

AGO BOSTON 2014 COMMISSIONS

LIBBY LARSEN: AGO 2014 DISTINGUISHED COMPOSER

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Libby Larsen (photo: Ann Marsden)

THIS YEAR, we celebrate Libby Larsen as our 2014 Distinguished Composer. As we in the Boston New Music Committee were making our long and short lists, we wanted to pick a composer with a large repertoire so that our members could have a lot to choose from in exploring that composer. We wanted someone already familiar with our organization, but not necessarily an organist. We wanted to balance the existing list with a woman composer. We kept coming back to Larsen.

She wrote “Aspects of Glory” in 1990 for the Boston convention. Her composition includes musical quotes from “Veni creator spiritus” to “Old Hundredth” to the spiritual “My Home in Glory.” Her “Kalenda Maya,” which quotes a 13th–14th-century troubadour song, is also part of the *AGO 90th Anniversary Anthology of American Organ Music* (1988). Larsen is known to us, and in that association she has learned some of the mysterious language we know and work with Sunday by Sunday. She understands the material we are required to use: the hymns, anthems, and service music—and the fact that in using the assigned material, we are called on to lead and inspire. While staying within the limits of our assignments, we organists are also called on to think outside those limits,

to allow our congregants to pull together the threads of thought presented each week.

What did I discover when I went to visit Libby Larsen at her home in Minneapolis?

First off, in following my GPS, I found myself in a neighborhood I often visited when I was growing up in Minnesota. Larsen lives very near the Walker Art Center, home to Frank Gehry’s 22-foot “Standing Glass Fish,” a sculpture that is right at home in the land of 10,000 lakes and even more fish stories. Just a few turns away, Larsen lives with her own glass sculptures by artist Peter Zelle in a home that overlooks Lake of the Isles, one in the Chain of Lakes Regional Park in Minneapolis. I walked into a home bursting with energy while the dog lazed on a landing. Lunch arrived courtesy of a friendly daughter, and we were off on a two-hour conversation that rushed by in a torrent of music and ideas.

What informs Larsen’s music?

As a child, Larsen went to Christ the King Catholic School in Minneapolis, where she sang Gregorian chant for daily masses and weddings. She was fascinated by what she called “ghost chords,” the sounds that remained after the chant had finished. She heard the overtones linger in the church, and that gathered her imagination. Larsen has been in hot pursuit of those free ranging tones ever since her Catholic school days.

She also found that her creativity could influence her peers when, in the fourth grade, her teacher, Sister Naomi, presented Larsen with two stacks of paper—one black and one white—and craft materials. Larsen’s task was to cut out all the letters to all Ten Commandments, with Roman numerals and periods, *twice*. The letters were to appear in shadow form to make a greater impact. The assignment didn’t have a due date, so Larsen could return to the task whenever she wanted. She suffered from dyslexia, and this task was exactly what she needed. She could trace and cut out the mysterious letters and then put them up around the classroom for everyone to read.

The fact that there was no due date was important for Larsen. She found that her creativity operated on a different schedule and did not rely on calen-

dars and school bells. She also found that she could put the letters up around the classroom and not in consecutive lines. Creativity existed in a circle in her project and surrounded the class.

Later, in seventh grade, Sister Timothea gave each student in Larsen’s class a marine band harmonica in C. When things needed livening up, Sister Timothea would say, “It’s harmonica time,” and everyone would play an Irish tune like “My Wild Irish Rose” or something similar. Everyone was in the same key, and everyone breathed and focused together. It was a memorable experience for the young musician.

“Eternal Ruler of the Ceaseless Round” Anthem for the 2014 AGO Convention

Larsen took her text from John Chadwick (1840–1904), born in Marblehead, Massachusetts.

Eternal Ruler of the ceaseless round
Of circling planets singing on their
way
Guide of the nations from the night
profound
Into the glory of the perfect day,
Rule in our hearts, that we may ever
be
Guided and strengthened and up-
held by Thee
We are of Thee, the people of Thy
love,
The children of Thy well beloved
One;
Descend, O Holy Radiance, like a
dove
Into our hearts, that we may be as
one;
As one with Thee, to whom we
ever tend;
As one with Him our brother and
our friend.
We would be one in hatred of all
wrong,
One in our love of all things sweet
and fair;
One with the joy that breaketh
into song,
One with the grief that trembleth
into prayer,
One in the power that makes Thy
children free
To follow truth, and thus to follow
Thee.

—John Chadwick (1864)

Larsen’s favorite moments are when ideas present themselves to be shaped and molded. The “Ceaseless Round” appealed to her as she began work on the commission. The text could speak to many of us in the AGO. She heard the

Ex. 1: mm. 24–28

Congregation and Choir *mf*

E - ter - nal Rul - er of the cease - less round

Ex. 2: mm. 35–41

Translucent, Radiant *mp* *molto legato* *tutti*

We are of Thee, the peo - ple of Thy love,
We are of Thee, the peo - ple of Thy love,
We are of Thee, the peo - ple of Thy love,
We are of Thee, the peo - ple of Thy love,

universal themes of cosmos and faith, of joy and grief, of truth and love. Her anthem sighs with appoggiaturas as well as the triumph of the ascending triad as shown in Example 1.

Larsen's own interest in the rising fourth of the Lydian mode and the major third make their mark especially in the anthem. She moves from the C-major of the hymn to the E-flat Lydian scoring of the second stanza. That makes the A-flat of E-flat major to A-natural in the Lydian mode. Larsen expands our notion of E-flat in this way and begins the second stanza with restless eighth notes in the organ in E-flat Lydian. The choir follows in a two-part octave setting (see Example 2). She moves back to E-flat major, from A-natural to A-flat, right in the middle of the second stanza ("Into our hearts"). The musical movement descends from A-natural to A-flat in a particularly poignant moment in the text. We move from the mode to the major, as we say "Descend, O Holy Radiance, like a dove into our hearts, that we may be as one."

We descend within the perimeters of the scales presented to us in the second stanza, as the "Holy Radiance" de-

scends into our hearts. We move within the notes as the text moves within our hearts. We can sing together as one.

The final stanza bows back to C major. E-flat becomes E-natural in C, another of Larsen's favorite harmonic moves, the major third. We're back to where we started, but changed.

In all, Larsen's energy comes to us as she explores the infinity of possibility to inform the syntax of the composition at hand. Since she is writing for the AGO, the organ part leads with triumphs and restless vitality. The organ part introduces the Lydian mode in the anthem section and brings us back to E-flat major with a change in texture. The hymn begins easily in C, and then takes giant leaps of fourths, from C to F to B-flat to E-flat before returning to a jubilant C major.

When I visited Larsen, the sculptures impressed me because they were outside the windows. They expanded the limits of her home to remind her to extend her own horizons on a daily basis. She has done that for us in writing an anthem for all of us to sing together in Boston. See you there.

More information on Libby Larsen may be found at Libbylarsen.com.

Organ Scores of Libby Larsen

- Aspects of Glory, solo organ; 20 minutes; 1990 (ECS)
- Blessed Be the Tie that Binds, solo organ; 3 minutes; 1996 (OUP)
- Fantasy on Slane, organ and flute; 6 minutes; (ECS)
- He Arose: Fanfare for Easter, organ, two trumpets, two trombones, horn (optional); 4 minutes; 2007 (LL)
- On a Day of Bells, solo organ; 8 minutes; 2002 (OUP)
- Prelude on "Veni Creator Spiritus," solo organ; 2 minutes; 1997 (OUP, also published by special arrangement with Augsburg Fortress in the anthology, *The New Liturgical Year*)
- Sonata in One Movement on Kalenda Maya, solo organ; 6 minutes; 1983 (ECS)

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