



Hildegard Westerkamp's Moments of Laughter: Recording Childhood, Performing Motherhood, Refusing to Shut Up, and Laughing

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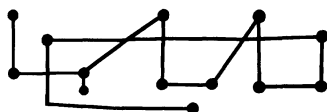
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HILDEGARD WESTERKAMP'S
MOMENTS OF LAUGHTER:
RECORDING CHILDHOOD,
PERFORMING MOTHERHOOD,
REFUSING TO SHUT UP,
AND LAUGHING



ANDRA MCCARTNEY

It has been a learning process for us to enjoy life, to get past that seriousness, and the older we get, the easier we find it to laugh. And we did laugh quite a bit during these interviews, like when Gislean protested our rigid upbringing. “Little German girls are raised to be little good girls. It took a long time to stop being a good girl, and I resent that. One misses a lot in life by being a little good girl. Cinderella was a wimp.” With others it was a different kind of laughter, a soft laughter as, together, we tried to fill in the first lines of a song or poem that we half-remembered from childhood. . . .

What serious children we used to be . . . Raised within the silence, we lived in communities where the adults were always right, where obedience and loyalty were valued above all. (Hegi 1997, 300)

THE THEME OF CHILDHOOD soundmaking has always been an important one for Hildegard Westerkamp, an issue that was evident from her Master's thesis, which uses her own childhood experience of Christmas music as a case study; to her autobiographical *Breathing Room III*, which includes a song that she used to sing as a child; to an article in *Musicworks* magazine ("A Child's Ritual," Summer 1987 issue); to many references to the importance and freedom of childhood soundmaking in her oral presentations. She explores this theme most fully in her work for tape and female voice, *Moments of Laughter* (1988). I think this piece, of all of Westerkamp's work, transgresses the most borders in relation to compositional choices and the thinking behind them, cultural expectations regarding the distinctions between public and private domains, the roles of children and women, and the importance of children's nonverbal communication.

My thinking about the transgressive power of this piece began when I included it in a pilot project about listener responses to Canadian electroacoustic works. Initially, I was surprised by some of the very visceral, and in some cases quite hostile, responses I received in relation to this work. This led me to single it out and continue my analysis, expanding the range of listeners, with the aim of learning more about what was behind these strong reactions.

My own response to the work was at first quite ambivalent. Having undergone a very difficult divorce and custody battle that raised all kinds of questions for me about what standards exist for motherhood and fatherhood in our culture, I am particularly sensitive to stereotyping in musical constructions of motherhood. When I first heard the work, I heard the performer's reading of a poem in the middle of the piece as too sweet. When Westerkamp gave me the score, I realized that this reading tone was not required by the piece, but had been chosen by that particular performer. In addition, I noted that although the piece had been performed only by professional vocalists with ample knowledge of extended vocal techniques (Meg Sheppard, Elise Bedard, and DB Boyko), Westerkamp's instructions in the score made the work accessible to a wider range of performers: for instance, when she asked for a particularly difficult vocal technique, she also included alternatives for less developed performers.

Aware that the work had been performed several times when it was first composed in 1988, but not since, I decided to perform it myself. Even though I had only attended short workshops in extended vocal techniques, I had lots of experience singing with groups and vocalizing with young children. I had enjoyed this interaction with my own children, and continue to enjoy vocal play, particularly with babies and tod-

dlers discovering their vocal range and abilities. I performed the work on radio in Toronto, at a festival of sound art by women in Chicago, and at the Modern Fuel art gallery in Kingston, Ontario. Learning to perform the piece, and practicing it, gave me a much deeper knowledge of it than I would have had otherwise. By the end of the rehearsal period, my response was no longer ambivalent: I am convinced that this work is deeply fascinating and worthy of much more attention than it has received so far.

In this article, I discuss my changing relationship to *Moments of Laughter*, using several methods of analysis simultaneously: a discussion of the background and context of the piece in terms of feminist psychoanalytic and aesthetic writings; an analysis of the sounds of the piece, inspired by James Tenney's gestalt approach as elaborated in his book *Meta+Hodos* (1992) as well as by my understanding of the piece as I rehearsed to perform it; and a discussion of listener responses to this piece, based on sessions conducted with high-school and university students as well as at concerts where I performed the work.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

In the score for *Moments of Laughter*, Westerkamp refers to the work of French psychoanalyst and semiotician Julia Kristeva:

Moments of Laughter is dedicated to my daughter Sonja whose voice forms the basis for this piece. Her voice has accompanied mine for many years now and has brought me in touch with an openness of perception, uninhibited expressiveness and physical presence that I had long forgotten.

I have made recordings of her voice since she was born and from the age of four on, she has made her own recordings of stories and songs. *Moments of Laughter* utilizes these for the tape portion of the piece, tracing musically/acoustically the emergence of the infant's voice from the oceanic state of the womb: from the soundmakings of the baby to the song and language of the child. According to Julia Kristeva, moments of laughter are those moments in infancy and early childhood in which the baby recognizes the "other" as distinct from the "self." They are the first creative moments that speak of recognition of self and place. The child expresses these moments with laughter. (HWV: Program note)¹

Westerkamp analyzes Kristeva's writings about moments of laughter in her Master's thesis.

Kristeva takes us as far back as the moment of separation from the womb. All human beings share this first loss, these first feelings of lack: life as a separation from the “oceanic state” in the womb. All creative process is based on the desire to recreate this state of wholeness. (Westerkamp 1988, 117)

This theme is an important one for Westerkamp: I have seen variations on it in several of her writings and musings. She associates creative work with attempts to create the sense of total immersion and connectedness that characterizes the womb state. While Westerkamp accepts this desire to return to a state of oceanic immersion as perhaps the strongest creative urge of human beings, it is important to note that others may not share this desire. David Schwarz suggests that envelopment might be experienced as claustrophobic: “On the one hand, envelopment suggests undifferentiated, oceanic, expansive oneness; on the other hand, it suggests being contained, enclosed, and marked off.” (1993, 27) For some, immersion could be positive, for some negative; for many, it is likely to be somewhat ambivalent.

Westerkamp continues:

The young baby is still close to this state of wholeness, is still in a relatively balanced situation. Impression and expression, listening and soundmaking happen simultaneously and play a large part in maintaining a sense of wholeness. Desire for such wholeness emerges once the baby recognizes an “other” as distinct from its “self,” that is, once the wholeness becomes harder to attain. (Westerkamp 1988, 118)

When Westerkamp uses the term “relatively balanced situation,” she is referring to a balance of sound impression and expression, that the baby makes sounds in balance with what she or he hears. However, this is not necessarily an emotionally or politically balanced situation. Kristeva says that during the first three months of life, the baby cries in distress, in what she calls *anaclises*:

Every cry is, psychologically and projectively, described as a cry of distress, up to and including the first vocalizations, which seem to constitute distress calls, in short: *anaclises*. The newborn body experiences three months of such *anaclitic “facilitations” without reaching a stable condition*. (Kristeva 1980, 282, my emphasis)

This sounds like a particularly unbalanced situation, in which the baby cries in distress without knowledge that the distress calls will be answered.

red. The baby is dependent on adults to provide for her. Kristeva describes the role of the adult, particularly the mother, at this time, as “a disturbed reception, a mobile receptacle, which fashions itself on the invocation” (Kristeva 1980, 282). Paradoxically, the mother is expected to empathize, feeling a “surge of anguish” (Kristeva 1980, 282) and thus to understand the child’s distress, yet at the same time to be able to break with this period of “primary narcissism” and allow the child to move on to the next phase, diatropy “so that, with the advent of autoeroticism, the door is finally open to a relationship with the object” (Kristeva 1980, 282).

Kristeva says that during the anaclitic period of the first three months, the baby begins to experience discreteness through.

The breast, given and withdrawn; lamplight capturing the gaze; intermittent sounds of voice, of music—all these meet with anaclysis . . . hold it, and thus inhibit and absorb it. . . . At that point, breast, light, and sound become a *there*: a place, a spot, a marker. The effect, which is dramatic, is no longer quiet but laughter. (Kristeva 1980, 283)

Westerkamp describes this as a balance of impression (hearing the sounds, seeing the lamplight) and expression (through the sound of laughter). She notes that Kristeva’s approach is different from that of theorists such as Deleuze, who describe the recognition of separateness as a violence (Westerkamp 1988, 119). The moment of recognition of another, for Kristeva, is not a moment of angst, of existential loneliness, but of laughter, an expression of joy that someone, some other, is here to relieve the distress and provide pleasure and security.

These scattered and funny moments become projected—archaic synthesis onto the stable support of the mother’s face, the privileged receiver of laughter at about three months. . . . Oral eroticism, the smile at the mother, and the first vocalizations are contemporaneous. . . .

The inaugural sublimation . . . brings us not only to the foundations of narcissism . . . but to the riant wellsprings of the imaginary. The imaginary takes over from childhood laughter: it is a joy without words. (Kristeva 1980, 283)

Here, Kristeva associates the imaginary not with desire for wholeness through a return to the womb, but with joy in a recognition of security through knowledge that desires will be met by intimate others.

Westerkamp also describes the infant's first expressions as searching outward for connection with something or someone else, a description that seems different from her earlier statement in which wholeness and balance were associated with the womb. She says:

one could say that these first "moments of laughter" are also first "productions," first expressions of the infant, in search of a "transcendent viewpoint," i.e. in search of the "other." (Westerkamp 1988, 119)

Westerkamp suggests that as the child matures, creative nourishment is recognized in other people, other things beyond the parental figure. However, Westerkamp maintains the primary role of the mother. Other objects are only substitutes for this important relationship. Creativity is born of the urge to connect with her, through these substitutes.

Kristeva continues by outlining how the development of language in children follows this idea of people and things as "place-names."

the future speaker is led to separate . . . points into *objects* . . . and add to them *no longer laughter but phonation*—archetype of the morpheme, condensation of the sentence. As if *the laughter that makes up space had become, with the help of maturation and repression, a "place name."* (Kristeva 1980, 287, her emphasis)

She notes that many utterances of two and three year-olds are of the type "that's a" followed by a noun, an evocation of demonstrating what things are, combined with other vocalizations related to their earlier sounds, such as "glottal stops and stress (a play on intensity as well as on frequencies of vowel sounds)" (Kristeva 1980, 287).

Kristeva ends by asserting that the use of place-names in the infant's language is an attempted replacement of the mother:

We suggest that naming always originating in a place (the chora, space, "topic," subject-predicate), is a replacement for what the speaker perceives as an archaic mother—a more or less victorious confrontation, never finished with her. (Kristeva 1980, 291)

This is a difficult point: Kristeva suggests that naming places, finding connections with objects and people other than the mother is a kind of victory over her, a diminishment of her archaic power over the child. Westerkamp asserts that finding such connections is a type of substitution for the mother while still desiring an original closeness with her, more of a nostalgia than a victory.

As a semiotician influenced by psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva describes the role of the mother-child dyad as crucial with regard to its relationship to desire and psychological wholeness. Westerkamp, as a composer, is interested in this desire as it relates to creativity. Lorraine Code, as an epistemologist, describes this relationship in terms of its importance to learning: “recognizing nurturant others, learning what she or he can expect of them, comprises the very earliest infant learning” (Code 1998, 218). Code also points out that in traditional developmental psychology and epistemology, this initial learning is devalued, constructed as an early, private, dependent and inarticulate phase in the development of the child into a mature individual:

Discourses of development and maturation represent “the child” as a being who unfolds out of an infancy in which he is radically, vitally dependent on nurturant others, to a place of full individual autonomy where he becomes his “own” person, renouncing dependence to emerge as a self-sufficient individual. Development thus represented is a linear process that achieves completion at “the age of majority,” having passed through well-marked stages or levels en route to this fully separated moment. Cognitive and moral maturity, then, marks an end of dependence on infant and childhood nurturers. It manifests itself in achieved mastery: mastery over “one’s own” body is so taken for granted that it rarely receives mention except as a precondition for all the rest; mastery over emotions aligns closely with bodily mastery; mastery over the becoming-adult’s physical, social, cultural, and natural surroundings: a complex of “masteries” that represents a solitary coming of age in matters moral, epistemological, social and personal. (Code 1998, 4)

Code challenges this traditional model of child development, suggesting an alternative in which the agency of the child is recognized and respected. Westerkamp’s approach to this time of initial learning, desire, and creative soundmaking also challenges this linear developmental model through its emphasis on the continuing construction of identity in both children and adults: the mother in the piece is changed by the experience as much as the child, and constantly shifts identities. By taking this relationship as a formal basis of the music, she also taps into important familial power relations, as was obvious from some of the listener responses to this piece.

MUSICAL STRUCTURE AND PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES

Moments of Laughter is a nineteen-minute piece for voice and tape. In this analysis of it, I will juxtapose excerpts from the score with comments on my performance choices.

A female voice interacts with the tape, performing live. It tries to find its own language and music on the one hand, and imitates, reacts to, and plays with the child's voice on tape on the other hand. It moves through a variety of characters in search of a confident, strong voice. *Moments of Laughter* explores the edge between the "wilderness" of the child's voice and the cultural formations of the female voice. (HW: Program note)

Note Westerkamp's location of this work on an edge that she describes as a border between wilderness and culture. This explicitly connects the work with some of her other pieces, such as *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, which is literally in a marginal place, a beach in an urban park, between land and water, city and nature. It also connects this work to pieces such as *Cricket Voice*, which explore her experience of wilderness. This description underlines the connection of *Moments of Laughter* with place, while the previous sentence asserts its connection with dialogue, primarily one between a live adult woman performer and a female child on tape. A dialogue also emerges between the child on tape and earlier recordings of herself. In addition, at one point, the live performer sings in counterpoint with Westerkamp's recorded voice. Throughout, there is a continuing interaction between the recorded and live voices and the other sounds on tape.

MOMENT ONE: PROLOGUE

Sounds of rhythmic play begin the tape part, the regular banging of a rattle on a surface juxtaposed with a melody on a harmonica, joined shortly by a higher-pitched melody on a music box and a high drone. The high-pitched music box and drone continue, providing a sparkling background for the introduction of Sonja's voice, sounding about seven or eight years in age:

I come here to tell you that I have been recording since I was nine months old. I was very excited to hear me again, recording from when I was a little baby. I've recorded tons of times, since I was nine months old I think it is. I'm not quite sure. But I am **so glad** that

I've been recording. I love recording. My mum's a composer. She does *Fantasia for Horns* and records sound. Well, today I don't quite know what we're going to do. But I don't know if we should do anything.

This introduction gives an authoritative position to Sonja: she is introducing the piece to the audience. She frames the coming performance. She is experienced and skilled as a recordist: she has recorded “tons of times.” She affirms her connection with her mother, who is a composer—a specific composer, the one who made *Fantasia for Horns*, and who also does what Sonja does, recording sound. She expresses a desire for nonintention that John Cage would appreciate: “I don't know quite what we're going to do. But I don't know if we should do anything.”

During the initial minute, while Sonja introduces the piece, the performer is instructed on the score (page one) to take slow deep breaths—a great antidote to stage fright, as I realized in Chicago. It gives the performer the chance to listen to Sonja's voice, concentrate on the tape part and ground herself. At around 1:30, the performer is instructed to breathe more rapidly, and “echo rhythms of harmonica (on out breath).” At this point, the harmonica is playing a mid-range melody of tremulous notes in a descending pattern. As the performer imitates this rhythm, she is also imitating the rapid, focused style of breathing called for in Lamaze classes in the transitional period of labor just before birth. I am always reminded of this experience when performing this section. Gradually, water sounds are introduced into the tape part, then a baby's cry at about 1:55. The performer here makes a succession of welcoming calls. In the DB Boyko performance, this is the high, warbling cry called for by Westerkamp. I could not reproduce this cry, and also did not want to,² so made a cry which is simply the word “welcome” using only vowels “eeeo—” and exaggerating the melody of saying the word, rising on the “e,” then quickly falling to rest on one note for the “o.”

As the performer makes shushing sounds, the child's voice gradually calms from the earlier crying, accompanied now on the tape by some newly introduced high-pitched sounds such as quick, light, glassy, and short downward glissandos and more processed sounds derived from water, beginning at around 2:30. Deeper water sounds form a rhythmic gulping close to the listener. The tape part at this point is timbrally dense and diverse, with higher pitches continuing to predominate. Throughout the lullaby section, the child on tape vocalizes, making “ahh” and “uhh” sounds.

MOMENT TWO: "DADAWAWA" (6 MONTHS OLD)

A quick knocking introduces the next section, at 4:08. On the tape, a xylophone and harmonica accompany the initial knocking. Musical clocks come in, again in a high pitch range, as the child's voice begins with "ahdada." Again, this section activates strong memories for me when I perform it. I enjoy the recognition that crosses a young baby's face when she or he realizes that I am imitating his/her sounds. The number of subtle variations of vocal inflection, pitch, and rhythm that babies can produce is really remarkable. Their willingness to experiment with these subtle variations can lead to long and intricate vocalization duets. It feels somewhat different performing this with a tape rather than with a live vocalist, since each time, the order of vocalizations is the same. The temptation is to go further and further from the taped child's vocalizations each time, for the sake of variety. But at the same time, it is important to maintain the connection with the child's voice on tape, as Westerkamp wants a balanced dialogue between adult and child voices.

The child's voice in this section makes a lot of "aa" vowel sounds with various consonants, as Westerkamp notes, as well as quick, deep inhalations (the performer has to be careful not to hyperventilate), and blurring noises. At the end of the section, the performer is asked to imitate the nasal inflection of the child's voice, and to sing a tune (on "naaa") with a tonal center of middle C, and repeated pitches (EE FF EE CC GG etc.) with the emphasis on the second note. The harmonica on tape is playing in the same pitch range, using longer gestures.

Initially, when I began rehearsing the piece, I was bending forward to perform the vocalizations in this part. I realized that this was because when I have done vocalizations with children under a year, it is often down on a blanket. When I sent Westerkamp a recording of a rehearsal of the piece to listen to, she noticed this orientation:

It might be interesting to try to combine the intimacy of your current approach, as if playing on a blanket with the child (that is the image I get from your voice work) and the more outgoing public performance approach. (Westerkamp email correspondence with McCartney, 20 November 1998).

In order to make a clearer separation between Moment Two and Moment Three, I decided to perform Moment Two actually on a blanket, with the microphone positioned just above the floor, then perform Moment Three standing up.

MOMENT THREE: "GEGOGEGODABABL" (1 YEAR OLD)

I have suggested two tunes for this section. One is a simple skipping tune and the other one is derived from a pygmy woman's lullaby. . . . If the performer is not familiar with this style of singing and/or if this style is outside of her vocal range or ability she can adapt this tune as long as it somehow connects to the child's vocal "jumps" on tape. (HW: score)

When I was rehearsing the piece, I had some problems with the skipping tune at the beginning of this moment. This tune is one that I do not associate with the age of one, but with the age of eight or nine. It was a tune used by children in my neighborhood to make fun of each other, in a cruel way, to pick on children who wore glasses, braces, or had other differences from the tormentors. However, as I performed the piece I noted the similarity of this tune to the tongue games that Sonja plays on tape (moving the tongue rapidly in and out of the mouth). This changed the association for me,³ and I was then able to improvise around the tune more comfortably, emphasizing its association with the tongue game. In this section, Sonja's voice is accompanied more sparsely with birdsong (in a similar rhythm to the skipping tune). Her vocalizations have expanded to include a wider range of vowel sounds (gegogego), and the rapid intervallic jumps discussed above by Westerkamp, interspersed with sounds similar to those in the previous section. After 7:00, the tape includes the sounds of toy animals, particularly a sheep, which Sonja imitates. The long chords produced by this mechanical sheep sound also anticipate a choral top used in the next section. At around 8:00 on the tape, I hear a man's voice briefly imitating Sonja, accompanied by Hildi's laughter. A high-pitched bell is introduced on the tape, followed briefly by a car horn. Sonja continues to vocalize with fast intervallic jumps. At around 8:40, the performer is instructed on the score:

Hum long tones, interspersed with audible breaths. Harmonic singing would be ideal here, anticipating the choral top [a toy—a spinning top that makes sound as it spins]. (HW: score)

MOMENT FOUR: "DA DA DO" (1-1/2 YEARS OLD), TEXT BY NORBERT RUEBSAAT

The choral top on tape provides a framework for the performer's recitation of Ruebsaat's poem. Each stanza of the poem is associated with one long gesture of the choral top.

In this section the pace is calm and reflective. The performer speaks directly to the audience. The text should be spoken in a storytelling mode, perhaps explaining, with quiet intensity. (HW: score)

As well as the choral top, the tape juxtaposes the sound of rattles (panned from left to right) with Sonja's voice, quietly repeating "aus baan, aus baan." So the first word that the listener hears from Sonja is the German word "aus," meaning "from." At 10:15, Sonja says, more loudly, "dadado." At 10:55, the telephone rings, and Westerkamp's voice says "telephone," with Sonja repeating "dadado."

MOMENT FIVE: SONG AND PLAY (2 1/2 YEARS OLD)

This is a meditative piece, in which the performer concentrates on a type of "inner song" that is quite different from what the child sings. The performer's and the child's voice connect only on a tonal level not in terms of musical "style." . . . The posture should express a thoughtful, reflective mood, somewhat dreamlike. (HW: score)

The female voice on tape is Westerkamp's. So in this part of the performance, there are three human presences interacting: Westerkamp, Sonja, and the live female vocalist. At the beginning of this section, as Westerkamp introduces the musical themes, Sonja's voice is processed for the first time, becoming more reverberant and pitch-oriented (one listener refers to Sonja's voice here as sounding like whale song). Then we hear Sonja in the bath, saying sentences for the first time "You are Penny" (repeated). The more processed child voice continues in the background, while Sonja's unprocessed voice continues with some more songlike vocalizations: "Ooh ahh" on a long downward glissando. She goes back and forth between these sentence forms and more extended vocalizations: "You are silly" "Splaaaaaash" "I waaaaant to, I waaant to," then counts to ten (begin again). "Oh look it!" "Buy some more?" then ends with laughter.

While I was careful to pay attention to the presence of the child's voice in this section, making sure that my own voice did not cover it up, I found that, initially, I could not listen as intently to the child in this section as in others. Because my primary interaction was with Westerkamp's voice on tape, developing a counterpoint between her song fragments and my own, I found it more difficult to listen to Sonja's voice as well, since, as Westerkamp notes, her voice connects with the vocal performer's only on a tonal level. I needed to listen to the tape part by itself

several times first, then only later to practice my vocal part with it, in order to integrate all the parts effectively. It would have been easy to ignore the child's voice altogether in this concentration on an "inner song" developed in counterpoint with the recorded adult voice. This performance situation creates more distance between the vocalist and the child. As vocalist, I refocused sonically, as a parent at times retreats emotionally from a child, developing an inner song that is only tenuously related to the child's experience. Westerkamp associates this meditative and attenuated state with the music of J. S. Bach.

MOMENT SIX: SELF AND OTHER (3-1/2 YEARS OLD)

As soon as the performer hears the first sound of this section she should jump up from her meditative position as if surprised, move downstage and deliver directly to the audience. This is a conceptual piece. It is about discovering a relationship between self and world, expressed through echo, feedback, reflection. (HW: score)

The tape part begins with Sonja's voice humming a tune and using nonsense syllables, or a made-up language. During this part, the performer says words such as "Voices. Sounds. Word. Song. Language." Then Sonja's voice says words which the vocal performer responds to directly:

<i>Sonja</i>	<i>Performer</i>
Boy!	Man!
Little Red Riding Hood	Woman [sung]
want to listen back to it	I want to hear myself
I want to listen back to it	I want to feel my voice
I said bye bye to myself	This is my voice!

Other words are interspersed, both on tape and in the performer's part, which are less directly echoed but still related to each other. Sonja says: "Light! Microphone! Flowers! Speaker! Light! Bed. Pillow. Sleep. How are you?" and tells a short story about a troll living under a bridge. These words are interspersed with laughter. Some of the words on tape have been processed with reverberation. The performer says: "Mirror. Garden. Reflection. Sound. Echo. Home. World. Love. The touch of sound."

MOMENT SEVEN: LAUGHTER (4-1/2 YEARS OLD)

I have given no musical suggestions to the performer here. I see this section as a chance to be funny, virtuosic, outrageous, gross, making faces, being a clown or a fool. . . . Whatever the performer decides to do should happen in interaction with the tape, never competing with or covering up the child's voice. The performer should definitely not include laughter into her vocal actions. (HW: score)

The tape part is all laughter from Sonja. Her voice, with reverberation added, is panned from side to side giving the listener the impression of being inside the laughter. At the end of this part, Westerkamp's laughter is heard briefly.

I was fortunate enough to have an opportunity to perform this piece privately for a mother and child, friends of mine. Initially, I had a great deal of trouble rehearsing this part, because although the laughter on tape is lively and engaging, it is still on tape. I realized how much, when clowning for children, I count on their response to develop what I do. When I knew that the laughter would come anyway, whatever I did (somewhat like a laugh track on a television show), it was difficult to be really funny. But when I had a young child for an audience, I was able to develop an approach which I knew at least worked for her. She started laughing when I hid my face then made gross faces and noises, and imitated a donkey's call while moving in an ungainly way. In the performance, I extended the hiding part to staggering around aimlessly on the floor under the baby blanket from Moment Two, making various gross noises.

MOMENT EIGHT: "SONGS AND STORIES" (5-1/2 YEARS OLD)

At the end of the laughter section the performer moves back to the rocking chair, sits down and opens a fairytale book. In this section the child is singing songs in various languages and is telling a story. The live vocal part consists of a series of beginning lines from fairytales. (HW: score)

The fairytale beginnings chosen by the performer in this section play a large role in determining the character of this section. There is a wide range of introductions, from fairly neutral: "Once there was a little girl who lived in a wild garden . . ." to some that bring attention to stereotypes in fairy tales: "Once upon a time there was a woman who was a real witch and she had two daughters. One was ugly and wicked. The other

was good and lovely. . . .” Then there are others that present more realistic contemporary situations: “Once upon a time there lived a mother with her three children. She worked hard to support her growing family. . . .

In the tape part, Sonja’s voice is singing songs in German, English, and French, and telling the story of the three little pigs in English. Every once in a while she stops and says: “mum, listen to it.” The tape part is completely made up of layers with Sonja’s voice, unprocessed. There are no other sounds around her.

MOMENT NINE: TO THE HEART (7 YEARS OLD)

This is the performer’s chance at a jazzy, freely extended vocal performance. . . .

The idea here is to create the reverse situation of Moment One: there the female voice contained with its structured tune the baby’s primal vocal techniques, here the child contains with its structured tune and language the female’s extended vocal explorations. (HW: score)

Sonja’s voice sings a descending melody, with the words: “My mum dug dug dug down to the middle of the earth, to the heart, to the heart, to the heart [inhale].” This melody is looped throughout the section, and accompanied on the tape by a reverberant organ sound playing a repeated broken chord in G, in a middle register (GDG below middle C). The differing lengths of these two repeated figures give this section a very strong rhythmic sense. After several repetitions, reverberation is added to Sonja’s voice. Shortly after this, a high-pitched drone is added in the background. Then Sonja’s voice is layered with itself, with the final words of the melody “to the heart” being heard in syncopation with itself. The reverberation is increased throughout this section, making the words less evident. Out of this reverberant field, Sonja’s unprocessed voice emerges, saying the words: “Hi mum, see you mum, you’re a silly fool, mum,” fading out on the third repetition to end the piece.

My knowledge of this piece was profoundly altered through the experience of performing it. I became much more aware of the changes from section to section, and their relationships to different stages of parent-child interaction. I greatly expanded my range and repertoire of vocalizations. Maintaining a dialogue between my voice and Sonja’s voice on tape also led me to think more about the ways in which parenting is dialogic, how the experience of parenting leads to the development of adults as well as of a children, although the focus in parenting books is almost

exclusively on the development of children. It also expanded my thinking about parenting as performance, and parenting relationships that extend beyond the biological. Throughout the performance of this work, I developed a relationship with the child's voice on tape, as a kind of surrogate mother. I started to wonder what it would be like if a young woman, who had not had children, performed this piece. Or a man?

LISTENER RESPONSES⁴

This piece formed part of a research project in 1995 about listener responses to a number of works by different Canadian electroacoustic composers. In that study, listeners responded to a short excerpt of the piece (about six minutes). I also played excerpts of this piece for a number of undergraduate university classes. I played the whole piece on tape for a large grade 10 girls' vocal class at North Toronto Collegiate. As I noted earlier, I also wanted to garner responses to the piece as a whole, performed live, and decided to perform it myself in order to facilitate this. The initial performance was for a friend, Donna Warr, and her three-year-old daughter, Mawgan, at their family cottage, a safe—and still relatively private—environment. The next performance was on CIUT radio, on Sarah Peebles's show *The Audible Woman*, which airs at 8 pm on Tuesday evenings in Toronto, broadcasting to southern Ontario and upper New York State. I also performed the piece live in Chicago, Illinois, in December of 1998, as well as in Kingston, Ontario, in March of 1999. There were ninety-eight listener responses in total.⁵

CHALLENGES TO MUSICAL CONVENTION

Moments of Laughter uses recognizable sounds from a traditionally private realm, focuses attention on the voices of women and children, and juxtaposes sounds more than manipulating them, creating a narrative structure. All of these qualities make it unusual in relation to the electroacoustic canon, and challenge convention. Larry, an electroacoustic composer in his fifties, says "If this is meant unpretentiously for small children, fine. Otherwise, there is nothing in it musically." It is interesting that several of the youngest group of listeners, those in the high school vocal class, heard the musical structure quite clearly. Amos (51f) asks: "Is this totally improvised or notated in some way? This is fascinating, but soundscape is a more apt name for it than music—I'm glad they coined a new term." Other listeners perceive the piece as a welcome chal-

lenge to musical convention. Angsax (23f, Waterloo music theory class) responds “music is a living thing, celebrating life.” Raen (22f, Waterloo music theory class) goes a little further, indicating that this idea of music as a celebration of daily life is one that challenges accepted ideas of what constitutes music: “challenges conception of music—life is music.”

One composer notes a connection between this piece and the work of an avant-garde filmmaker, searching for a connection in another artistic discipline that will help him make sense of it. Albert (28m email) says: “Waterbaby—what was the name of the film with the birth of the baby? 1st year avant-garde cinema.” He is likely referring to the film *Window Water Baby Moving* by Stan Brakhage (1959), which focuses on Jane Brakhage as she gives birth to their child. Brakhage is considered one of North America’s most prominent avant-garde filmmakers, in part because of his films that make no clear distinction between (public) art and (private) life, creation and procreation. In visual art, Mary Kelly’s *Post-partum document* (1975), a large piece based on her relationship with her son from birth to age six, does similar work.⁶ Westerkamp’s *Moments of Laughter* was composed in 1988, much later than either of these works, and is the only musical piece that I have heard which is based on the sounds of a developing relationship between a parent and a child over time.

This piece was performed at Convergence, a conference on electroacoustic music held at the Banff Centre for the Arts, in 1989. After the concert, a few composers spoke privately to Westerkamp, telling her that they found the piece “too personal.” The work has been performed rarely since that time, and I only know of one review of it. There has been no discussion of it in any public forum. Perhaps this silence reflects lack of interest, embarrassment, ignorance, or something else. Silence about a work is ambiguous. Since the criticism was made that the piece is “too personal,” I will explore the possible meanings of this phrase, which is itself ambiguous.

Are the visceral bodily sounds that are represented too intimate for some? A short segment of the work imitates (albeit in a very muted form) the sounds of birth, a part of life that is rarely represented in music. Could this be because of a cultural horror of the act of birth-giving? Is part of the social discomfort with the act of giving birth the changes in breathing and the cries of a laboring mother that can sound sexual? Some listeners initially interpreted the birthing section as a representation of sexuality, and were embarrassed by it. Another listener notes that the birth section was very stylized. But if it had been even more visceral, perhaps it would have caused even greater embarrassment. Beth (23f, Waterloo music theory class) interprets the bodily sounds as dangerous: “don’t

like the breathing—giving birth or doing something she shouldn't to a baby [psycho] while they are in the bath." Live (20f, Waterloo music theory class) also hears these sounds as evidence of the mother being a danger to the child: "scaring the poor baby [moans and groans]. Splashing in the bathtub. Mommy had a little too much to drink."

The conflation of sexuality and motherhood through the bodily sounds of heavy breathing and panting is a cultural danger zone: Jo Anna Isaak, reading Julia Kristeva, claims that "the figure of the 'mother who knows sexual pleasure' is the most severely repressed 'feminine' figure in Western culture" (Isaak, in Kelly 1983, 205).⁷ To make these sounds public is considered by some to be obscene, embarrassing, or potentially dangerous (sexual). I would suggest that the act of representing this repressed figure by making these sounds public is radical and transgressive.

Is the call-and-response too close to the sonic play between parent and child that I myself initially found "too personal" to be considered music? One aspect of the vocal work that excites commentary is its exploration in Moments Two and Three of nonverbal communication between mother and child, as the child learns language. Some listeners like this expression of communication without words. For instance, James (20m, York electroacoustic composition class) says: "I liked the call/response between voice and baby—playful like a child. . . . Reminded me of how we learn to associate sounds and what it would be like not to have any associations." My own initial response to this section was "Why, this is exactly what I did with my children. But it is just play, not music." But when I was asked to make similar sounds in an extended vocal workshop,⁸ I did not question their musicality. When I associated this kind of sound-making with the musical context of an extended vocal workshop, they seemed musical. In the context of my home and my own children, perhaps I associated them too much with the domestic realm.

In an article on this topic, composer Pauline Oliveros and music theorist Fred Maus have the following interchange:

[Oliveros] . . . there is the whole cynical attitude about babies and children that their activities are to be sneered at, not to be taken seriously. "That's just a baby!"⁹

[Maus] *And of course, that's tied in with the way that women are thought about—"That's just a baby" and "That's just the way that women spend their time, watching the baby do these silly things."* (Oliveros and Maus 1994, 181)

With a deeply-rooted cultural prejudice that babies have nothing to say, particularly before they learn language, it would seem foolish to base a musical piece on imitation of the baby's sounds—just baby babble, not worth listening to. This is similar to the reaction of the traditional art world in 1975 to Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*: “the mainstream art crowd denigrated the piece because it was just about a woman and her baby, thereby no fit subject for high culture” (Lippard 1983, xi). Focusing on these voices and the sonic relationship between parent and child in a concert setting challenges these assumptions.

I have long since reconsidered my initial response that questioned the musicality of childhood vocables, remembering the concentration, improvisation, repetition, and interaction that characterized daily sessions of soundmaking with my children. Perhaps because Westerkamp calls for extended vocal techniques in this piece, it allows audience members to make the connection that she wishes between musical expressivity and the sounds of young children. Perhaps for some this also tends to situate the musicality of the piece in the virtuosity of the female vocalist's responses to the child's sounds more than in the child's sounds themselves, which are not considered musical in themselves. One of the responses to my performance in Chicago focuses on my more limited scope as an extended vocalist as a weakness of the piece:

I've heard other pieces by Hildegard and am most familiar with *In the Forest Floor* [*sic*], which is quite different from this piece. The tape part is interesting enough, but I strongly feel that this piece necessitates a very strong, wide-ranging, and truly exploratory vocalist, which was not the case in this performance. So the “responses” to the tape were very unsatisfying improvisations, which distracted and detracted from the piece. (Decker, no other information given, Chicago)

Decker claims that the piece “necessitates” a very exploratory vocalist, not considering the possibility that Westerkamp could have written it to accommodate people with a wide range of technical abilities, as she did. When Westerkamp provided alternate suggestions for vocalists, she was emphasizing the development of a relationship between vocalist and taped child that depended less on vocal virtuosity, and more on the ability to create a meaningful dialogue between female performer and child on tape. Blue-Green (27f, composer, Chicago) finds the variation in interplay to be most interesting: “baby section was most interesting when performer's voice was not mimicking exactly—kept the piece in a realm beyond nostalgia.” While Westerkamp asks the performer to improvise

rather than mimicking the child's voice exactly, she does not want these responses to become too virtuosic, or to take over from the child's voice. Many times throughout the instructions to the performer, Westerkamp reminds her to balance her voice with that of the child's, avoiding competing with or covering up the child's voice.

Does "too personal" refer to Westerkamp's decision to leave the vocal sounds on tape relatively unaltered, and therefore recognizable, not abstracted from their context? Technical skill with equipment is highly valued in the electroacoustic music community. Many of the sounds in this piece are juxtaposed but not altered: this is more characteristic of this work than of others of Westerkamp's such as *Cricket Voice* or *Fantasie for Horns*, for instance (both of these latter pieces have received prominent attention as electroacoustic compositions). Westerkamp decides how much to manipulate particular sounds based on her relationship to the sound, her care for it: she admits that she is more ruthless with the sounds of truck brakes than with the sounds of organisms, and she is even more careful than usual with the sound of her own daughter's voice.

Some listeners share Westerkamp's careful attitude towards the manipulation of sounds. Eve Angeline (27f, individual contact) says:

kind of "dangerous" sounding, about things that are explicitly private [invisible?] in relation to the symbolic order. Voice not particularly altered: I worried about scary alterations of mother/baby voice. Anticipated [she anticipated such alterations with fear]. . . . *Safety* is important to me . . . i.e. don't want composer to "turn baby into machine."

It is interesting that the first time Sonja's voice is altered is during Moment Five, when the child is two-and-a-half years old. This is the point at which children begin to express themselves more fully with language, entering the symbolic order. At that point, perhaps, Westerkamp feels less of a need to protect the child's voice from alteration, since she has moved out of the realm that Eve Angeline describes as "explicitly private" in relation to the symbolic order. Eve Angeline wants the child's voice to remain safely unaltered, and anticipates frightening alterations of it. Jane (20f, York undergraduate electroacoustic music) says "the child seems vulnerable and helpless amid a hostile and potentially dangerous world."

This theme of the innocent child menaced by a hostile world is one that has been used repeatedly in Hollywood films, as Lou (31m, composer, Chicago) points out: "Kids' voices recorded are a horror show cliché. It's creepy and sentimental." It is not Westerkamp's intention to

present such a dramatic context: this is not a story about a child being menaced. Yet nineteen listeners use words such as “scary” and “sinister” in their responses.¹⁰ I believe that this has less to do with Westerkamp’s treatment of childhood sounds, and more to do with Hollywood’s dramatization of them. As Eve Angeline points out, it is the anticipation of a possibly dangerous environment that characterizes her response, rather than the perception of one intended by the composer; in Jane’s words, a “potentially dangerous” world rather than one that is actually dangerous. It is plausible that listeners would anticipate a dangerous environment for the child’s voice since the treatment of a child’s voice in a dramatic context such as television or film is often to create an image of innocence that is menaced.

Westerkamp chooses to keep the child’s voice safe by only changing it slightly rather than radically, and by doing this she loses the attention of some of the composers, who wish for more manipulation of the voices. Elizabeth (21f, York undergraduate electroacoustic composition) says: “Interesting things are done with the voice. The singing voice in the middle sounds a bit out of place—needs to be a bit more ‘abstract’ or experimented with.” Biff (22m York undergraduate electroacoustic composition) comments: “I really think that the vocals would have sounded better altered—like at the beginning.” In these responses, there is no concern about the safety of the child’s voice, but rather a description of it as a resource, something to be experimented with, or altered, or made more abstract. These responses by young composers already seem to reflect the emphasis on technique and abstraction that also characterizes electroacoustic textbooks, and the traditional values of the genre (McCartney 2000).

Is the simple presence of a child’s voice in a public place controversial? Do some people believe that children (and perhaps women) should be seen and not heard? Some listeners in my study reacted very negatively to the voices themselves. Zubian (20m, York electroacoustic composition class) says: “Extremely annoying child talking. Excited woman grabs attention. I feel like I’m intruding on the woman and child’s privacy. Towards end of piece voice becomes unbearable torture. Shut up lady!” Cora (25f, Queen’s University gender and music course): “Can’t take this. Can’t stand the little girl’s voice who sang ‘I love recording.’” Both these listeners use very strong language expressing their distaste for the voices such as “unbearable torture” or “I can’t stand this.” While there were many responses which did not complain about the characteristics of the recorded and live voices, the intensity of these comments leads me to wonder what is at their basis. Zubian emphasizes privacy. Is it an insistence that the private sounds of a mother and child should remain pri-

vate, not cross into the public domain of a concert hall where listeners could feel that they are intruding on a private space, spying on a home?

It was one of the most difficult transitions as a performer, to take on an act which is usually considered private, playing with a baby, and to take this relationship seriously as a musical one. At first, I felt that I was transgressing. In order to develop a greater understanding of this piece, I ritualized rehearsal, investing it with significance and emotional intensity, and orchestrating my movement from private to public space. I was careful to schedule my rehearsals for *Moments of Laughter* in the privacy and comfort of my home studio. I paid attention to the emotional effect of different moments, writing about these in my journal and corresponding with Westerkamp about them. There was a gradual movement from living room to radio, where I could broadcast from the safe intimacy of a studio, and finally to a public gallery space. I find this challenge to the public-private dichotomy an exciting and important aspect of the piece, one that needed to be taken seriously in rehearsal.

While privacy seems to be a concern in relation to the voices, so also is stereotyping. Lucy Lippard (1983) notes that Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* was misinterpreted as one that stereotyped women, even though Lippard herself came to believe that the piece interrupted rather than maintaining stereotypes. My initial reaction to Westerkamp's piece reflected a similar concern: I heard the performer's rendition of the poem as too sweet, indexing a stereotype of motherhood as simply sweet, soft, and nurturant. Some other women listeners discuss similar feelings. There is no question that rehearsing and performing this piece contributed to my understanding of the important ways in which *Moments of Laughter* works to complicate stereotypes of motherhood, through its structured passage through seven years and a variety of emotional and political stances, from playfulness to reassurance, power, silliness, distance, and humor.

Westerkamp asks the performer to engage with a range of identities. The vocalist is asked to move through—to perform—a series of different identities in relation to the child's development, culminating in that of the fool, a parodic character. At times the female vocalist is soothing, at another she is discovering the joys of vocal performance with the child, at another she is involved in developing an inner song, at another she is teaching the child about feminine identities through story-telling, at times she clowns to make the child laugh. In the ending, there is a sonic expression of the tension between the woman as earth-mother and as clown, expressed by the child: she sings "my mom dug down, down, down to the middle of the earth, to the heart, to the heart" and her final words are: "Hi mum, see you mum, you're a silly fool, mum." Through-

out the piece, the performer revels at times in being silly, in playing both child and fool simultaneously, the fool who is childlike. In Westerkamp's work, as in Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, the identities of both child and parent constantly shift. Kelly states:

In the *Post-Partum Document*, I am trying to show the reciprocity of the process of socialization in the first few years of life. It is not only the infant whose future personality is formed at this crucial moment, but also the mother whose "feminine psychology" is sealed by the sexual division of labour in childcare. (Kelly 1983, 1)

Lorraine Code notes that recognition of this type of reciprocity is unusual in most feminist writing about motherhood, in which primary attention is usually given to the woman as subject:

In mothering relations throughout their duration, it is difficult to "let go" of a child sufficiently to see her, or him, and act with her in full cognizance of her own agency; to resist treating her as a projection of her mother. Maternal thinkers' sometimes excessive valuing of connectedness can represent such "letting go" as neither right nor desirable. Moreover, in most feminist writing on motherhood, mothers are the "persons" and children are the "others." . . . Engaging with one's child as "the person she or he is," however fluctuating her identity, requires more separateness than the early articulations of maternal thinking allow. (Code 1991, 94)

Throughout *Moments of Laughter*, the adult female performer is directed to balance her soundmaking with that of the child, engaging sonically with the child's voice as it is at that point. These directions to the performer differ from moment to moment, at times emphasizing connectedness with the child through dialogic improvisation, at other times moving towards more detachment through the use of contrasting musical styles or delivery. Throughout the piece, the performer is never intended to overwhelm the child's voice with her own: she is to aim for balance as much as possible, indicating a respect for the child's voice and position, while maintaining different positions in relation to her. This dialogue acknowledges the importance of mother and child to each other as second persons, while allowing their identities to shift interdependently, creating a kind of ideal musical parenting world.

The performer is both mother and not-mother,¹¹ as Homi Bhabha says of a character in another production, "the mother's simulacrum, at once a symbol of her presence and the sign of her absence" (Bhabha 1992,

61). This being mother and not-mother simultaneously complicates the private-public distinction still further: the performer is a symbol of motherhood, a shifting symbol at that, as well as a sign of [real] absent mothers. When I performed this piece, people often thought it was my piece, even though I had included program notes listing it as Westerkamp's. To complicate matters further, when I performed it in Kingston, and a young girl was in the audience, some people thought that she was my daughter. I am reminded of the listener who said that she only likes baby babble when she is with the baby. There is an emphasis on authenticity in relation to motherhood: people wanted me to be a real mother, to have a real daughter who was present. To witness a mother-child interaction as a sonic performance can be unsettling to ideals of the real and "natural" mother.

I can only agree with Minfe (51f, individual contact), who says:

Worthy of more attention. No one has, as far as I know formulated such sounds of a baby so closely. I would like to interpret with my soprano voice this vocal score. For my fun—would anyone else like to listen to it? I wonder!

Certainly, performing this piece was physically, intellectually, and emotionally demanding as well as fun. The variety of listener responses, and their emotional intensity, brought me to realize the complex and important issues that it explores, especially regarding the strong boundary that still exists between private family life and public performance. Not only has no one formulated the sounds of a baby so closely, no other composer has explored musically the positions of a mother in relation to a child in quite such a complex way. The emphasis on a musical dialogue between performer and tape, and the wide range of sounds voiced by the child make it challenging to perform and remind the performer of the value of listening to children's voices. Because it tugs at the walls of the family home, it excites more emotional responses than with other works, and in some cases more hostile responses. On the other hand, some listeners thought of their mothers and families with greater appreciation. Each time I presented it, people talked of recording the voices of their children or their own practices of recording as a child, and some pored over the score, announcing that they would like to perform this piece.

The score and tape part for *Moments of Laughter* are available from the Canadian Music Centre/Centre de Musique Canadienne,

<<http://www.musiccentre.ca/>>.

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NOTES

1. In order to honor the dialogic consultative role that Westerkamp had in the writing and editing process, I keep her commentary in a different font throughout.
2. Also, I was aware by this point that several listeners had been disturbed by the intensity of this cry, which was not always interpreted as a welcoming sound. For instance, Newton (22f, Queen's University gender and music class): "after the baby is born, the noises which the mother makes are quite disturbing until the mother starts to hum."
3. The unpleasant associations were also changed as a result of an email conversation with Westerkamp. I told her of my reservations, and also mentioned that my dog, Nikita, responds strongly to my rehearsals, howling and watching me intently. When I e-mailed Westerkamp with my concern, she replied as follows: "I wonder how Nikita would react to your interpretation of that moment? You could try to use her name with it and see what happens." Her suggestion worked: when I rehearsed that section using Nikita's name to sing the melody, it reframed it sufficiently that I was able to perform it more effectively. Also, once the initial block was removed, I was able to hear associations between that melody and some of Sonja's vocalizations on tape, that I had not been able to hear before because of the strong emotional tone of my memory.
4. This section gives a summary of listener responses. If you are interested in a more detailed reception analysis, you can read it online as part of my monograph on Hildegard Westerkamp, published on the Electronic Music Foundation website:

www.emf.org/guidetotheworld/artists/mccartney00/

This site also has several excerpts of the piece that you can listen to, along with score excerpts and imagery.

5. Respondents were asked to give information such as age, gender, and background in electroacoustic music on their response sheets, as well as to suggest a pseudonym. My identifying notes following each response give age first, followed by *f*=female, *m*=male, as well as any other information given.

6. “The work, begun in 1973 with the birth of her child, is an extended documentation of the mother-child relationship. It covers the first six years of the child’s development and is divided into six sections including, in all, approximately 135 pieces. Each section examines a stage in the constitution of a woman’s identity in and through significant moments in her child’s development: for instance, weaning from the breast, weaning from the holophrase (learning to speak), weaning from the dyad (periodic separation from the mother). the first questions about sexuality and the collection of cathected objects which represent loss, not only of the child but of the maternal body, and finally the child’s entry into the law of the father—learning to write, starting school. The child’s entry into the patriarchal order is experienced by the mother both as a loss and as a reenactment of her own initial negative entry into language and culture.” (Isaak 1983, 203)
7. Even the highly sexualized Madonna of popular music changed her image radically when she became a mother, protecting her child from public scrutiny and toning down her stage persona, projecting spirituality more than sensuality. Perhaps she is aware of the power of the mother stereotype, and does not wish to tamper with it. Although Madonna may seem transgressive in her projections of sexuality, perhaps she does not dare take on this very difficult issue of sexuality in motherhood.
8. With actor, singer, and vocal coach Richard Armstrong, in Toronto during the Fall of 1993.
9. I attended a Deep Listening workshop led by Oliveros at the Kitchener, Ontario, Open Ears Festival of Music and Sound. There was a baby there, who vocalized during the first few minutes of the workshop, as we all listened intently.
10. Ten of these were from the class of Grade 10 girls.
11. Perhaps this is part of the reason I was drawn to performing this piece: in my position as mother and not-mother, it was in some ways similar to my position as a noncustodial mother.

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