

**Daughters of the Lesbian Poet:
Contemporary Feminist Interpretations of Sappho's Poems Through Song (August, 2015)**
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Abstract

This thesis examines the seven song and/or choral settings of Sappho's poetry by contemporary women composers Carol Barnett, Sheila Silver, Elizabeth Vercoe, Liza Lim, Augusta Read Thomas, Mary Ellen Childs, and Patricia Van Ness. Each composer has set Sappho's poems in her own creative and artistic interpretation through diverse modern musical styles, giving the Greek poetess a modern, gendered female voice. This paper presents connections between the poetry chosen, its themes and interpretations, as well as the expressive musical devices employed. The various methodological approaches include historical and textual criticism, sociomusicology, and gender and sexual studies. The setting of Sappho's poetry and the commonalities of the poetic themes set to music help us understand how modern women view Sappho's image, hear, and give voice to the poetess of the ancient world.

CHAPTER 4

ELIZABETH VERCOE

Biographical Sketch

Elizabeth Vercoe (b. 1941) has been called by Joseph McLellan "one of the most inventive composers working in America today" in a review from *The Washington Post*.²²⁷ A native of Washington, D.C., Vercoe grew up in a musical family: her mother was a pianist and her father was proficient on many instruments. She attended National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C. (1958-62) to study piano and violin. Besides being a composer, Vercoe is multi-talented as a pianist, music educator, music critic, music therapist, and musicologist. She studied with David Barnett, receiving her B.A. in music theory and history (1962) from Wellesley College. She then attended the University of Michigan, where she studied with George Wilson, Ross Lee Finney, and Leslie Bassett. One professor in particular made a difference in her decision to pursue a Masters in composition: George Wilson, who believed that "women could be composers."²²⁸ Vercoe obtained a M.M. in composition (1963).

²²⁷ Joseph McLellan, "Review of Irreveries from Sappho, 1981," *Style Section*, *The Washington Post*, June 20, 1995, <http://elizabethvercoe.com/image/irreveriespostrevi ew.j pg>, accessed April 6, 2014.

²²⁸ Jennifer Capaldo, "Elizabeth Vercoe: Composing Her Story" (PhD Diss., University of Cincinnati, 2008), 9, in Elizabeth Vercoe, *composer, Publications: Music & Articles*, <http://elizabethvercoe.com/pub.html>, accessed April 6, 2014.

Because of Wilson's encouragement, she went on to Boston University where she received her D.M.A. in composition and music theory (1978) under the mentorship of Gardner Read.

Vercoe received fellowships and grants from an esteemed list of regional, national, and international agencies, and she has been recognized in numerous composition competitions. Besides composing, she has taught music theory in several institutions, including Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey (1969-71), and Framingham State College in Massachusetts (1973-74), and she served as recipient of the Roy Acuff Chair of Excellence in the Creative Arts at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee (2003). Since 1997, she has taught music theory, women in music, and music history at Regis College, in Weston, Massachusetts. She was also composer-in-residence at several colleges and universities, including Connecticut (2001), Illinois College (2011), and Longwood University in Virginia (2013).

Vercoe has received many commissions, including from Wellesley College, Austin Peay State University, the Pro Arte Orchestra, and the First National Congress on Women in Music. Her music has been performed by orchestras across the country and she has collaborated with international artists, ensembles, and dance companies. Many of Vercoe's pieces are recorded on Owl, Capstone, Leonarda, Navona, Centaur Records, and others. Her compositions are published by Arsis Press, Noteworthy Sheet Music, and Certosa Verlag (Germany).

The feminist movement of the 1960s had a great impact on Vercoe, so that she became a strong advocate for promoting works by women composers. Serving as board member of the International League of Women Composers (1980-87), Vercoe has written articles for the *International Choral Bulletin*, *Perspectives of New Music*, *Journal of Early Music America*, and *Journal of the International League of Women Composers*; most of these articles address the struggles and achievements of women composers. Vercoe's feminist views can be clearly heard in her famous *Herstory* series of vocal works on texts by women, to be discussed later.

Musical Style and Compositions

Elizabeth Vercoe is best known for chamber ensemble, solo vocal, and solo instrumental works rather than larger orchestral and choral music. She prefers textures that feature a solo instrument or voice and piano. Vercoe claims, "the whole process of trying to find the right music and the right poem is really mysterious."²²⁹ She recognizes the "mysterious" ways of each composer, who although train similarly, develop an individual voice. Vercoe writes music from the beginning to end, rarely making changes. She often returns to the main theme achieving the symmetry of arch form. She claims that she writes down a list of chords and picks from the list those that best fit the piece. Sometimes, she uses tritone clusters: "I do like the sound—and it's ambiguous . . . The tritone is a very friendly thing to have because it helps you destroy the sense of tonality but is not necessarily harsh."²³⁰ Joseph McLellan, from *The Washington Post*, considers

²²⁹ Elizabeth Vercoe, quoted in Capaldo, 111.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

Vercoe "similar to Charles Ives, who broke all the rules and wrote some of the most interesting songs, piano pieces and symphonies."²³¹

Vercoe describes her musical style as "contemporary classical music" stating, "I would describe it as not too experimental and not too conservative, but somewhere in the middle. If you ask what I think my music sounds like—that becomes a very difficult question. Some of it is a cry from the heart."²³² Gardner Read states that "her music possesses power and strength as well as great warmth and imagination."²³³ It is classical in the sense that she uses standard genres such as song cycle, concerto, or sonata, but Vercoe does not consider her music to fit strictly in a particular category of genre or style but is more focused on a feminist or humorous themes.²³⁴

Vercoe enjoys selecting the texts for vocal music, a task that requires ample research and reading. She likes to choose poetry that tells a story, writing "it has to have a narrative quality to it."²³⁵ In the Herstory series, the texts are by different women poets but each tells its own story. The texts have to be short and concise and the music has "to have a striking affect . . ." producing an "aha!" or "eureka!" moment.²³⁶ When

²³¹ Joseph McLellan, quoted in Capaldo, *ibid.*

²³² Elizabeth Vercoe, quoted in Capaldo, 119.

²³³ Gardner Read, quoted in Elizabeth Vercoe, composer, *Publications: Music & Articles*, <http://elizabethvercoe.com/pub.html>, accessed April 6, 2014.

²³⁴ Capaldo, 28.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

composing a vocal work, Vercoe allows the text to speak to her, as she believes that it affects the path of composition: "the text is telling me what to do, guiding me as to what to do."²³⁷ Over the years in writing vocal works, she noted "The voice is so wonderfully expressive and flexible. A singer can not only sing . . . shatteringly high, ominously low, adamantly loud, stirringly soft—but can also whisper, screech, yell, scream, cluck, use Sprechstimme, glissandi, trills and all kinds of speech."²³⁸ Vercoe has also learned to listen to singers and observe how comfortably they can sing. She considers important words to stress or give an affect or a melismatic passage. She is a perfectionist; indeed, she meticulously sings each line while composing, which takes a great amount of time.

According to Vercoe, her music always has been autobiographical, associated with the different phases of her life. The titles and texts in her music are based on her experiences—past and present—and on stories that are linked to her life. For example, her vocal work *Herstory IV* (1997), for mezzo or soprano and mandolin or marimba, is about acceptance, forgiveness, and making peace, written after her divorce from New Zealander composer Barry Vercoe. As noted, the feminist movement of the 60s and 70s had a great influence on her music, and notably on the "feministic connections in the texts of Herstory series."²³⁹ Vercoe's *Herstory I* (1975) and *Herstory II* (1979) include

²³⁷ Elizabeth Vercoe, quoted in Capaldo, 112.

²³⁸ Ibid., 30.

²³⁹ Ibid., 118.

settings of women's poetry from America and Japan, "characterized by great energy and drama, and it reflect Vercoe's ongoing commitment to important social issues."²⁴⁰

In 1985, Vercoe was commissioned by mezzo-soprano Sharon Mabry to write a vocal work while in Paris. Her trip to the ruins of Chateau de Chinon where Joan of Arc led an army inspired Vercoe, resulting in *Herstory III: Jehanne de Lorraine* (1986), a highly acclaimed monodrama for mezzo-soprano and piano. Writing *Herstory III* was "an opportunity to make a feminist statement to give a twentieth-century woman's view of important historical women, while attempting to create a musical drama from an inherently dramatic story."²⁴¹ Most importantly, it draws on Vercoe's experiences with discrimination as a woman composer in the late 1970s. In a graduate composition seminar in the early 60s, she was the only female in a room full of about a dozen male composers. Upon seeing her, composer Ross Lee Finney stated, "Well, I guess I'll have to tone down my language a little bit."²⁴² In another class, in which Vincent Persichetti was the guest speaker, he challenged, "Well, I'd like to see a score by the woman composer."²⁴²

²⁴⁰ "Composer to Occupy Acuff Chair." Austin Peay State University, January 28, 2003, <http://www.apsu.edu/news/composer-occupy-acuff-chiar>, accessed May 5, 2014.

²⁴¹ Elizabeth Vercoe. "Composing a Life," <http://elizabethvercoe.com/imagecompusinglife.jpg>, accessed April 6, 2014.

²⁴² Ross Lee Finney, quoted in Capaldo, 124.

At a composition seminar, she recalls, "I was always the only woman . . . I attended and laughingly offered cigars when one of the men's wives had a baby."²⁴⁴

Herstory I, II, and III

In *Herstory I* and *II*, the American and Japanese women poets she chose each have a different point of view. "Some of them were frightened and oppressed by men, others were flippant and sure of themselves, and others are spiritual about their love relationship. It is reflecting on how many different kinds of women there are and how they feel in different ways."²⁴⁵ The first review of *Herstory II* that appeared in *Fanfare* was criticized by an English professor; Vercoe states that "He hated the piece . . . saying how ridiculous it was to put together those two words and make a pseudo-word out of it . . . To imply that the word "history" is his story. But . . . that is the point—that so much history has been done in such a way that it was only the story of male enterprises. I kept using it anyway."²⁴⁶

Herstory III is described by *The Washington Post* as "the most powerful work by a woman on a feminist theme."²⁴⁷ However, Vercoe does not consider herself a staunch feminist; she asserts that she writes her music from a woman's point of view. She claims

²⁴³ Vincent Persichetti, quoted in Capaldo, 124.

²⁴⁴ Elizabeth Vercoe, quoted in Capaldo, 67.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁴⁶ Elizabeth Vercoe, quoted in Capaldo, 67.

²⁴⁷ "Review of Herstory III, 1986," in *The Washington Post*, <http://elizabethvercoe.com/herstory3.html>, accessed April 6, 2014.

her works are feminine, "but not in the sense of ruffles and lace, just a woman's view . . . much as I love the Schumann cycles, even when a man is writing from a woman's point of view there are all these men writing on these subjects and surely a woman might have a slightly different point of view."²⁴⁸ She further explains, "I suspect that women who are composers find their gender an issue and their lives even more inextricably intertwined with their music than do men who are composers So I suspect that my story is in many ways HERstory, that is, the story of many another woman composer."²⁴⁹ Since then, Vercoe became aware of women composers' undeserved treatment and purposeful exclusion from textbooks and concerts. As a result, she participated in the women's music movement—she has promoted women composers and musicians; written articles about the struggles of women composers, conductors, and musicians; and has served as a board member, writer, and women's music festival organizer for The International League of Women Composers. She also helped establish the American Women Composers Inc. in Massachusetts and became president of the chapter in 1985.

Vercoe's Herstory V, for voice and six players is currently in progress. It is a song cycle with texts by Japanese women poets, ancient Greek women poets Sappho and Praxilla, an anonymous nineteenth-century Irish woman, and her daughter, Andrea Vercoe. The goal for Vercoe's Herstory series is that "each cycle strives to express some view on life from a woman's perspective. She publicly and powerfully draws attention to

²⁴⁸ Vercoe, quoted in Capaldo, 121.

²⁴⁹ Elizabeth Vercoe. "Herstory Unfolding." Paper presented at Wellesley College, MA, 1996.

the distinctive experiences and values of women, expressing their unique contribution through music."²⁵⁰ "Vercoe does not wish to limit the reception of her works by labeling it as 'feminist,' and she does not wish to deny the presence of such themes" but rather explicitly tell about women and their stories.²⁵¹ Therefore, to Vercoe, feminism has a different meaning—it is not political, but simply "an opportunity to say something that only a woman could say" as evidence in her song cycle, *Irreveries* from Sappho.²⁵²

Irreveries from Sappho (1981)

The song cycle *Irreveries from Sappho*, for soprano or mezzo-soprano or SSA and piano, features a variety of musical styles all drawn from popular music, in the movement titles: *Andromeda Rag*, *Older Woman Blues*, and *Boogie for Leda*. Vercoe was fascinated with Sappho's poems and their relevance to modern times. She chose to set the text translations by Mary Barnard. Coming up with a title for the set of three

songs she had composed on Sappho's texts was a challenge. She kept trying titles and sometimes combining them. Then she came up with "Irreveries," a word she made up. She was pleased with the result because she understood that audiences "prefer fanciful titles over absolute ones and finding a good title is part of the creative process."²⁵³

²⁵⁰ Jennifer Capaldo, "Tracking the Herstory Cycles of Elizabeth Vercoe." *Journal of the International Alliance for Women in Music* 17, no. 2 (2011): 18, <http://elizabethvercoe.com/capaldoarticle.html>, accessed April 6, 2014.

²⁵¹ Capaldo, 26.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁵³ Elizabeth Vercoe, quoted in Capaldo, 115.

Singer Sharon Mabry, a professor of music at Austin Peay State University, commissioned Vercoe to write *Herstory III*, to bring awareness to women's compositions. Mabry performed and recorded *Herstory III*, and Vercoe dedicated *Irreveries* from Sappho to her. Vercoe and Mabry share a passion for including women's music on concert programs. Like Vercoe, Mabry was strongly influenced by feminism and the women's music movement, noting that "women composers need much more support and exposure . . . If women don't do it, men certainly aren't going to. [Women] They're just as good [as men] and worthy of performance and worthy of study."²⁵⁴

The first performance of *Irreveries* from Sappho was at the American Society of University Composers (ASUC) conference held in Holyoke, Massachusetts in 1981, with Melissa Spratlan as solo soprano. Since its premiere, a variety of soloists and choral groups have performed the cycle, including the New York Virtuoso Singers and the Thamyris Contemporary Ensemble, among others. Dedicattee Sharon Mabry performed it at the National Gallery of Art in 1995 with a successful reception from audiences and critics, including Joseph McLellan of *The Washington Post*, who wrote, "The hit of the American selections . . . the most . . . important on the program was Vercoe's *Irreveries* from Sappho, witty treatments of three texts by the ancient Greek poet. English translations of the fragmented texts, which contain some of the most passionate poetry . . . were set in ragtime, blues, and boogie styles that strikingly underlined the poems' /

²⁵⁴ Sharon Mabry, quoted in Capaldo, 25.

modernity. Mabry . . . performed superbly . . . [she] sang with beautiful clarity."²⁵⁵ A reviewer from *The Columbus Dispatch* raved: "It makes serious the musical styles of ragtime, blues, and boogie but makes humorous some of women's age-old traumas."²⁵⁶ Although Sappho's poems are 2,600 years old, the ancient texts are remarkably applicable to modern times. The timeless feminine themes of jealousy, old age, and rumor in Sappho's poems captured Vercoe's attention, and she purposely set the texts in modern popular styles.

Both singer and pianist must possess excellent technique with a good knowledge of the styles in each song. Although written for a mezzo-soprano, a soprano can also sing the songs "as long as the middle voice has enough full-bodied

color and texture."²⁵⁷According to Mabry, these songs are entertaining and are open to various expressions and interpretations. Each woman is able to project her own personality and individuality as she gives voice to these gendered complaints.

I. Andromeda Rag: Text Analysis

Sappho is not the only one who had a school for girls in the island of Lesbos. She had two adversaries: Gorgo and Andromeda. According to many Greek scholars, there is little known about these two except that they were also poets. In a different fragment,

²⁵⁵ McLellan, review.

²⁵⁶ "Review of Irreveries from Sappho, 1981," in The Columbus Dispatch, <http://elizabethvercoe.com/irreveries.html>, accessed April 6, 2014.

²⁵⁷ Laura G. Kapka, "Review of Elizabeth Vercoe: Kleemation and Other Works." *Journal of the IAWM* 19, no. 1 (2013): 2, <http://elizabethvercoe.com/image/kleemation.review.pdf>, accessed April 6, 2014.

Sappho expresses her anger at Andromeda, who took away her beloved Atthis, a close companion and former student. It is not certain if the young girl in the poem is Atthis or someone else for there is no name mentioned (this is in contrast to other poems where Sappho declares Atthis by name.) In the text of the first song, Sappho refers to Andromeda. Vercoe chooses Mary Barnard's translation, whose title names Andromeda; however, Barnstone's translation is also considered for comparison.

TABLE 18. Mary Barnard, Frag. 74 and Willis Barnstone, Frag. 192

Mary Barnard, Frag. 74
I hear that Andromeda—
That hayseed in her
hayseed finery—has put
a torch to your heart
and she without even
the art of lifting her
skirt over her ankles

Willis Barnstone, Frag. 192
Andromeda, What Now?
Can this farm girl in farm-girl
finery burn your heart?
She is even ignorant of the way
to lift her gown over her
ankles.²⁵⁸

Mary Barnard, Willis Barnstone, and Paul Roche all noted that this fragment was quoted in a fifteen-volume work, *Deipnosophistae* (Scholars at Dinner) by Athenaeus (230 A.D.), a Greek rhetorician and grammarian.²⁵⁹ According to Jane McIntosh Snyder, Sappho was jealous and reproaches Andromeda for seducing an innocent young girl. Sappho describes Andromeda as "a hayseed," which Snyder interprets as a country-

²⁵⁸ Barnstone, 8.

²⁵⁹ Barnard, 109; Barnstone, 292; Roche, 204.

bumpkin who does not know how to dress properly.²⁶⁰ In Barnstone's translation as shown above, he also confirms that Sappho sarcastically refers to Andromeda as a "farm girl."²⁶¹ Sappho speaks of Andromeda's lack of fashion sense, or rather lack of femininity or grace. Margaret Williamson believes that Sappho insults Andromeda by calling her "rustic," due to her low ranking skills as a poet.²⁶²

I. Andromeda Rag: Music Analysis

Vercoe appropriately requests both the singer and the pianist to be "spirited, with a touch of venom," a designation clearly inspired by the poem.²⁶³ Overall, the first song is a mixture of melodic, tonal, and highly dissonant sounds. The typical rag style in the piano features a steady left hand against a syncopated right hand. Moving from a fortissimo, mezzo forte, to mezzo piano, the soprano sings in the manner of an "outburst, sarcastic, mocking sweetness with clenched teeth,"²⁶⁴ as part of Vercoe's performance directions, presumably to depict Sappho's jealousy and hateful feelings toward Andromeda. The soprano also sings Sprechstimme and descending glissandi with large intervallic leaps on the word "hayseed" to strongly emphasize the country girl,

²⁶⁰ Snyder, *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho*, 116.

²⁶¹ Barnstone, 82. ²⁶² Williamson, 85-86.

²⁶³ Elizabeth Vercoe, *Irreveries from Sappho*, for soprano with piano accompaniment, (Washington D.C.: Arsis Press, 1983), 2. Audio sample is available on the composer's website, Vercoe, "Listening, Andromeda Rag," <http://elizabethvercoe.com/mp3/irreveries1.mp3>, accessed February 2, 2014.

²⁶⁴ Vercoe, 2-4.

Andromeda. Word painting on the word "lifting her skirt" and ascending glissando conveys the wardrobe troubles of Andromeda. At the end of the cycle, Vercoe inserts the familiar but almost unnoticeable melody *Auld Lang Sang* in the piano as a musical joke. She describes the whole song cycle as "wickedly satiric and full of musical jokes and parodies."²⁶⁵ She was actually worried of being labeled as a "not serious" composer; happily, the opposite "happened that audiences and performers everywhere have continued to enjoy the humor and delight of this set."²⁶⁶ Vercoe includes this song as a joke perhaps to suggest that Andromeda's lack of fashion sense is laughable. *Auld Lang Sang*, sung mostly in celebration of the New Year could be included here to emphasize a new beginning or an ending, or a farewell. Perhaps Vercoe gives Sappho voice to say farewell to a former student snatched by the wiles of her nemesis.

II. Older Woman Blues: Text Analysis

In the poem set in the second movement, Sappho declares her love to someone of unspecified gender. Diane Rayor assumes that "the speaker was female and the friend is male."²⁶⁷ The conversation between the two persons in the poem is somewhat convoluted or confusing because the love declaration is followed by an almost angry ultimatum. The speaker declares love for the other and gives an ultimatum that, if the other reciprocates the same feeling, he or she should "marry a young woman.

²⁶⁵ Elizabeth Vercoe, quoted in Capaldo, 75.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 74-75.

²⁶⁷ Rayor, 164.

TABLE 19. Mary Barnard, Frag. 72 and Paul Roche, Frag. 124

Mary Barnard, Frag. 72
Of course I love you

But if you love me,
marry a young woman!

I couldn't stand it
to live with a young man,
I being older

Paul Roche, Frag. 124
No! It Wouldn't Work

If you love me choose a
younger partner for your
your bed and board: I
could not bear to live, an
elder woman with a younger
lord ²⁶⁸

Sappho strongly expressed her feelings about aging in this poem and several others and how it affected her relationships. Greek scholars agree that a fifth century A.D. anthologist named Stobaeus included this fragment in his *Anthology*, a collection of ancient Greek writings, suggesting that the poem alludes to the significant age difference between marriage couples.²⁶⁹ Anne Carson interprets the poem also as referring to the "the relative ages of marriage partners."²⁷⁰ Marriage was the ultimate goal for a woman of noble birth in ancient Greece. It was an important part in a woman's life socially and politically, with the reputation of the family name, wealth, and social status in aristocratic society at stake. According to Margaret Williamson:

Sappho's poetry suggests love and marriage can be viewed in a very different way, and the condition of Parthenos [virgin, associated with Athena] occupied only a small part of a woman's life, unlike the comparable status for a man, that of citizen and fighter, which lasted until he reached old age. Marriage and its social importance provided the way

²⁶⁸ Roche, 113.

²⁶⁹ Barnard, 109; Barnstone, 297; Carson, 375.

²⁷⁰ Carson, *ibid.*

women are represented in literary and artistic sources, and the opportunities they themselves had to participate in *mousikē* (music). It helps to explain why images of young women are widespread, and why beauty and grace receive such emphasis in descriptions of them. Preparation for marriage and marriage were among the occasions that call for women themselves, and thus potentially women poets, to engage in song and dance.²⁷¹

The whole point of aristocratic parents sending their young virgin daughter to a girl's school like Sappho's was because it was part of the culture for them to learn about marriage and how to maintain the relationship. The preparation for marriage meant to learn different tasks, including preserving their beauty with many regimens such as bathing in fragrant oils, washing and styling their hair with flowers, and dressing their best; knowing poetry, art, and music; and learning how to pleasure their future husband.

In Paul Roche's translation, he believes that Sappho is addressing her older contemporary poet Alcaeus.²⁷² Furthermore, Roche claims that there is evidence that Alcaeus was in love with Sappho until the day of her death. Countering this, scholar Arthur Weigall suggests that she perhaps is speaking to the youthful Phaon; she was madly in love with him, but her unrequited love led to her leap from the Leucadian cliff.²⁷³ Weigall further speculates that Sappho has been asked to be married by a young man, but rejected his proposal via this fragment.²⁷⁴ The reason for her rejection: Sappho

²⁷¹ Williamson, 75-76.

²⁷² Roche, 209. ²⁷³ Arthur Weigall, quoted in Roche, *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ Weigall, 291-292.

could not accept the fact that she is no longer capable of satisfying a man, nor can she stop her aging. Even if he marries her, he will eventually leave her for a younger woman.

II. Older Woman Blues: Music Analysis

Older Woman Blues is slow and is set in a compound meter.²⁷⁵ The steady chords in the left hand and the syncopation in the right hand of the piano, clearly give a "bluesy" feel. Vercoe instructs the singer and pianist to perform the work "subdued but sensual."²⁷⁶ Being sensual in the performance emphasizes the ancient Greek value of beauty and sexual pleasure in a marriage. She may be able to perform her sexual duties with her mate, but she cannot maintain her beauty, for it is fleeting. Therefore, the singer's complaints of being old perfectly fit the genre and the title of the second song. Overall, the focus on a tonal center symbolizes her unwavering love for her partner and the wide intervallic leaps portray her complaint on her fading beauty. Moreover, the singer's expressive recitations, accompanied by dynamic changes from mezzo forte to forte on the phrase "I being older," conveys Sappho's woes of old age as she pleads her partner leaving her for another.

III. Boogie for Leda: Text Analysis

The third song evokes the story of Leda, for whom there are different versions of the myth. She was a princess from Sparta who was seduced by the womanizer Zeus, who had transformed himself into a swan. Their union produced three children: Helen, and

²⁷⁵ Vercoe, "Listening, Older Woman Blues," <http://elizabethvercoe.com/mp3/irreveries2.mp3>, accessed February 2, 2014.

²⁷⁶ Vercoe, 6.

the twins Castor and Pollux, said to have been hatched from a single egg. According to Jane McIntosh Snyder and Paul Roche, there were two eggs, not one, and there were four children, not three: Castor, Pollux, Clytemnestra, and Helen.²⁷⁷ Anne Carson believes that all four children came from one egg and that the swan's egg was white, not blue.²⁷⁸ However Mary Barnard tells a different tale: "according to one story, Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, laid the egg, and Leda only found it."²⁷⁹

Willis Barnstone and Anne Carson both claim that this fragment was cited by grammarian Athenaeus (230 A.D.), in his work *Scholars at Dinner*.²⁸⁰ However, Mary Barnard and Paul Roche both noted that this poem was quoted in the *Treatise of Etymology*, but they did not mention the identity of the author.²⁸¹

Paul Roche claims that the translated word "hyacinth" is not the specific flower as we know it today, but it could mean other flowers, such as a larkspur or iris, so that Sappho is probably describing the egg's color of hyacinth blue.²⁸² Returning to the Leda story, Diane Rayor speculates that Leda did not give birth to Helen, but was found by her

²⁷⁷ Snyder, 111; Roche, 188. Clytemnestra and Helen are twin sisters or half sisters.

²⁷⁸ Carson, 381.

²⁷⁹ Barnard, 113. ²⁸⁰ Barnstone, 297; Carson, 381.

²⁸¹ Barnard, 107; Roche, 188.

²⁸² Roche, 188.

TABLE 20. Mary Barnard, Frag. 13: People Do Gossip

Mary Barnard, Frag. 13
People do gossip

And they say about
Leda, that she
once found an egg
Hidden under
Wild hyacinths

mother, who "is not raped by Zeus in the form of a swan, but instead found an egg hidden in a fragrant flower."²⁸³ According to Jack Winkler's interpretation of the poem, he argues that Sappho mixes the Leda tale with sexual imagery in the fragment, discussed below. Winkler agrees with Rayor that Leda was not a victim of rape by Zeus, but she discovered "a mysterious egg hidden inside the frilly blossoms of a hyacinth stem, or (better) in a bed of hyacinths when she parted the petals and looked under the leaves."²⁸⁴ Winkler suggests the egg discovered has three possible interpretations: 1) "a clitoris hidden under the labia; 2) the supremely beautiful woman, a tiny Helen; and 3) a story, object, and person hidden from the male culture."²⁸⁵ With the first interpretation, the parting of the petals (labia) is inferred; combing the hyacinth leaves (mons pubis), and finding the egg (clitoris)—all clear sexual images. The second interpretation suggests

²⁸³ Rayor, 164.

²⁸⁴ Winkler, 105.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

finding Helen in the egg. The last explanation, according to Winkler, refers to a covering of an object such as clothing, flowers, or hair, as an accessory or for protection from men. Furthermore, he notes that the bushy flowers that cover the earth serve as a cushion for both Zeus and Hera in their lovemaking. If Winkler's

speculation of Sappho's sexual imagery in Leda's story is correct, it provides homoerotic symbolism of Leda discovering another woman's clitoris, or Leda actually discovering her own object of sexual pleasure.

III. Boogie for Leda: Music Analysis

The setting of Boogie for Leda matches well with the composer's performance direction of "flippant."²⁸⁶ The piano part is disjunct with syncopations. This song is quite complicated and challenging for the soprano because of the fast tempo and wide leaps in the vocal line. Sprechstimme and glissando emphasize the word "gossip," conveying the many rumors about the life of Leda. The piano echoes with chord clusters and glissandi. The name Leda is sung portamento at forte, depicting the widespread gossiping of people. Vercoe instructs the soprano to sing "hysterically and exaggerated," at fortissimo employing Sprechstimme and a glissando on the phrase "that she once found an egg," to emphasize the discovery of someone else's or her own sexual pleasure.²⁸⁷ At the last declamation of the soprano, she sings with large intervallic leaps on the words "hidden under wild hyacinths," unaccompanied, "freely, cadenza-like and agitated."²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Vercoe, 8. Vercoe, "Listening, Boogie for Leda," <http://elizabethvercoe.com/mp3/irreveries3.mp3>, accessed February 2, 2014.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 10.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 11.

The piano then plays an extended postlude. Capaldo notes that "Vercoe recognizes that there is a tradition of the piano having the last word in a song, acknowledging the roots in the Lieder of the Romantic era."²⁸⁹ The soprano reaches an orgasmic climax and the piano's last notes in the cycle evoke the fulfillment Sappho's homoerotic fantasies.

Clearly, Vercoe is a strong proponent of feminism. Her performance directions such as "spirited, outburst, sarcastic, mocking, flippant, hysterically and exaggerated, freely and agitated" were fixated on declaring feminist views and emotions. In addition, Sappho's poetry speaks to Silver's heart and prompts themes of lesbian love, sexual love, marriage, anger, jealousy, rivalry, and old age. Vercoe sees Sappho as a vessel for women to have a strong voice and to emote their feelings. Sappho's text and Vercoe's music provide women an opportunity to individually express their powerful feminine emotions based on their experiences and values that are associated to the different phases of life from a women's perspective.

²⁸⁹ Capaldo, 75