*

Larsen’s philosophy of the abstract and infinite nature of music is most present in the second movement. Titled *Drift*, this movement provides a clear example of Larsen’s technique of gradually applying changing harmonic sonorities with varying timbres and textures to create subtle moods. Simple repeated piano chords create a calm and serene atmosphere, and for long spans of time the harmony is quite static in this movement. Through the voicing of these chords and the use of harmonics, tremolo, and dynamics in the viola part, a complex texture is created to capture the essence of “drifting.”

This is the longest movement of the sonata, yet it is one of the most texturally sparse pieces of chamber music Larsen has penned. The question in her program note, “Can eloquence come as a result of non motion?” is most clearly applicable to this movement. Unlike the outer movements, rhythmic energy is not the priority here, suggesting a departure from the way Larsen usually conceives of music with rhythmic motion at the forefront. The composer attributes this study of non-motion to the vocal and lyric qualities of the viola.

As with all of the works in this study, this movement is sectional, but because the motives are not organized in any obvious way, the overall structure is not as clearly defined as the first movement. There continues to be no tonal center in a traditional sense,

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65 Larsen, Viola Sonata, preface.
yet the repetitions of the open string pitches of the viola act as a sort of grounding for the harmonic structure. In addition, much of the melodic and harmonic material is derived from thirds (both major and minor), tritones and octaves, as in the outer movements.

As previously mentioned, the motivic connections between *Black Birds, Red Hills* and the Viola Sonata are especially pronounced in this movement. The very first viola entrance consists of a series of alternating minor thirds, strikingly reminiscent of a figure from *Black Rock*, the second movement of *Black Birds, Red Hills*, as shown in Example 3.17.

**Example 3.17: Comparison of Motives found in *Black Birds, Red Hills*, Second mvt., mm. 11-12, and Viola Sonata, Second mvt., m. 2**

Although the thirds alternate in different directions, the number of oscillations is the same, and the rhythmic and melodic contour following the thirds is related. Indeed, the mood of both pieces is quite similar: *Black Rock* is a study of the sand acting on a stone, or motion acting on non-motion, which seems closely related to the concept of drifting, where an immobile object is moved by water currents.\(^{67}\) This alternating third motive becomes a major structural part of the slow movement of the sonata.\(^{68}\) When Larsen realized the connection she remarked, “it’s as if we got into [O’Keeffe’s] rock and are just sitting there.”\(^{69}\)

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\(^{67}\) This unintentional musical duplication led Larsen to remark, “It’s funny how the unconscious works...sometimes I take a little bit of a piece, consciously, and put it in another, but not this one.” (Larsen, interview 8/2008).

\(^{68}\) It returns in m. 10, 14, 16, 21, 38-39, 43-44, and 67-68.

\(^{69}\) Larsen, interview 8/2008.
The movement begins with a series of sustained and repeated chords marked *extremely smoothly*. The chords themselves are six-note collections of mostly minor thirds. The sonority produced creates the impression of bells being struck in the distance. Initially the pitches for these chords are derived from an F minor diatonic collection, but as the piece progresses these six note collections gradually move or “drift” away from the initial pitch collection. Example 3.18 outlines this “drifting” of the chords; in the last four chords the octaves are rewritten next to the original to put all the pitches in the same range.

**Example 3.18: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., Harmonic Changes**

The chords in Example 3.19 occur within long measures of differing lengths. The meter is ambiguous because the dotted quarters, tied notes, and long sustained chords, often with syncopation, eliminate any sense of pulse that the viola line might suggest. The use of rhythmic and harmonic static motion further strengthens the feeling of *drifting*. This pulse-less atmosphere is reminiscent of the chant-like and meditative mood created in the first movement of *Black Birds, Red Hills*.  

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70 See Chapter 2.
Example 3.19: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 1-2

![Example 3.19: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 1-2](image)

The static texture, along with the motives of alternating thirds and rising octaves, is sustained throughout the first part of the movement, punctuated only once in the viola line in m. 7. Here, a little flourish of a tritone followed by a series of thirds foreshadows the slightly more animated motion that occurs in the middle section of the movement.

The first short hint of a meter occurs simultaneously with the first change of harmony and tempo in m. 11. A new sonority in the piano part (a D-flat Major triad in second inversion and an E-flat augmented triad) is emphasized with a subtle but regular dotted motive, shown in Example 3.20. This rhythm produces the first sense of “grounding” in the movement, perhaps suggesting that the music is “drifting” towards something.

Example 3.20: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 11-12

![Example 3.20: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 11-12](image)

The sonic possibilities of the pitch C are explored in the section between mm. 23 and 29 (see Example 3.21). Addressing this section in her program note, Larsen noted “I found that I had to calm my ears down for this work, composing subtler gestures that are,
at the same time, bold. This dichotomy is evident in the separate roles of the viola and piano. Beginning with the low open string C₃, the viola line sustains this same pitch in two different octaves for a total duration of about sixty seconds. Larsen turns the sustained dotted whole notes into a “subtle gesture” by gradually varying the dynamics, never notating a dynamic above mf, and changing to the octave C₄ and its harmonic in m. 24 and m. 25. Accompanying these subtle gestures are “bolder” piano flourishes in the upper registers, reminiscent of the viola figure in m. 7. The resulting color is both eerie and mysterious.

Example 3.21: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 23-29

This idea is repeated on a smaller scale both in m. 50 with sustained B-flats and in the final measures of the piece with the pitch G. In m. 50 the pitch B-flat is suspended over three measures in varying octaves that alternate between trilled notes and non-vibrato. In all three instances, Larsen is experimenting, by using a single instrument, with

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70 Larsen, Viola Sonata, preface.
Schoenberg's idea of *klangfarbenmelodie* in a much more subtle manner than she had in *Black Roller*, where she had the timbres of eight instruments at her disposal.

Throughout the movement, descriptive words such as *sweetly* (m. 15), *bell-like* (m. 26 & 38), or *extremely smoothly* (m. 35) are used to relate Larsen’s ideas more directly to the musicians. *Wafting*, a common term in Larsen’s music, accompanies the swift arpeggiated piano flourishes several times, including the passage in Example 3.21. This word is part of Larsen’s compositional vocabulary, and when asked about how and why she uses it, she remarked, “I try to find descriptive words that cause the performer to question what the feel of that particular bit of music should be. [It] is a word that I searched for, in order to find a term that describes that surprised moment of the ruffling of one’s surface by another force…” 72

Though Larsen is quite clear from the preface to the score that this piece is strictly about the viola and piano, the water image evoked through the title *drifting* and the use of the term ‘wafting’ seem to suggest otherwise. In the context of her *Symphony: Water Music* (1984), she remarked:

> My identity with water, and especially inland lake water, meant something in the way that I perceive phrasing, dynamics, color in music, and the form and shape that my music takes is very much tied to my lifelong relationship to lakes. 73

Larsen uses *Wafting* as the title for the third movement of this symphony, and it also appears in her violin concerto *Pinions* and in the “light rippling wind” section of *Black Roller*. 74 The entire symphony is about water images, and in the *Wafting* movement she is

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73 Ibid.
74 See discussion in Chapter 1.
visualizing, "the tiny scatter squalls and cat’s paws created by puffs on still water just before a front moves in."\textsuperscript{75} Larsen does not provide any such insight for the Viola Sonata, yet considering the title of the movement, \textit{Drift}, and Larsen’s preoccupation with water imagery, the connection can certainly be implied.

In m. 30, a more animated section develops the flourishes from m. 23 with fast arpeggios of mostly thirds, fourths, and tritones. These quintuple and sextuple sixteenth-note figures have similar outlines to the sustained chords shown in Example 3.18. For the first time in the movement the chords are absent and the piano and viola are intertwined. The music builds in harmonic and dynamic intensity, but an unexpected diminuendo to an E harmonic in m. 35 prevents the musical line from climaxing naturally.

The lack of arrival resets the momentum of the movement and an increasingly intense and rich texture of overlapping melodic gestures follows (mm. 36-44). Both the rising octave motive and the alternating thirds are repeated in different registers, building to the true climax of the movement where the thirds are notated with separated articulation in the upper register of the viola (see Example 3.22). Throughout this section the pitches A and C are emphasized, another example of Larsen’s study of the natural resonance of the viola and the interval of a third.

\textsuperscript{75} Libby Larsen, “Symphony: Water Music”
Example 3.22: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 36-44

Occurrences of both horizontal and vertical alignments of major and minor third are too numerous to list. Following this passage the pitch center of the viola line switches from A in mm. 36-44 to F in m. 45, (another example of the third relationship). The dotted “breathing” motive, which unites the first and second movement, appears in m. 73 as an augmentation of the dotted figure used as a rhythmic grounding earlier in the movement. This sustained rhythm, marked as if breathing in a deep sleep, is accompanied by flourishes similar to earlier material. The significance of this lies in the placement within the movement: immediately before the last section of the piece (see Example 3.15 and 3.23). This mirrors the spot where the similar motive was introduced in the first movement.
Example 3.23: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 74-77

The last section of the piece (mm. 78-86) ties together all of the main ideas from the movement including the klangfarbenmelodie (this time on the pitch G), the wafting flourishes, the alternating thirds or ‘Black Rock’ motive, and the quarter note dotted figure. Aside from the B-flat, all of the notes used in the last iteration of the ‘Black Rock’ motive (A, D, G, C and B-flat) are resonant tones to the viola.

On the whole, Larsen’s second movement is filled with subtle texture and timbral changes which capture a sense of “drifting.” In it Larsen is not telling any sort of story, or even incorporating any characteristically “American” musical sounds or rhythms as she does in the outer movements. Instead, she has created a sparse, yet complex movement that utilizes many techniques often found in the music of Impressionistic composers. Parallel chords used in a “planar” fashion (see Example 3.24), melodies and harmonies displaced by several octaves, static harmony, the use of a variety of string techniques, and both extreme and subtle dynamic changes—all combined with an overall dynamically muted effect—are gestures one might normally associate with composers such as Debussy and Ravel.
Example 3.24: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 42-44, “Impressionistic Chords,” (piano only)

This is not surprising, since earlier in her career Larsen wrote:

Among the composers whose treatment of nature I most admire [are] Debussy and Messiaen, who can incorporate natural sounds that may or may not be recognized, but serve as structural tools for the composer’s purpose, for the effect of the composition. 76

In this movement Larsen has drawn on these same structural tools and created a complex sound pallet that has no recognizable source material, yet blurs the line between absolute and programmatic music. Indeed, the harmonic influence of the Impressionistic era and the connections to the water images of Debussy and the bird sounds of Messiaen (found in the numerous flourishes) abound in this movement. Using its title, Drift, as a starting point, one can discover all kinds of programmatic details, yet Larsen deliberately leaves this open-ended by offering only the title and a smattering of instructions to the musicians as clues to her musical intentions.

Third Movement: Breathless

In the third movement, the sparse, drawn-out texture of the second movement is replaced with a rhythmic energy and vigorous percussive drive found in other

instrumental works by Larsen, yet new to her work with the viola. The title *Breathless* not only captures the pace and emotion of the music, but in a subtle way ties together the "breathing" motives and instructions from the earlier movements. Following the second movement "quasi attacca," the third movement has continuous and often manic meter changes. Unlike the second movement, the pulse is always strong, yet the beat patterns alternate between 5/16, 6/16, 3/4, 4/4, 5/8, and 2/4. When composing the *String Symphony* in 1999, Larsen recalled that she "kept coming upon rhythms that Bernstein had come upon: alternating 6/8 and 3/4. Non-triple rhythms, non-duple rhythms, mixed rhythms, 5/8 and 7/8." Although there are no direct references to Bernstein in the viola sonata, both composers work with a keen awareness of the jazz and popular musics around them and both have found a way to integrate the rhythms of jazz and pop music into their concert music, partially through the use of mixed meters.

The piano voicing in the opening measure of stacked fourths a half step apart, shown in Example 3.25, creates an ambiguous tonality and open sonority similar to the first movement. Beginning in the second measure, the "stride piano" technique from the first movement is again encountered with repeated chords of stacked thirds in alternating octaves marked *slap staccato*. The viola begins in m. 5 with a passage of double stop thirds and fourths, one of just a handful of instances of extended double stop

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77 Barbieri, 74.
78 Larsen notes: "It stumped me actually. Why did Bernstein come across these rhythms? What made it elegant? I can't put my finger on it, except that it's mannerly. It's got a little lift, a little lilt. And it's got that 5/8, but not Dave Brubeck 5/8, which is more trafficy, more driven. This thing that Bernstein kept finding and that Copland found and Schumann found, it's finding the meters within rather than setting the meter to drive. ..." (Barbieri, 74).
passagework in the sonata. Although the harmony is similar to the first movement, the rhythmic energy makes this movement feel completely new.

Example 3.25: Viola Sonata, Third mvt., mm. 1-11

Throughout the movement, the piano reiterates the syncopated rhythm first presented in the opening measure. Although the viola never has a similar syncopated figure (except briefly in m. 84), the rhythm is a major structural motive in the movement, creating its energetic drive, and is similar to one used in the second of Larsen’s Blue Third Pieces, shown in Example 3.26 and her 2008 Quartets in Example 3.2.

Example 3.26: Blue Third Pieces, Second mvt., mm. 62-65
As with the earlier movements there are no direct quotes from source material, yet Larsen cites the rhythmic energy of artists such as Bob Seger and Bruce Springsteen as influential in the conception of this movement. In addition to the rhythm, the liberal use of accents and other articulation marks are intended to capture the sound of "gritty rock." For example, the viola entrance in m. 5 is marked vigorously, and includes an accent, a $fp$, and a one-octave glissando. Throughout the movement Larsen notates slides, scoops, and bent pitches in the viola part, suggesting the influence of vocal jazz as well as the sound of George Gershwin's famous clarinet opening to *Rhapsody in Blue*.

In recent years, Larsen has incorporated this style into many of her instrumental works and recognizes Gershwin's influence in her compositions. When asked about the slides and influence of Gershwin in *Licorice Stick* (2002) for clarinet and piano, Larsen remarked:

Gershwin recognized the vocal style of sliding between notes in jazz and hot club genres, and honored it in his music with the famous opening of *Rhapsody in Blue*. I admire that groundwork and have consciously decided, as Gershwin did, to work from the inflections and articulations of American authentic music. I inform my own language from this core.

Although the third movement of the sonata is filled with articulation markings and instructions to the performers, at times Larsen feels as though there are not enough

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80 Ibid.
82 In the first movement of *Black Birds, Red Hills* there is a very difficult slide for the clarinet in m. 39 from D$_4$ to A$_3$, which in some ways recalls Gershwin's famous slide.
83 Harg, 59.
84 The glissando was not originally Gershwin's idea: it was suggested by the first performer of the work.
symbols with which to communicate her intentions to musicians.\textsuperscript{85} One of the challenges for the violist in this movement is bringing out the accents in the fast passages and getting the right tone colors for the contrasting lyrical lines. Here Larsen’s directions should be taken to extremes. For instance, when playing the opening of the third movement, Larsen asks that the glissando sound more like an air-raid siren, and the staccatos more secco.\textsuperscript{86}

Structurally, much of the third movement alternates between sixteenth note passages built around the minor third and lyrical sections with the narrow melodic range of American English. Like the earlier movements, it is sectional, as shown in Figure 10, yet unlike the first movement, it lacks any traditional formal structure.

**Figure 10: Formal Structure of Viola Sonata, Third mvt.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Sub Section</th>
<th>Tempo Indications</th>
<th>General Features</th>
<th>Motive x Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mm. 1-16</td>
<td></td>
<td>quarter=80-88</td>
<td>Intro material, rhythmic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 17-35</td>
<td>mm. 17-28</td>
<td></td>
<td>rhythmic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mm. 29-35</td>
<td></td>
<td>motive x, viola: pizz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 36-43</td>
<td></td>
<td>meno mosso, rubato</td>
<td>lyrical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 43-78</td>
<td>mm. 43-59</td>
<td>quarter=100 poco animato</td>
<td>rhythmic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mm. 60-78</td>
<td></td>
<td>motive x (m. 62): viola arco/double bows</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 79-104</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Loosely</em> quarter=76</td>
<td>lyrical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 105-end</td>
<td>mm. 105-117</td>
<td>quarter=84-88</td>
<td>rhythmic, ending material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mm. 118-125</td>
<td></td>
<td>motive x, viola</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mm. 126-end</td>
<td><em>Ferociously, to the end</em> (m. 132)</td>
<td>motive x (m. 127) piano</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{85} Larsen muses: “Let me ask you this: What is the purpose of articulation? In speech we use articulation to create emphasis and infer meaning. One would assume that in music, articulation is used for the same purposes; however, beyond emphasis and inferred meaning, articulation is used to delineate rhythm as well as to convey a particular dramatic persona in any given piece. I dearly hope that performers bring their own dramatic persona and sense of rhythm to bear on the written page [as well as] their own sense of language. This is what makes the music live.” (Harg, 59).

\textsuperscript{86} Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
Motives that sound related to those found in earlier movements, including the rising octave figure, permeate this movement. Here, the octave motive is most often used transitionally and appears with several different combinations of pitches and rhythms.\footnote{See mm. 11-16, 41-42, 58, and 115-117.}

Motive x, the main melodic material of the movement is longer than many found in Larsen’s music. This fast pizzicato passage, punctuated by accents, is sparsely accompanied. Melodically, its range is all within a major sixth, yet the chromatic motion mostly emphasizes the minor third, shown in Example 3.27. Motive x is the only significant melodic material that is repeated in this movement.

Example 3.27: Viola Sonata, Third mvt., mm. 17-28\footnote{There is a mistake in the score: measure 22 should happen twice as shown in Example 3.27 (See Appendix C for other errata).}

A pattern of four alternating minor thirds (motive y), first heard in m. 24 and presented again in m. 29, does not develop the same structural importance as motive x, yet is played by both viola and piano as a sort of punctuation figure throughout both the
lyrical and rhythmic sections of the piece.\textsuperscript{89} Example 3.28 reveals the connection between
the x motive from the first movement and the push rhythm of motive y.

Example 3.28: Viola Sonata, First mvt. mm. 20-21, (motive x) and Third mvt., m. 29,
(motive y)

Another important short melodic figure is the three note rising minor/major third in
m. 34 (motive z). It is a variant of motive x and is also used throughout the movement.
The first time it is introduced, the viola has doubled notes and its accents produce a
hemiola. The motive reappears in both instruments with various rhythms throughout the
movement. Example 3.29 highlights an augmented and slightly varied version of motive
z in the piano, which appears two measures after it is first presented by the viola.
Additionally, this example shows another instance of ‘breathing’ material in the viola
part beginning in m. 36.

Example 3.29: Viola Sonata, Third mvt., mm. 34-37, (motive z)

\textsuperscript{89} The viola has this figure in m. 33, 45, 54, 55, 60, 70, and 126. The piano has it in m.
29, 30, 32, 38, 40, 41, 70, and 126.
The meter remains in 4/4 for the duration of the contrasting lyrical section (mm. 36-50). The viola melody, marked *cantabile*, is quite chromatic and narrow in range, and is reminiscent of the "soaring" theme from *Black Birds, Red Hills*. It begins with a dotted rhythm (see Example 3.30), and its chromatic movement gives it a yearning feeling that seems influenced by the blues. After the first two measures, it gradually breaks down into inversions and fragments of motive y.

The long *poco animato* section that follows (mm. 43-78) begins in a fragmented way, both rhythmically and melodically. The piano’s rhythm in mm. 43 and 44 creates short, sudden silences that seem especially jarring because until this point in the sonata there have not been any moments where both instruments are silent (except between the first and second movement).\(^9^0\) In addition to the rests, the timbre of the viola changes frequently and often quite suddenly as it has throughout the sonata, through the use of non-vibrato, trills, extreme subato dynamic changes, accents, and repetition of the same motivic material in different octaves. Whole notes of the same pitch as shown in Example 3.30 are repeated with different articulations, analogous to the technique used throughout the second movement.

Example 3.30: Viola Sonata., Third mvt., mm. 47-48, (viola only)

\[
\text{non vibr.} \quad \text{p sub.}
\]

Larsen saves the real rock ‘n’ roll energy, and jazz-inspired harmonies in this movement until the end (mm. 105-114). The trichord (016) from the first movement returns on the downbeat of m. 105 and continues throughout the section. A rhythmically

\(^9^0\) This is especially interesting in light of the following statement by the composer: "music can only live with silence around it." (Bezerra, 24).
intense sound is created through the use of repeated and accented sixteenth-note double stops on the lower open strings of the viola. Dunham expanded on the instructions, 

*suddenly, jazz* in m. 111 by splitting the bowing to bring out the glissando and adding left hand pizzicatos to the accented notes in m. 107 and 110.\(^1\) This is all new material, and like the first fast passage from m. 17, the piano part is rather sparse, its function purely rhythmic. The final two statements of motive x are played by the viola in mm. 118-126 and by the piano in mm. 127-134. The ending restates several of the motives of the piece, including the syncopated piano part (m. 136), the rising viola octaves (m. 136), and motive z (m. 136). Although most of the final motives are reiterations of earlier material, a new three-measure motive, the "salt peanuts" theme outlined earlier in Example 3.4, and the (016) harmony closes the piece. There are some familiar aspects of this figure including the emphases on the pitch C, the voicing of the piano chord, the accents, and the general influence of a jazz gesture. However, perhaps because of the lack of a traditional tonic-dominant relationship, the ending of the piece seems rather abrupt.

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\(^1\) See appendix D. As he puts it, "I think she likes a good ‘rock-em’ sock-em last movement!" (James Dunham, interview by author, 7 July, 2009).
Conclusion

In her Viola Sonata Libby Larsen set out to find a way to fuse the lyrical nature of the viola with the percussive sound of American music and American language. In some respects the fusion of the language of rock ’n’ roll and jazz with Larsen’s melodic and harmonic style is successful. By listening to a variety of American popular music and allowing the rhythms she heard to take priority over the melodic structure, she created a blend of rhythms unique to the viola repertoire. Although the individual motives used in the outer movements successfully combine rhythmic and melodic elements, the lack of transitional material and the limited connection between motives creates a very sectional and sometimes interrupted feeling. The second movement has its own set of challenges due to its static harmony and limited melodic material.

The Viola Sonata provides a glimpse into the early stages of a new approach for the composer in terms of creating a work free of extramusical material. Larsen, who for much of her career has felt tied to stories, images, experiences, and the sounds of the world around her, is now working to incorporate her philosophies about music and her life experiences into her music without providing a narrative at the beginning of her scores. While in her earlier works, she accompanied each score with a description of its genesis and message, in the Viola Sonata she provides just the opposite. In its preface she writes:

It seems that when I compose for strings, as in my String Symphony, I focus on the quality of the instrument for its purely communicative powers, leaving any extramusical interpretation to the listener.\(^92\)

\(^92\) Larsen, Viola Sonata, Preface.
Nonetheless, the titles of the movements do not just serve as instructions for the performers, but also provide clues for the audience. The titles of the second and third movements, *Drift* and *Breathless*, are perhaps more accessible for both audience and performers because of the manner in which the titles, the words, and the music relate. *Flow*, the first movement, is challenging because although the x and y motives are very lyrical, they are somewhat awkward on the viola and are pieced together in a way that is not conducive to lyrical, smooth, and flowing style of playing.

As in all of her music, Larsen is her own most vocal critic and is quick to acknowledge any perceived weaknesses in the sonata. When asked about how the piece changed for her after she first heard it, she remarked,

> It became technically more difficult...because [Dunham] is better than the piece. When I brought it to him, and he played it and I listened to him play it, I just thought, ‘he is much better than the piece.’ I’m trying to write a piece for him, yet I don’t want to write a piece that only [Dunham] can play...He made a comment when we were working through *Breathless*, he said ‘can you write something really ferocious?’ and I thought, not here. I did, towards the end, and so we actually worked pretty hard on the third movement, because I needed to try to understand how I could write for [Dunham].

Larsen notes that it was Dunham who suggested adding double stops in several passages as Van had done in *Cajun Set*. In looking back on her attempt to create a strong rhythmic sound with the viola, she realizes that she and Dunham had differing concepts in mind:

> When James says ferocious and I say ferocious, I think we mean different things... My ferocious is big leaps, lots of punctuation. [For instance], in *Licorice Stick*, which is clarinet-piano piece, that’s ferocious from my point of view.

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93 Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
94 Ibid.
The challenge of creating percussive energy on a stringed instrument seems to have been the largest obstacle for the composer. After writing the String Symphony she remarked:

We live in a percussive world. Can you imagine American music, all kinds of American music, without the drum set? The tough thing about writing for strings is that there's no percussion. So the challenge is, what do those strings mean? What do they mean in the flow of life? Why do strings exist? Larsen concedes that she was not completely comfortable with the viola when she wrote the Viola Sonata and that therefore some of her attempts to get a percussive sound out of the instrument seem unnatural. Eight years after its premiere she now realizes:

I feel that I'm getting to the point where I understand the rhythm enough so that I can also work within the idiom of the instrument...so the instrument feels comfortable playing the rhythms. For a while I felt that—like with the Viola Sonata, I know that James [Dunham] has that rhythm in him, but my attempts to get it to feel fluid on the viola feel forced in some places for me.”

Larsen’s preoccupation with trying to replicate the rhythm and sound of American language and music permeates this piece, and is directly in line with the development of her current style. However forced some of the rhythms feel, it is nonetheless a valid example of how she perceives the role of and place for concert music in the twenty first century. The contradiction in the sonata relates to her statement in the program notes that: “I often draw influences from extramusical influence. This work is about viola and piano, nothing more, nothing less.” Indeed, in the viola sonata there are no direct quotes from source music as in Cajun Set, no story like that of Black Roller, no subject as in Black Birds, Red Hills, and no unifying theme given by a descriptive title, yet there are clearly

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95 Barbieri, 71.
96 Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
97 Larsen, Viola Sonata, Preface.
outside references most notably of jazz and early American rock 'n' roll which blur her line between “program” and “absolute” music.
CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of her career, Libby Larsen has granted numerous interviews to musicians interested in performing and researching her works and has written many articles and speeches relating to her compositional philosophy and musical language. In these various publications and interviews, mostly dating from the period between her residency with the Minnesota Orchestra in the mid 1980's and the turn of the twenty first century, she outlines her inspirations and influences, her views on the role of the contemporary composer, her thoughts on the function of music in modern society, and insights into her approach to composition. In addition, she is forthright and forthcoming about the origins of each of her pieces, and also quick to point out any weaknesses that she perceives in her work.

Throughout this study of selected viola music, several general trends relating to both Larsen's compositional style and her incorporation of extramusical material in her chamber music have become evident. On a large scale, there is a change in the focus of her instrumental music away from programmatic works towards abstract compositions. This does not mean, however, that the composer has completely abandoned the wealth of innovative and creative subjects that informed her earlier compositions. Indeed, Larsen's outside influences are as important as ever, yet the way in which she incorporates her ideas into her pieces has become less explicit. Newer compositions, such as the Viola

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1 For more recent musings, she has developed a website with a “library” section. This library includes frequently asked questions, speeches and lectures, and articles she has written. Libby Larsen, “Library” http://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=221 (accessed 7 February 2010).
Sonata, the Concert Piece for Bassoon and Piano, and the Trio in Four Movements all are in accord with the style of earlier pieces in terms of compositional approach (although arguably they have a more mature style), yet the titles and lengthy program notes which Larsen previously used to explain or accompany her pieces are conspicuously absent.

Throughout this gradual progression Larsen has never abandoned four main influences or categories of extramusical material that appear, with just a few exceptions, in all of her works: the use of nature and the natural world; sounds, both musical (especially American popular music) and non-musical (e.g., bird calls or water); the speech patterns of American English; and the lives, writing, or art of influential Americans (particularly women). This latter category is most often utilized in the numerous song cycles and choral works that Larsen has penned, but is also relevant in chamber works such as *Black Birds, Red Hills*.

In more technical terms, the music in Larsen's catalogue shares many general features. The rhythms and melodic lines in both texted and non-texted works are often derived from the natural phrasing and contour of American English. This puts limits on the range of melodies and creates irregular rhythmic patterns and often uneven or asymmetrical phrases. Larsen tends to favor the interval of a third (both major and minor) in both melodies and harmonies. Additionally, Larsen's harmonic language is largely tonal, yet not in a traditional sense. Vertical sonorities often define the harmony, and chords comprised of largely diatonic or modal collections often use extended triads (7ths, 9ths, 11ths, etc). Larsen's music frequently employs modality and polytonality, although not in a deliberate or pre-composed manner.

Structurally, Larsen works with motives, choosing more frequently to repeat rather
than develop melodic figures to build intensity within a movement. Her works are generally quite sectional, yet clear cadence points are infrequent, and in some cases nonexistent. In some pieces, like Black Birds, Red Hills or Cajun Set, Larsen uses ostinati to create environment and atmosphere; in others, like Black Roller and the Viola Sonata, she utilizes changes in timbre and articulation to capture a particular mood or character.

A detailed study of Larsen’s work also reveals numerous motivic connections between pieces. These fall into three main categories. The first is her deliberate reuse of musical material, both from outside sources, such as in Salt Peanuts or Cajun Set, and from within her own music, for instance in Quartet: She Wrote and Over, Easy. The second category encompasses musical gestures that are more influential in their nature. These generally consist of originally composed gestures, motives, or phrases, but are related to some sort of outside source, such as a transcription of the auctioneer’s voice, as in Bid Call, or a more general nod to jazz, rock ’n’ roll, or some other type of American music, as is the basis for the outer movements in the Viola Sonata. The third category, and the most difficult one to substantiate, relates to subconscious connections between two of Larsen’s own pieces. This study has found that there are links in gesture and mood that connect Black Birds, Red Hills with the Viola Sonata in a manner that the composer did not intend. Larsen was quite surprised to realize that the two pieces, composed many years apart, were so closely related motivically. Even when not intended, Larsen’s compositional “fingerprint” can be found in numerous works.

In this study a pattern of motion and non-motion in Larsen’s music has also emerged. This originates with Black Roller, a study of the contrasts of a weather event

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2 See Example 3.2, 3.4, and the discussion of Cajun Set in Chapter 1.
tracing the atmospheric changes from “deathly stillness” to the full-fledged force of a tornado. *Black Rock*, the second movement of *Black Birds, Red Hills*, illustrates the pull between motion and non-motion clearly, and the final two movements of the trio study the motion of Georgia O’Keeffe’s black bird against the air. In *Black Rock*, Larsen uses thirds to simulate the motion of sand wearing away the surface of a rock, an object at rest, made smooth over thousands of years. Larsen’s study of motion can also be seen in her frequent use of water imagery. References to water include the use of the musical direction *wafting* in several compositions and the movement titles *Flow* and *Drift* in the Viola Sonata. Larsen herself has commented on this in the program note accompanying the Viola Sonata score, remarking that when composing *Drift*, her compositional goal was to study if in fact “eloquence [can] come as a result of non-motion.”[^3] Taken a step further, the contrast between motion and non-motion could be seen as an analogy for the relationship between the music (motion) and the audience (non-motion).

Larsen always has her audience in mind when she composes, as each piece she writes is composed on commission for a specific performer and performance. She thinks carefully about the various ways people listen to music (“actively, passively, as an escape, [or, perhaps] as a door to the deepest, unnamed emotions”)[^4] and what ‘accessible contemporary music’ actually is. She also considers whether or not these issues should “concern her composition or influence her composition process.”[^5] She remarks:

> I write music because I want to connect with that part of the people. I don’t want to impress other composers; I don’t care about prizes and any of that stuff. And when you do, you can lose perspective—oh my

[^3]: Larsen, Viola Sonata, preface.
[^4]: Libby Larsen, “Reaching the Audience,” *Symphony* 47.5 (September/October 1996): 41.
[^5]: Ibid.
goodness! And you can think that what you’re doing is the only thing in the world that matters.⁶

Despite the general uniting characteristics in her music, Larsen wholeheartedly wants her audience to listen to her music for its overall effect and not for the individual elements of which it is comprised. The composer conceives of her compositions on a large scale, not by a predetermined formal or tonal structure. In addressing her overall compositional approach and the connections the author made between her compositions, Larsen explains:

I’ve gotten over the fact that so much of it is instinct, because I’m prolific and it’s just there. I think in music. I’m trying to be as curious as I can be about what you’re finding, because I’m thinking, ‘wow, that’s how that worked!’ I can tell you the story of how I think it came to be but that isn’t necessarily how it came to be.⁷

Indeed, she is quite prolific and the scope of her achievements will not be fully appreciated for many years to come. She has left a lasting effect on the countless musicians who have had the privilege to work with her, and her contributions to the contemporary music community both as a composer and an advocate are innumerable. As James Levine, who commissioned one of her earliest pieces, Cajun Set, recently remarked:

LL was a joy to work with. She set out to make a career as a professional composer and she actually succeeded. It’s a remarkable achievement! She has a combination of talent, really hard work, and tremendous intelligence about the process. She did it on her own.⁸

Larsen’s career continues to flourish and her calendar is filled with numerous commissions, premiere performances, coachings with musicians, and academic and

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⁶ Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
⁷ Larsen, interview, 7/2009.
professional residencies each year. Although she has yet to write compositions without
titles (an idea she mentioned during a conversation with the author) many of her newest
pieces are quite abstract in nature. She has not completely abandoned programmatic
music, as the titles and program notes of several of her most recent pieces continue to
reflect her curiosity about the world around her. Whether she is composing with the use
of source material or setting out to write a primarily abstract composition, she continues
to be fascinated with both the role of the American vernacular in her music and the place
of her music in American culture.
APPENDIX A

Biography of Libby Larsen

"Music exists in an 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."

-- Libby Larsen

Libby Larsen (b. 24 December 1950, Wilmington, Delaware) is one of America’s most prolific and most performed living composers. She has created a catalogue of over 400 works spanning virtually every genre from intimate vocal and chamber music to massive orchestral works and over twelve operas. Her music has been praised for its dynamic, deeply inspired, and vigorous contemporary American spirit. Constantly sought after for commissions and premieres by major artists, ensembles and orchestras around the world, Libby Larsen has established a permanent place for her works in the concert repertory.

Larsen has been hailed as “the only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively” (USA Today); as “a composer who has made the art of symphonic writing very much her own.” (Gramophone); as “a mistress of orchestration” (Times Union); and for “assembling one of the most impressive bodies of music of our time” (Hartford Courant). Her music has been praised for its “clear textures, easily absorbed rhythms and appealing melodic contours that make singing seem the most natural expression imaginable.” (Philadelphia Inquirer) “Libby Larsen has come up with a way to make contemporary opera both musically current and accessible to the average audience.” (The Wall Street Journal).

“Her ability to write memorable new music completely within the confines of traditional harmonic language is most impressive.” (Fanfare)

Libby Larsen has received numerous awards and accolades, including a 1994 Grammy as producer of the CD: The Art of Arlene Augér, an acclaimed recording that features Larsen’s Sonnets from the Portuguese. Her opera Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus was selected as one of the eight best classical music events of 1990 by USA Today. The first woman to serve as a resident composer with a major orchestra, she has held residencies with the California Institute of the Arts, the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, the Philadelphia School of the Arts, the Cincinnati Conservatory, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Charlotte Symphony, and the Colorado Symphony. Larsen’s many

commissions and recordings are a testament to her fruitful collaborations with a long list of world-renowned artists, including The King’s Singers, Benita Valente, and Frederica von Stade, among others. Her works are widely recorded on such labels as Angel/EMI, Nonesuch, Decca, and Koch International.

As a past holder of the 2003-2004 Harissios Papamarkou Chair in Education at the Library of Congress and recipient of the Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as well as a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Libby Larsen is a vigorous, articulate champion of the music and musicians of our time. In 1973, she co-founded (with Stephen Paulus) the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composers Forum, which has been an invaluable advocate for composers in a difficult, transitional time for American arts. Consistently sought-after as a leader in the generation of millennium thinkers, Libby Larsen’s music and ideas have refreshed the concert music tradition and the composer’s role in it.
APPENDIX B

Libby Larsen’s Instrumental Catalogue by Date

Pre 1983:
Circular Rondo, Canti Breve, 1974 (oboe, guitar)
Three Pieces for Treble Wind and Guitar, 1974
Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1975 (soprano, flute, guitar, harp)
Argyle Sketches, 1976 (soprano, guitar)
Piano Suite, 1976 (solo piano)
Corker, 1977 (clarinet, percussion)
Jazz Variations for Solo Bassoon (1977)
Bronze Veils, 1979 (trombone, 2 percussion)
Sarabande: In Profane Style, 1979 (soprano, flute, harp)
Cajun Set, 1980 (solo guitar, string trio)
Scudding, 1980 (cello)
Three Rilke Songs, 1980 (cello)
Black Roller, 1981 (soprano, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, piano, violins, viola (featured), cello)
Aubade, 1982 (solo flute)

1983-1987: Minnesota Orchestra Residency
Four on the Floor, 1983 (violin, cello, bass, piano)
Sonata in One Movement on Kalenda Maya, 1983 (solo organ)
Up Where the Air Gets Thin, 1985 (cello, bass)
With Love and Hisses, 1985 (double woodwind quintet)
Alauda: Concert Piece for String Quartet, 1986
Black Birds, Red Hills, 1987/1996 (clarinet, viola, piano)
Juba, 1986 (cello, piano)
Song Without Words, 1986 (clarinet and piano)

Post-residency 1987-1999
The Astonishing Flight of the Gump, 1987 (flute, oboe, bassoon, piano)
Vive: Celebration for Flute Quartet, 1988
Kathleen, As She Was, 1989 (soprano, harpsichord)
Aspects of Glory, 1990 (organ)
Xibalba, 1990 (bassoon, harpsichord)
Adventures of Wonderboy, The: Issue One, 1991 (bass, sampler, narrator, cartoons, strings)
Schoenberg, Schenker, and Schillinger, 1991 (flute, oboe, viola, cello, keyboard)
String Quartet: Schoenberg, Schenker, and Schillinger, 1991
Piano Concerto: Since Armstrong, 1992
Concert Piece, 1993 (tuba, piano)
Dancing Solo, 1994 (clarinet)
Fanfare for the Women, 1994 (trumpet solo)
Slang, 1994 (clarinet, violin, piano)
Blessed be the Tie that Binds, 1996 (organ)
Blue Third Pieces, 1996 (flute, clarinet, guitar)
Brass Flight, 1996 (brass choir)
A Child’s Garden of Monsters: Dracula’s Blues, 1997 (wind chamber ensemble)
Holy Roller, 1997 (saxophone, piano)
Prelude on Veni Creator Spiritus, 1997 (organ)
Ulloa’s Ring, 1997 (flute, piano)
Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra, 1998
Halley’s Dance, 1998 (solo piano)
Impromptu, 1998 (flute, clarinet, bassoon)

New Style: 2000-present
Brazen Overture, 2000 (brass quintet)
Mephisto Rag, 2000 (solo piano)
Neon Angel, 2000 (violin, cello, clarinet/saxophone, flute, piano, percussion, CD)
Three for the Road, 2000 (violin, cello, piano)
Bally Deux, 2001 (two clarinets and string quartet)
Barn Dances, 2001 (flute, clarinet, piano)
The Book of Rhythms, 2001 (woodwind quintet, Orff instrumentation)
Trio: Piano, Violin, Cello, 2001
Viola Sonata, 2001 (viola, piano)
Licorice Stick, 2002 (clarinet and piano)
On a Day of Bells, 2002 (organ)
Bid Call, 2003 (saxophone, cello/viola)
Fanfare for Humanity, 2003 (brass ensemble)
Firebrand, 2003 (flute/piccolo, violin, cello, piano)
Pocket Sonata, 2003 (oboe, saxophone, violin, cello, marimba/vibraphone, piano)
Concertino for Tenor Steel Drum, and Chamber Ensemble, 2004 (tenor, steel drum solo,
flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, trumpet, trombone, violin, cello, piano)
Bee Navigation, 2004 (solo clarinet)
For Two, 2004 (four-hand piano)
Gavel Patter, 2004 (four-hand piano)
Pealing Fire, 2004 (carillon)
Penta Metrics, 2004 (piano)
Wait a Minute, 2004 (saxophone quartet)
Yellow Jersey, 2004 (clarinet duo)
Sifting Through the Ruins, 2005 (mezzo-soprano, viola, and piano)
Blue Windows: After Marc Chagall, 2005 (woodwind quintet, piano)
Fanfare for a Learned Man, 2005 (brass quintet)
Now I Pull Silver, 2005 (amplified flute, CD)
Slow Structures, 2005 (flute, cello, piano)
Song Concerto, 2005 (sax and chamber orchestra)
Trio in Four Movements, 2005 (flute, viola, harp)
Engelberg: *Trio for Brass and Organ*, 2006
*Acapelorus*, 2007 (soprano, string quartet, cued CD)
*He Arose: Fanfare for Easter*, 2007 (organ, trumpet I and II, trombone I, and II with optional French Horn)
*Concert Piece for Bassoon and Piano*, 2008 (bassoon and piano)
*Double String Quartet: J.S.B.*, 2008
*Quartet: She Wrote*, 2008 (string quartet)
*Ricochet*, 2008 (two marimbas)
*Ricochet Piano*, 2008 (solo piano)
*Over, Easy*, 2009 (violin, viola, cello, piano)
APPENDIX C

Errata in Selected Works by Libby Larsen

Black Birds, Red Hills

First mvt.

m.39, beat 1, clarinet: should be a lip glissando

Second mvt.

mm. 13-14 and 24-25, viola: F# should be a G#
m. 29, beat 4, piano: right hand should be A-natural

Black Roller

First full measure (and subsequent occurrences), beat 5: the figure should be 16th-16th rest-two 16th

Cajun Set

First mvt.

m. 52: tempo indication should be 144 not 112-120

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2 Larsen, interview, 8/2008.
5 Larsen, email to the author.
Viola Sonata

First mvt.
- m. 15, end of 2nd beat, viola: should be A flat (not natural)
- m. 61, first note, viola: should be C natural (not B)
- m. 73, last C, viola: should be a half note
- m. 93: tempo should be 80-84, not 108
- m. 98, viola: articulation should be the same as m. 100
- m. 114, viola: the two separate 16ths should be up an octave creating three octaves of A in that bar
- m. 119, piano: third beat should be E D C A in both hands

Second mvt.
- m. 22, viola: dim into the 6/4 bar, then p dim to pp.
- m. 34, viola: triplet should be D-G flat-D
- m. 48: no rall.

Third mvt.
- m. 22, tutti: should be played twice: 1x f, 2x p
- m. 59, viola: tremolo D, tremolo C, then double notes on the 16ths in the 3rd & 4th beats. Also, the last note of the bar is an E.
- m. 60, viola: Back to single notes.
- m. 62, tutti: quasi Tempo 1 "I allow the figure at the end of m. 59 to tug me back a bit in tempo so that m. 60 is quasi Pesante and then again at m. 62 I resist the tempo just a bit more, bringing it back more or less to the opening tempo." 
- m. 62-63, piano: should be bass clef
- m. 82, viola: 2nd beat should be G/B flat
- m. 85, viola: third beat should be naturals (B-E fifth)
- m. 89, viola: last note is an F natural
- m. 99, viola: third beat should be naturals (B-E fifth)

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6 James Dunham, email to the author.
7 Dunham plays open A for the middle octave as per Larsen’s instruction.
8 James Dunham, email to the author.
APPENDIX D

Selected Fingerings and Bowings used by James Dunham for the Premiere Performance of Larsen’s Viola Sonata

A1: Viola Sonata, First mvt., mm. 12-14

A2: Viola Sonata, First mvt., mm. 36-37

A3: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., m. 2

very quietly

A4: Viola Sonata, Second mvt., mm. 14-16

Sul G for a whispered, quasi-vocalized breathing sound.

Dunham notes that the bariolage effect felt right for the simple yet subtle motion of drifting.
Dunham uses bariolage in this case for a more intense, physical experience. He notes, “it is no mere trill!”

The use of harmonic helps to avoid the string-crossing bump at the softest most special harmony.
A10: Viola Sonata, Third mvt., mm. 69-74

Method of execution for mm. 71-72: to be played on the string in the upper half of the bow.
Books and Articles


———. “Reaching the Audience.” *Symphony* 47.5 (September/October 1996): 40-41.


———. Interview by author, 14 July 2009, Minneapolis. Digital Recording.


Levine, Robert. Interview by author, 7 November 2009, phone interview.


Sound Recordings


Musical Scores


