Intercultural Encounters in Music in Canada

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Author Bio

A native of Chatham, Ontario, **Sara Brooks** is active throughout Canada as conductor, clinician, collaborative pianist, and teacher. With degrees in piano performance from Acadia University (BMus) and the University of Ottawa (MMus), she is now a doctoral candidate and is completing her thesis work in choral conducting from the University of Alberta with supervisor Dr. Leonard Ratzlaff. Sara has worked with several notable ensembles including the Richard Eaton Singers (Edmonton), Pro Coro Canada (Edmonton), Voces boreales (Montreal), and Opera Lyra Ottawa. Sara's current area of research is the relationship between gender and gesture as it relates to choral conducting.

Abstract

With the increasingly rapid distribution of information as a result of advancing technology, global communities are engaging daily in new cultural negotiations and intercultural experiences. Music is not exempt from these conditions, and the resultant blending of diverse sonorities and musical traditions leads us to a unique and exciting area of study: intercultural performance. The study of intercultural performance allows us to communicate and negotiate musical differences in a rapidly changing world. As a performative concept, how does interculturalism apply to music composed in Canada? How have Canadian composers negotiated the cultural boundaries that exist between different musical traditions? By examining three works by Canadian composers Alexina Louie, Ana Sokolovic, and Juliet Palmer, I illustrate the ways in which these musical compositions become intercultural experiences. Each work employs elements of timbre, scoring, and text, to create the musical experiences of diverse cultures, often within a Western musical framework, [and reveal the value of intercultural performance].

Key Words

Intercultural; Canada; Music; Performance

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Arriving at a clear definition of "interculturalism" and applying it to the study of music of the twenty-first century is a challenge. The term itself is continuously debated and many scholars in the fields of global studies, theatre, and music, are highly suspicious of its associated connotations. Some view its use as an acceptance of related power struggles; they approach with a belief that use of the term must always coincide with concession to one dominant power structure (Western music, for example). Knowles (2010) states that in other areas of social study, interculturalism is similarly infused with ideas of cultural imperialism (as stated by Daryl Chin) or "cultural rape" (as stated by Una Chaudhuri) (Knowles, 2010, p. 2). Yet others prefer to use the term in order to open doors of creativity, prompting new ventures into the areas of intercultural art. Adding to the confusion however is the interchangeable use of additional labels. These include, but are not limited to: cross cultural, multicultural, transcultural, and transnational. Consequentially, interculturalism has become a pressing and complex topic in the twenty-first century.

Understanding the term in light of globalization is the first step; there is simply no location in the twenty-first century not experiencing constant change (societal, cultural, economic, etc.), nor engaged in cultural negotiations (Schechner, 2006, p. 232). Through globalization we recognize that with the rapid distribution of culture and ideas (mainly a result of substantial advancements in technology), it is now more important than ever to study the "ways in which human subjectivity and identity are constituted – brought into being – through performance" (Knowles, 2010, p. 3). Intercultural "performance"

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(representing all types of encounters) is not a new concept and takes place daily on a global level. In fact, some in the field argue that globalization and intercultural activity should be studied concurrently – as one result from the contact of the world's peoples (Schechner, 2006, p. 226).

Within the field of theatre studies, the bridging of cultures results from a focus on how these cultural elements interact within the performance relationship. A proposed theatrical definition is the following, taken from Joanne Tompkins and Julie Holledge: "the meeting in the moment of performance of two or more cultural traditions" (Knowles, 2010, p. 4). This definition identifies the performance space as the site of cultural negotiation. Applying this definition to music then, one asks whether it is the composition itself or the act of performance that serves as a "mediator across boundaries of cultural difference" (Knowles, 2010, p. 5). Oxford very generally defines "intercultural" as "*taking place between* cultures or derived from different cultures" [emphasis added] (Oxford, 2014). Considering the frequent and interchangeable use of the term multicultural, it may help to contrast its definition. From oxford: "*relating to or containing* several cultural or ethnic groups within a society" [emphasis added] (Oxford, 2014). By simply contrasting these definitions we understand that the term "intercultural" implies activity, yet can we argue that is it exclusively a performance-based term, while "multicultural" functions as a descriptive one?

It is only since the 1980s that scholars have begun theorisation in terms of intercultural performance. With the effects of globalization, we are now very aware of the swift and continuous transfer of ideas (Knowles, 2010, p. 6). The potential resulting hybridization of cultures is to some, a threatening prospect, and yet it is this very process

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that has prompted investigation into intercultural interactions (Chang Tan, 2012). With a more specific reference to intercultural study in music, Cynthia Tse Kimberlin (1995) identifies "intercultural music" as that in which "elements from two or more cultures are integrated" (Kimberlin, 1995, para. 1). What then is our definition of "element," and how does this relate to our oxford definition of "multicultural," which is primarily descriptive and implies no activity? Cook's definition defines interculturalism as a relational process, depending solely on human contact and the complex relationships between cultures. This definition takes into consideration the *active exchange* required in intercultural practice. In most relational concepts there must be a very clear distinction between "self" and "other." Yet Cook (2012) argues that the "self" and "other" no longer exist; that defining them is no longer possible "in a world where the local and the global have become comprehensively enfolded within one another" (Cook, 2012, p. 194). (This also relates to a discussion of "traditional" and "authentic" to be found below.)

In order to arrive at a useful definition of "intercultural" in application to music, we shall adapt the theatrical approach from Tompkins and Holledge: "the meeting in the moment of performance of two or more cultural traditions" (Knowles, 2010, p. 4). For use in a musical composition, these "cultural traditions" can take on many forms, but in a basic sense can be represented by various compositional elements, including traditional scale patterns and pitch classes, sounds and timbres, structural forms, texts, etc. The interaction of these "traditions" in the moment of performance results in an intercultural experience.

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A Struggle With The "Authentic"

Not surprisingly, an attempt to define the elements required for an intercultural performance incites debate on what is truly "authentic" with respect to each culture. Marcus Chang Tan highlights the misunderstood nature of authenticity with respect to intercultural study. Authenticity requires "an assertion that a particular music is ineluctably bound to a given group or a given place" (Tan, 2012, p. 201). The elusive nature of the authentic goes hand in hand with that of "tradition," another term used freely in debates of intercultural performance. Marcus Chang Tan identifies correctly that a purely traditional and authentic performance is impossible. By its very nature, music is never fixed, but dependent on the whims of each individual performer. Similarly, "traditional" art forms are subject to "multiple contacts and events, of convergent influences whose fusion was achieved through long periods of assimilation" (Tan, 2012, p. 198). A discussion of what is truly traditional must recognize the extra-cultural forces that have influenced its evolution. Additionally, once a "traditional element" is removed from its origin, does it remain unaltered? When taken out of context, do our "cultural elements" have the same effect within an intercultural performance?

In this discussion, various intercultural encounters will be examined in three works by three Canadian composers. First, Alexina Louie's *Love Songs for a Small Planet* (1995), will illustrate an intercultural encounter of a timbral and acoustical variety, through use of Western scoring and instrumentation to produce acoustic affects of East Asian origin. Second, Ana Sokolovic's *Svadba* (2011), contains compositional negotiations between the firmly established Western genre, opera, and Serbian texts with

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associated rhythmic folk traditions. Finally, Juliet Palmer's *W is for* (1999), incorporates Western instruments and English texts with traditional Maori texts and musical timbres.

Love Songs for a Small Planet – Alexina Louie

Canadian composer Alexina Louie is noted for her very distinctive musical vocabulary. Experiences with Japanese gagaku music early in her career continue to impact her compositional style in many ways. At the time of composition of this work, the instruments of interest to Louie include the *hichiriki, ryuteki,* and *sho* (wind instruments), the *so-no-koto* and *biwa* (strings), and *shoko, kakko*, and *tsuridaiko* (percussion) (Parker, 1989, p. 7). Her desire to emulate the various timbres of these and other instruments, led to experiments with extended techniques and prepared instruments resulting in compositions recognizable by their unique sonorities and notation. Even from the opening instructions found in Louie's *Love Songs for a Small Planet*, the performer is presented with a new notational language, intended to aid the performance on Western instruments and vocal production. It is clear that a timbral effect is of primary importance through instructions such as, "aeolian rustling," "metallic sounds," "falling hail effect," and "slow whistling sounds." Figure 1 shows these and other instructions on notation and effect (Louie, 1995). The opening four measures of the work are very free and acoustically spacious. Effects such as bent pitches and techniques involving the gliding of fingernails across strings are combined with time indications rather than meter or tempo, in order to create a very specific acoustical experience. The listener is well aware that these instruments (including harp, marimba, tam-tam, and strings) have a place in a traditional Western orchestra, yet the manipulation of these instruments serve to simulate

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timbres encountered in many forms of traditional East Asian music (recall the *so-no-koto* and *biwa*, both of particular interest to Louie at the time of composition).

Parker's (1989) dissertation on the piano music of Alexina Louie uncovers some of the details of her composition process, labelling them either "Eastern" or "Western" in terms of influence. Though he does not specifically label her musical negotiations as "intercultural," it is clear that the majority of her compositional output involves intercultural negotiations between two or more cultural elements. In his document Parker discusses the use of glissandi and tremolos in many of her piano compositions in order to create the affect of bent pitches heard in many oriental works (Parker, 1989, p. 12). In the very first measure of *Love Songs*, we see Louie's use of tremolos as well. In fact, the entire opening four measures reflect some sort of pitch bending through extended techniques on the harp or strings (see figure 2). Though not technically related to timbre, Louie's scale usage, seen in measures 57 onward, provide another excellent example of her intercultural intentions. Setting a traditional Chinese pentatonic scale in the harp, Louie manages to use the tones of the scale as a "colouring device" (Parker, 1989, p. 14). Arguably here, the timbre of the harp strings relates to that of the stringed *biwa* of Japanese origin. The combination of timbre and scale use alludes even more strongly to traditional oriental features. What we must also keep in mind is that while Louie is making use of these timbres as a result of her interest in these effects, she is also eluding to the image of "night" implied by the work's title. In fact, in this movement she adds the element of language, by setting a Hawaiian text accompanied by East Asian timbres, all in order to evoke the "universal" concept of the mysterious soundscape of night.

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At rehearsal 1 of the second movement, we see the voice used for additional timbral effect. With simple humming, the upper voices oscillate on the interval of a whole tone. When the soli arrive in measures 9 and 10, the intervals continue to be approximated through glides and sliding of the voice. Perhaps in this way the voice is used to imitate bent pitch content in any number of traditional instruments. The third movement opens with rhythmic patterns on glass bottles (figure 3). These rhythmic patterns serve to displace the beat – a compositional element used frequently by Louie. Parker (1989) labels this rhythmic maneuvering a "Western" element, though certainly arguments could be made for other influences. (In consideration of the rhythmic experiments in general taking place in the second half of the 20th century, and in consideration of Louie's North American studies in composition, it is conceivable that this element is of Western origin.) Yet, performed on empty glass bottles, the resulting timbre is that of an East Asian bamboo flute. Here we see a very direct negotiation of cultures even within one single measure.

The title of this work implies from the very beginning that various cultures may be musically represented. Louie features texts from a variety of geographic location including Pacific, African, and North American regions. The addition of the timbral effects and scales of an East Asian origin performed on traditional Western instruments enhances the listening experience and increases the work's ability to communicate its intercultural nature, while still making a very clear statement about the universal nature of a work whose topic is the "small planet."

Svadba – Ana Sokolovic

Ana Sokolovic's opera *Svadba* received its Canadian premiere in 2011. The work presents the story of the girl Milica on the night before her wedding, celebrating with five of her friends. The opera is scored for only these six voices and is unaccompanied except for an unseen glockenspiel that is played occasionally for pitches, and some use of drums onstage. One hour in length, the opera depicts the pre-nuptial activities of the girls throughout the evening, which include games, singing, drinking, and preparing the dress for the next day. What motivated Sokolovic to create this work were the universal themes found within the rituals of marriage. Charles Downey (2013) explains in his review: "Sokolovic uses music to get at the heart of what made marriage so potentially terrifying to women: the texts refer to a woman who is being married off to a "bon vivant" when she wants to marry a "hero"; girlfriends who will miss their friend; a mother who will weep at the loss of her child; a bride carried off by midnight abductors; the bride separated by her parents and siblings, often for good" (Downey, 2013, para. 9). It is reported that Sokolovic traveled back to Serbia in order to find the right texts for this particular work; texts that would effectively communicate the emotion associated with the ritual of marriage. She believes that it is this ritual that the audience will interpret, even without necessarily understanding the text (Dáirine Ní Mheadhra, 2013, para. 13). Heidi Waleson evaluated the cultural practices within the opera as "a vibrant blend of folklore and contemporary composition, a communal ritual infused with human resonance" (Waleson, 2013, para. 1).

This "universal" custom of marriage may in fact label the opera a *transcultural* experience, though some will argue that this type of tradition is no longer representative

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of many cultures. Yet what makes this work an *intercultural* one? We first look to the language. The Serbian texts used in the opera create unique rhythms and textures, all which operate within a firmly established Western genre tradition. It is the interaction of the text with the expectations of the genre that leads to an intercultural operatic experience. First, consider the genre itself. Within the Western music tradition, the operatic form has an immense history. From Monteverdi's *Orfeo* to the comic operas of Mozart, to the grandeur of the nineteenth century traditions of Verdi, Wagner, and Strauss – the operatic form has historically been one of intense development and is arguably one of the most highly regarded art forms. Historically with respect to composition, opera came to represent a level of competence and status. In his view on the history of this genre, Nicholas Temperley states, "the history of music, in the end, is not about what composers do, but what the public accepts" (Temperley, 2014, para. 1). He highlights the strength of the operatic tradition and acknowledges the public awareness of those works that are purely representative of the genre. The general public's expectation of form and structure of the opera is certainly challenged by many twentieth and twenty-first century works, but as Temperley (2014) points out, these works very rarely make it into the standard repertory. In fact, it seems that historical revivals are now more commonly received ahead of new twenty-first century presentations of the form (Temperley, 2014, para. 2). All of the above simply highlights the generally very strongly held convictions with respect to formal expectations of an audience.

Considering Sokolovic's opera then, we are instantly struck by the challenges it poses to the general concept of the operatic genre. Yes, the work is vocal and dramatic and constructed for the stage, yet the form of the work is only loosely structured, divided

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into seven sections performed without break. It is also unaccompanied. Composing an unaccompanied opera was certainly risky feat, and it is this aspect with respect to the genre that those enmeshed in Western musical traditions may not recognize. The unaccompanied form is arguably the result of the text itself; the cultural traditions associated with unaccompanied folk song, and the rhythmic textures of Balkan chant may have led Sokolovic to a completely unaccompanied work. Despite this challenge to the genre, there are instances in *Svadba* where Western operatic features are present. In very few instances Sokolovic does score for a small ensemble (as opposed to all six voices for long periods of time), calling to mind the drama-inspired duets and trios employed by Mozart, Donizetti, or even Verdi. She also makes one significant use of features associated with the much-recognized aria form. These traditional operatic structures are arguably recognizable to the listener and interact with an unknown (to the operatic genre) and rhythmically driven text. In the seventh movement (figure 4) we hear Milica's aria. After six movements of nearly continuous six-voice texture presenting alternations between text and extended vocal techniques, we hear a shift to the fundamental elements of a recognized Western operatic form. The vocal style heard in this movement is highly melodic and expressive, and fulfills a traditional function of the aria form by exposing emotional content. Perhaps the listener remains aware that the aria is unaccompanied and very exposed, yet at this point, nearing the end of the opera, the impact is less. Earlier in the third movement (m. 215), we hear the first use of a smaller ensemble. Up to this point the work has challenged our expectations by keeping all six voices active for the entire work. Here, even for a brief moment, we hear only three of the six, eventually joined by one voice at a time, until the texture is once again full by measure 237. Though this

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period of small ensemble is brief, it is a smaller texture that we recognize as a result of underlying theatrics of the opera tradition.

Why does *Svadba* challenge the operatic genre in this structural way? Sokolovic has blended the art form of opera with a style of writing that has been completely inspired by the rhythms of language. Consider the general notation in the opening pages of the score, which includes instructions like, "clac with tongue," "lowest tone possible," "melodic talk," "inhale/exhale," "irregular and incomprehensible talk," and "clap hands." These kinds of extended techniques are not unheard of, especially in works of the twenty-first century, yet we must consider their usage amongst rhythms and languages not often employed in Western operas. Consider measures 26-28 (figure 5). Here we see a rhythmic ostinato figure that is clearly the result of the text itself. The rhythmic placement of accents serves to propel the music forward and the texture builds as additional voices enter (m. 29 onward). Arguably, these texts have served as the very genesis of these measures (and this is highly representative of the entire score). In hearing these rhythmic textures develop, we perhaps understand the absence of an orchestra or accompanying ensemble. In fact, by the end of the work, it is conceivable that the listener no longer perceives the lack of accompaniment due to the structures and textures of the text itself. Sokolovic uses texts to create a work that fulfills many of the requirements of an operatic genre, without the presence of instrumental accompaniment. Another area where we see rhythm of text as the dominant feature is in measures 13-17 (figure 6). Here, Sokolovic is creating a sense of "chatter" between the girls that builds in excitement and interacts seamlessly with the drama onstage. Again, the rhythm of the text

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has supplied these measures with their structure and functionality. No other elements of accompaniment are required in telling this story.

In the presentation of *Svadba*, we see an increased role of the performer in the intercultural negotiations. Does the absence of accompaniment limit the use of "opera" as a genre label? The expectations of the operatic genre (specifically, the requirement of instrumental accompaniment) must be addressed by the vocal activity. In order to mediate this, the score itself must now function in such a way that the absence of an orchestra does not affect the perception of the genre. The audience is indirectly involved, simply by their perception of the unaccompanied hour-long work.

W is for **– Juliet Palmer**

W is for, is a one-movement work scored for clarinet, trumpet, drum, keyboard, violin, double bass, and 2 sopranos. Its composition was inspired by Maori action songs, which themselves are arguably an intercultural experience. Juliet Palmer defines them as "a hybrid form combining traditional movements, borrowed Western melodies, and Maori lyrics" (Palmer, 1999). Palmer takes this intercultural experience a step further and integrates these texts and melodies into a work scored for traditional Western instruments. Interesting to note is the rhythmic variability of the text itself and its importance to the composition. Palmer notes that in her experience with these action songs, she did not learn to speak or understand the language. Rather, the significance lies in the text rhythm and associated movement of the songs (Palmer, 1999). The intercultural experience in *W is for* lies not only in the instrumental interactions with the Maori action songs, but also in the direct integration of English and Maori texts.

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Throughout the entire work Palmer is very direct in outlining her intercultural intentions through textual negotiations. This is specifically shown in measures 27-30 (see figure 7). Here we hear the direct interaction of Maori text with English text presented by the Soprano voices. The rhythms are clearly derived from the syllabically set texts, and the rhythmic interactions between them are fluid. The text set here is somewhat arbitrary, taken from a Maori-English dictionary. Palmer chose to begin with the word "Waka" (canoe), and set each word and translation in succession through to "Wareware" (forgotten) (Palmer, 1999). The texture resulting from the rhythms of the two languages is a very direct intercultural negotiation. Taking the work a step further, Palmer seamlessly integrates this rhythmic texture into the instrumental melodic lines.

Most traditional Maori instruments of ancient origin belong to the wind family. Various stone or bone flutes along with wooden trumpets were typically used to accompany vocal song, resulting in a reedy or piercing instrumental quality of sound. Traditional Maori music uses no instrumental percussion, but participants keep time in the body through stamping or clapping (A.H. McLintock, 2009). In light of this, Palmer's scoring is certainly of a Western variety (through use of traditional instrument types), but is being used to create effects and sounds associated with the traditional Maori songs. Her incorporation of drum set, keyboard (Hammond organ is indicated), and strings, contributes to the overall timbral impact of the work. Conceivably, her specification of organ for the keyboard writing is intended to emulate the timbre of the reedy wind instruments of the Maori people. Additionally, extended techniques are incorporated for effect, including harmonic mutes in the trumpets and glissandi in the strings, which again create a penetrating timbre within the texture. Similarly, the sopranos are presented with

the instruction "incant," creating the effect of the traditional chant tones of the *Karakia* or *Patere* chants (A.H. McLintock, 2009). Palmer's use of drum set is somewhat perplexing and would require further investigation. Through personal encounters of the work, instruments such as the *hi-hat* and *snare drum* do not appear to function in creating timbres associated with the traditional songs themselves. Consider measures 16-18 where the *tom-tom* executes a low roll. This is arguably for some extra-musical effect rather than a contribution to the rhythmic structure, or, to imitate an element of song. This "roll" notation frequently coincides with instructions for trumpet and clarinet to blow through the instrument creating an unpitched sound. Additionally, the drum elements do not appear to be involved in creating rhythmic direction (oddly enough), until measure 27 (again see figure 7).

Like Louie, Palmer is using Western instrumentation to imitate sounds of another culture. These sounds are then incorporated into the rhythmic texture produced by the interactions of Maori and English texts. Arguably, this work is an intercultural experience on multiple levels.

Conclusions

The search for a genuine intercultural experience will be a continuous one. The uncomfortable nature of what represents "authentic" and "traditional" in particular cultures will always call into question the intercultural practices between them. Marcus Chang Tan uniquely addresses this question of tradition through his investigation into the genealogy of musical instruments. His simple conclusion is that a mixing of sounds (in a very general sense) permeates musical history. One instrument, scale, or rhythm, has always influenced the development of another. Following this logic, there is no "one

ahistorical authentic pure nature of music to start with" (Tan 2012, 198-199). Even if one solves the problem of the traditional and authentic, questions are raised once that particular element is removed from its context. How does an "authentic" element function outside of its place of origin? Within intercultural musical performances, the question becomes, "why are these cultural sounds being used and how much of the practice has been transformed for pure artistic innovation or capitalistic profit?" (Tan 2012, 204) The interactions of cultural traditions seemingly cannot be questioned or studied until scholars face the challenge of determining how much imitation has affected the final product.

And yet obviously there *are* differences in the music of all cultures. We know that music itself ascribes meaning and has the power to reflect a cultural history and societal language. The music of a nation "represents the united voice of a population, the summation of its past history, the particular colour of its inflections and language" (Tan 2014, 203). Consider the choral traditions of the Baltic regions with the above statement. Baltic nations with histories of oppression and division continue to be defined by their musical language, a language that has recently become highly recognizable to the world around them (Wolverton, 1998).

Naturally, there are a number of perspectives that have not been addressed in this article. The examples included here are specifically Canadian and represent only a fraction of the compositional activity taking place in the twenty-first century. An investigation into non-Canadian works and intercultural interactions on a broader scale would certainly be of interest. A discussion of the perceptions and interpretations of non-

Western listeners when exposed to intercultural negotiations, remains yet another exciting area to be explored.

Chang Tan concludes by stating that the term "intercultural" may in fact need to be replaced. In a society that contains many traces of various cultural practices, the imitation of sound has blurred the lines, and the "accepted ontologies" of these practices must be understood (Tan 2014, 211). He states that scholars now propose the term "interweaving," arguing its appropriateness in this age of constant global performance (Tan 2014, 212). Regardless of the final definition, the study of intercultural performance is an important one. Intercultural musical performance ascribes a new and exciting power to music. A study of a composition's cultural elements uncovers its ability to communicate and negotiate differences in a rapidly changing world.

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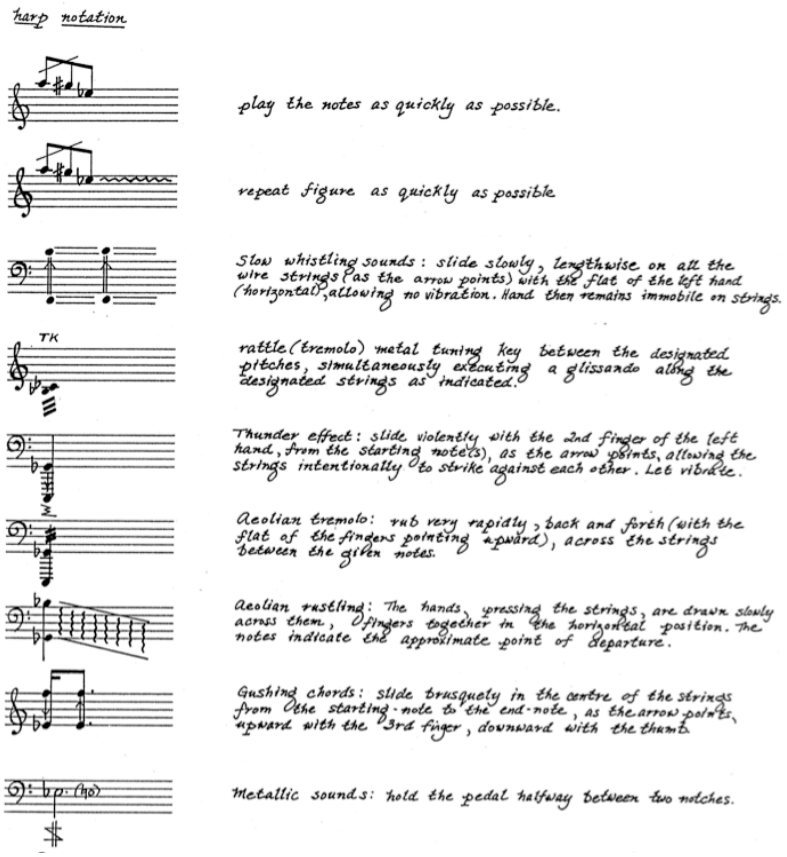

Figure 1: Alexina Louie, Love Songs for a Small Planet, Canadian Music Centre, 1992

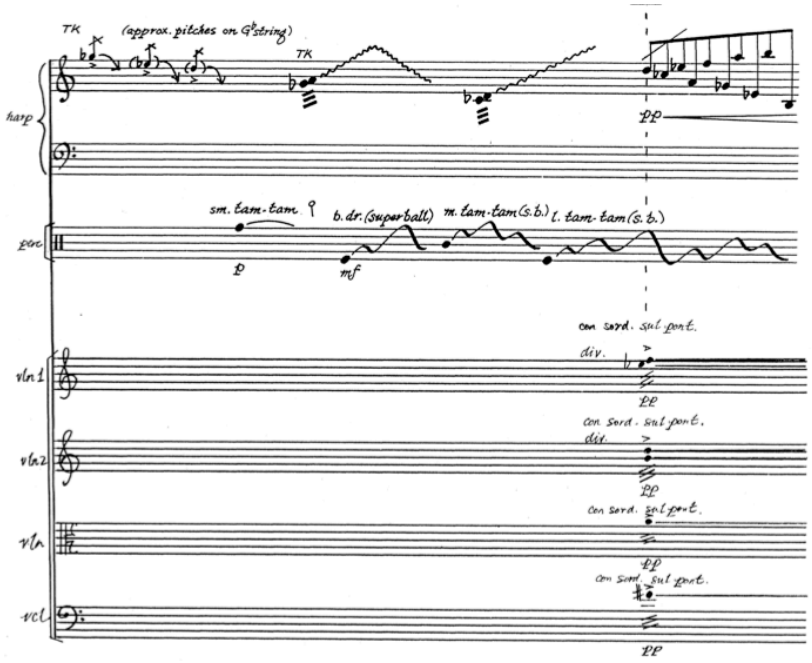

Figure 2: Mvt I, Alexina Louie, Love Songs for a Small Planet, Canadian Music Centre, 1992

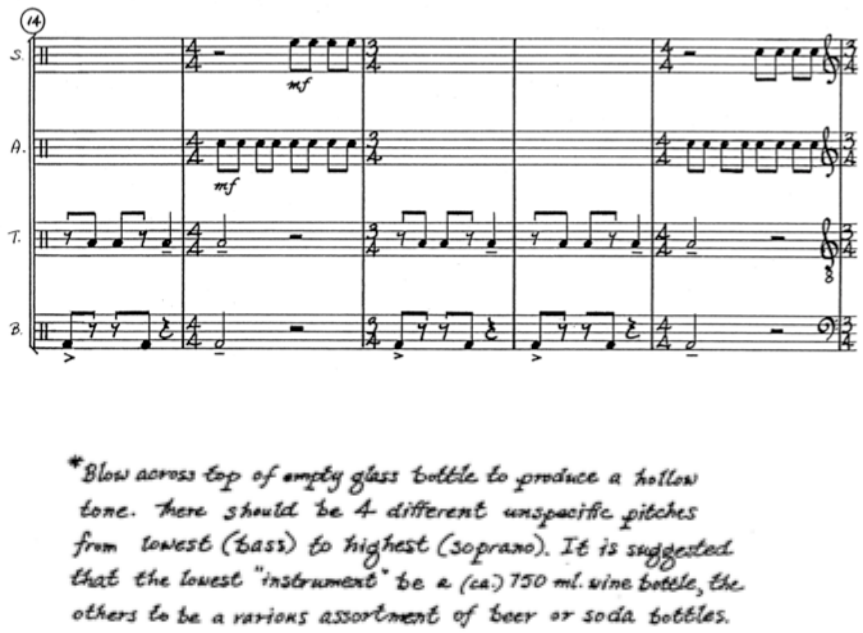

Figure 3: Movement III, Alexina Louie, *Love Songs for a Small Planet*, Canadian Music Centre, 1992

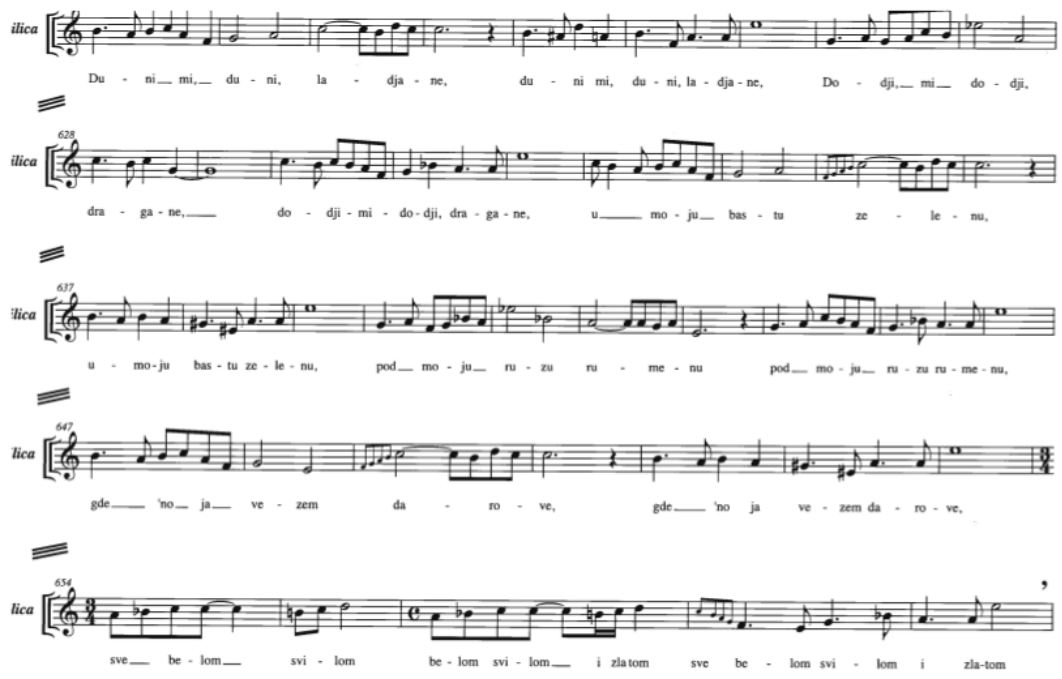

Figure 4: Milica's aria, Ana Sokolovic, Svabda, Canadian Music Centre, 2011

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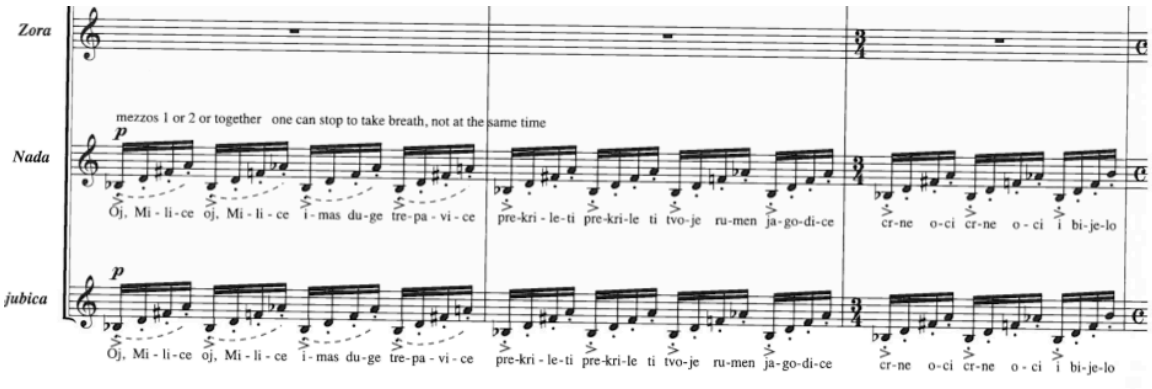

Figure 5: Mvt I m. 26-28, Ana Sokolovic, Svabda, Canadian Music Centre, 2011

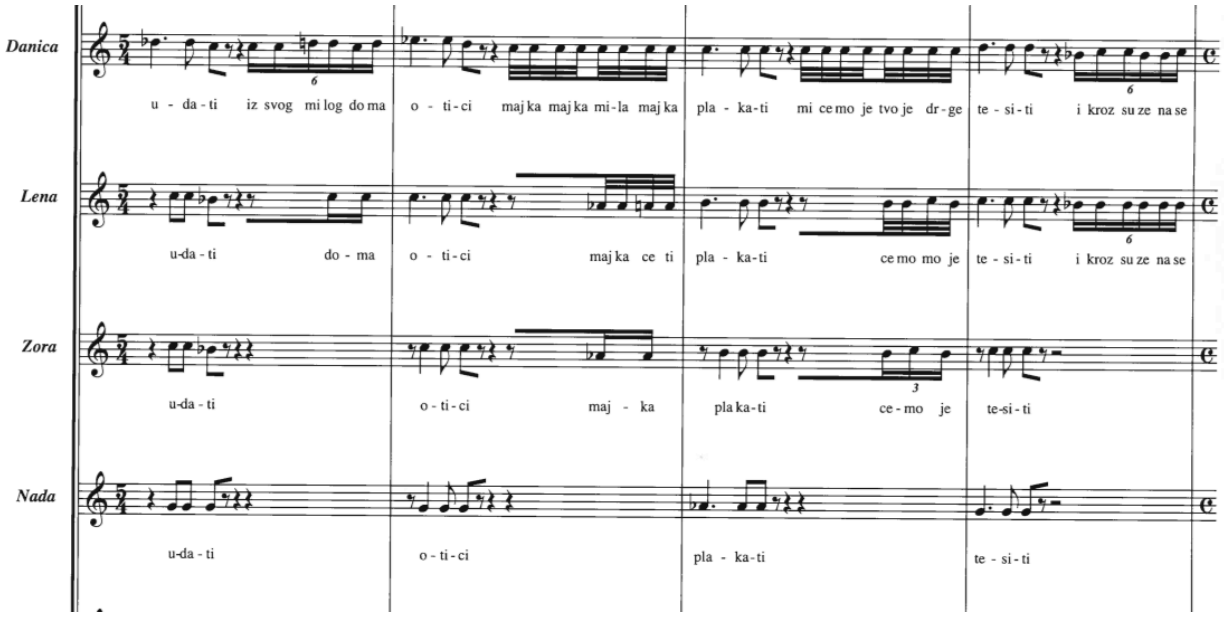

Figure 6: Mvt I m. 13-17, Ana Sokolovic, Svabda, Canadian Music Centre, 2011

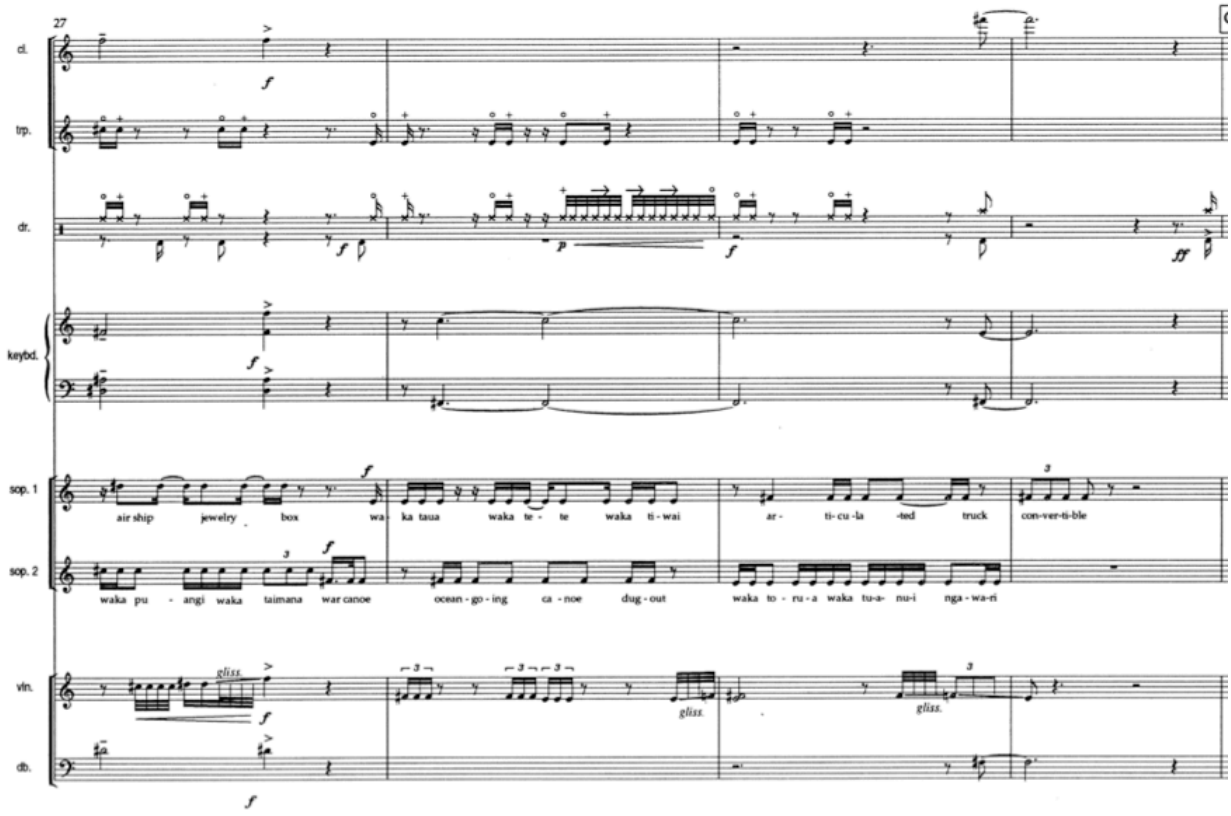

Figure 7: Juliet Palmer, *W is for*, Canadian Music Centre, 1999

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