

Beethoven Was a Lesbian

A Radio Opera by Sophie Seita & Naomi Woo
Tête-à-Tête Opera Festival 2020

adapted from a lecture-performance
first presented at Murray Edwards College in May 2019

Overture [conducting]

Tristan and Isolde were really a couple of Lesbians, because a man making love to a woman couldn't really get
into that rapturous state.

(W. H. Auden)

Let us call this "temporal drag," with all of the associations that the word "drag" has with retrogression, delay,
and the pull of the past upon the present.

(Elizabeth Freeman)

[music: from the Overture to *Tristan & Isolde* by Richard Wagner, played on piano]

ACT I: Postcards [standing]

New York, April 8, 2019
Naomi,

‘What constitutes your musical universe?’ Mine was formed—perhaps aged 7—with Mozart’s *Magic Flute*; with the half-bird, half-human character of Papageno. Mozart was a Harpy, etc. Shall we add that to our list?

Sophie

P.S. I watched several of Carolee Schneemann’s videos in the archive last week, mourning the loss of this trailblazing artist. What could be the buffer against the disappearance of female voices? An imaginary collective? In my research, I came across an early piece of Schneemann’s, a self-published artist book containing notes and letters, called *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter*, from 1975. I’ll copy a little bit for you here: ‘Around twelve years old I knew a few names of “great artists”. [...] I decided a painter named “Cézanne” would be my mascot; I would assume Céz-anne was unquestionably a woman—after all, the “anne” in it was feminine. [...] If Cézanne could do it, I could do it.’

April 2019, Cambridge
Dear Sophie,

Loved receiving your note about C. Did you know that as a child, I always assumed Chopin was a woman?

This reminds me that you asked me to tell you more about sonata form. A postcard may not be the place, but I’ve always been one for using this genre inappropriately. So: Three sections--exposition, development, recapitulation. The exposition includes two main themes. Theme I is the “masculine theme”, presented in the tonic key; Theme II is the “feminine” theme, which is always in a different key, usually the dominant. In the development, material from these themes is manipulated and modulated, finally arriving at an expectant dominant building tension for the return.... The recapitulation is much like the exposition: same two themes. But instead, after the “masculine” theme in the tonic, the feminine theme returns... in the TONIC TOO. Subordinated into the masculine key....

Does that make sense? Let me show you some more at the piano next time I see you.

Naomi

ACT II: Chords of Joy [at the piano]

A man in terror of impotence
or infertility, not knowing the difference
a man trying to tell something
howling from the climacteric
music of the entirely
isolated soul
yelling at Joy from the tunnel of ego
music without the ghost
of another person in it, music
trying to tell something the man
does not want out, would keep if he could
gagged and bound and flogged with chords of Joy
where everything is silence and the
beating of a bloody fist upon
a splintered table.

(Adrienne Rich)

The point of recapitulation in the first movement of the Ninth is one of the most horrifying moments in music, as the carefully prepared cadence is frustrated, damming up energy which finally explodes in the throttling murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release.

(Susan McClary)

[music from Beethoven's *Symphony no. 9*, I. Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso]

Interlude, or, 'A Satire of Epistolary Literature' [reading]

In 1974, Oliveros made a postcard that overlaid the line 'Beethoven Was A Lesbian' on a photo of herself reading in her garden. She's reading *All Hallows' Eve*, a novel about two women who don't know they are ghosts. Next to her, hidden amidst foliage is a papier-mache bust of Beethoven. Thus began a project she would call her 'postcard theater'. In collaboration with her friend, the artist Alison Knowles, Oliveros produced a series of similar postcards, each of which reframe male composers by using female epithets traditionally used as slurs. Transformed into pithy slogans, the postcards serve as commentary on the marginal status of women in the music world: "Brahms was a two-penny harlot, Chopin had dishpan hands".

The postcards resonate with the counter-cultural genre of mail art: think, Fluxus, think, Ray Johnson, think, Yoko Ono. Yet there is something more personal about Oliveros and Knowles' postcards. Postcards are already intimate, tactile, and material. The photos themselves feel almost intrusive: Oliveros reading privately outdoors, or innocent childhood photos. And the postcard, of course, is an intrusive genre. Unlike a sealed letter, the text of a postcard is fully exposed to the eyes of any would-be eavesdropper. As a result, the sending of a postcard is generally a performative act: a public enacting of intimacy, exposure, and connection, rather than a medium for efficient communication.

ACT III: Dear [listening]

Hooker, lady, woman, queen, lesbian, girl, whore, princess, mother, daughter, duchess, aunt, mistress, niece, courtesan, bitch, barlot, nanny, she-goat, tom-boy, grandmother, wife, filly, nun, squan, priestess, witch, nurse, housekeeper, secretary, maid, maiden, gal, old maid, hoyden, prostitute, strumpet, debutante, bride, female, scrub-lady, feme, feme sole, spinster, widow, divorcee, feme sole trader, chambermaid, femme fatale, shren, virgin, mama, mom, biddy, mother's helper, Aunt Sally, sister, madam, damsel, dam, dame, broad, crone, goddess, lady kin, lady love, lady of pleasure, lady's maid, lady of the house, lady of the evening, lady in waiting, dowager, queen regent, girl Friday, a girlie, school marm, fille de joie, ballerina, soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, alto coloratura, termagent, virago, maid of honor, maid serve, madame, mad cap, son, con, mare, Cassandra, bridesmaid, matriarch, matron, matron of honor, actress, lass, miss mademoiselle, lassy, missy, puss, pussy, wench, chick, flapper, babe, curve, frail, doll, baby, cutie, flufdeb, bobby soxer, romp, old lady, gammer, granny, old battle-axe, warhorse, hag, beldame, frump, heifer, daughter, sister, calico, kitten, "the lesser man," distaff, weaker sex, vessel, from, gentlewoman, petticoat, skirt, Jane, "a rag, a bone, a hank of hair" (Kipling), "God's second mistake" (Nietzsche), of nature's agreeable blunders" (Hannah Cowley), "the last civilized by man" (Meredith), "Sphinxes without secrets" Wilde, "a necessary evil" (Latin proverb), missus, slut, tigress, Jezebel, suffragette, hellcat, harridan, hex, lama, shamaness, siren, vamp, scold, ogress, Madonna, nymph, bird, lolita, ion, laundress, washer woman, cook, marron, helpmeet, better ball-and-chain, street walker, callgirl, band, tart, concubine, Diana, coquette, spitfire, innamorata, flirt, empress, countess, chionesse, Viscountess, Oceanid, dryad, naiad, oread, hamadryad, sorceress, harpy, abbess, prioress, canoness, superior, doxy, meretrix, Paphian, queen, sten, trollop, trull, chippie, nymphomaniac, betaera, odalisque, jade, demirep, Sapphist, tribade, "-at best a contradiction still" (Pope), mare, hussy, baggage, tomato, gold-digger, amazon, androgyne, colleen, ingenue, slip, diet, giglet, minx, midinette, housewife, domestic, soubrette, fizgig, Sheba, pet, dear, playmate, bunny, feminist, belle, vision, knockout, duenna, treasure, religieuse, fiancee, charwoman, scullion, handmaid, governess, ine, diva, commedienne, showgirl, starlet, peeress, dyke. (Pauline Oliveros)

ACT IV: Heart-to-Heart & Other Theoretical Gossip [sitting down]

[whenever you're ready]

First Woman: I don't remember how that inspiration struck me, but I thought it was really terrifically funny. Beethoven was a lesbian—let's twist this thing around! If we're out of the camp, then let's turn it around. I mean, who's going to prove that he wasn't? . . . (Pauline Oliveros)

Second Woman: The word 'queer' itself means across (Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick)

First Woman: It comes from the Indo-European root -twerkw, which also yields the German quer (transverse), Latin for twist, English athwart.

Second Woman: ...writing a history against history... (Julia Eckhardt)

First Woman: Power circulates freely across porous boundaries; the categories of player and played, lover and beloved dissolve (Suzanne Cusick)

Second Woman: Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end. (bell hooks)

First Woman: I *needed* to work it out. I needed to understand what relationship, if any, I could suppose to exist between my being a lesbian and my being a musician, a musicologist' (Suzanne Cusick)

Second Woman: The word 'queer' itself means across... (Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick)

First Woman: *Like good sex*, [listening] is an experience that re-teaches me how to relate to the world, how to have the nerve to open myself to it. (Suzanne Cusick)

Second Woman: Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy, in the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, harkening to its deepest rhythms so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, or examining an idea. (Audre Lorde)

First Woman: I remember driving into the night and wondering what on earth I would do with my life. My life, struck by Norman's artistry, had become a thing worth interrogating. My life had become, suddenly, very very small, and in its smallness, glimmering with possibilities. (Wayne Koestenbaum)

Second Woman: That is still the way I love, when I love a piece of music. (Suzanne Cusick)

First Woman: I feel a deep, deep reluctance to engage in what feels like the dismemberment of music's body into the categories "form", "melody", "rhythm", "harmony". (Suzanne Cusick)

Second Woman: You're all the different organisms and parasites that live on your body and also the ones who live in a symbiotic relationship to you. . . . So who are you? You're not one single entity. (Gloria Anzaldua)

First Woman: The ear is a faithful collector of all sounds that can be gathered within its limits of frequency and amplitude. (Pauline Oliveros)

Second Woman: What if the ears are sex organs? (Suzanne Cusick)

Intermission, with Pauline, in the Living Room [reclining]

In her role as a composer, Oliveros is most well-known for expanding our understanding and experience of sound through her method of ‘deep listening’, inviting a sensual encounter with materials and the environment. In 1970, Oliveros began gathering a group of women to explore new ways of listening and sounding together. “They met at Oliveros’ home, usually on a weekday evening. Oliver composed a meditation for each session. She planned a basic structure of four or five activities for each meeting and wrote them down for the group to read when they arrived. Written outlines helped to minimize extraneous chatting during the meetings; non-verbal forms of communication were extremely important to Oliveros during the sonic meditation meetings. Gathering often began with some form of massage or bodily relaxation exercises (referred to as “kinetic awareness” and “hangout”) and moved into the practice of two or three *Sonic Meditations*. The explorations and investigations conducted by Oliveros and the group eventually became a set of twenty-five *Sonic Meditations*, published in 1974. They are practices of the deep listening method, and are intended for anyone and everyone, regardless of musical training or background. (Martha Mockus)

ACT V: Final Aria [dying]

Isolde's "Liebestod" depends on certain beliefs, some homophobic, sewn into opera and queer culture.

- (1) Taboo love leads to death and is only satisfied by death.
- (2) In an unsanctioned love affair, gender dissolves.
- (3) Declarations of love rebound: Isolde serenades dead Tristan, but Isolde also serenades Isolde.
- (4) A dead, wounded, or paralyzed male body is an erotic sight and will inspire a soprano to sing.
- (5) Gay love grows social, sublimated, and audible by passing through the soprano voice.

(Wayne Koestenbaum)

Now it is the end of the opera, the end of my long night. I must turn on the "majesty" effect and relax, and spread out the powerful sound I've been saving, because when immortality arrives I want Isolde to be ready.

(Wayne Koestenbaum, imagining Jessye Norman)

[music: "Liebestod" from Tristan and Isolde, sung by Jessye Norman with Herbert Von Karajan, Wiener Philharmonic]