

Libby Larsen

An American Musical Icon

By Theresa Bogard, NCTM

"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

The first time I heard Libby Larsen speak, I realized I was hearing one of the most vibrant and compelling champions for the arts in the United States. She was the Composer-in-Residence for the 2007 Rocky Mountain Contemporary Music Festival in Fort Collins, Colorado, and I was honored to have been asked to play her *Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to Her Daughter Janey 1880–1902* (1998) for soprano and piano. I had known of her as a composer for many years and first started playing her music in 1999 when I played the fiery piece, *Juba* (1986), for cello and piano, for the first time. Since then, I have had the privilege of playing several of her other works in addition to helping organize a one-year residency at the University of Wyoming in 2016–2017.

Libby Larsen (b. 1950, Wilmington, Delaware) is of that generation of women composers who had to fight for everything she accomplished, and she did so with humility and grace. She is one of America's most performed living composers. A 2024 inductee into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she has composed more than 500 works including orchestra, opera, vocal and chamber music, symphonic winds and band. Her work is widely recorded. An advocate for the music and musicians of our time, in 1973 Larsen co-founded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composers Forum. Grammy Award winner and former holder of the Papamarkou Chair at John W. Kluge Center of the Library of Congress, Larsen has also held residencies with the Minnesota Orchestra,



the Charlotte Symphony and the Colorado Symphony.

Larsen holds proud associations with the University of Wyoming (Eminent



Musician-in-Residence 2016–2017), Otterbein University (Vernon L. Pack Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence, 2022), Peabody Conservatory (George Peabody Medal, 2009), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2004 Recipient of the Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts), and holds honorary doctorates from Valparaiso University, the University of Florida, Saint Mary's College Notre Dame, the University of Nebraska and Bemidji State University. She regularly appears at colleges and universities as guest composer, working with students and faculties, teaching, coaching and giving master classes. She is currently faculty composer with Source Song Festival and SongFest. Larsen's 2017 biography, *Libby Larsen: Composing an American Life* by the author Denise Von Glahn, is available from the University of Illinois Press.

When I was preparing this article, I called Libby Larsen and talked with her about her career and her thoughts about music today. She shared this insightful interview with researcher, Kelsey Loeslie:

In a recent interview with Kelsey Loeslie, PhD candidate in voice at the University of Kentucky, we chatted about the challenges student musicians face when they study classical music. It was a fascinating discussion ranging from technical challenges to challenges in communicating with non-classical audiences.

Kelsey Loeslie: I had a follow-up question of talking about challenges in the field of music and you know you spoke to some of that...What challenges do you think that maybe just performers face in studying classical music? If there is advice that you would give to them, if they're on a journey of this education path.

Libby Larsen: Well, you brought up the word "curiosity" at the very beginning of this interview. I want to bring it up again in relationship to what we're discussing right now. I think that those of us who learn to make music through the rigors of classical training are faced with a dilemma: How do we translate our passion for our training and for the

music we perform to those people who listen to us “out-of-context?” What I mean by out-of-context is that we perform in the context of our training and its attendant culture. Most of our listeners don’t live in this context. They bring themselves and their lives to our performances. This presents us with many a grand opportunity to create a context for our performance which includes us all—a new context! I think this presents us with a dilemma. How do we translate our passion for our training and for the music we perform? Especially to someone who hasn’t walked the walk of a rigorous classical musical training. Masterful performance is one way. Each one of us, at whatever level of technical development we are at, is a master of the piece we are performing. We master our art and that’s great personal achievement. We should display this, but it’s not what we should be displaying as the focus of the concert. I think first and foremost, we should display our curiosity about the music. What is curiosity in this context? It is a kind of joyful generosity and collaborative partnership between the performers and the listeners. I’m seeing this more and more in young chamber music performers. It used to be that performers were admonished to “engage with the audience” as if the two were separate and a bridge needed to be built between them. What I’m seeing is performers engaging with the audience and the audience engaging with the performers in a collaborative journey propelled with mutual collaborative, curious energy. This transforms the concert experience. What has been a traditional “performance display with audience appreciation” model now becomes a collaborative journey where performer and audience are propelled through the music with mutual collaborative, curious energy.

Larsen has composed numerous pieces for solo piano, piano concerto and piano in chamber ensemble including the following:

Solo Piano (piano concerto):

Piano Suite (1976), *Piano Concerto: Since Armstrong* (1992), *Mephisto Rag* (2000), *Penta Metrics* (2004), *Ricochet* (2008), *4 ½* (2016), *White Pieces* (2018), *Ocean Suite* (2023), *Piano Sonata: Hope* (2024)

Piano Four Hands:

Gavel Patter (2004), *79 Fossil Gestures of Antonio Alberto De Biedma* (2011), *Ghosts of Old Pianos* (2013), *A Day: Prelude/Postlude* (2014)

Chamber Music With Piano:

Four on the Floor (1983), *With Love and Hisses* (1985), *Song Without Words* (1986), *Juba* (1986), *Ulloa’s Ring* (1987), *Blues in Six* (1992), *Slang* (1994), *Concert Piece for Tuba and Piano* (1995), *Black Birds, Red Hills*, (1996), *Holy Roller* (1997), *Trio* (2001), *Viola Sonata* (2001), *Barn Dances* (2001), *Firebrand* (2003), *Blue Windows* (2005), *Slow Structures* (2005), *Concert Piece for Bassoon and Piano* (2008), *Blue Piece* (2010), *Ferlinghetti* (2014), *Timepiece for Tim* (2017), *Rag: Blue Rubato* (2019), *Trio Noir* (2022), *Land* (2023), *Ocean Suite* (2024)

A full catalogue of Libby Larsen’s works can be found at www.libbylarsen.com

MTNA is so fortunate to have Libby Larsen as our keynote speaker for the conference in Minneapolis. Her varied and extensive body of work clearly puts her among the top composers in the United States today. Her prowess as a composer and her advocacy for the arts makes her exceptional. Meeting Libby Larsen, playing her music, coaching with her and hearing her speak has impacted me professionally and personally. I know MTNA members will be pleased to hear the keynote address of this musical icon.

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Theresa Bogard, NCTM, is an avid performer of under-represented literature. She has played in 17 different countries on five continents and is passionate about teaching. She is a professor of piano at the University of Wyoming.

