

Lori Laitman Takes the Operatic Stage

Kathleen Watt spoke with the acclaimed composer



BORN IN 1955 into a family of musicians in Long Beach, NY (“my mom was a singer, pianist and violinist; one sister was a pianist, and the other was a violinist; my father was a great appreciator”), composer Lori Laitman was intent on becoming a professional flutist. At five years of age she was studying piano, and by seven had picked up the flute. Composing and composers were “amazing to me, and beyond my comprehension—not something I ever imagined for myself.”

That is, not until she found herself in the heady company of undergraduate musicians at Yale College in New Haven, CT. Ms Laitman began composing in her sophomore year, with ragtime. “The structure gave me an easy starting and finishing point.” Graduating magna cum laude with honors in music in 1975, Ms Laitman went on to graduate studies at Yale School of Music. By 1976, she had earned a Master of Music degree in flute performance, studying with the late Thomas Nyfenger, and a rich foundation in composing from teachers Jonathan Kramer and Frank Lewin. Instrumental music, chamber ensemble, and music for film and theater exerted an early attraction.

So did college boyfriend, double-bassist Bruce Rosenblum, whom she married, and accompanied to Williamstown, MA. There the couple together constituted the entire music department of the Buxton School, a small private boarding school, and Ms Laitman crossed the border to play flute with the Vermont Symphony. When her husband laid aside his double-bass to enroll at Columbia Law School in New York City, Ms Laitman taught flute at various music schools, and began to compose in earnest—for industrial films. “I became the composer for the Dick Roberts Film Company, and wrote scores for such films as *Psychology Today*, and *Camera Arts Magazine*.” In 1980, she wrote the score to *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Folger Theatre in Washington, DC. “Then, I became a Mom,” says Ms Laitman, “and

that was the end of that! In 1980, I had my first child, James,” who was followed in 1983 by daughter Diana, and then Andrew in 1986. Seems running a family and composing for film do not fare happily together.

But composer Laitman, now based in Potomac, MD, has never stopped composing. Since 1991, she has focused on works for voice, completing a fellowship at The Charles Ives Center for American Music (1993). Her mounting accolades include Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award in Vocal Composition, three times (1995, 1997, 2001); Boston Art Song Competition winner (2000); and Nebraska Music Teachers Association Composer of the Year (2002). “Men with Small Heads,” the first song from the cycle of the same name (to poems by Thomas Lux) won Best Song in the 2004 American Art Song Competition sponsored by the San Francisco Song Festival. Her song cycles have been performed in such venues as The Skylight Opera Theatre (Wisconsin), Weill Recital Hall, Merkin Hall and Alice Tully Hall (New York), Shriver Hall (Maryland), Benaroya Hall (Washington), The Cleveland Institute of Art, The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, The Corcoran Gallery and The Kennedy Center (D.C.).

Ms Laitman’s affiliations include American Composers Alliance, Dramatists Guild, and American Music Center.

Whenever I’m writing a song, I sing

I have called to ask composer Lori Laitman about the upcoming world premiere of her new opera, *Come to Me in Dreams*, at Cleveland Opera (June 9, 11, 12, 13). But the first words heard from Ms Laitman this morning are an apology for her hoarse voice. She has been composing.

“Whenever I’m writing a song, I sing it, though I’m not a singer at all. It’s really hideous! I feel sorry for my poets sometimes. If I’m meeting a poet—a poet who’s alive, of course—I will sing for them—because I’m always so excited about my music! I ask them to use their imagination.”

Ms Laitman tends to speak with the charm and disclosure of sentence fragments, free associations and restarts, all suggesting her high energy and keen attention to changes in moments as they pass, in her busy mind.

“I don’t normally sound like this! But I got a commission the other day for this piece and I just got the poem in the mail yesterday. All of a sudden, I have to work quickly for it—it’s scheduled for performance on June 12. But right now I have a lot of ideas and I’m already halfway done. That doesn’t always happen—at all—but when it does happen, it’s nice.”

One measure of composer Lori Laitman’s gifts is that poets and performers with widely diverse specialties believe in common that her musical voice is ideally matched to their own:

Former singer and patron, Dr. Adelaide Whitaker, has just commissioned a seventh song cycle, this one based upon the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Dr. Whitaker’s objective is to create a body of music composed by women, to texts written by women.

Writer Susan Dormady has commissioned a song for her novel-in-progress, *The Voice I Just Heard*. The book will be a coming-of-age fiction about an opera singer who is haunted by a melody. Dormady wanted a real song, and she wanted Ms Laitman to write it. The song sets a real nineteenth century poem, about a real spot in upstate New York. And in a real marketing coup, it will be offered on a CD with purchase of the book.

Jean Del Santo, associate professor of voice at University of Minnesota School of Music, has commissioned Ms Laitman—again the ideal candidate—to set several poems about horses, for an ambitious inter-disciplinary performance entitled, “The Horse in Art, Mythology, Literature and Song.” It will be presented in conjunction with the Minnesota Horse Expo of 2005.

“I’m excited about this,” says Ms Laitman of the horse project. “Bringing art songs and art to people who generally would not expect to see such a thing. And there are some phenomenal horse poems! [Jean Del Santo] gave me a bunch of them and out of that bunch I’ll pretty much choose my own. After all, I have to feel that my connection to them is genuine or I’m not going to be able to write good music....”

Ms Laitman herself divides her oeuvre into two catalogues only. She is especially committed to making her music a voice for the victims of the Nazi Holocaust of World War II. And the other catalogue? “I’d have to say...well...*non*-Holocaust music,” she laughs, “in other words, everything else.”

Ms Laitman speaks about her work with such happy assurance that our conversation is at once exhilarating and disarmingly misaligned with the enormity of her undertaking.

Offering to send me a scratch disc of one new piece, she tells me, “It’s a great, great song. It’s a masterpiece....” I am enjoying her candor, and she is laughing too—but only, I think, in surprise. For the very thing that makes me chuckle is, for her, a simple statement of fact (Since then I have heard the song, splendidly sung by Amanda Gosier with the composer at the piano. It is a five minute evocation of the fabled falls at Cohoes, NY—all foam and spray, destiny and wonder. She is, I see, right about the song.).

In Ms Laitman’s *Come to Me in Dreams*, a man (baritone Sanford Sylan) who has survived the horrors of World War II, remembers his wife (mezzo-soprano Fenlon Lamb) and a daughter (soprano Megan Tillman) who died at the hands of the Nazis, as he finally reveals his story to his surviving daughter (a non-singing role). Ultimately he comes poignantly to terms with the past, and therefore his future. But what, I wonder, was so persuasive about the Cleveland commission that it wooed this highly sought-after composer of contemporary lyric art song to the operatic stage?

“The Cleveland Opera collaboration wasn’t really a commission. I don’t have an agent. I’m just me. So commissions come directly to me. Usually someone has heard my songs somewhere and thought up a project. This was more of an e-mail inquiry from Cleveland Opera’s General Director David Bamberger, back in October 2002, asking me about the possibility of using one of my song cycles. I didn’t know him at all—and he hadn’t yet heard any of my music, but he knew the title, ‘I Never Saw Another Butterfly.’ There are actually many, many song cycles with this name, although not exactly the same sequence of poems. It’s one of the most famous poems from the book that was published under same title, which is a collection of poetry written by children at the Terezin deportation camp in World War II, before they were sent to Auschwitz. ‘I Never Saw Another Butterfly,’ is also the title of my own song cycle for soprano and saxophone, based on some of these poems.

“Fortunately, when David searched the title in Google™, the link to [my website](#) popped up. He hadn’t realized there were so many of these pieces. My version is for saxophone and soprano only—no piano—which is unusual to begin with. I was initially concerned about writing for this combination, because the saxophone is not accustomed to being the accompaniment. Also because, although the sax can go lower than a soprano, they are both treble instruments, in basically the same range. I didn’t know if it would work. But—I

can say now—it worked perfectly. In fact, it has a haunting, mournful quality which is, to me, reminiscent of Klezmer music.

“David was compiling a program to commemorate what would have been the 75th birthday of Anne Frank. They were already planning on doing an opera called *The Diary of Anne Frank*, by Russian composer Grigori Frid. It’s a short one-woman opera, so David was looking for another work, or two, that would round out the evening. I called him back and I said, ‘Oh! Not only do I have *this* Holocaust song cycle, but I have *three others!*’ I mailed them all to him. I sent him my first CD (*Mystery*, © 2000, Albany Records)—my second CD (*Dreaming*, © 2003, Albany Records) wasn’t out yet—a preview copy of ‘Holocaust 1944’ and ‘The Years’ as well. I knew he would love them—because I have great confidence in my work—and he did love it! He loved everything I sent him.

“Then—and this part was totally unexpected, I did not see this coming at all—he said, ‘How would you feel if some of these characters in this song came alive and interacted with one another?’ I thought it was a great idea. The way he put it all together was *extremely* creative—juxtaposing everything in a way that it was not particularly intended to be juxtaposed. The poems took on new meanings, in a different context. It’s sort of the same as when I’m composing a song cycle, and I’m free to put together whatever poems I want in the cycle—sometimes the poems will take on a new meaning. I will hear musical connections between the poems that I’m sure the poet did not intend. But it ‘works.’ Here, David Bamberger has created a gigantic cycle by using my existing songs.

“I’m very open about my pieces. It doesn’t always have to be performed in the same way, or with the instrument for which it was written. For ‘Butterfly’ I have actually made two other versions—one for clarinet and voice, and one for bassoon and voice—which opens up more possibilities for performance. For example, it may be easier to find a great clarinetist or bassoonist than it is to find a great saxophonist. So, while I think the sax is the *most* ideal, I am happy with the other versions as well.

“The three cycles of mine in general that David used [for *Come to Me in Dreams*] are ‘I Never Saw Another Butterfly,’ (composed in 1996), ‘The Years,’ for soprano with piano, to poems by Sara Teasdale (which I composed in summer of 2001 as a tribute to my in-laws on their 50th wedding anniversary), and ‘Holocaust 1944,’ for baritone and double-bass (from 1996, which uses poems about the Holocaust by five different living poets, revised in 1998).

“There is a kind of ‘fusion’ thing that we’re doing, although here it’s more *sequential* than strictly *collaborative*. We work in sequence rather than all together, so every one has their own control. I like being able to control everything that I’m doing, and then give it over to another artist completely. All my poets, every one, has been pleased so far. In fact, it has been revelatory—poets find that my work reveals aspects of their of poems to them, and my singers reveal aspects of my own songs to me. It is wonderful to have these many layers going on.

“To me, for example, it’s always a matter of getting the stuff out of my head and onto the page, whereas for the performers it’s a matter off getting it off the page, and back out into the world. Song cycles are really baby operas, after all. The Cleveland Opera performance is going to be staged, with sets...Izzy Einsidler is the lighting director. I actually think this will be a new genre—a song cycle opera—rather than a hybrid of disciplines.

“Because these songs were not originally intended in this order, I did have to change some of the keys, so they would flow from one into another. And in the last song I wrote some new things so that all the instruments could come in together. Other than that, everything just flows naturally from one song to the next, to create the story. I think the fact that there are just three singers and three instruments contributes to the impression of the piece as a great dramatic whole.

“I will be going to Cleveland to prepare the musicians and coach the singers, and David has been sensitive to many of the things I’ve had to say already. For example, I did not get to cast it, but I did get to make a few suggestions as to who I would like to have him audition. So although I won’t be involved in the directing, I do feel like this has been a good partnership.

“The one thing that was tricky—I always forget about this—is that I do not own the rights to the “Butterfly” cycle anymore.”

It seems so odd that you can create something and not own it

“It’s the only cycle that I don’t own myself. I had a publisher, who published several of my song cycles, but last summer I was able to take my rights back. I am now my own publisher [Enchanted Knickers Music], with a distributor in New York [Glendower Jones of [Classical Vocal Reprints](#)]. At this point, the one cycle I do not own is ‘Butterfly.’

“Fortunately the publisher is a friend of mine, and this is a win-win-win situation—for all of us. Because whatever money is made, or however much it turns out to be after it’s divided up, is not a big concern to me. Generally, unless a poem is in the public domain, I split my royalties 50-50 with the poet or the estate, which is fine with me, because the poets should get paid for their poems. But to write up my contract to cover whatever profit there may be, and for all the necessary permissions and liabilities—that’s been the one really scary thing.

“By far, the worst thing about dealing with these extraneous things, things other than art, is getting permission from these publishers who just don’t understand what a song actually *is*. My first song cycle ever was a setting of poems by Sara Teasdale. Some of the poems were in the public domain. But others were owned by the publisher, and some of them were still in the estate. So I was prepared for it to be a bit tricky. What I didn’t expect was that the publishers clearly had no idea just *what* a song *was*. I wrote to the publisher, who said,

‘Okay, you can write this song, as long as you only have it performed once.’

‘Well, that’s not acceptable,’ I said, ‘that’s not how it works!’

“He said, ‘Well, okay, you can have it performed more than once, but you have to let us know *every time* it’s performed.’

‘Well, *that’s* not acceptable *either!*’

“I finally got my husband in on it (My husband is a lawyer, which is nice!). It took about three years to secure the permission to use just the ones I wanted. And *then* I got a *blanket* permission to set *all* the Teasdale poems!”

There is so much to do besides write the music

“I would hesitate to call myself a businesswoman. Working out a price is never a problem. I’m in a really great position where I can just go about the art. Generally, since I am my own agent and everything, I go to a lot of vocal concerts, and always introduce myself. Sometimes that can get annoying, because you have to really sell yourself. I have sent songs to people, but no one has the time to listen, unless I show up *with* my songs and play them.

“For example, I kept meeting [internationally renowned pianist/accompanist] [Warren Jones](#) at parties, year after year. He’s a marvelous musician—I just love him—and he was always friendly. So I introduced myself:

‘Can I send you my new disc?’ It was at the end of the party, and he said ‘Sure!’

‘I never heard from him again. The next time I saw him at a party I said, ‘Oh, I have more music! Can I send it to you?’ And he said, ‘Sure!’

“After about four years, at another party, he told me that he was going to play Aaron Copland’s Emily Dickinson songs in a concert at Carnegie Hall. I casually said that I didn’t like them. That caught his attention. When he asked me why, somewhat in amazement, I said, ‘Because mine are so much better!’ [more laughter here] Then he did listen, and since then he’s been a wonderful support, even giving my music to his young students at the Vocal Academy.” Mr. Jones is on the faculty of Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, CA, and Manhattan School of Music in New York City. His accompaniment is featured on Ms Laitman’s second CD, *Dreaming*.

“Obviously,” muses Ms Laitman, “he found out what I could do....”

“I guess that’s the businesswoman side of me,” she continues. “I do have a strong belief in my abilities, so I don’t really mind introducing myself to people. But the turning point for me was when I met baritone Randall Scarlata. He was singing Franz Schubert’s *Die Winterreise* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. in February 2000. I went backstage, introduced myself, and he had actually heard of me! When I sent my stuff to him, he responded! Now, mind you, this doesn’t always happen. I send my stuff out to many, many people. Generally you don’t hear anything back, ever.”

When I mention that I have sung Aaron Copland’s *Songs on the Poems of Emily Dickinson*, the present composer whispers candidly, “I hope you like mine better. I think that...I mean they’re...Oh I don’t know...I love my songs! I think they’re all beautiful!” Yes, she is laughing, as she explains:

“I think the Copland songs are competent, but not *beautiful*. There’s a great level of beauty in the poetry, in the poems themselves. Hopefully, they come through in my songs, where everything is tucked and tailored to the poem itself, so that the words and the music become inseparable.”

So many wonderful poets

“I’ve befriended all but one poet that I have worked with. That’s great—I need to know that I can become a friend, because that’s what opens the gate. It’s a world of gold out there, for anyone who’s willing to pursue it, though I think many times composers don’t. I’ve been so fortunate. It really feeds my creative fire. For one thing, you want to do well for your friend. Working with great singers, also, you don’t want to insult them. The greater the artist, the more driven you feel to create something that will be great for them as well.

“I never feel that there’s any competition for ascendancy between writing for the voice, or for the text, or writing to my own muse. Because everything I do, every melody that I write, is absolutely derived *from* the words. Therefore it’s custom-fit *to* the words. I never know how anything is going to come out before I begin it. The words project the way the musical phrase should go. Generally I use harmony to color the emotional content. I never get a melody in my head and try to fit the poem to it. It’s totally the opposite. I’ll have some kind of a bare bones kernel of the harmony in my head, but until I feel that the vocal line is perfect, I don’t even begin the harmony. Then, I really get into it and see what I can do with some kind of color or instrumentation, to go even further into what’s happening inside of the text.

“There are some poems that clearly should just not be set to music at all. Either they are too dense, or too complex. Some poems are difficult to set because they’re so long that it’s hard to make a coherent structure out of them. Even a phenomenal poem has to have enough breathing space within itself, so that the music can have something to add, something that an audience can grasp.”

Ms Laitman seems to have her own affinity for language—her liner notes are consistently generous and distinctly articulate. But, “I *hate* writing my liner notes,” she clarifies.

“It’s a real struggle [and] takes me a long time, because everything I do rises from intuition. Over time I’ve made an effort to articulate—or maybe to recognize—why it is that I do what I do, but I never know how much to say. My *own* eyes glaze over, if I’m reading something theoretical about my songs! The liner notes are made for ‘regular’ people. I do them because the more you know about songs, the more you can appreciate what’s in *my* songs. I want my music to speak to all people, and not just to singers.”

My living poets

Ms Laitman may not warm to the business side of her art, but of “her” poets and poems she is as possessive as she is devoted:

“For a new cycle that I’m writing, I haven’t actually met my poet. It’s a new commission from Mina Miller at [Music of Remembrance](#), for baritone, cello and piano. Abraham Sutzkever is an Israeli poet, a Vilna Ghetto survivor, who doesn’t even know I’m setting him yet. The translator is Pulitzer Prize winning poet and translator C. K. Williams, whose own poems I plan on setting as well. I wrote to C. K. Williams to let him know I was setting his translations. He was delightful, and completely amenable to talking. Now I plan to get one of my Israeli friends to help me call Abraham Sutzkever and speak to him in Hebrew.

“It has been extraordinary for me, to work with living poets. It’s not that they collaborate with me, as in theater. It’s a different sort of thing. If I have questions, for example, about where a line breaks the beat, or what did you really mean by that....They give me free range.”

Many will share Ms Laitman’s enthusiasm for current NEA chairman Dana Gioia, “...who’s *an artist!* He’s a brilliant poet. He’s my local poet. I set his poems, and just went over and sang them for him. Dana was trained as a musician himself. At one time he had wanted to be a composer, and he knows so much about it. When I was still in the middle of writing his songs, he’d say, ‘Oh, well, you could repeat this phrase here, or could you make more of that word....’ Pretty neat! That was probably the most “collaborative” experience I’ve had with a living poet. I like the fact that they’re *willing* to suggest something. I don’t always *take* a suggestion,” she laughs, “but I’ll consider it. I did repeat something [in the Gioia cycle] that I absolutely would not have thought of myself. I simply could not make more of one word—that part of it was really ‘done,’ and you have to be true to your own vision... So repeating the phrase was a great suggestion. Right now I’m orchestrating my Gioia cycle. And I love the Gioia cycle so much that I’m actually making it for all voice types, so everybody can sing it.”

Can I change it?

“It is particularly reciprocal with some poets, like Anne Ranasinghe in Sri Lanka, one of my Holocaust poets. I’ve never met her, although we’ve become close friends through letters and phone calls.” Ranasinghe, who was a child refugee from Nazi Germany, spent her teen

years in England, ultimately remade her life in Sri Lanka, and has become one of that country's most revered poets.

“At one point I made a mistake in typing one word, and found I liked my word better. ‘It just works there. Can I have the singer sing it?’ And she said ‘Sure!’ It’s not often that I have asked for change—but it’s nice to be able to.”

I wonder aloud whether singers ever ask the same of the composer. A singer will have to be concerned about the “lie” of a vowel, for instance, on any given pitch. Or it may be the approach to the pitch. Or a tempo, or an effect? Maybe something unique to a particular singer’s technique?

“Singers do sometimes ask for a change. My friend Lauren, especially, is the most vocal of my singers. ‘I really want to go up at the end of this phrase here. Can you change it?’” Ms Laitman laughs as she imitates her friend, soprano [Lauren Wagner](#), whom she credits with introducing her to composing for voice.

“I always strive to accommodate the singers, particularly if the piece is being written *for* that voice. I do have to juggle sometimes between the singer and the poem. I respect the words above everything else. But if the singer is not happy, it’s not good. So if I’m already done with a piece and the singer wants me to change something, I will at least consider it. And I always listen to them. The bottom line is that I want to do the best I can *for the poem*. By making the best music that I can for *this* singer to communicate *that* poem to the audience, I’ll accomplish that.

“I find that younger singers are so focused on making a beautiful sound that they don’t quite get the communicative power, yet, of the song. They don’t know how to get the music off the page. It surprises me sometimes to have to tell people, because [laughing] I know it all—what I want to do, and how each word should be.”

There, of course, is the crux of the matter, because it is at the point of interpretation that the interpretive artist becomes a creator—which may be at variance with the other creators—composer or poet.

“But I’m always nice to people. I actually have notations in my music saying, *All markings are guidelines*. The most important thing to me is for it to be an expressive performance. You could go in a totally opposite direction—not that I would want you to,

necessarily—but instead of singing something *forte* as marked, you could take it *diminuendo* to *pianissimo*, and it would be fine with me, as long as it *works*. I do think I give my artists a lot of flexibility. You know, I watch my son bring his interpretive sensibilities to the music of Bach, where there are no markings on the page at all—and I’m reminded that I don’t want to *limit* somebody else’s ability, even though there may be certain parameters that are ‘correct.’”

I was never big on theory

There was a time, not so long ago, when neo-Romantic, melodic, “accessible” music would not get play, just because it was accessible (I try to press the composer into a comparative theory mini-session, noting that she is far from the twelve-tone, or fusion, or minimalist schools of her contemporaries from Yale). How does Ms Laitman categorize her own style?

“It probably doesn’t matter at all, to me. When I began studying composition in my sophomore year at Yale, I distinctly remember hearing professors say, ‘Well, she writes beautifully, *but...*’ At that time, that was just about the *worst* thing that you could say. I felt almost embarrassed. The implication was that it was *beautiful*, but that it was *nothing*.”

In the summer before her junior year at Yale, Ms Laitman came to a fork in the road. Should she make the pilgrimage to Fontainebleau to study composing with the legendary Nadia Boulanger, as her sisters before her had done? Or should she spend the summer playing the flute at Interlochen Music Camp in Michigan?

“I’m not a very adventurous person—my children complain about it!” she laughs. “I just didn’t have any desire to go to Paris. As it turns out, going to Interlochen was the right decision, with totally unforeseen consequences for the rest of my life. I was paired with Lauren Wagner as my roommate, for one thing. I doubt that I... I’m just so *happy* that I found out I was able to write for voice!” Soprano Lauren Wagner is featured on Ms Laitman’s *Mystery* disc, and Ms Laitman’s songs are featured on Ms Wagner’s debut CD, *American Song Recital*, © 2000, on Channel Classics Records.

While the two young friends were at music camp, composer Lori wrote for soprano Lauren “a crazy piece in an ‘avant-garde’ style, requiring her to make all sorts of weird sounds, singing the words ‘yo-yo-yo-yo-yo’ to some leaping intervals.” Nowadays, Ms Laitman’s style has been compared to such eminent melodists as William Bolcom, Richard

Hundley, John Adams. No less an arbiter of vocal praiseworthiness than the National Association of Teachers of Singing pronounces her “deservedly shoulder to shoulder with Ned Rorem....”

Ms Laitman uses three words to describe her work:

“I would hope it’s *timeless*. I think it’s *beautiful*. And it’s certainly *lyric*. Even in the funny songs there’s a lyrical quality that is unmistakable. I respond differently to different poets. My Emily Dickinson songs have a certain flavor whereas my Thomas Lux songs have another kind of flavor. But I think you can tell it’s me. I try to imagine that I’m the person in the poem. The gender of that person or the poet doesn’t matter at all, because the real differences are in the words themselves.

“I’m highly sensitive to changes in a text, though I never grew up with poetry. I never took a poetry class, or analyzed literature in the way that my kids have. I took an online poetry class just to see if it would make a difference in how I approach a poem. It doesn’t, really. In fact, I’d rather *not* know anything, and retain the freedom to do whatever I want to do, however I *feel* the poem.”

Now I know

Ms Laitman’s performance artists constitute a *Who’s Who* of today’s great lieder and art song singers. Singers love the flowing lyricism of her melodies, and the grateful way her accompaniments couch the voice as it pours out of them. What accounts for this special empathy for the voice?

“I vividly remember my friend Lauren calling me excitedly in 1991. She had just won the Concert Artists Guild competition, and was about to make her debut CD. ‘Would you write me some songs?’ I said, ‘Well, *no*, I *can’t* do that! I don’t write songs. I don’t know *how* to do that!’ Then I just sat down and I wrote ‘The Metropolitan Tower,’ with texts from poet Sara Teasdale, really in about ten minutes. It’s embarrassing. It came so easily! I was suspicious of it. I couldn’t tell whether it was beautiful or just—dumb. I was ready to throw it out. I was scared to show it to my husband. And he said ‘Oh no, no, no, no, it’s really beautiful!’

“I remember revising the melody in my head as I walked to the elementary school to pick up my son James, or when I was at the pool with my kids.... I worked hard on the

accompaniment. But I had no confidence in it at all in the beginning. I showed it to three people only—my husband, Lauren Wagner, and my former professor, Frank Lewin. After they had all looked at it and all said, ‘This is great,’ I thought, ‘OK. Maybe it’s OK.’ And now, finally, I have progressed to the point where [laughter here] I have a *massive* ego! But I still go through pretty much the same process, actually—my little manic cycle, until I’m inspired strongly, and then I do it, and then it turns out alright.

“Writing for the voice was just kind of instinctual for me. You know, I think my mother’s voice must be in my ear somewhere. Even now—she’s 85—she still knows all of the words to all of the songs she ever sang, from the 1920s or the 1930s. She doesn’t use an operatic voice at all—she was a mom—but she had studied voice in college. She was a violinist also, so there was a melodic feel to whatever she sang, as well. I guess growing up with her singing, and hearing all those songs, gave me the feeling of how to write for voice.

“There is a difference, of course, in writing for the voice, as opposed to writing for instruments. You’re not going to take great leaps up and down in the vocal tessitura, whereas with instruments you can build pretty much what you need for whatever effect you want. I always try to be kind to my singers. Because if you have a *happy* singer you can’t lose!

“It can be overwhelming to start a new song. There’s a point in the beginning where you hit a brick wall and don’t exactly know how to proceed. But then it becomes a concept that takes shape in your head, and you work out the details. Since I have done it many times now, I know that I’m always going to come to a solution—if there’s a solution to come to.”

No longer the composer who worried that “songs were not her thing,” Ms Laitman now says, “I don’t bother Lauren for feedback anymore. Now I know. But when things do come easily to me, I worry, and I need someone—my family—to say ‘Go further!’ It’s just great to have that extra feedback.”

That extra family feedback in this case is no soft soap. No one in the family is not an accomplished musician. “My husband was a bassist in a former life. He’s been a lawyer for many years, but now he’s just turned 50, and I’m having a bass built for him, thinking maybe he could return to it at some point.” Ms Laitman calls her children her “three best creations.” And here the composer digresses into proud parenthood: “My younger son, Andrew, performed on [From the Top](#) [PRI’s nationally broadcast radio showcase for pre-college age

classical musicians]. You can hear him at their website! My older son, James, and my daughter, Diana, are both musicians, too, and quite sensitive.”

So does she write for the musicians in the family?

“No, not really. I have written a piece for each of my kids, though. For my older son I wrote a piano piece when he was twelve. He never played it, but my other kids did. And when my younger son was twelve I wrote a trumpet piece for him. Then for my daughter I wrote a little cello piece. But mainly—unless they’re going to start singing, or want to play the piano part to my songs—I’m really only writing for voice.”

So steeped in family life is Ms Laitman, referring easily to parents, siblings, husband and children, that when asked if she is interested in doing larger scale dramatic works, she answers, “Yes. Yes. I am an empty nester next year.”

Then she gets down to business. “I want to write for voice with chamber orchestra, and I hope to write some opera. Operas that are *conceived* as operas. I have a librettist in mind, and a story that I love.”

Ms Laitman will not be pressed further on details about future projects, so I ask her to say more about her thematic core material. Cambodia, Rumania, Kosovo, Rwanda—each has produced its own special holocaust voice. Does this body of literature attract her musically?

“I am Jewish. My father was one of three Jewish people in the West Point Class of 1939. I do feel particularly aligned with the Nazi Holocaust. All this other material should be set as well—by someone. And in a way, it’s all the same tragedy. When you memorialize one, you honor them all. There will never be a shortage of material.

“Sometimes, as with ‘Holocaust 1944’ it’s actually easier for me, when poems are so sad. There’s some kind of stimulus that I feel. I’m not religious, but I am Jewish, and I’m a mother, and I’m a human being. I feel a responsibility to set these poems. ‘Holocaust 1944’ took me a long time to write, and when I was done I thought—my soul is in that piece. And when I first heard [double-bass virtuoso] Gary Karr play it...I thought he was me.

“It also took years to find the right venue for the premiere of ‘Holocaust 1944.’ It’s extremely frustrating to have a time lag between creation of a song cycle (or song) and its performance birth. It was an organization called [Music of Remembrance](#) [a Seattle, WA,

nonprofit organization run by Mina Miller, dedicated to preserving authentic voices from the Holocaust] that provided us the right venue. “

Other commissions for the coming year have arrived with performance dates assured, including a staged song cycle concert at Alice Tully Hall in May 2005. And the neo-empty nester will be busy on campuses throughout the country, as guest artist, coach and keynote speaker. In 2006, she will be one of the two United States citizen composers-in-residence at Songs Across America, an art song festival sponsored by Songs Unlimited, Inc. A complete calendar is kept up-to-date at artsongs.com along with reviews and news, links and other resources. Meanwhile, the mail keeps coming.

All these great ideas

“Two days ago I got an e-mail from Michael Peich, who runs the West Chester University Poetry Conference. He’s commissioning three women composers to set David Mason’s poem ‘Swimmers on the Shore—Whidbey Island’ for a performance on June 12—which is pretty soon! I said I could do it, but I have this commission for the Music of Remembrance that I’m right in the middle of composing—which is going well—and I have had to put it on hold to take on this new commission. I don’t like doing that....

“Fortunately I’m having all these great ideas for the new poem, which I just got in the mail yesterday....”

<http://www.artsongs.com/>

<http://www.classicalvocalrep.com>

<http://www.warrenjones.com>

<http://www.musicofremembrance.org>

http://www.fromthetop.org/popups/pop_radio_033004.html/

http://www.promusicis.org/index.php?module=ProMusicis&func=display_artist&aid=55