# REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN BARBARA PENTLAND'S *DISASTERS OF THE SUN*

by

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines Barbara Pentland's relationship with feminist and gender issues as explored in her 1976 song cycle *Disasters of the Sun*. The first half of this thesis provides biographical information and some of Pentland's thoughts on being a woman composer in Canada. It briefly examines the collaboration between Pentland and the poet Dorothy Livesay and their relationship with the feminist movement in Canada. The latter half of this study is devoted to a detailed analysis of the seven songs in the cycle.

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## MUSICAL EXAMPLES

## Introduction

Born in Winnipeg in 1912, Barbara Pentland is among the first generation of Canadian composers to explore modernist styles. She played an instrumental role in establishing new music instruction at the University of British Columbia and was one of the most forward-looking composers in the newly formed Canadian League of Composers in the 1950s. Her work has been internationally recognized by the International Society for Contemporary Music (1956) and domestically by having Pentland Place in Kanata, Ontario named in her honour, as well as September 12, 1987 officially named Barbara Pentland Day in Vancouver. She received the Diplôme d'Honneur from the Canadian Conference of the Arts and an honorary doctorate from the University of Manitoba (1976).

Success for Pentland has been hard won, however, as she views her career as a struggle against sexual discrimination.[1] As one of the few women composers of her generation, Pentland fought for recognition and objective criticism of her work. Given the important role that gender played in her career, it is surprising that it has not figured prominently in her work. Her 1976 pseudo-dramatic song cycle *Disasters of the Sun* is therefore unique in its exploration of gender relations. The work is exemplary of her late compositional style but employs several techniques which appear rarely in her oeuvre. As her most overt musical expression of

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[1]Sheila Eastman and Timothy J. McGee. *Barbara Pentland,* Canadian Composers 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 6.

feminism, *Disasters* is a step toward understanding Pentland's otherwise silent voice concerning the position of women in society.

**Barbara Pentland: Background**

**Education**

Barbara Pentland's family held conventional values. Pentland's mother, Constance Lally Pentland, had come from a wealthy middle class family. Her own mother had risen to the highest level in Winnipeg society—her husband was the Chief Justice for Manitoba at the time. Constance married a minor bank official thus placing her in a relatively lower social level but she hoped that her daughter would realize her dream of becoming "an elegant and cultured young lady who would succeed in the world of high society."[2]

From an early age, Pentland had longed for music lessons but her parents refused them until she turned nine. Having started lessons, she was anxious to compose; however, her first attempts were discouraged by both her teacher and parents. Consistent with conventional gender roles of the time, music lessons were viewed as a desirable social grace but composition was not appropriate: "they wanted a girl who would play pretty pieces, a child who would behave normally, but they were beginning to think I would be queer. They led me to believe that composition was morally wrong."[3] Despite opposition, Pentland continued to

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[2]Ibid., 12.

[3]Pentland quoted in *Ubyssey* Dec. 2, 1954 p. 6 in Sheila Jane Eastman, *Barbara Pentland: A Biography* (M. M. Thesis Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1974), 11.

compose "because music provided me with an escape into a fantasy world which seemed more meaningful to me than the real one."[4]

In 1929, her parents sent her to a finishing school in Paris hoping this would dispel any notions she maintained about composition. It had the opposite effect. Her year in Paris provided Pentland with numerous opportunities to explore her musical ambitions. She began lessons and received encouragement from her teacher, Cécile Gauthiez—a professor at the Schola Cantorum. Gauthiez was a student of D'Indy and a follower of Franck and she instilled this late romantic style in Pentland. After the latter's return to Winnipeg, the two women continued their composition lessons by mail. Pentland, however, soon discovered that she was moving away from the French style and ended her lessons with Gauthiez after eighteen months.

On her return to Winnipeg, Pentland's parents hosted a "coming-out" ball with the hopes that their daughter would finally give up dreams of composition and choose a husband. Their attempt to launch Pentland as a "social butterfly" was a failure and only served to worsen the relationship between mother and daughter.[5] One consolation was the gift of a new Steinway piano which her parents purchased shortly after her return from Paris.

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[4]Pentland quoted in Canadian Broadcasting Corporation *Thirty-Four Biographies of Canadian Composers,* (Montreal: CBC, 1964), 76.

[5]Eastman and McGee, 22.

With the new instrument, Pentland continued studies in piano and composition in Winnipeg. In 1935 she began advanced studies at the Juilliard school in New York, studying composition with Frederick Jacobi for two years and with Bernard Wagenaar in her final year. The former introduced her to Renaissance music and her interest in independence of line can be traced to this time. Jacobi's traditional approach to harmony and composition, though, left Pentland disenchanted and she happily changed teachers in her third year. Wagenaar encouraged her to compose in her own style and to explore contemporary idioms. Pentland was attracted at this time to Copland, Hindemith, and Stravinsky. Of this early period, her best known work is her 1941 *Studies in Line* for solo piano. The pieces experiment with different linear contours and utilize intervallic motives in a bi-tonal framework.[6]

Pentland's musical training continued with two summers (1941 and 1942) at the Berkshire Music Centre at Tanglewood, Massachusetts. There she studied composition with Aaron Copland who had a profound effect on her early style. He encouraged her to compose in a neo-classical idiom using established forms but with her own melodic and harmonic content. Pentland was attracted to Copland's light texture, dance-like rhythms, and folk-like melodies. Many of her pieces from the 1940s including *Variations for Piano* (1942), *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1946), and *Symphony No. 1* (1945-48) reveal the influence of Copland.[7]

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[6]Ibid., 31.

[7]Ibid., 35.

Moving to Toronto in 1942 to be closer to the centre of new Canadian music, Pentland soon allied herself with Godfrey Ridout, John Weinzweig, and Harry Adaskin. Pentland and Weinzweig were described at the time as revealing "unmistakably the impregnation of the more extreme modernistic school."[8] While spending the summers of 1947 and 1948 at the MacDowell Colony, she met Dika Newlin, a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg who was translating Rene Leibowitz's *Schoenberg et son école*. Prior to this, she had objected to what she perceived to be a romantic temperament in Schoenberg's serial works. Only after purging that emotional expression did she feel comfortable adopting the technique. Pentland's initial experiments with serialism resulted in her *Octet for Winds* (1948).

**Mature Style**

A visit to Europe in 1955 convinced her to continue exploring serial techniques. At the *Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für neue Musik*, Pentland heard new works by Boulez, Stockhausen, and Berio and became interested in the music of Webern.[9] She was attracted by the economy and precision of Webern's music.

> I love Webern's work because it offered a way of stripping music down to the bare essentials. His materials were so restricted, yet his music was so revealing and expressive. His ideas freed me from the last vestiges of influence of the 19th century or of the neo-classical style. . . . Schoenberg, on the other hand, was much too much tied to the 19th century for me to

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[8]"League of Composers Presents Young Canadian Composers" *Musical America* Jan. 25, 1942 in Eastman, 44.

[9]Eastman and McGee, 69.

> appreciate him. Even his most rigorous 12-tone works. . . sound 19th century in texture and form to me. I consider him an unhealthy influence.[10]

Her works after 1955 exhibit this concern with economy: "I realized you can say as much with two notes as with twenty if you use the right two in the right place."[11]

*Symphony for Ten Parts* (1957) displays elements of her new style including contrasting tone colours, sparse textures, and attention to subtle shadings of tone and articulation.[12] In this and later pieces, Pentland places significance on the opening measures as they are the seeds from which the rest of the piece germinates. She identifies this as the "initial impulse" and subsequent musical material is often an elaboration or development of these measures.[13] While many of her mature works open with a complete statement of a row, some present only a few important intervallic sequences and she often uses pitches of the row out of order. She is more concerned with giving the impression of the row and equality of pitch than with strict serial technique.

> I have always avoided musical systems, because so often the work of a composer is fresh and unbounded before they develop a system and then, once they formulate a technique, their music becomes so determinately logical. I find that with Hindemith, for instance.[14]

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[10]Pentland in Pamela Margles, "The Arduous Journey of Barbara Pentland," *Music Magazine* 6 (July-August 1983): 12.

[11]Pentland in Peter Huse, "Barbara Pentland," *The Music Scene* (Jul-Aug 1968): 242.

[12]Eastman and McGee, 70-73.

[13]Pentland in John Adames, "The Art of Composition: An Interview with Barbara Pentland," *Performing Arts in Canada* 20 (Fall 1983): 41.

[14]Pentland in Margles, 12.

In the 1960s, Pentland moved further away from the "determinately logical" by incorporating aleatoric passages. *Trio con Alea* (1966) provides opportunities for the performers to improvise within a controlled framework. Pitches are notated but after playing them once in the given order, the performers are permitted to play them in other orders. In subsequent pieces, the players decide on articulation, dynamics, and tempo. These zones rarely appear near the beginning of a work, often they occur in a later position which allows the performers time to assimilate the style of the work and adapt their improvisation to suit the piece.[15]

**Gender Issues**

Although Pentland explored new compositional techniques, sexual discrimination remained a personal obstacle against which she continued to struggle throughout her career. Looking back on her career, she noted:

> When I was struggling to be a composer, the fact that I happened to be also a female didn't at first concern me, because just to get the education I needed occupied all my attention. About the age of 19 I was signing my compositions using my initials with the surname (and was referred to as Mr. until someone advised me to use my first name), so I must have been aware, but the real impact came later. I was naïve enough to believe that if I wrote good music *that* was what mattered, and I was so absorbed in putting music first in my life, I thought others would too. It only came to me poco a poco that others thought differently, and the discrimination was very real. It is much more subtle, less obvious than racial discrimination, and therefore more lethal in its effect.[16]

Pentland encountered discrimination both at home and abroad. Her musical education had been a struggle against her parents' narrowly conceived ambitions

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[15]Eastman and McGee, 91.

[16]Pentland in letter to Marie Vachon in Eastman, 122.

for their daughter. As late as 1967, conservative Canadian values were echoed by Sir Ernest MacMillan who maintained that "men have more sheer creative ability than women." [17] He hastened to admit that given the increasing number of women composers his attitude may require re-evaluation. Pentland hoped to find a more enlightened atmosphere in Europe when she attended the ISCM conference in 1955 but was disturbed to discover the opposite situation:

> I felt the discrimination in Europe, but I had this delusion that women there were freer. I hadn't counted on the influence of Hitler, which had changed things considerably. I was not prepared for the change in attitude that being a woman brought about. I though only of myself as a composer, not as a woman. I was a professional. I would have breakfast with the Yugoslav composers, eager to discuss what they were doing musically, and then get a frigid reception from the British. I was horrified to find my interest in the music was entirely misinterpreted, so after that I kept more to myself.[18]

At a later international conference, this time at Stratford, Pentland recalls that prevailing attitudes had not changed. On receiving a copy of the papers from the 1961 International Conference of Composers entitled *The Modern Composers and His World* she remarked: "and it was that—exactly. (I inserted "man" before "Composer" on my copy.) After 40 years of struggling to be a composer, at that time the "World" was still closed to women it seemed."[19]

Pentland felt discrimination not only as a woman composer, but as a woman composer interested in the latest musical techniques. In the early 1940s, she applied

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[17]Sir Earnest MacMillan quoted in Barbara Frum "Music Makers Not Muses," *The Women's Globe and Mail*, (March 16, 1967): W1

[18]Pentland in interview with Eastman, June 8, 1974 in Eastman, 123.

[19]Letter to Mary Gardner of the Association of Canadian Women Composers, May 28, 1984.

for the position of composer-in-residence at the University of Minnesota. When asked to play one of her works, she chose *Studies in Line*. Her choice shocked the committee and, after a long silence, one of them finally commented: 'when you came in I thought you were a *nice* girl'.[20]

The belief that "nice" women should not compose in an atonal or avant-garde idiom is a constant criticism of women composers. The English composer Elizabeth Maconchy, for example, has been criticized for her "crabbed" and stern musical style.[21] Jill Halstead points out that women who have written in a modern idiom have been accused of adopting a "masculine" language and thus concealing their true gender identity. Ethel Smyth, for example, was widely described in masculine terms such as "virile" and praised for her transcendence of "feminine" musical qualities.[22] Conversely, women who compose in idioms which are considered to display feminine traits are criticized for not being able to transcend their sexuality. Women composers have thus found it difficult to be accepted without prejudice.[23] Helen Weinzweig, wife of composer John Weinzweig, has said

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[20]Eastman and McGee, 32.

[21]Peter J. Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance* in Jill Halstead, *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gendered Politics of Musical Composition* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1997), 144.

[22]Jane A. Bernstein, "'Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!' Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer," in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 305.

[23]Halstead, 144.

of Pentland: "She had a rough time as a woman in a man's world. Her music was never received objectively."[24]

Throughout her career, Pentland strove for a gender neutral reception of her music. She considered her sex to be secondary to her vocation. "I knew. . . that I didn't want gender to interfere with my music. I have always tried to emphasize that first of all I am a composer. . . Everything people do should be received on a human level."[25] She maintains, however, that "a woman still has to be very much better than a man to achieve attention."[26] Godfrey Ridout praises Pentland's independence and ability to transcend gender controversies:

> Let's face it—Barbara's unique. I don't intend to sound like a male chauvinist or whatever the hell it is, but some of the women composers may have been composers because they were women at a time when there wasn't an entirely equal right. A woman composer was something of a phenomenon, consequently she got attention. And that accounts for some pretty bloody awful music. Barbara was different. Barbara could meet anybody on anybody's ground. She was different stuff, and a fighter as well, but she didn't fight as a feminist, she fought as a person.[27]

Ridout's praise for Pentland's separation from the feminist movement is not wholly accurate. Throughout her career she has supported women's increasing roles in public life and equal treatment. In the 1970s, however, the women's movement changed focus and tactics, relying on lobbying organizations,

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[24]Helen Weinzweig in conversation with Eastman September 28, 1972 in Eastman, 123.

[25]Pentland in Margles, 15.

[26]Pentland in interview with Eastman June 8, 1974 in Eastman, 124.

[27]Godfrey Ridout in interview with Eastman September 27, 1972 in Eastman, 123.

consciousness raising groups, and cultural initiatives.[28] For some, including Pentland, the pro-active organizations and demonstrations that characterize second wave feminism in Canada had a negative impact on the movement. She remarked in a 1982 interview:

> I hate this kind of militancy that you see everywhere with women's lib. I shouldn't have to be and yet I suppose it's kind of an over-reaction to years and years of getting nowhere and of being paid less for the same job [as a man's]. I know what it's like; I know that I've had to be very better, often, than my men colleagues to be considered at all. But you feel that after all these years and all the very fine, intelligent women who have entered various areas of work, and done well, that this would not be necessary . . . I don't like a ghetto attitude in any field.[29]

Pentland's comments came shortly after the founding of the Association of Canadian Woman Composers (ACWC) in 1980 by Carolyn Lomax. She was at first reluctant to join such an organization, citing the segregation of women which she deplored. In a letter to the ACWC, she acknowledges that her dislike for such "ghettos" stems from "those ghastly parties where women discreetly separated from the men's 'important' discussion for their own trivial conversations."[30] Her opinion changed, however, as she came to realize the important role the ACWC could play in providing support and role models for young composers. United, Pentland realized women could make a greater difference. She became a member in 1983 writing with her membership fee: "Nowadays, judging by the many

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[28]Roberta Hamilton, *Gendering the Vertical Mosaic: Feminist Perspectives on Canadian Society*, (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996): 52-54.

[29]Pentland in Rich MacMillan, "Vancouver composer at 70 concentrates on chamber works." *The Music Scene*. 327 (1982): 6.

[30]Pentland letter to Mary Gardner, May 31, 1983.

women's groups forming to protest various conditions or to reach certain goals, I realize that the younger women find that the only course to bring results."[31] The ACWC named her an honorary life member of the organization in 1998.

In addition to concerns about women's social and political equality, Pentland has shown an interest in the work of other female artists. For her vocal pieces, she has drawn largely on women poets including Ann Marriot and English translations of Chinese poetry by Clara M. Candlin. The poet from whom she has drawn most consistently is Dorothy Livesay. The two collaborated on Pentland's only opera, *The Lake* (1952), which centres on events in the life of one of British Columbia's first female settlers. Later settings include *Disasters of the Sun* and *Ice Age* (1986). Livesay's poetry serves as Pentland's only explicit exploration of gender issues.[32]

**Dorothy Livesay**

Livesay is regarded by many as one of Canada's finest poets. Her parents, both writers, supported her literary endeavours and were influential in developing her early lyric voice. Moreover, unlike Pentland's family, they encouraged her not to regard gender as a barrier to any goal. Livesay's youthful focus on rural Canada gave way in the 1930s to social concerns and she became an active member of the Young Communist League, writing Marxist leaflets and proletarian verse.

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[31]Ibid.

[32] While the specific subject matter of these work may be unique in Pentland's oeuvre, earlier works address various other social concerns: *Ruins (Ypres 1912)* (1932), *Lament* (1934), *Rhapsody (The World on the March to War Again)* (1939), *Lament* (1939), *Freedom March (From the South)* (1963), *Songs of Peace and Protest* (1968), and *News* (1968-70) express her abhorrence for violence and war. *Small Pieces for a Shrinking Planet* (1988-90), a collection of piano miniatures, is dedicated to people around the world suffering from social injustice.

Although her interest in communism waned after the Depression, her concern for social justice remained. *Call My People Home* (1950), about the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, is a significant poem of this time. Livesay's interest in promoting social justice naturally included supporting women's equality; however, like Pentland, she tended to dissociate herself from the feminist movement characterizing "them" as "stoney" women.[33] The importance of women's issues in her poetry as well as her editing of *40 Women Poets of Canada* and *Woman's Eye: 12 B.C. Poets* "document overwhelmingly the truth that Livesay [was] a practicing—maybe not a card-carrying, but unquestionably practicing—feminist".[34] Throughout the last thirty years of her life, sexuality and gender issues played an important role in her poetry thanks largely to significant changes in her personal relationships.

Livesay's twenty-year marriage deteriorated in the late 1950s and, after her husband's unexpected death in 1958, she embarked on a journey of personal discovery. Traveling to Africa, she was rejuvenated by the lively culture. A love affair with a much younger man in 1960s inspired some of the most honest and sexually explicit verse by a mature Canadian poet in her 1967 collection *The Unquiet Bed*. The work openly addresses issues of female sexuality, aging, and the nuances of male-female relationships. In the 1970s, Livesay gradually sought the

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[33]Thompson, 78.

[34]Ibid.

companionship of women and in the 1980s she retired to a community of women artists on Galiano Island where she further explored lesbian relationships.

Livesay's poetry traces her various sexual relationships and explores changing gender roles. Throughout her career, the sun and moon served as important images in exploring these relationships. In early works, Livesay follows conventional cosmology in which the sun represents masculine strength and sexuality while the moon is a representation of the feminine. Poems from the period of the 1950s and 60s evoke the sun as a representation of sexual energy and ecstasy.[35] In later works, however, Livesay expresses the desire to be freed of the sun's oppressive power and she looks to the earth with a desire to be connected underground.[36] *The Phases of Love* (1983) completes this fundamental shift toward seeking female love and lesbian relationships by reversing the gender roles of the sun and moon:

> When the moon stops by
> with his bag of silver
> I'll not give him
> a look in
>
> I'll wait for the tender fingers
> of the woman sun
> slipping through the window
> sliding like love
> into my skin[37]

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[35]Ibid., 109.

[36]Dennis Cooley, "House/Sun/Earth: Livesay's Changing Selves" in *A Public and Private Voice*, ed. Lindsay Dorney et al. (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986), 120.

[37]Dorothy Livesay, "Dawnings" in *The Phases of Love* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1983).

One of Livesay's first works to decry masculine sexual power in search of fulfillment through the feminine is the seven poem collection *Disasters of the Sun* (1971). The work opens with the poet experiencing a crisis of identity: "if I'm a woman/. . . /assure me I am human." That the poet needs reassurance of her humanity suggests the possibility that she experiences treatment that is more appropriately "inhuman" and related to the image of a "beast." Through the seven poems, the poet searches for a more human identity which results from the unity of the masculine and the feminine.

As in her earlier works, Livesay describes the sun in the first poem as "gold garnered," suggesting brightness, glory, and power. The masculine sun is also a creative force: "I'm totem carved/with your splayed/scalpel." Over the course of the seven poems, the poet changes her view of the sun. The "gold garnered/incredible sun" of the first poem becomes a "tyrannical king" in the sixth and finally the "black sun" disappears below the horizon in the seventh poem. By the last poem, a more fluid conception of gender appears. The ideal man, she maintains, would be one who adopts aspects of the feminine: ". . . he with moon-wand/who witches water."

The significant change which occurs between the first and seventh poems is the result of a process of self-discovery that hinges on the pivotal change in imagery of the fourth poem. Here the poet becomes aware of the physical changes related to old age. Her hands "that used to be leaves" are now "roots/gnarled in soil." This imagery represents a fundamental change in allegiance. The leaves, which

characterize the poet's youth, once reached skyward toward the sun for nourishment. Now, however, she seeks the earth for nourishment as the roots hide from the sun in soil. Moreover, the poet recognizes the destructive ability of the sun by pointing to it as the cause for her ". . . knotted bones/whitening. . .." After this central poem, the sun's imagery darkens as it increasingly becomes a destructive force. Simultaneously, there is an increase in female imagery: the earth, soil, subterranean, moon, and water.

Just as the first and seventh poems present antithetical imagery, so, too, do the second and sixth poems. The second poem is a general reflection on the unity between two opposing forces in the poet's relationships. In the first stanza, the warmth of Africa is paired with a cold Siberia to create a unified whole. Livesay's use of inclusive language helps to suggest the unity between the two opposing forces: "bright between our bones/shines the invisible sun." The sun, a shared experience, is thus a unifying force. The sixth poem destroys the figment of unity presented in the second poem by decrying the sun and revealing its oppressive nature. The poet reveals that her relationship with the sun was not one of equality but of oppression: "I have lived sixty years/under your fiery blades." Moreover, the poet seeks to end this relationship and unite herself with the feminine moon. The mutilation suggested by the "blunt/moon scissors" enforces her conviction to end her destructive relationship with the sun.

The third and fifth poems present another pairing, linked this time by their narrative recounting of events. The tone changes in these poems from nostalgic

recollection to recognition of violence. In the third poem, the poet is speechless and confused in the presence of her lover. Livesay's internal rhymes give the second stanza a nervous quality:

> In the airport circle where
> the baggage tumbled
> all my jumbled life
> fumbled
> to find the one sweet piece
> recognizable, red[38]
> the clothing stuffed and duffled
> labeled mine

The lover, contrarily, is calm and the poet is aware of his power: "your look a *soft bomb/behind my eyes*" (emphasis original). The fifth poem reveals the sun's dual role as creator and destroyer. The sunflower is a figure torn between the earth and the sun. Its roots link it with the earth but it grows through the warmth of the sun. This longing for the sun is eventually destructive as the flower wilts and collapses "under a pitiless July/sky." The poet protects herself from the sun by closing herself off in her room with the comfortable breeze of a fan. Her retreat indoors proves harmful, however, as the fan injures her. The poem ends with a warning of the sun's dangerous oppression.

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[38]This line is omitted from the poem as published in *Collected Poems: The Two Seasons*. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 357.

*Disasters of the Sun*

Livesay was attracted to Pentland's sparse, linear style and in 1973, after the premier of *Mutations* in Vancouver, sent the composer her *Disasters* poems. The attraction was mutual. According to Pentland, the explicitly feminist content of Livesay's poetry was not the initial inspiration for her setting:

> When Dorothy Livesay gave me her set of poems called "Disasters of the Sun," I reacted to them on a purely musical level. I felt that their strength and intensity was something I wanted to express in music, but I wasn't looking for their philosophical content. I was reacting to the sounds and colors that I heard while reading them. Now, when I analyze the work that I wrote with the poems, I realize that my emotional reaction was the instigator of the whole work. [39]

Pentland's reaction to the "sounds and colours" of Livesay's words is indicative of her creative process in setting texts. She experienced difficulties in finding poetry as she avoided texts which had their own sense of meter or rhyme. Thus, in recent years she has chosen to set translations of ancient Chinese poetry, Sanskrit, and Biblical texts.[40]

Pentland completed *Disasters of the Sun* for a commission from the Vancouver New Music Society in 1976 and its first public performance was given in a concert celebrating her 65th birthday in 1977. The personal significance of the work can be gleaned from these circumstances. Other commissions produced purely abstract works such as her 4th Symphony for the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra or her

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[39]Pentland in Margles, 12.

[40]Eastman and McGee, 96. See Pentland's *Sung Songs, Three Sung Songs, Sung Songs Nos. 4 & 5*, translated by Clara M. Candlin, "Salutation of the Dawn" using a Sanskrit text, and "What is Man" from Ecclesiasticus XVIII.

String Quartets for various ensembles. Her choice of a highly political text for a piece intended to celebrate her birthday suggests the importance of gender issues for Pentland.

The work is scored for a chamber ensemble of nine players with mezzo-soprano soloist. The instruments are grouped into three "choirs" of three players each: winds (flute, clarinet, and horn); percussion (including piano); and string trio. At thirty minutes in duration, *Disasters* is Pentland's longest work, a length approached only by *News* and her one act opera *The Lake*. Moreover, it is scored for the largest ensemble since her *Symphony No. 4* in 1959. In addition to expanded instrumental resources, Pentland employs a tape recorder for the only time since *News*. Pre-recorded vocal passages are played simultaneously with the live vocalist. Although she followed developments in electronic music with interest, these two works remain the only ones to use this technology. In both cases, the pre-recorded material serves to recall a mood or thought.[41]

Pentland's setting pays particular attention to the imagery of each song, thus in mood they are each independent. Despite their individuality, the large scale form of the collection recognizes the pivotal role of the fourth poem. While the first three songs exhibit both nervous energy and melancholy introspection, the final three songs express anger and resoluteness which culminates finally with a sense of peace in the final song.

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[41]Pentland in interview with Phyllis Mailing recorded for broadcast CBC "Music of Today" May 3, 177.

Eastman and McGee suggest that *Disasters of the Sun* contains numerological significance in its large scale planning through the use of seven motifs throughout the seven song. These motifs, all of which occur in the first song, are:

1. decoration of a single note
2. shimmering sound (tremolo)
3. falling line over a wide range
4. interval of a ninth
5. interval of a third (major and minor)
6. three equal notes on the same pitch
7. piano clusters[42]

Several of these are merely recurring intervals and general melodic shapes or techniques which are too generic to rightly be named motifs. Moreover, Pentland denies any intentional numerological planning in the work.[43] She does, however, acknowledge the significance of the last named motif along with the interval of a minor ninth which she claims gives a "harsh, dominating quality" to her characterization of the sun.[44]

In addition to motifs, Pentland uses quotation as a structural tool. Direct quotation does not figure prominently in compositions before *Disasters*. Her *Fourth Symphony* uses a muted trumpet to humorously suggest jazz styles but she does not quote directly from this repertoire. *News* (1970) was the first work to include direct quotations and, like *Disasters*, it is a large-scale pseudo-dramatic work for virtuoso

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[42]Eastman and McGee, 105.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Pentland in interview with Phyllis Mailling May 3, 1977.

voice and orchestra. Quotation in *News* acts largely as a satirical device.[45] Pentland uses the tune of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," for example, to enumerate the destructive effects of war: "Ten patients were captured twenty troops killed, four hundred pounds of medicine and ten buildings were destroyed."[46]

On the surface, quotations in *Disasters of the Sun* seem satirical but their effect goes well beyond this. Two of the three quotations draw on musical portraits of the infamous womanizer Don Juan. In the first and sixth songs, Pentland uses the heroic theme of Richard Strauss' *Don Juan*. In the third song, "*La ci darem la mano*" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* appears twice. While these quotations may seem superficially humorous, they make potent musical comments about masculinity and female relations with men which will be explored in detail with their respective songs. In the final song, Pentland quotes a brief passage from "Dido's Lament" in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* as well as using the formal device of a ground bass. Quotation in this song serves no ironic or satirical function but helps convey the resolution of the final song. In addition to external references, Pentland quotes material from earlier in the work itself. Passages of self-reference occur in introspective songs as a means of self-reflection.

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[45]Eastman and McGee, 99.

[46]Barbara Pentland, *News for virtuosos voice and orchestra*, (1968 and 1970) measures 409-414.

I

O you old
gold garnered
incredible sun
sink through my skin
into the barren bone

If I'm real
I'm totem carved
with your splayed
scalpel

If I'm a person
the gods roar
in horrible surprised
masculinity

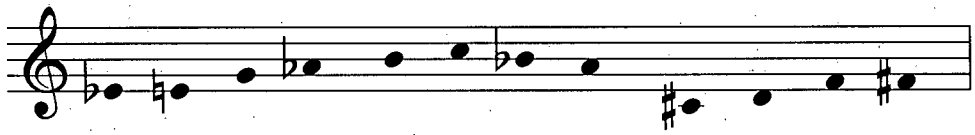
but if I'm a woman
paint me
with the beast stripes
assure me I am human

As noted earlier, this first song establishes the work's central theme of gender conflict. The four stanzas introduce the relationship between the creative sun and the poet; moreover, each stanza presents a progressively narrower view of the poet from the most general human existence to her identity as a woman. Pentland's setting is through-composed and articulates the divisions between stanzas with short instrumental interludes.

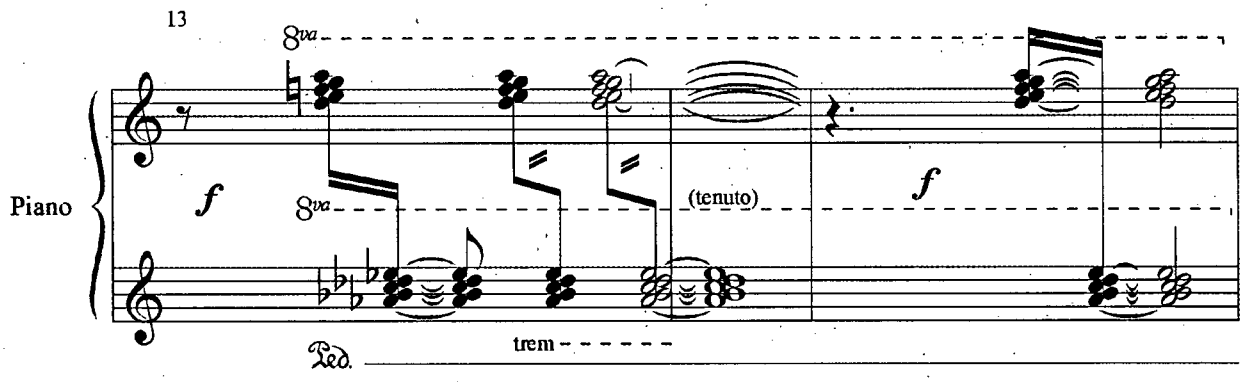
The "initial impulse" of this song takes the shape of an instrumental introduction which contains a complete statement of the aggregate. This introduction acts as a row in so far as interval patterns established in the opening measures recur throughout the song (see example 1). As already noted, Pentland

tends to avoid strict applications of serial techniques.[47] Some pitches are repeated in the introduction but the end of the row is clearly articulated by the appearance of a low F sharp in the piano. The row is characteristic in its frequent use of half steps which appear throughout the song often as a minor ninth between two instruments. In this and later songs in the cycle, the interval of a minor ninth serves as a motif through its association with the word "sun" and its role in accompanying the more conspicuous "sun motif": tremolo clusters in the piano (example 2).

**Example 1: Song I Row**



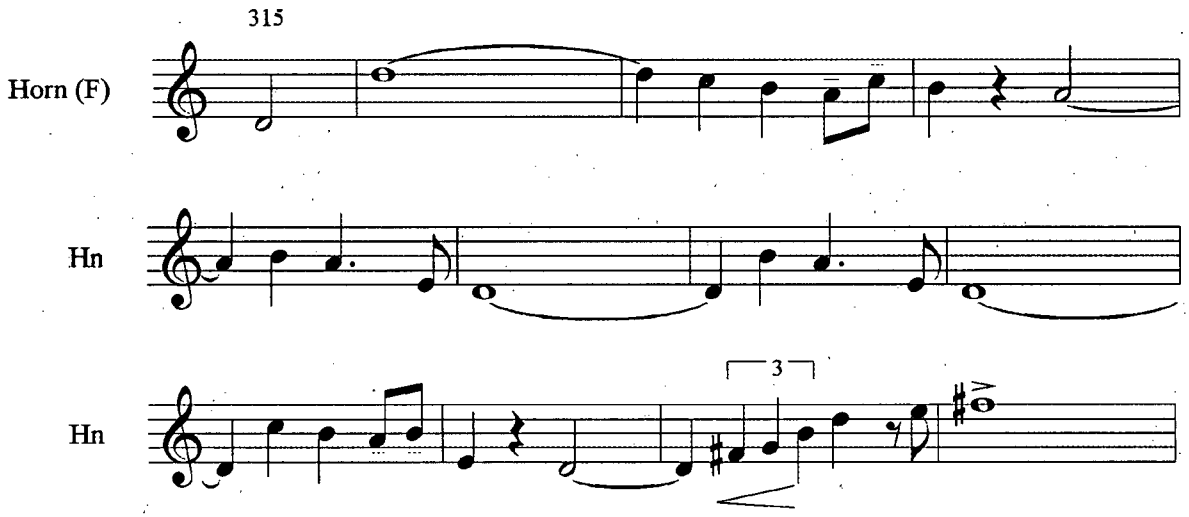
**Example 2: Sun Motif**




[47]Here, as in all subsequent songs in *Disasters of the Sun*, the opening statement of the aggregate acts loosely as a row from which later material in the song is derived. In the analysis that follows, rows will be noted only where they appear to be the primary structural tool and will be omitted from this discussion where colouristic devices take precedence over pitch organization.

Changes in instrumentation articulate the four stanzas of the song. The first three stanzas employ only the string trio with percussion. The winds, with the exception of the horn, appear in the final two lines of the first stanza and in each of the three interludes between stanzas. Between the third and the fourth stanzas, the entire ensemble builds up to a climactic and distorted quotation of Richard Strauss' *Don Juan*. The final stanza of the song employs the winds to a greater degree than any of the preceding stanzas as a means of expressing the poet's change in attitude. The rising lines of the clarinet and flute which accompany the final lines of the song, "paint me/with the beast's stripes/assure me I am human," seem to convey the poet's longing and unease. Furthermore, the horn plays a significant role in this song and throughout the cycle by introducing the Strauss quotation and is thus associated with masculinity and patriarchy.

**Example 3: Richard Strauss *Don Juan***



The third stanza is the textual climax of the poem as the poet's human identity elicits a cry of masculine virility from the creator-gods. Musically, Pentland's setting conveys a similar sense of climactic arrival at the end of this stanza following the word "masculinity" with a quotation of Strauss' *Don Juan* (examples 3 and 4). Pentland's use of this quotation is two-fold. On the one hand, the quotation refers directly to the word "masculinity" and draws attention to parallels between the womanizer of Strauss' piece and the masculine "sun" and gods of the poem. The quotation suggests that the poet's feeling of inhumanity stems from the cavalier attitude of the Don Juan figure for whom women are merely a sport and source of sexual gratification. On the other hand, the quotation has personal significance as Pentland believes her struggle as a woman composer has been directly related to men "trumpeting their 'masculinity.'"[48]

This theme from *Don Juan* possesses masculine strength according to Pentland who describes it as a "very *machismo* theme." She is quick to point out, however, that she distorts the quotation.[49] The melody appears fragmented between the winds and strings and in various keys. Although identifiable fragments of the melody are clearly diatonic, the tonality constantly shifts both within a single instrumental statement and between instruments creating a polytonal framework. Moreover, Pentland divides melodic fragments between the instruments with some omissions, repetitions, and canonic treatment. The result of

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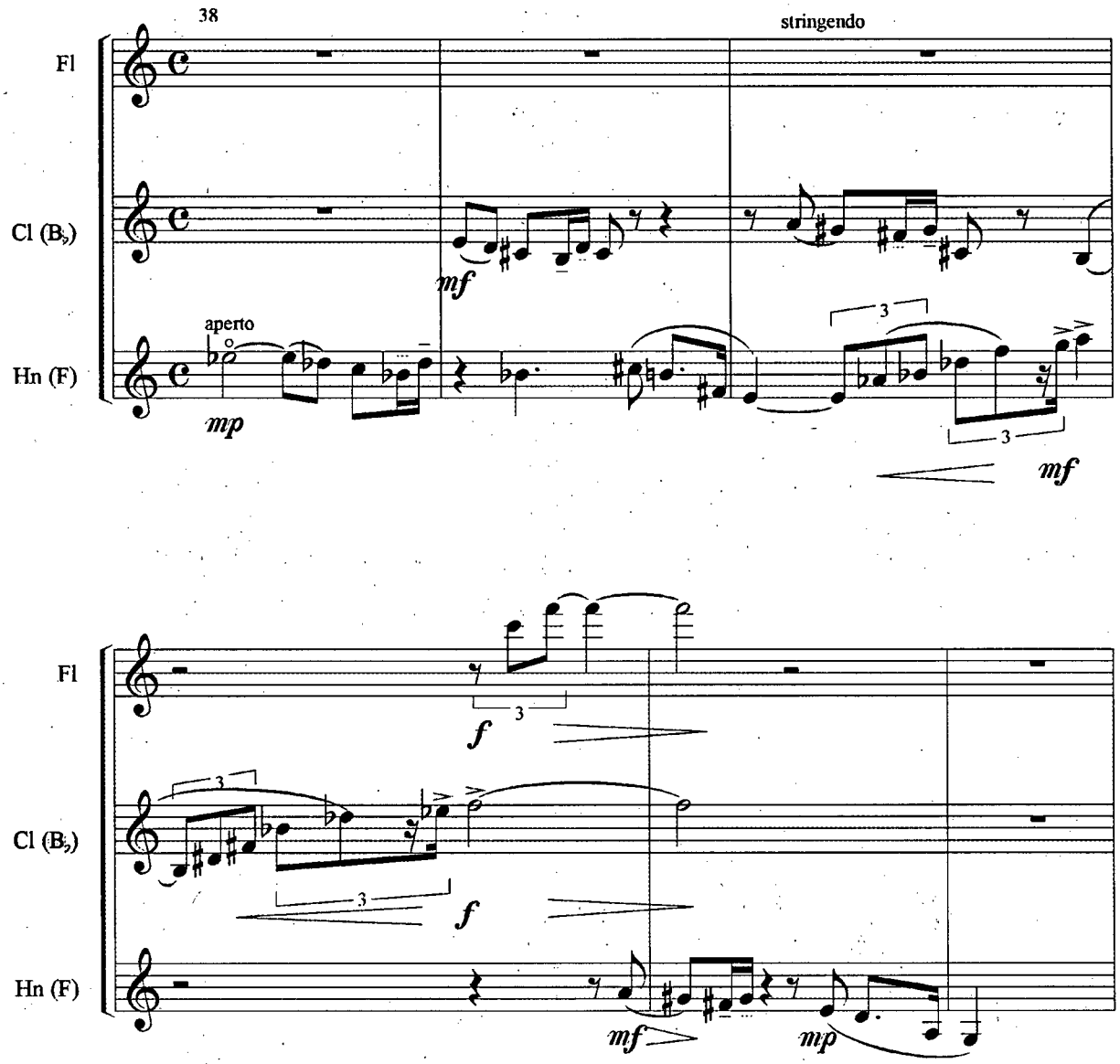
[48]Eastman and McGee, 106.

[49]Pentland in interview with Phyllis Mailing. May 3, 1977.

these distortions is to undermine the melody's tonal assertiveness and melodic ascent to an anticipated climax on F sharp. Stripped of its tonal context, the quotation exhibits no urgency in achieving resolution. If this sense of tonal drive for climax and resolution played a significant role in Pentland's opinion of the theme as one that expresses masculinity, then her treatment emasculates it. Moreover, if this melody is, as she claims, a reference to men who have hindered her achievements as a composer through their masculine assertiveness, her manipulation of it expresses a desire to reverse the situation by controlling and thereby weakening her former aggressors.

The Strauss quotation is one of many illustrative gestures used by Pentland in the song. Elsewhere, in measure 16, a descending glissando accompanies the word "sink" and the unaccompanied horn helps describe the "barren bone" of measures 19 to 20. For the words "roar/in horrible" the singer is instructed to sing freely following general contour lines; no absolute pitches are given. This onomatopoeic setting of "roar" continues through the word "horrible," thus taking advantage of the vowel rhyme between the two words.

**Example 4: Strauss quotation**




It has been suggested that the tone of this first song is angry and challenges the dominance of the sun.[50] The distortion of the Strauss quotation seems to call

[50]Ibid., 100 and *Vancouver New Music Society Anniversary Concert for the Canada Council Commemorating its 25th year of Service, and Barbara Pentland, Celebrating in 1982 her 70th Birthday.* Sunday, October 24, 1982 Recital hall UBC. Program Notes.

into question the sun's power; however, little of the song is explicitly angry. The first stanza opens with an ascending line reaching for its highest pitch at the word "sun" as an evocation. The second stanza is quiet and accompanied by tremolo strings. The staccato notes and wide leaps of the vocal line suggests sarcasm rather than anger. The third stanza builds up to the dramatic and onomatopoeic setting of "roar" followed by the distorted Strauss quotation. The singer's use of *sprechstimme* on the word "masculinity" suggests bitterness. The final stanza, rather than expressing an angry tone with respect to her marginal position, is a quiet, lyrical setting accompanied by long lines in the flute and clarinet which finally fade out at the end of the song. The tempo gradually slows and the song ends with barely a whisper. Rather than suggesting anger, the song conveys several moods which mirror the text. It is at times sarcastic and even violent, particularly in the third stanza, but the final stanza is melancholic in its longing for reassurance.

II

The world is round
it is an arm
a round us
my fingers touching Africa
your hand
tilting Siberian trees
our thoughts
still as the tundra stones
awaiting footprints

bright between our bones
shines the invisible sun

Pentland follows the melancholic tone of the first song with a calm and reflective mood. The poem reveals a sense of wholeness in the collaboration of opposites. The warmth of Africa coupled with Siberian frigidity represent respectively the female poet and her male companion. United, they are whole as the world is round; however, individually they are incomplete. Pentland's setting focuses on the poem's imagery through word painting.

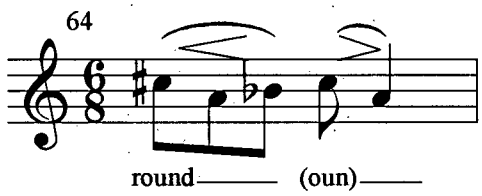
This song is divided into three sections. The opening section, which includes an eight measure instrumental introduction, encompasses the first six lines of the poem. The wholeness expressed in the poetry is not fully realized in the introductory material (mm. 55-62) as the aggregate is left incomplete (missing A). This "initial impulse" emphasizes the intervals of major and minor thirds particularly in the opening flute melody which alternates between the pitches D and B. Unity of musical material is also achieved through the use of a recurring three-note pattern: a major third followed by a minor second (trichord [014]).

The middle section of the song (mm. 85-97, lines 7-9) contains none of these recurring pitch class arrangements and the rhythm slows to portray the frozen tundra of the poem. The abrupt appearance of the sun's cluster motif in the piano signals the start of the final section of the song at measure 98. The trichord motif again dominates the musical material and measures 105 to 112, the closing measures of the song, repeat the flute material from the instrumental introduction. This repetition thus completes the circle suggested by the poem. The overall form of the

song is therefore an abbreviated mirror form—a form which Pentland frequently employs.[51]

Eastman and McGee suggest that the recurring interval of a third symbolizes the roundness of the world as the thirds turn around one another throughout the collection.[52] Such revolutions can be heard in this song's opening measures. The flute introduction opens with an alternation of pitches D and B and the word "round" is set to a major third (see example 5).

**Example 5: Melodic thirds representing unity**




Despite the poetic and musical suggestions of synthesis, the powerful and dominating "Sun" motif emerges in the final lines of the song. On the one hand, the preceding poetry suggests an harmonious union between male and female—one which does not harbour resentment toward the oppressive masculinity which the sun previously represented. On the other hand, the final lines act as a warning of the hidden, "invisible" sun which is no less harmful than that of the preceding song. The ominous warning of the final lines works against the unity that was suggested

[51]See, for example, Eastman and McGee, 72.

[52]Ibid., 105.

earlier in the poem while the sun motif musically disturbs the sense of wholeness. Pentland's mirror form, however, attempts to maintain a tenuous hold on the suggested unity.

III

Though I was certain
we recognized each other
I could not speak:
the flashing fire
between us
fanned no words

In the airport circle where
the baggage tumbled
all my jumbled life
fumbled
to find the one sweet piece
recognizable, red
the clothing stuffed and duffled
labeled mine

and over across the circle saw
your dark hair, piercing eyes
lean profile, pipe in mouth.

Incredibly, you move.
You seem to dance
and suddenly
you stand beside me, calm
without surprise:

I cannot tell
what country you are from
we recognize each other
and are dumb

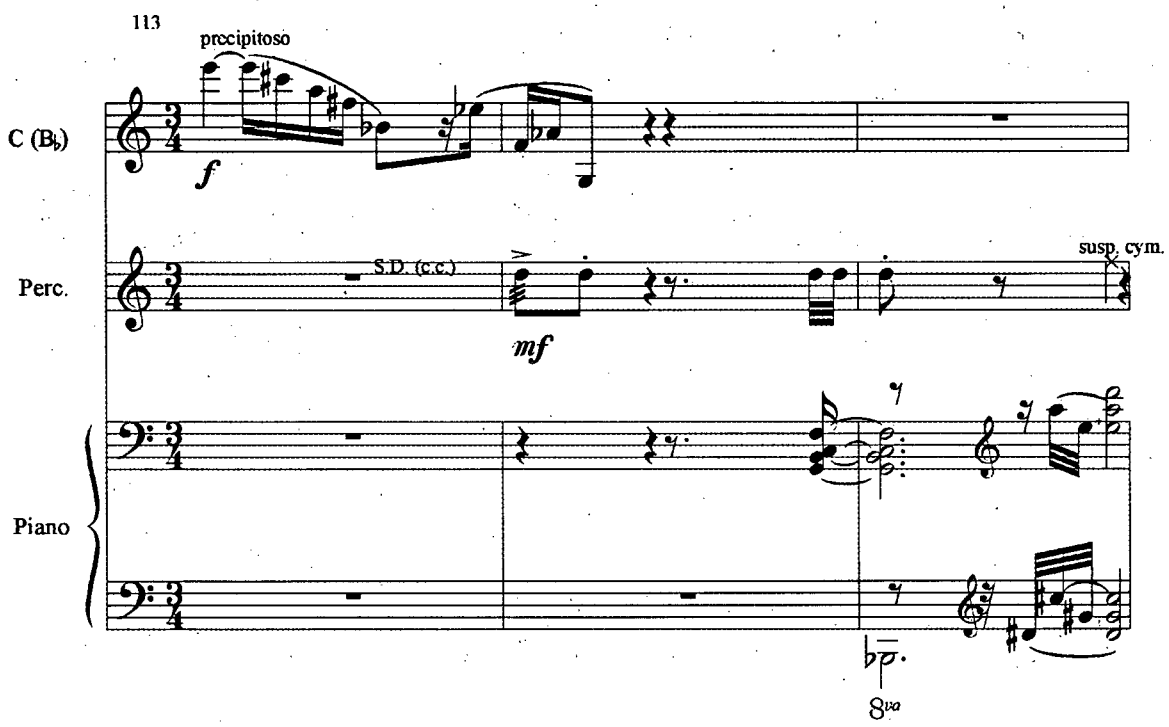
your hand your hand
tense on your pipe
your look *a soft bomb*
*behind my eyes*

With the third poem, the large-scale narrative of the collection moves from general comments to more specific recollections of past relationships. In this long, narrative song, Pentland's music changes abruptly with each fleeting image. It is playful yet nervous at times but the final words are, like the preceding song, an ominous warning. The song is divided into three sections indicated by changes in tempo. Section A ends at measures 136 after the first stanza. Section B concludes at measure 161 after the third stanza and section C includes the last three stanzas of the poem.

The introduction to section A is divided into two parts separated by an aleatoric zone marked "nervous, excited rather than noisy" (see example 6). The first half of this introduction (mm. 113-115) contains the aggregate and emphasizes significant intervals, particularly the minor third.[53] In the second half of this introduction, following the aleatoric zone of measure 116, Pentland introduces an awkward dance rhythm (see mm. 117-121 of example 6) which continues through the first stanza and is evocative of the poet's nervousness, an emotion which Pentland further explores in section B.

[53]The order of pitches in the aggregate is (D B G E G# C# D# F# F C A# A).

**Example 6: Song III Introduction**



117

F

flutter

mp

mf

C (B♭)

mp

mf

H (F)

open

mp

Pno

leggero

mp

p

8va

8va

Vn

ord.

pizz.

Va

ord.

pizz.

Vc

ord.

pizz.

The B section constitutes a contrasting middle section in the song through its employment of a different row and generally quicker setting. The new row

emphasizes perfect fourths[54] and the singer employs more *sprechstimme* to get through the long text. The fast, breathless setting coupled with quick, nervous rhythms helps to convey the poet's unease.

As in the second song, Pentland creates unity through repetition of motifs. The introductory material of measures 113-115 recurs in measures 161-163 as the introduction to section C. Further material from the first stanza (mm. 117-120) is recapitulated as accompaniment material in measures 182-185 (transposed up a half-step) within the sixth stanza, a possible reference to the line "we recognize each other" which is shared between the two stanzas. Like the second song, however, this imposed musical mirror does not reflect the form of the poetry. Poetically, there is little to suggest that the second and third stanzas provide a contrast to the outer stanzas. Furthermore, the fourth stanza does not suggest a return to an earlier sentiment. The last lines of the song, "your look *a soft bomb/behind my eyes,*" are ominous and suggest that the poet's earlier anxiety is not unwarranted. Rather than continue the sentiments presented earlier in the song, the final lines are a dramatic closure which invite the audience to reevaluate the poet's relationship with the stranger. Pentland's use of a mirror form therefore both conflicts with and enhances the narrative of the poem. On the one hand, there is little in the poetry to suggest such a reflexive device in the fourth stanza. The final lines, however, encourage a look back at the beginning of the song which Pentland musically expresses with the device of a mirror form.

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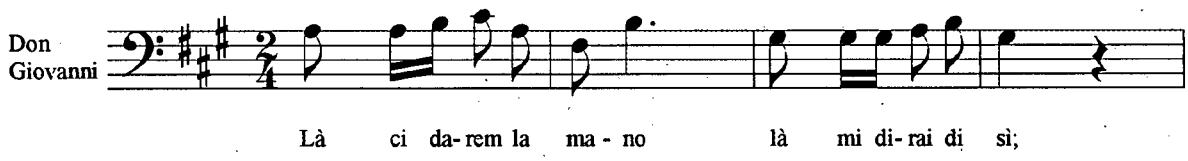
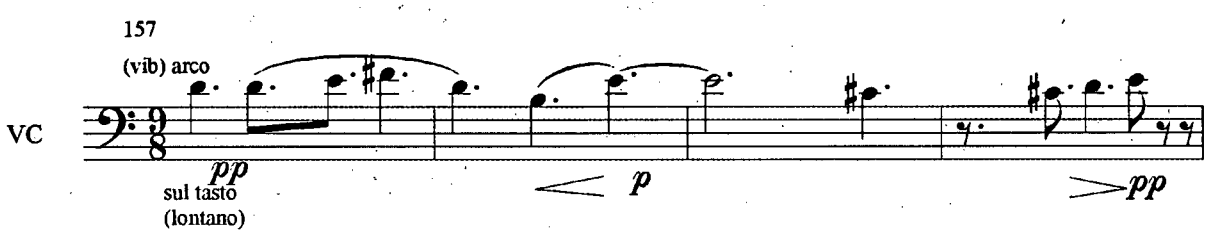
[54] This contrasting row is (Bb, Eb, G, C, E, D, A, F, Ab, C#, F#, B)

Whereas sections A and C are clearly linked through both musical and textual repetition, sections B and C also share an important musical bond. In measures 157-158 of section B ("your dark hair, piercing eyes") and 189-191 of section C ("your hand/tense on your pipe"), Mozart's duet "*La ci darem la mano*" from *Don Giovanni* appears first in the cello and then in the violin accompaniment (see examples 7, 8, and 9). Like the Strauss quotation, Pentland uses the rogue womanizer Don Juan to characterize the male persona of the poem. Here, the dance-like melody of the seducer's song evokes the playful seduction of Mozart's opera. Although no physical interaction is overtly suggested by Livesay's words, Pentland's choice of quotation clearly suggests that there is a power dynamic at work—one in which the male figure exerts his masculine charms to take advantage of the female.

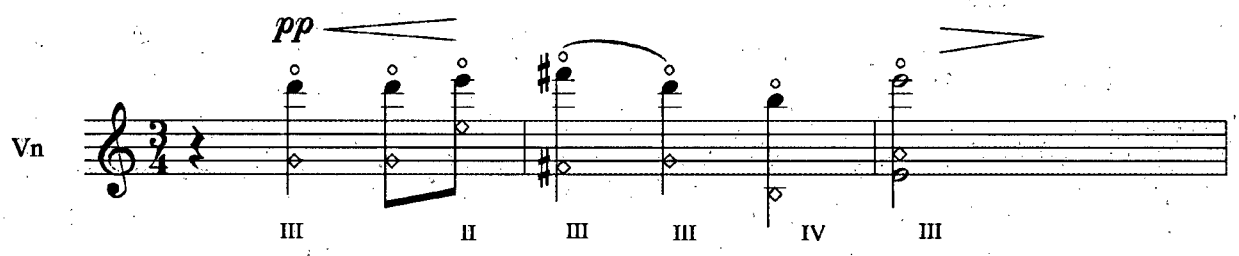
**Example 7: Mozart *Don Giovanni* Act I scene 9**




**Example 8: First Mozart Quote**



**Example 9: Second Mozart Quote**




Like the earlier quotation of Strauss, Pentland distorts the Mozart aria. The first statement in section B retains the characteristic melodic shape and tonal implications of Mozart's aria; however, the rhythmic context of the melody differs. Instead of a lilting duple meter, the melody is played in a compound triple meter causing the musical phrases to conflict with the notated bar lines. While this conflict is not readily audible, the altered rhythm of the second phrase of the quotation (measures 159-160) is easily discernible. This quotation appears again in section C, this time in harmonics in the violin. Pentland's use of this technique makes the quotation seem haunting and unnatural. Unlike the strong and forceful quotation of Strauss' *Don Juan*, Pentland treats Mozart's *Don Giovanni* as a distant memory. This treatment fits well with Livesay's poetry in which the poet struggles to recognize the man in the airport. As she studies him, the very quiet and distant strains of the Mozart duet appear as a fleeting and faded memory of their relationship or as a hint of their relationship to come.

While the Mozart quotation does not suggest the same oppressive masculinity that the Strauss did in the first song, it does imply manipulation. The

poet's awareness of possible pending dangers is made evident through the appearance of the "Sun" motif in the final lines of the song with the word "bomb" (m. 196). The motif creates a link between the stranger in the airport, the destructive image of a bomb, and the sun's masculinity which was established in the first song.

IV

My hands that used to be leaves
tender and sweet and soothing
have become roots
gnarled in soil

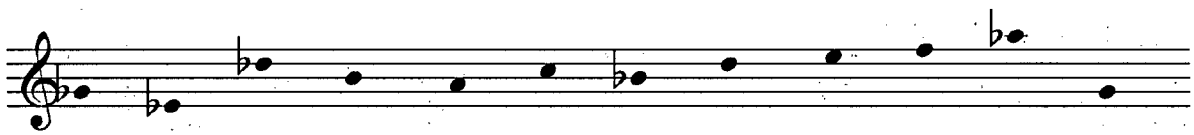
my hands
tender as green leaves
blowing on your skin
pulling you up
into joyous air
are knotted bones
whitening in the sun

Like the second song, the fourth is calm and introspective but relies, in contrast, on more personal imagery and self-reflection. While the second and third songs centre on the physical attributes of the poet's male companion, this song explores more intimately her own physical identity and the changes she experiences. The tree imagery suggests a process of aging as the poet's hands that were once soft like tender leaves have become aged and "gnarled." While the poet compares her hands as a young woman with leaves, in old age she likens them to the roots of a tree. Leaves reach toward the sky and the sun for nourishment but

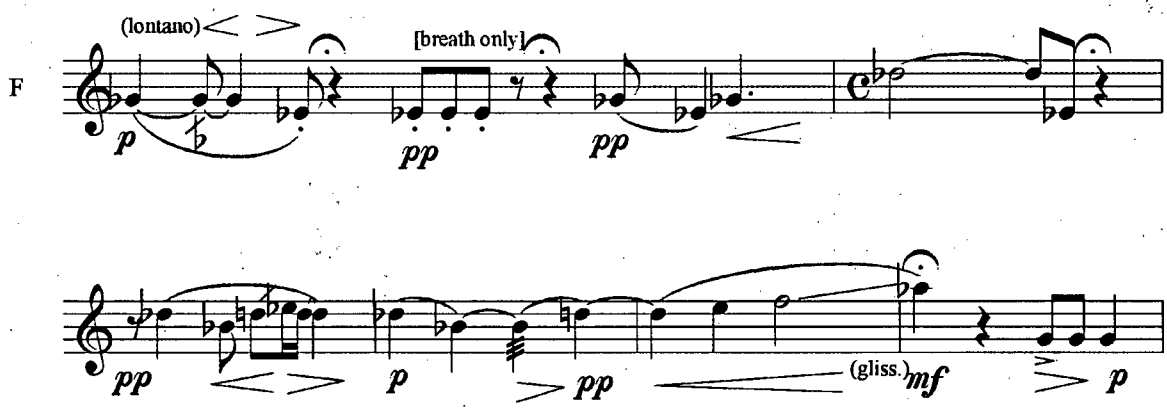
roots reach deep underground to find nourishment from the earth. The poet, therefore, turns from the masculine sun to the feminine earth for nourishment, thus, discarding the unity that was suggested in the second poem. The poet suggests, moreover, that the sun has in some way effected this change: "my hands/. . . /are knotted bones/whitening in the sun." As the central song in the collection, this is the first to explicitly express the idea of the sun as destroyer—a theme that was suggested in earlier songs and will persist through the three subsequent songs.

The introductory material in measures 199 to 204 presents the aggregate and important intervals which serve as the basic unifying material of the song. This row (see example 10) is marked by frequent occurrences of major seconds and minor thirds. The voice's entry at measure 205 mimics the opening of the flute introduction (see example 11). Moreover, between the two stanzas a short instrumental interlude ends with the same rhythmic and melodic figure as the introduction. Pentland follows the poetic structure of the poem by beginning the second stanza with this same motif.

**Example 10: Song IV Row**



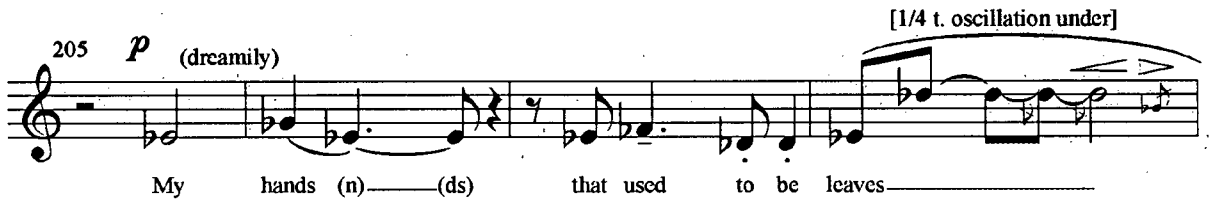
**Example 11: Introduction**



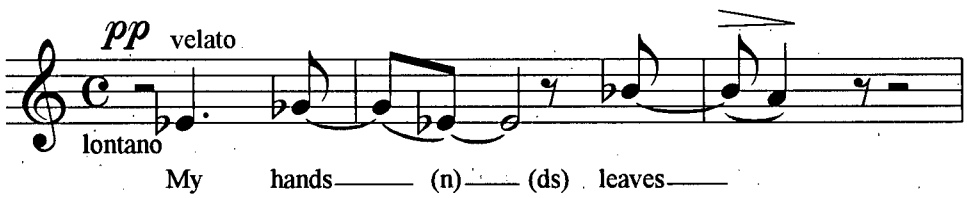

Despite similar openings in the two stanzas, the second moves toward more poignant reflection and ends by suggesting that the sun is the cause of her physical changes. An important means by which Pentland captures the theme of aging is the use of pre-recorded material played simultaneously with the singer. In the first stanza, the singer's pre-recorded voice sings "My hands leaves" while in live performance she sings "have become roots/gnarled in soil." Past experience thus appears as a disembodied memory—a ghost image projected onto the singer's present state. In the second stanza, the same effect is produced with the tape's "gnarled in soil" played simultaneously with the singer's "my hands/tender as green leaves." In this case, the current situation haunts the singer as she reminisces about her past beauty. Unlike earlier quotations, the recorded singer's voice is not manipulated or altered. Although the pitches of the recorded lines are not exactly the same as the sung versions, they are similar (examples 12 and 13). The absence of any significant and perceptible changes to the quoted material suggests greater

authenticity and private significance of the poet's experience. While Pentland distorts those quotations which represent external forces, she does little to manipulate these pre-recorded quotations which represent personal reflections. This distinction between quotations persists throughout the rest of the song cycle.

**Example 12: Song IV opening vocal line m. 205**




**Example 13: Song IV recorded vocal line m. 215**




While the treatment of quotations separates this song from the first and third, its instrumentation and introductory motif unite it with the second. In both songs which are concerned with the identity of the poet, the flute plays a significant structural role. Whereas the horn, as noted earlier, is associated with the masculine identity of the poet's lover, the flute is here associated with the poet's feminine identity. The use of alternating pitches in the flute introduction also recalls the

second song. Moreover, the motivic unity within the song through formal divisions makes a strong connection between the second and fourth songs. Both songs are introspective and philosophical so it is not surprising that Pentland should use similar techniques.

V

During the last heat wave
a sunflower
that had stood up straight
outstaring the June
sun
wilted  collapsed
under a pitiless July
sky

now in burning August
I close out the city
trembling under heat
the green trees visibly
paling—

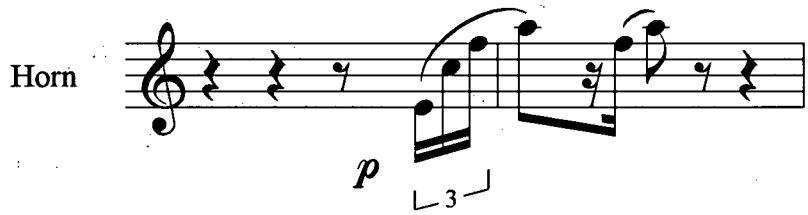
I close and curtain off myself
into four walls
breezed by a fan
but the fan
fumes!
And suddenly it
BREAKS OFF  from the wall
whirls  across the room
to rip my forefinger.

*I tell you*
*we live in constant*
*danger*
*under the sun  bleeding*
*I tell you*

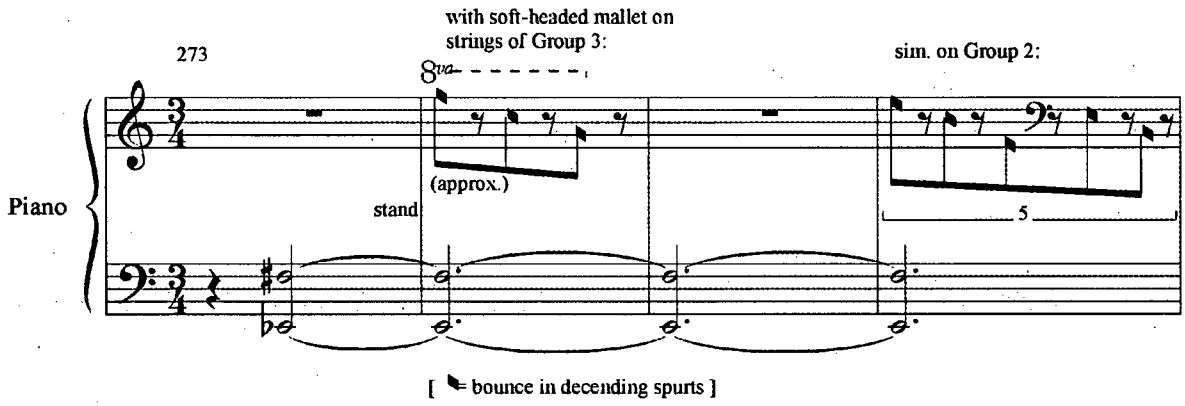
Following the introspection of the fourth song, the poet warns of the sun's destructive force. The oppressive heat of the sun causes the sunflower to wilt and forces the poet to close herself off from its August heat. The final lines of the poem are another prophetic warning of the sun's destructive nature. Pentland sets the long narrative of this song as a build-up to a musical climax. The drama of this song is also portrayed by theatrical directions and extended performance techniques.

The instrumental introduction again contains a complete statement of the aggregate. More important than its pitch content, however, is its evocative use of timbres. Detailed descriptions in the score instruct the string players to play harmonics while the pianist ventures inside the piano to stop the strings at the frets and uses the sostenuto pedal. Pentland continues this use of colourful timbres throughout this song where sound effects and word painting are more important than strict formal divisions and motivic repetition. In describing the sunflower that "had stood up straight," Pentland employs a dramatic rising figure reaching for a loud unison in the entire ensemble as well as the recognizable horn call "Charge" to suggest a driving force (see example 14). Descending clusters played with a mallet directly on the piano's strings describe the wilted sunflower in measures 274 to 276 (example 15) while tremolo strings evoke the poet's "trembling" in measures 301-308 and suggest fear in the final stanza. As expected, the "sun" motif piano clusters appear with both instances of the word "sun."

**Example 14: "Charge" motif**




**Example 15: "wilted"**




Extended performance techniques are also used for descriptive and dramatic effect. In the third stanza, the wind players blow through their instruments to suggest the breeze of the fan (m. 327). The climax of the song is reached in the eighth aleatoric zone where the entire ensemble grows in density and volume with the word "fumes." Furthermore, Pentland gives instructions for the pianist to play inside of the piano as well as "prepare" the piano by placing a fifteen inch metal ruler on the strings. The singer is directed to "walk around turning about" (m. 287), sing into the piano, and to "hold up finger, wrist curved as if blood dripping..." (mm. 345-46) in an effort to accentuate the drama of this song. Such techniques are

not typical of Pentland's compositional style, with the exception of *News*, but are employed for descriptive purposes in this song.[55] Livesay's poetry is full of dramatic and poignant images from the wilting sunflower to the tangibly oppressive heat of the sun. Pentland's reliance on sound effects, quotations, and theatrical gestures to provide musical illustrations of these images suggest that she found serialism limited in terms of expression. In an effort to capture Livesay's evocative imagery, she reaches beyond the abstract serial system and introduces the familiar and visual.

VI

Keep out
keep out of the way of
this most killing
northern sun
grower  destroyer

Sun, you are no goodfather
but tyrannical king:
I have lived sixty years
under your fiery blades
all I want now
is to grope for those blunt
moon scissors

After the philosophical reflections and dramatic narration of the previous songs, the tone moves to anger and warning in the sixth song. The poet has

[55]In the review of the work's première, music critic Lloyd Dykk criticizes Pentland's judgment in relying on standard descriptive techniques. Lloyd Dykk, "A Birthday Gift From the Composer" *Vancouver Sun* (January 24, 1977), 29.

reflected on her relationship with the sun and now expresses her desire to be free. The violence of her resolve is suggested by her desire to "grope for those blunt/moon scissors." This suggestions of mutilation reveals a changed attitude from the passive yet nervous woman of the third song. Pentland's setting relies less on descriptive techniques and more on formal devices and rhythmic coherence.

The song is in a rough ABA ternary form in which the rhythmic material of the first section (lines 1-5) recurs in the final section (lines 8-12). The ternary form is not strict and Pentland breaks from it in order to fit the text. Like many other songs in the collection, the instrumental introduction contains a complete statement of the aggregate.

The beginning of the first stanza evokes the tyranny of the sun with a march rhythm beginning at measure 376 (example 16). The march suddenly ceases in the second stanza (B section) and, as expected, the word "Sun" is accompanied by the sun motif clusters in the piano. A fragment of Strauss' *Don Juan* returns in measures 416-417 with the words "tyrannical king" (example 17) and is again stated by the horn, confirming its role in portraying masculinity.[56] Pentland views this quotation as a direct reference to men who throughout her career have tried to suppress her work.[57]

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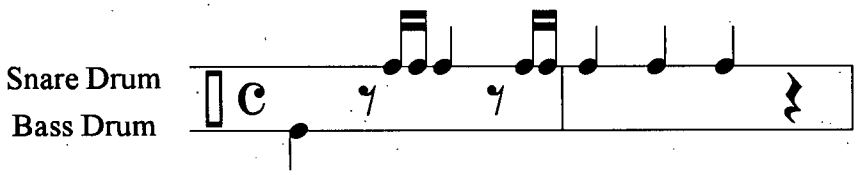
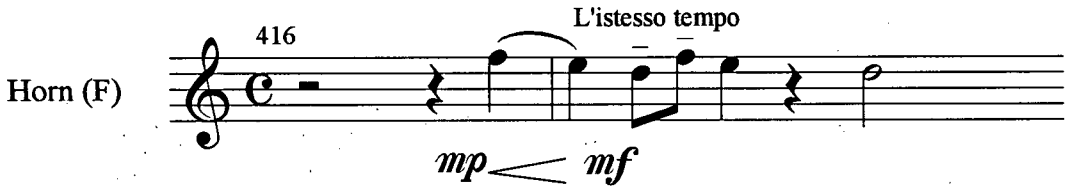
[56]Immediately following this quotation, the horn states another diatonic melody. Pentland has not identified this as another quotation and it is not part of Strauss' *Don Juan*.

[57]Eastman and McGee, 106.

**Example 16: March rhythm**




**Example 17: Strauss Quotation**




The march reappears to begin the final section of the song with the line "I have lived sixty years." This rhythm, carried throughout the piece by a snare drum, fades out at measure 447 and continues with the light tapping of the string players on their instruments. The relentlessness of the march serves two functions: on the one hand, it evokes the militaristic sun as "tyrannical king;" on the other hand, its persistence is emblematic of the poet's resoluteness. The march fades to silence at the end of the song along with the stage lights which fade to black. This creates a dramatic link with the following song which opens with imagery of the setting sun.

VII

When the black sun's
gone down
connect me underground:
root tentacles
subterranean water

no more lovely man can be
than he with moon-wand
who witches water

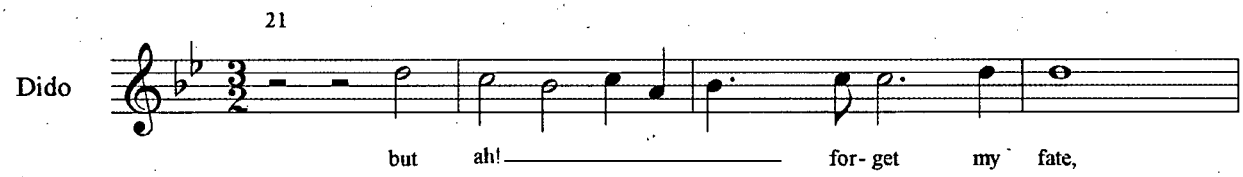
With the poet's resolve in the previous poem to free herself of the tyrannical oppression of the sun, the collection closes with an introspective reflection on her final desires. The imagery presented opposes the celestial heights of the sun. The poet seeks unity with the earth, water, and moon—all antithetical to the sun's fire and heavenly position. The song ends by invoking the unity of male and female as the ideal man assumes aspects of the feminine: "he with moon-wand/who witches water."

Pentland sets this song as a lament, noting that the text and music in Dido's lament from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* create a mood similar to the final statement: "after a lifetime of struggling against the Sun's tyranny, the Moon could relax with a quiet, introspective moment."[58] She directly quotes the Purcell piece in measure 487 with the word "subterranean" (see examples 18 and 19). The imagery in the two works is similar—Dido sings of her desire to be "laid in earth" while the poet seeks solace in the earth from her worldly troubles. An important difference

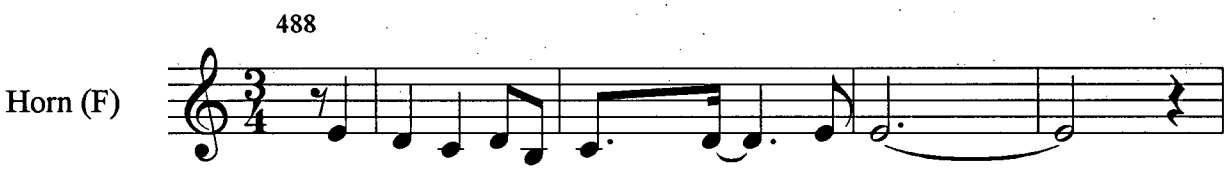
[58]Ibid.

should, however, be noted. Dido resigns herself to death after falling victim to the plot of scheming gods. Her self-immolation is spurned by the flight of her lover without whom she cannot live. Livesay's words do not suggest this sort of dependent relationship; in fact, they imply the opposite. The poet has found the inner power to reject the tyrannical rule of the sun and through her own will looks to the earth for connection. She is no longer the victim but an empowered decision-making individual.

**Example 18: *Dido and Aeneas* Act III scene 2**




**Example 19: Purcell quotation in Pentland**




Just as the ideal man would assume feminine aspects, Pentland suggests that the woman poet likewise assumes aspects of the masculine: the horn states the quotation from *Dido and Aeneas*. Previously, the horn was associated with

masculinity through its role in the Strauss quotations and absence from songs which dwell on the female poet's identity. Here, however, the horn becomes a vehicle for the poet's final expression of gender unity. The masculine horn adopts feminine qualities in its association with Dido's melody and likewise her melody is united with masculine traits through its statement in the horn.

Dido's lament is most often viewed in the tradition of songs of mourning; however, laments serve an additional cultural purpose which sheds some light on Pentland's use of the genre. Jane Bowers notes that lamenting is, in most cultures, exclusively a female activity. In many cases, laments are a means not only of grieving the passing of a loved one, but also of airing grievances against relatives or society. Most common among these are difficulties faced by women in a male-dominated social structure.

> In such poetry, the death of a specific person was utilized to affirm kinship ties, to cement bonding among women, to heighten the meaning of female roles, and to reinforce social roles and modes of interaction that could best serve as strategies for survival in "patriarchal" . . . village society. The symbolic associations of the subject matter of 'female suffering' transformed the lament into a communicative event."[59]

She notes that in other traditions, the women's lament expresses protest using generalizations and a communal voice thus passing a "rhetoric of resistance along in the tradition."[60] Laments sung at weddings express similar emotions about

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[59]Jane Bowers, "Women's Lamenting Traditions around the World," in *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 2 (1998): 130.

[60]Angela Bourke, "More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry" in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture* ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993): 172-73; in Bowers, 130.

separation from the family and unfortunate circumstances in a woman's new home. Thus, they serve as a verbal tool for expressing feelings in a social structure that is disadvantageous for women.[61] Viewed in this larger cultural context, the closing lament of *Disasters* is not an expression of mourning but one of resistance.

In Purcell's opera, Dido sings her lament as she is about to end her life. Throughout operatic history, the lament has served a similar role in signaling a woman's death or "undoing." In Pentland's song, however, the genre appears as the final song but one which suggests a new beginning. Thus, Pentland reclaims the lament and transforms it into a genre of strength and rebirth rather than one of resignation and death.

More importantly than the direct musical quotation, Pentland organizes the song around a ground bass like Dido's lament. Pentland uses a twelve-tone row as the ground bass and states it in a three part canon in the strings (see example 20). The canonic treatment of the bass is, perhaps, a reference to Purcell's canon-like treatment of the ground bass following Dido's lament in the short interlude preceding the contrapuntal texture of the chorus "With drooping wings." This canon is made more explicit by the lighting direction to raise the lights as each player enters. The canonic statements end at measure 480 but elements of the row persist throughout the song. In aleatoric zone number 10 (mm. 492-498), the row is stated in the violin and is later divided between instruments in measures 507 to 514.

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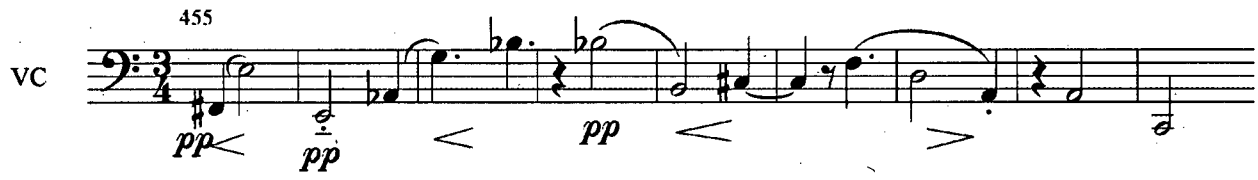
[61]Joel Sherzer, "A Diversity of Voices: Men's and Women's Speech in Ethnographic Perspective" in *Language, Gender, and Sex in Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Susan U. Philips, Susan Steele, and Christine Tanz, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 113-114; in Bowers, 131.

**Example 20: Ground Bass (Tone Row)**

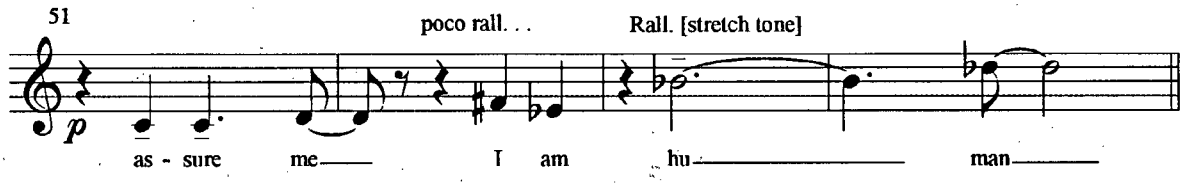



Normally, a repetitive ground bass provides a sense of inevitability. Purcell accomplishes this through the teleological nature of functional harmony and the persistent descending motion of the line. Pentland's ground bass is serial and possesses no inevitable sense of arrival beyond the need to complete the aggregate. Moreover, unlike Purcell's ground, Pentland's disintegrates after the third line of the song. The aggregate appears again with the final stanza but the melodic shape which characterized the ground bass has disappeared. This disintegration of a strict formal device helps to characterize the female poet's independence and desire to break with a controlling force.

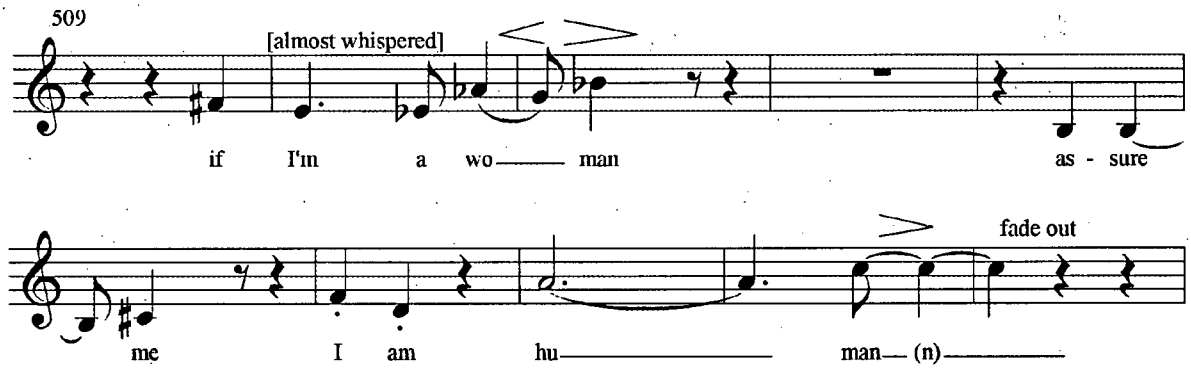
Pentland uses tape once again to recall the opening song. Parts of the final stanza of the first song are played simultaneously with the final stanza of this song: "If I'm a woman assure me I am human" along with "No more lovely man can be/than he with moon-wand/who witches water." This juxtaposition contrasts women's perception of "difference" with the poet's desire for an androgynous gender union in the final song. The poet thus seeks unity rather than separation, difference, and power. Moreover, the quotation brings a sense of cyclical closure to the work and shows explicitly the changes in attitude experienced by the poet.

Unlike the quotations of Strauss and Mozart, those of Purcell and of the first song are not significantly altered or distorted. Although the first pitches of the taped soloist are slightly different, Pentland uses the same melodic shape from the first song transposed down a half-step for the phrase "assure me I am human" (examples 21 and 22). Likewise, the recorded quotation of the song's opening line, though simplified, retains its characteristic melodic shape (examples 23 and 24). This and other quotations which represent the female poet's voice remain unaltered in Pentland's setting. Those referring to male characters have been distorted and altered in an effort to exert control and to strip them of their manipulative or destructive power.

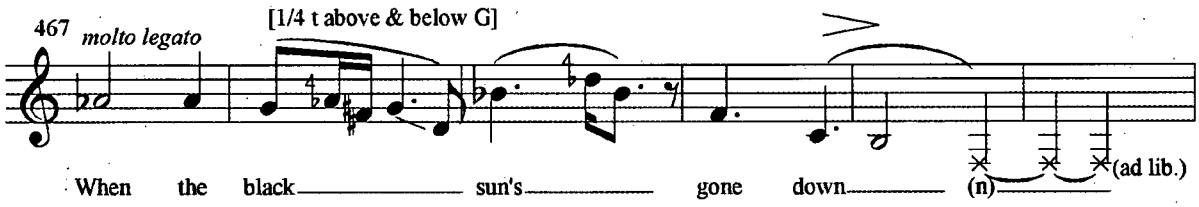
**Example 21: Song I measures 51 to 54**



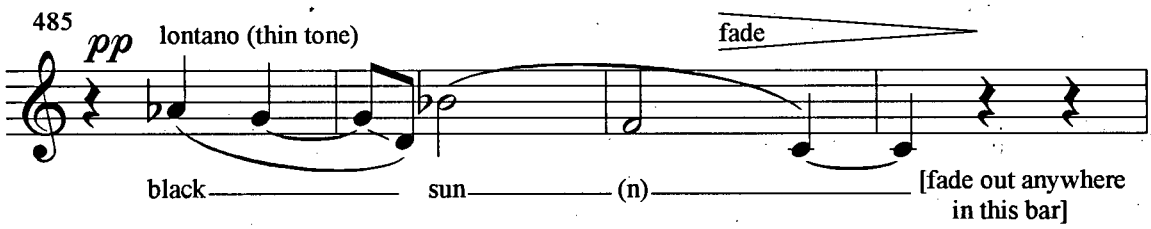

**Example 22: Song VII recorded quotation of Song I**



**Example 23: Song VII opening vocal line measures 467 to 472**




**Example 24: Song VII recorded quotation of opening vocal line measures 485 to 488**




## Conclusion

The musical techniques employed in *Disasters of the Sun* are exemplary of Pentland's mature style particularly in the use of broad serial techniques, sparse texture, strong individual lines, and aleatoric zones. In order to meet the descriptive needs of the piece, Pentland expanded her style by using quotation, pre-recorded tape, and extended performance techniques. Moreover, the limited expressive capabilities of her serial language are evident in her need to utilize graphic musical representations of the poems through sound effects and conventional word painting techniques.

Pentland regards *Disasters of the Sun* as her finest work in the vocal chamber ensemble genre.[62] As a personal expression of gender issues, *Disasters* seems to confirm Pentland's struggles as a woman composer confronted with patriarchal discrimination. The unity of male and female imagery in the final song rather than triumph of one over the other resembles Pentland's own struggles to transcend gender differences and to be treated first, and above all, as a composer.

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[62]Pentland in interview with Norma Beecroft, *Anthology of Canadian Music* volume 25 *Barbara Pentland*. Radio Canada International ACM 25, 1986.

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