

in the areas of gender, class, music criticism, opera studies, and performance studies. Musicology is a richer field for its existence.

Laura Moore Pruett

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Journal of the Society for American Music (2020), Volume 14, Number 2, pp. 236–238
© The Society for American Music 2020 doi:10.1017/S1752196320000097

Libby Larsen: Composing an American Life. By Denise Von Glahn. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Denise Von Glahn's *Libby Larsen: Composing an American Life*, the first biography written on the contemporary US American composer, tells a story of the artist whose award-winning and globally recognized compositions range from solo and chamber pieces to large-scale operas and symphonies. Rather than a strictly chronological biography, Von Glahn arranges the book around themes from Larsen's (b. 1950) life: "The Cultural Movement," "Family," "Religion," "Nature," "The Academy," "Gender," "Technology," and "The Collaborators." Von Glahn weaves a rich tapestry of primary source research, analyses, and conversations with Larsen for each of the thematic sections, painting a picture of Larsen, which considers her "geographic, temporal, political, religious, familial, aesthetic, technological, and cultural milieu" (xvi). In the process, this book balances the image of Larsen as a wife and mother (i.e., an ordinary person with hobbies around sports and nature) with her roles as a model for women within the music profession and a champion of new music.

In the first chapter, "The Cultural Movement," Von Glahn brilliantly contextualizes the postwar American culture in which Larsen grew up, delving deeper into the years 1948–1962, which Larson characterized as the "most radical portion of the twentieth century" (1). In Larsen's white middle-class family, children were meant to be seen and not heard. She remembers the "formula" of dinners during which her parents, particularly her father, would carry most of the conversation. When Larsen was silenced for talking too much as a child (or even bribed to keep quiet), she realized she needed to find other ways to express herself. Her youthful resistance helped her understand the need to be heard and through music, she finally found her voice (14). Teachers encouraged Larsen to communicate her eclectic energies during piano lessons, water activities, running, or driving. In chapter 2, Von Glahn discusses Larsen's love of cars, recklessness of teenage driving, and the elegance of a Ford Thunderbird as heard in the 1983 work *Four on the Floor* (28). This chamber piece (violin, cello, string bass, piano) takes the listener from a fast, bombastic ride to a boogie-woogie inspired cruise, with pizzicati, glissandi, slight deviations in the meter, and beyond: "Listeners hear Larsen applying the brake, or maybe it's the clutch. She shifts gears. . . . What might seem like unchecked recklessness, the composer metaphorically taking her hands off the wheel for a moment, is in reality a meticulously crafted spinning out of a small number of musical ideas.

The beauty of the Thunderbird and its musical progeny is the elegance of the design” (28–30).

Von Glahn’s book moves easily from one topic to another, addressing areas of powerful influence in Larsen’s life connecting to family, religion, nature, and place. I particularly enjoyed how closely chapter 5 (“Larsen and the Academy Years”) and chapter 6 (“Larsen and Gender”) connected to one another. Larsen attended college during a period of social and political upheaval (1968–1972); her freshman year included the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, but also new horizons in women’s rights. Determined to create gender equality on her college campus, Larsen organized and competed in the University of Minnesota’s first women’s cross country team. While working as a summer house cleaner at the MacDowell Colony, Larsen decided to compose. Her decision led her to continue musical studies and eventually to establish the Minnesota Composers Forum (later the American Composers Forum) (101). Larsen struggled financially as a graduate student, sometimes holding down three jobs, including a teaching assistantship with musicologist Donna Cardamone Jackson, to pay for her education. She understood the struggle of working through school, which resonates with many graduate students, especially women, people of color, and the myriad intersections that may cause financial struggles in academia today.

Larsen is also interested in technology and the spatial dimensions of sound, which Von Glahn addresses in chapter 7. Larsen’s concern with the effects of space and time on sound is exemplified in her pieces *Fanfare for the Women* (1993) and *Now I Pull Silver* (2004). Both works play with and manipulate the “active roles musicians assume projecting, releasing, and spinning a ‘sound into space and time’” (196–99), often employing technology to aid in her sonic experiments. Von Glahn compares Larsen’s spatial techniques to those of Varèse, whom Larsen holds in the highest regard. Varèse’s imagination of sounds in the twentieth century, as well as his ideas on the “projection” of sound (“a feeling of sound leaving with no hop of reflecting back . . . a journey into space” [195]), connects to Larsen’s otherworldly operatic setting of *A Wrinkle in Time* (1991–1992). In the original production, Larsen used a basic EMAX II (keyboard sampler) amplified through speakers.¹ Chapter 7 helps readers recognize Larsen’s diversity as a composer—working in acoustic and electroacoustic techniques and aesthetics—whose compositions contemplate and challenge listeners to engage with the spaces in which the music is being created.

Von Glahn tells a story of Larsen at the margins of musical circles because of her gender, her geographic location in the hub of Minneapolis, her refusal to conform to the aesthetic dogmas of any particular group or school, and her exploration of the richness of her musical resources. Von Glahn even compares Larsen to Gloria Steinem, both forces impacting US culture, though Larsen’s influence being more focused in the musical sphere (viii). Although Larsen is the main subject of the

¹ The 2014 reproduction of the opera fell through because she wanted digital surround sound and new mixes that the concert hall could not afford (195).

book, Von Glahn weaves in her own accounts and memories of stories about women in the arts and demonstrates the need for more such biographies. I particularly enjoyed Von Glahn's introductory remarks on constructing a biography, especially one of which the subject is still living. She quotes Leon Edel, asserting that biographies aim to reveal "the overlap between what the individual did and the life that made this possible" (x). This contribution is heartfelt, entertaining, and brilliantly researched, and is sure to be a catalyst for biographies to come. Von Glahn merges the traditional biography with scholarly analysis, filling in gaps around Larsen as a leading female composer of our time.

One of Von Glahn's greatest successes with *Libby Larsen* is that it presents well researched biographical information in a style that is accessible to general audiences. The book is suitable for non-academics interested in knowing more about women composers, as well as scholars wanting to dig deeper into Larsen's life. From the very first sentence of the preface, I was captivated by Von Glahn's honest, thoughtful, and elegant telling of how she met Libby Larsen. I found her openness about their collaboration refreshing and their journey of capturing Larsen's biography motivating. Their relationship seemed idyllic for any scholar working with a living subject: genuine, supportive, and productive. Von Glahn took her role as a biographer very seriously with the goal to reveal the life of Larsen, entwining this with stories of what she had accomplished and the life that made these things possible. Although I am thrilled this research exists, there are still many other women composers from varying backgrounds who have yet to have their compositions recognized within the Western(?) musical canon. My hope is this book serves as a catalyst and model for scholars to provide more inclusive approaches to biographical subjects within musicology.

Megan Murph

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Journal of the Society for American Music (2020), Volume 14, Number 2, pp. 238–241
© The Society for American Music 2020 doi:10.1017/S1752196320000103

Steelpan Ambassadors: The US Navy Steel Band, 1957–1999. By Andrew R. Martin. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017.

In *Steelpan Ambassadors: The US Navy Steel Band, 1957–1999*, Andrew R. Martin presents a detailed account chronicling the US Navy Steel Band's development from the band's inception through the budget cuts that permanently dissolved the ensemble in 1999. Using eyewitness accounts, correspondence from multiple band members, and detailed information about the band's founder, Admiral Daniel Gallery, Martin examines the Navy's overt cultural appropriation of the instrument and musical genre and stresses the band's importance as a goodwill ambassador and recruiting tool for the US Navy.

As Martin states in his Introduction, the US Navy Steel Band had very little impact on the development of steel bands in Trinidad, but was integral in the