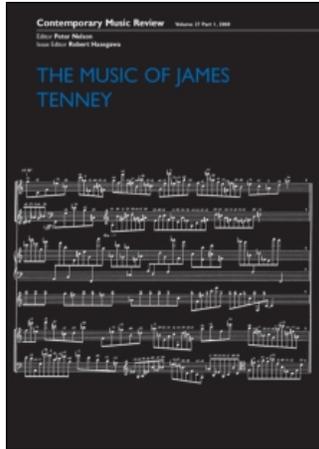


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Voice is the Original Instrument

Joan La Barbara

The singer Joan La Barbara's career as a composer, performer, and sound artist has been devoted to exploring the human voice as a multifaceted instrument, going beyond its traditional boundaries to create works for voices, instruments, and interactive technologies. As a pioneer in the field of contemporary classical music and sound art, she has developed a unique vocabulary of experimental and extended vocal techniques, including the multiphonics, circular singing, ululation, and glottal clicks that have become her signature sounds. Tracing her development as a performer and composer, La Barbara discusses her collaborations with American composers including John Cage, Morton Feldman, Alvin Lucier, Morton Subotnick, Philip Glass, and Steve Reich, and describes the musical world of New York in the 1970s.

KEYWORDS: New York school, extended techniques, vocal music, minimalism, performance art, technology

I was always singing; I can't remember a time when I was not singing. My mother says I told her when I was two years old that I was going to become a singer. We know a great deal when we are children; it takes a lifetime to become what we know.

I sang in church choirs as a child and was always given the solo parts there and in school productions. In fact, I remember one Christmastime when I had been given a solo part and then came down with an illness. The director gave the solo to another child. I was so furious, I managed to get well and return in time to sing the solo part in the production. I also played piano from the age of four. In high school, I had a folk music group, The Calicos, four women. We sang in coffeehouses around the Philadelphia and New Hope (Pennsylvania) area.

When I got to Syracuse University, I focused on the Western classical tradition, learning art songs and arias. There was a composer at Syracuse, Franklin Morris, who was doing "happenings" and convinced the school to purchase a MOOG synthesizer. He didn't have an actual class in electronic music production – this was 1967 – but allowed a few of us who were interested to come up to his studio in the Crouse College tower and work on the equipment. I produced a couple of pieces on tape and became fascinated with this medium and with the exploration of sound in general. I had also become friends with Phyllis Bryn-Julson, who had done extensive work with Gunther Schuller, and she helped me convince Helen Boatwright to take me on as a student. Helen was renowned as a Bach soprano but also had premiered *Das Marienleben* by Paul Hindemith. She taught me a

great deal about the performance persona and how to command the stage. I also was in Phyllis Curtin's summer master classes at Tanglewood/Berkshire Music Center for two summers and was exposed to a great deal of contemporary music there. Curtin had, of course, worked with Ligeti, as well as doing conventional opera, so I had two teachers who were combining contemporary with more traditional music.

The contemporary works I was singing at that time were fairly standard fare: Copland, Barber, Britten, Menotti, and Stravinsky. It wasn't until I came to New York – anxious to get my career started and to be in a place where I could begin to make career connections, I transferred from Syracuse after my junior year and finished my degree at NYU in 1970 – that I began to stretch out and experiment more with my instrument. I studied with a teacher from Juilliard, Marian Szekely Freschl, a statuesque Hungarian contralto in her seventies who used to tell me, "I will just fix your voice and then I can die." She allowed me to sit in on the lessons of her students at Juilliard and, whenever one would call in sick, she would give that person's lesson to me. So I got to watch her teach many other students, as well as getting additional lesson time for myself. I'd do my classes at NYU and then get on the subway and rush up to Juilliard (which was at that time in the old Claremont Avenue building that the Manhattan School of Music has since taken over), hungry to absorb as much information about the voice, mine or others, as I could. She arranged that I study breathing with a registered nurse whose concept and exercises were much like yoga.

Freschl told me that it was important to sing contemporary music and that one must become friends with composers and teach them how to write for the voice. She had gone to school with Bartók and said he had helped her with her theory exercises. Every summer, Freschl would return to Hungary, and, after the second year of my study with her, she had arranged that I attend Boris Goldovsky's opera workshop in West Virginia and study *Pelléas et Mélisande*. It was about that time that I was becoming somewhat disenchanted with the opera world and its approach to singing, learning to do roles as they had been done for years, becoming part of the tradition. After Freschl left for Europe, I phoned the opera workshop and told them I was having vocal trouble and couldn't attend. They tried to assure me that they could fix whatever problems I was having, but I told them I just couldn't take the risk. I walked away from the traditional singing world at that moment and never turned back, although I do regret never having shared my New Music world with Freschl.

I began to work with jazz musicians, working with one instrument at a time, asking individual instrumentalists to play long tones on single pitches as I tried to imitate that sound. It was a slow process: listening to the sound, analyzing the timbre, and then sounding with the voice, analyzing again to judge how close I came to that timbre, listening again and sounding again, gradually retraining my thinking as well as my voice. I also became fascinated with the ways instrumentalists were extending their sounds, stretching the boundaries of what was the established technique. I didn't hear other singers doing that, and I wondered why. I had heard recordings of Cathy Berberian, of course, and also listened to jazz scat singing. But I wanted to discover for myself what my voice could do, so I started improvising, alone and with other musicians. WBAI had something called the Free Music Store in the early seventies and, on Thursday nights, jazz and New Music musicians would gather for improv sessions. Anthony Braxton,

Frederic Rzewski, Garrett List, Steve Lacy, I, and various others would play for hours. On the evenings Rzewski was there, he would always insist on having a discussion afterwards, analyzing what we had done and why. Although I found it annoying at the time, it became part of the process, and I absorbed that instant analysis into my thinking, so that it became as much a part of improvising as the making of sound. This marked the beginnings of my commitment to exploring new sounds and ideas, and paved the way for my own compositional activities and for my connection as a performer to the creative thought processes of the composers with whom I would choose to work.

In 1971, I was singing commercials for composer Michael Sahl, who also worked as Judy Collins's pianist and music director. In one commercial for a Japanese perfume, I imitated everything from a koto (actually, a harp imitating a koto, since the ad executives thought the koto was too ethnic-sounding for American listeners) to eventually sounding something like a Japanese Astrud Gilberto. Michael knew that Steve Reich was looking for singers who could imitate instrumental sounds, and so I auditioned and started working with him on *Drumming*. At first, he thought he wanted me to imitate the sound of bongo drums, but then he decided that a male voice sounded better with the drums and that the female voice worked better with marimba. It was just what I had been working on; his needs and my technique were a perfect match. Steve would put tape loops on the decks, and, as the patterns shifted out of phase and into new interlocking relationships, we (at first with singer, now producer, Judy Sherman, later with jazz singer Jay Clayton) would improvise, singing the resulting patterns that we heard. Steve chose certain patterns and then locked them into the final score. I worked with Steve for three years (1971–1974), through the Deutsche Gramophon recordings of *Drumming* and *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ*. We did most of our performances in European art galleries and museums where American new music was welcomed. When we came back to America, with the exception of Town Hall, which Steve rented for the *Drumming* premiere, our concerts were also predominantly in galleries and museums; the concert world was not yet ready for this kind of music.

Philip Glass came to one of the concerts, and I introduced myself to him and asked if he had ever considered using voice in his music. He replied that Yvonne Rainer (a filmmaker and one of the Grand Union/Judson Church dancers) came by every once in awhile and screamed along, but it wasn't exactly singing. He asked if I knew his music, and I said no, so he invited me to a concert he was giving later that week in a loft on Lafayette Street, just off the Bowery. I went, climbed the ten flights to a grungy loft space, and listened to this loud, trancelike music played by flutes, saxophones, and Farfisa organs. I liked what I heard, told him so, and he said that his trumpet player had just died, and I could join the band and sing the trumpet part if I wanted. Over the 3–4-year period I worked with Glass, he produced the monumental six-hour *Music in 12 Parts* (which we premiered at a gigantic event at Town Hall complete with a dinner break), *Another Look at Harmony*, and Philip's first foray into the potential area of pop music, *North Star*. I gradually taught him more about what the voice could do, how long one could stay in a limited tessitura, and when one needed to move to another part of the range to avoid vocal fatigue. Philip was very supportive of my solo concert work, encouraging me to do performances whenever possible on free days while we were on tour. In the summer of 1976, we premiered *Einstein on*

the Beach, the now-acknowledged landmark experimental opera, at the Festival d'Avignon.

That same summer, I also premiered John Cage's *Solo for Voice 45* from *Song Books* with *Atlas Eclipticalis* for orchestra and *Winter Music* for two pianos at the Festival de La Rochelle. The two-hour-and-forty-minute performance was both a triumph and a disaster. The orchestral players misbehaved, clowning, talking, drinking on-stage, and doing their utmost to disrupt the proceedings, while the conductor Richard Dufallo, the two pianists, and I did our best to stay focused and perform our musical tasks. At the end of the performance, Cage was livid about the orchestra's behavior but was delighted with mine, promising to be with me always from that moment on. He became my mentor, the one I trusted with my professional and personal guidance. While we were at La Rochelle, I told him I was troubled about the *Einstein* production and that I felt it was taking a great deal of time, pulling me away from my own work. As we walked on the beach, I asked Cage's advice about what I should do, and his response was that he thought I had already come to a decision. Guidance, not answers. I took an important step toward establishing my independent identity, leaving the Glass Ensemble after the *Einstein* premiere to devote myself to other work and to my own compositional development.

I had first encountered John Cage in Berlin in 1972 at a performance of *HPSCHD* at the Berlin Philharmonie. It had so infuriated me – the cacophony and the crowds and the moon landing slides and performers talking instead of playing – that I marched up to him and demanded, "With all the chaos in the world, why do you make more?" The devotees seated at his feet gasped, and I turned on my heel and stormed off, certain I wouldn't get a reasonable reply in that situation. Several minutes later, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see John smiling beatifically. "Perhaps when you go back out into the world, it won't seem so chaotic." I was charmed and astonished that he had sought me out in the melee and produced a reasoned, thoughtful answer to my question. It changed my mind about him and about music.

In 1974, when I was about to do solo concerts of my own music for the first time, I saw Cage at a performance at Phill Niblock's loft (Cage was always attending concerts when he wasn't performing in them) and gave him a list of my upcoming events, saying, "I'm doing some concerts, and I'd like you to be there." He went through some difficulty to attend the first of these, arriving at the wrong venue and then rushing to find the right one. I premiered my *Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation* that evening, a rigorous étude exploring the multitude of timbres, colors, overtones, and multiphonics that could be created from a single tone. Cage loved it and my performance and asked me if I'd like to work with him. He gave me the score to *Solo for Voice 45* from *Song Books*, eighteen pages of "aggregates" with numbers above each aggregate determining how many pitches were to be chosen in the alto and treble clefs, and letters beneath, to be used as vocalize. It took me nearly six months to work out my decisions, notate them, and learn to sing them "as fast as possible." When I felt I was ready, I phoned him and invited him to my loft to listen. He told me it was beautiful but it wasn't fast enough, and then demonstrated how he wanted the sound to be a flurry of notes, like a calligraphic gesture. I worked harder at getting my speed faster but complained to David Tudor that Cage's directions hadn't been clear. He looked at them and said that Cage had been clear; I simply

hadn't taken them literally enough. Another lesson. Over the years as I worked with Cage, I watched him answer many questions about his music, responding carefully to questions even when people interrupted him during a meal, and he always referred back to the score or to the printed instructions, making certain that the answer was there. In cases of ambiguity, he would write in a correction or clarification.

Cage had spoken of me to Alvin Lucier. "She has devoted her life to contemporary music. Isn't that marvelous?" Based on Cage's description and without having heard me sing, Alvin trusted me to work with him on a new piece he was developing, *Still and Moving Lines of Silence in Families of Hyperbolas*. We discussed the concept of interference patterns. Alvin explained how he would create a sonic geography of peaks and troughs, valleys of silence one could move through, bordered by walls of sound. We were rehearsing in the Cunningham dancespace at Westbeth, and, as I moved onto the wooden floor, I began singing very softly, changing my pitch microtonally, causing the oscillator-produced soundwaves from the speakers to beat against the vocal soundwaves, giving the impression that I could move them away from me. After about twenty minutes, I stopped, and Alvin asked me what I had been doing. I explained that I was locating myself in the sonic center of the room by finding the place where the sound waves were bombarding me equally from all sides, and I could push them away from me by tuning my voice, adjusting the pitch to deflect the oscillator waves. Alvin was fascinated by my approach to the concept we had discussed. We first performed the work at the Musée d'Art Moderne for the Festival d'Automne à Paris in 1974. I also performed there for the first time with two other members of the Sonic Arts Union, the quartet of kindred-thinking electronic-based composers who had banded together to produce concerts and share equipment on their tours. David Behrman had created a new work for me called *Voice with Melody-driven Harmonies* for Merce Cunningham's dance, *Rebus*, in which specific pitches that I sang caused the oscillator tones to shift and slide about. I also played viola in a solo version of Robert Ashley's work for string quartet, in which ticks from the bow pulled slowly across the string of the viola, placed in my lap, caused electronic "gates" to open, allowing portions of Mimi Johnson's rambling storytelling to be heard, or not.

In 1974, I began writing preview articles for the *SoHo Weekly News*, a free paper that was given out on the streets of the burgeoning arts neighborhood. I felt that many of the composers I was working with were being misunderstood by the critics and that, if I could provide insight in advance to both the audience and the critics, I would be providing a meaningful service. John Rockwell began quoting some of my comments in his *New York Times* reviews and suggested to me that Shirley Fleming was looking for someone to write about contemporary music in *Musical America* magazine. I contacted her and subsequently served as the New Music Editor for that monthly publication from 1977 to 1987, writing descriptive articles that were designed to give readers a sense of what they would have experienced had they been at the performance. For many years, people told me they depended on my articles to inform them about the New Music scene in New York and at the various festivals I attended worldwide.

Some of my works from the early seventies were strongly influenced by the world of conceptual art and reflected the thinking and pondering and emphasis on process that was very much a part of the gallery and art performance scene.

Hear What I Feel (1974–1975) was a sensory deprivation performance piece, definitely conceptual art but also designed to help me discover new vocal sounds. I spent an hour before the performance in an isolated room with my eyes taped shut, also not touching anything. The idea was that if one or two of one's usually functioning senses were cut off from normal response, others would become more active, stronger in response to that deprivation of data. After the isolation period, I was led out to the performance space, eyes still taped shut. My assistant would have placed a variety of items in six glass dishes (I stipulated only that nothing should crawl or injure me), and I tried to vocalize an immediate reaction to touching these substances, not trying to identify but to respond to feelings, emotions, to issue a sonic response. I wanted to communicate with the audience on a pre-verbal sound level, while also revealing possible new vocal territory.

In 1974, I wrote *Performance Piece*, a work based on left brain/right brain thought patterns, exploring the artistic process in real time, that is, vocalizing when I was thinking in sonic gestures and verbalizing when I found myself analyzing the sounds or making conscious decisions about how to order them. The trigger or inspiration for this work came from a discussion I had with Robert Ashley during an interview for one of my *SoHo Weekly News* preview articles, regarding what he referred to as the "internal dialogue" that one has with oneself (self-monitoring or censoring one's own thoughts before speaking them aloud). I subtitled *Performance Piece* "Ashley gave me an idea," because our conversation got me thinking about how one makes conscious decisions during improvisation but the audience only hears the musical result, not the process of considering that one goes through in making musical decisions. I thought this would be a fascinating exploration. In fact, both works proved intriguing both to me and to the audience but were also somewhat psychologically stressful for me in their necessity to expose an honest dialogue over the brain bridge.

In 1975 and 1976, Morton Feldman, whom I had met several years earlier while performing at Walter Bachauer's *Metamusik* Festivals in Berlin, invited me to be Visiting Slee Composer at the Center for Creative and Performing Arts at SUNY-Buffalo. I had been exploring my vocal ideas in specialized études and improvisational settings for several years, in solo concerts in New York and Europe, and with the New Wilderness Preservation Band, an improvisational ensemble that provided musical soundscapes for various poets and writers in concert-readings at Washington Square Church. Roger Reynolds had also heard of my experimental vocal work and had come to my loft to invite me to join a new Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble at the Center for Music Experiment at the University of California in San Diego (UCSD). I was happy doing my explorations as a solo artist and wasn't sure I wanted to leave New York to join an ensemble, especially for the kind of money that was being offered. So I stayed in New York, traveling and performing solo concerts, and accepted Feldman's offer to visit Buffalo on a visiting artist basis, allowing me to explore some of my instrumental ideas with the Creative Associates, a select group of specialists in contemporary music.

That season, I had been awarded my first grant for music composition, from CAPS (Creative Artists Public Service program), a division of the New York State Council for the Arts. I was exploring a new work for six timpani and voice with live electronics, called *Thunder*. The electronics I was using at that time were

essentially designed for electric guitar players. I had started using them on my work *Vocal Extensions* (which I premiered in concert at Washington Square Church in New York on 17 January 1975) to extend the voice further through electronic modification and also to use the electronics as a surprise element, turning the dials randomly, and then playing with the resulting sounds as I would play with sounds coming from other musicians in an ensemble setting. I premiered *Thunder* at The Kitchen in 1976, along with another ensemble work, *Ides of March* for string and vocal quartets and percussion, exploring the acoustic phenomenon of "beats" occurring between closely tuned instruments, using the percussion to articulate, punctuate, and reinforce the naturally occurring beat patterns. I was looking forward to exploring these works with other musicians, such as the Creative Associates at Buffalo. Feldman was very encouraging and supportive of my music.

In 1977, I was invited by Hans Otte, Director of New Music, to do a production for Radio Bremen in Germany. It was the first of my "sound paintings," multi-track vocal works composed for tape utilizing my extended vocal techniques as an orchestra of voices. My concept was visual as well as sonic: I felt as if I were painting on the tape with my voice, making vocal gestures and layering these to create a textured, multi-layered composition. The work was called *Twelvesong* and utilized 12 tracks of voice in a composition that lasted 12 minutes and 12 seconds. I began by recording the "foundation" tracks, steady tones, circularly sung on inhale and exhale to create a constant sound, micro-tonally separated from each other to create subtle beats. Over these tracks, I layered flutters (ululation), inhaled glottal clicks, gentle sighing glissandi, and birdlike sounds. I'm quite certain the recording engineers had never experienced this kind of real-time composition or such unusual vocal sounds, but they were very professional and supportive, and Hans Otte was delighted with the result. I learned a great deal about mixing from that session, recorded in one day and mixed that evening. Once I had sung all of my material, it was time to place it in the stereo horizon, and that was where the engineers took over and taught me about finding a unique spot for each sound so that each sound was distinct but blended into a cohesive fabric.

In September 1976, I traveled with Cage to Los Angeles to do performances at the California Institute of the Arts. I performed a version of *Solo for Voice 45* from *Song Books* with twenty pianists playing *Winter Music* on instruments placed on two levels of the Main Gallery space. It was a very successful performance in a marvelous contemporary music festival that also featured works by Feldman, and that was the beginning of my association with Cal Arts. In 1978, Morton Subotnick invited me to be guest composer there, replacing him while he was touring. I was delighted to have the opportunity to be at a place that encouraged interdisciplinary work, and I also looked forward to being able to explore some of my ideas for multitracked voices with electronic modifications and spatial location.

I composed and recorded a work there, *Autumn Signal*, using the Buchla synthesizer to alter some of my vocal sounds and also for spatial movement of those sounds. It was the first of my "soundances," a continuation of the idea of sound painting but now further personifying the sounds as figures, sonic dancers in space. I had had an opportunity to work with Merce Cunningham's Dance Company on several occasions, both in my own music for an "Events" evening

and also with other composers. For the "Events," Merce gave the composer a timeframe to work within, and he chose which dances or sections of dances would be done in the same time frame. I chose *Thunder* as one of my works to perform and, afterwards, the dancers told me it had been an incredible experience for them because the dance they were doing, *Summerspace*, had originally had a score by Morton Feldman! It transformed their imaginary space from some place gentle and serene into a kind of jungle atmosphere. I also chose to do my rigorous étude *Circular Song* (1975) that evening and, in one of those strange coincidences, as I started my solo work, Merce moved onstage to do a solo dance. It was a uniquely extraordinary experience for me as young composer. I was fascinated with what I saw as Merce's concept of individual simultaneous movements, that groups of dancers or individuals could be doing very different kinds of movements at the same time but that a complex yet cohesive whole was achieved. I wanted to try to achieve that idea with sounds, to give each sound a kind of trajectory through space, moving like individual dancers, but contributing to a cohesive sonic whole. I premiered my work *Autumn Signal* in West Berlin at Metamusik Festival 1978.

Late in 1978, I was awarded an artist-in-residency by the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst Künstlerprogramm) to live and work in West Berlin for the calendar year 1979. I arrived in January to gray skies and constant snow, a good time and place to stay inside and work. I decided to rent a piano and compose a performance work for solo pianist, collecting objects from around the apartment to use inside the piano. I found a small wooden ball which I tried bouncing on the strings, chopsticks (which I later switched to felt-covered wooden dulcimer hammers), some oddly shaped paper clips to attach to the strings, creating bell-like or gong-like sounds depending on where I placed them. I recorded vocal sounds and played these back through small speakers placed inside the piano, so that the piano and the pianist were carrying on a dialogue. I had been a pianist in my youth, and so *Responsive Resonance (with Feathers)* explored memories as well as the psychological state of the solitary artist intimately involved with the instrument, with the tools of the craft and engaged in the means of expression. The work was premiered by composer-pianist Joan Tower at Christ and St Stephen's Church in Manhattan, 21 May 1979.

The DAAD residency afforded me time to compose quite a number of works. I created a new score, *Twelve for Five in Eight*, based on my sound painting, *Twelvesong*, translating my multitrack tape work into a five-voice graphic and traditionally notated score for performance by myself with the Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble of San Diego. We performed it at contemporary music festivals at Cal Arts and at UCSD. Also, I composed two new works for radio, *Klee Alee* and *ShadowSong*, produced at the RIAS studios in Berlin. Both were sound paintings but were very different in character. *Klee Alee* was inspired by a painting I had seen in the Walraf Richartz (now Ludwig) Museum in Köln. I made extensive notes about the colors and structure and thickness of the paint and the figures scratched into it by the artist Paul Klee. What I neglected to note was the name of the painting. Subsequently, I have looked in books of reproductions and am almost certain that the work that inspired *Klee Alee* was *Hauptweg und Nebenzweg*, although that painting was one of a series of grid-like works. I constructed sound blocks of particular timbres which reflected for me the greens and blues of the painting. I then "scratched" into the thickness of the

vocal sound blocks as Klee had scratched into the thickness of his paint, creating tiny figures using inhaled sounds, some thin, some click-like, some pensive, some wailing and distressed. *ShadowSong* explored, again, a psychological state – in this case, the idea that as one moves through the day, or through life, one encounters distractions, images on the periphery of sight or thought. One constantly has to choose to continue with one's chosen path, or to diverge and move into the realm controlled by the "distractions," a kind of "road not taken" exploration, with language playing a subtle part. Words for ghosts, spectres, shadows in several languages, drift into audibility and melt away again. *Shadow-Song* and *Klee Alee* were premiered at Festival d'Automne à Paris in September 1979.

During the Berlin residency, I also produced, with flutist Eberhard Blum, a four-day festival of Text-Sound works, including historical pieces from the Italian Futurists and Dada artists, Fluxus, and more contemporary artists working in this form. It began a passion I have continued to research in order to satisfy my curiosity and to be able teach about the historical perspective of performance art as well as an alternative, experimental strain of music history.

In 1979 and 1980, I was awarded an individual fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts Visual Arts program. There had been some controversy about the conservative nature of the grants in Music Composition and the Visual Arts panel decided to look at sound work as part of the overall arts scene. I produced *October Music: Star Showers and Extraterrestrials* during that fellowship year, doing my recordings on sixteen-track analog equipment at IRCAM that was going unused (since most of the composers working there were focused on digital and computer-based works). I used my voice to paint a night sky of shooting stars and constellations, inspired by an evening spent by the Pacific Ocean, adding imaginary characters that developed from certain vocal explorations.

Over the years, I have requested a number of new works from composers and have thus generated a large body of new vocal material. Some of these works have now become landmarks and masterworks of the late twentieth century.

In 1981, I spent six months in Berlin – this time, my husband, Morton Subotnick, had been awarded a DAAD residency. I was focusing on shaping my career and performance activities and decided to contact some composers whose works I greatly admired and ask them to compose for my voice, curious to know what they might decide to focus on. I wrote to Morty Feldman and asked him to write me a piece for voice and orchestra, thinking of his beautiful *Viola in My Life* works. He wrote back, explaining the problems with getting orchestral performances but that he had something else in mind. Not long after, he sent me *Three Voices*. In the letter that accompanied it, dated 23 April 1982, he wrote:

Dear Joan,

Well, here it is.

I'm somewhat shocked with the more sensuous if not "gorgeous" sound of most of it – never expecting it would go that way. The words are from the two opening lines of *WIND*, a poem Frank O'Hara dedicated to me. I think Frank had a lot to do with some of the "gorgeous" aspect of the piece.

The bottom system is what you sing 'live', the other two are layered in – where the 2 loud speakers should be placed I have no idea – it is also one of the very few pieces

where I didn't indicate a metronome marking – feeling that your tone and how you breathe should pace it – it sounds good both “slow” as well as a “fast” slowness (whatever that means).

I know that putting this work together is a horrendous undertaking! I feel that the work is you like “Joan that's your color – what a beautiful neck line – and the length though somewhat long (whoever heard of an afternoon dress with a long trail?) – still – buy it!”

Of course you can always return it for whatever reason.

All love to you and Mort

from the other

Morty

When I started working on *Three Voices*, I called him to find out how long it was so I could begin including it on upcoming concerts. “I think it's about forty-five,” he replied, and so I programmed it along with other works on several events. Then, when I started recording the two upper voices, I called him back in a panic. “Morty,” I said, “it's almost twice that long! About ninety minutes!” “Yeh,” he said, “I always thought it would be that long.” And that was the length of the first performance, March 1983, starting at 11.00 p.m., at the California Institute of the Arts Contemporary Music Festival and lasting well after midnight . . . like an eternity spent in a vast and beautiful space.

When Feldman died, I was devastated. To make a permanent lasting homage and tribute to my friend and colleague, I decided to record *Three Voices* and discovered that ninety minutes was too long for a single CD, then a very new medium. I didn't want to break it up over two discs, so I went back to the fastest moving figures in the score and began to learn to sing them faster, as fast as I could while retaining the clarity of each pitch. The final result was very close to his original idea of the forty-five-minute timing and was the first compact disc of Feldman's music to be released.

For me, both versions work. In the faster version, one is suddenly propelled into the storm from the infinite stillness of intricate chords, and I felt O'Hara's image of the bear in the snowstorm, trapped in the ball of whirling snow that never fell. “Nothing ever fell.” In the slower, ninety-minute version, one experiences individual moments in a more precious, luxurious soundscape, and perhaps one is drawn to the starkness of the Abstract Expressionists' fascination with “nothing” in a more nihilistic sense.

It was not until after the first performance that Feldman revealed the more private aspects of the work, that he thought loudspeakers had a kind of “tombstone” look and that his friend the painter Philip Guston had just died, and his friend Frank O'Hara, whose poem he fragmented, had died, and so he saw this as a kind of dialogue between the living and the dead, himself and his two friends.¹ This aspect of conversation, of sharing of ideas, is reflected in the inner concept, as musical motives are split and shared between the three voices, or appear in one voice and then in another. Because of John Rockwell's championing of Feldman's music as a critic long before the composer's death and his continuing devotion to presenting it when he had the opportunity as a festival director, I returned to the ninety-minute version for the 1996 Lincoln Center Festival.²

I had last performed the ninety-minute version on April 14, 1985, at the

Alternative Museum in New York, with Feldman in attendance; it was part of a three-concert series I produced in New York, funded in part by an National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Solo Recitalist grant, combining my work with those of the composers who had written for me, most of it at my request. The concert series included: *The Waves* by Charles Dodge, *Eight Whiskus* by John Cage, *Jacob's Room* by Morton Subotnick (in its original version for voice and string quartet with Kronos), *Sketchbook for the Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Roger Reynolds, *Voices* by James Tenney, *The Last World* by Rhys Chatham, my own *Berliner Träume*, and Feldman's *Three Voices*.

Charles Dodge composed *The Waves* in 1984, using the opening lines of Virginia Woolf's novel of the same name. The initial challenge for me was to find the right vocal range and delivery attitude for my readings. I didn't want to effect an English accent but wanted to delineate a tone and timbre that reflected Woolf herself. After several readings in different tessituras, I focused on my recollection of an English woman who had no "lows" in her voice, only "highs." It was this recording that Dodge chose, extracting consonants for percussive elements and using the speech inflections for pitch terrain. I also recorded a series of long tones with reinforced harmonics and "multiphonics," the simultaneous singing of two pitches usually an octave apart, a form of vocal "double stop" consisting of a fundamental and a sub-tone. Dodge then created a fluid computer-enhanced tape from my voice recordings and a vocal score that called for singing, speaking, intoning, and then matching those reinforced harmonics and multiphonics at designated places and on specific pitches, a very difficult technical feat for the singer to achieve. Singing certain "extended vocal techniques" is not necessarily difficult, but doing them on specific pitches in strict time is not an easy task and requires great concentration and focus, while also remaining relaxed enough to produce the effect. I also learned that Woolf had taken her own life by filling her pockets with rocks and walking into the sea, making the intoning of that final deep multiphonic of the score an extremely effective and poignant gesture.

I asked John Cage to write a work for me and assumed, somewhat naïvely, that he would explore my vocabulary of extended techniques. He presented me with *Eight Whiskus*, and, before playing it for me on a toy piano (the only keyboard in his loft), he warned me that here were some four-letter words that had appeared as he "wrote through" the text by Chris Mann, using the strict mesostic process he had developed. I told him I had no problem with that (although several years later I did have a request from a presenter that I substitute another Cage work for that one, since my concert was scheduled at the local City Hall and they didn't want to have complaints). This simple and elegant collection of eight short songs bridges abstract words and lyrical fragments into poetic gems. The melodies were so enticing that violinist Malcolm Goldstein begged that Cage allow him to play them alone without texts.

When Morton Subotnick decided to compose an aria for me, we began with a work session in which I demonstrated a collection of extended vocal techniques that were available and how they could best be used, specifying which ones were easily done and which required more preparation time. *The Last Dream of the Beast*, composed in 1979, mixes traditional singing with certain extended techniques and an electronic ghost score which modifies the voice in real time, along with an electronic score; it was later blended into his 1984 staged tone poem, *The Double Life*

of *Amphibians*, and the score expanded to include an instrumental ensemble. The original version of Subotnick's *Jacob's Room*, for voice and string quartet, was commissioned by the arts patron and photographer Betty Freeman, for myself and Kronos, and includes many of my "signature" extended techniques.

Sketchbook for the Unbearable Lightness of Being by Roger Reynolds was scored in three lines: one mostly speaking, one mostly extended techniques, and a transitional line between speaking, singing and special effects, including electronics to modify the vocal sound. *Voices* by James Tenney, a work for vocal soloist based on seventh tones, uses five reel-to-reel tape recorders with instructions for five operators to record specific time segments of my vocal work at specified speeds and then turn the tapes over, play them backwards, at different speeds. My own *Berliner Träume* (Berlin Dreaming) was a sound painting, a multilayered portrait of the city that had offered me so much support and of which I had grown quite fond. One of the tragedies of the elimination of grants from the NEA to individual artists is that young artists no longer have the opportunity to generate a concert series such as the one I did in 1985 with assistance from this public funding source.

Each new score or new work presents its own set of challenges. In approaching a traditionally notated score, I look through to find the most difficult sections and start there while my mind is freshest. I generally select a fragment and loop it, repeating it over and over, checking pitches with the piano, until I can sing it without mistake. Then I add material leading into that fragment to the "learning loop," ultimately getting a large section learned and memorized. Then, when I go back and start at the beginning, I arrive at that difficult section having already mastered it, finding a "friend" instead of an obstacle.

In my work with experimental music theater or new opera, I have found myself faced with prospects of acting and movement, bringing additional factors to the performance beyond concert singing. In the case of Robert Ashley's text operas, much of the initial discussion about a new work concerns the story and the nature of the characters and how they relate to one another. Because some of the vocal music is not precisely notated but delivered in a highly stylized contemporary vernacular somewhat akin to *Sprechstimme*, each individual performer shapes his or her own vocal persona, developing a quality, timbre, and attitude to fit the character. Ashley's creative process involves choosing performers who are actively committed to furthering his compositional ideas. The process and challenge for the performer involves learning Ashley's style of vocal delivery and then making it one's own.

Over the past three decades, I have enjoyed working with many different composers, exploring ideas and trying to help them realize certain concepts, from the graphic scores of John Cage to the scientific and conceptual principles of Alvin Lucier. I always learn a great deal from the experience and am certain I gain as much as I give.

On In the Dreamtime

Klaus Schöning, director of Akustische Kunst at the Westdeutscher Rundfunk in Köln, commissioned a work from me in 1990, requesting that I introduce my music to the radio audience by creating a sonic self-portrait. I selected seventeen of my compositions, spanning a fourteen-year period, and layered them, not in

chronological order but in a kind of dreamtime as ideas or visions float and mingle in one's dreams, taking on a logical placement of their own. I had learned during my years of working with John Cage that simultaneities can afford beautiful surprises, so, trusting that wisdom, I intertwined works from vastly different creative periods and inspirational sources and discovered startling and fascinating new relationships. *In the Dreamtime* has been broadcast many times over the past ten years on WDR-Köln, and I have used it as the soundscape for many concert performances, but it has not yet been released on a commercial recording; it is offered along with this publication.

Select Discography

- Ashley, Robert (2000) *Dust*. With Robert Ashley, Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner, and Jacqueline Humbert, voices, and "Blue" Gene Tyranny, electronic keyboards. Lovely Music LCD 1006.
- Ashley, Robert (1993) *Improvement*. Elektra Nonesuch 79289-2.
- Ashley, Robert (1999) *Your Money My Life Goodbye*. Robert Ashley, Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner and Jacqueline Humbert, voices. Lovely Music LCD 1005.
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- Brown, Earle (1998) *Centering: The Art of Earle Brown*. With the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, Stephen L. Mosko, director. Newport Classic npd85631.
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- La Barbara, Joan (1991) *Sound Paintings*. Lovely Music LCD 3001.
- La Barbara, Joan (1993) *L'albero dalle Foglie Azzurre (Tree of Blue Leaves)*. Centaur CRC-2166.
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- La Barbara, Joan (1998) *ShamanSong*. New World Records 80545-2.
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- Laws, Hubert (1993) *My Time Will Come*. Music Masters Jazz 01612-65100-2.
- Moon, Beata (2001) *Perigee & Apogee*. Albany Records #Troy 426.
- Subotnick, Morton (1985) *The Last Dream of the Beast*. Nonesuch 78029-1.
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Notes

1. "One of my closest friends, the painter Philip Guston, had just died; Frank O'Hara had died several years before. I saw the piece with Joan in front and these two loudspeakers behind her. There is something kind of tombstone about the look of loudspeakers. I thought of the piece as an exchange of the live voice with the dead ones - a mixture of the living and the dead." Morton Feldman, speaking about the conception of *Three Voices* in a *New York Times* interview, 7 April 1985.
2. The original recordings for *Three Voices* were done in February 1983 at the California Institute for the Arts, with George Brunner as sound engineer. The New Albion recordings (NA018) were done in Los Angeles in 1989 with Pamela Neal as recording engineer and composer-sound designer Michael Hoenig as my trusted producer.