“Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly”: Discovering Thematic Continuity in Libby Larsen’s *Cowboy Songs*

Although Libby Larsen has composed works in a variety of genres, her output displays stylistic consistency. The homogeneity of Larsen’s music results from her use of unified texts, vernacular rhythms, the abandonment of key signatures, and motive usage.¹ Larsen’s song cycles, of which she has composed more than ten,² are especially uniform in style. However, as a result of Larsen’s selection of poetry and her musical setting, one work, *Cowboy Songs*, does not display the same cohesiveness as that of the composer’s other song cycles. Song cycles are meant to be a group of “individually complete songs designed as a unit,”³ and it is certainly permissible for some collections to have weaker connections than other collections. As a result of lack of both a single poet and of motivic coherence throughout the three pieces of *Cowboy Song*, this “grouping” – a term given to the set by Larsen⁴ – is considered weak and thus only loosely a song cycle. In particular, the middle song of the cycle, “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly,” does not appear to connect textually or musically with the other songs within the grouping, let alone display the characteristic tendencies of Larsen’s other cycles. The apparent inconsistencies between this song cycle and Larsen’s others results from the variety of poets used and the emotional weakness of the characters portrayed. Along with this, “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly”

²Ibid., ii.
⁴Glenda Denise Secrest, “Songs from Letters and Cowboy Songs by Libby Larsen: Two Different Approaches to Western Mythology and Western Mythological Features,” *Journal of Singing* 64 (September—October 2007): 25.
uses musical techniques and a text that contrast the two other songs in the cycle. Even the poet of “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” thought Larsen set it in “far from the usual manner.”

It is predominately text selection and character portrayal that vary Cowboy Songs from Larsen’s other cycles. In several of Larsen’s works—Love After 1950, Songs from Letters, Try Me, Good King, My Ántonia, and ME—text and music are unified into a coherent cycle. Before any music is notated, Larsen works from an idea and then “selects texts based on inherent musicality.” Her careful choices allow for her song cycles to be unified on the literary level. The texts are given a coherent order, which Larsen meticulously pieces together. While Love After 1950 and Try Me, Good King do break the mold of Larsen’s song cycles being based on texts written by a single poet, every song within the five cycles is based on texts written by women, thus showcasing Larsen’s passion for “illuminating the writings of strong-minded women.” However, strong-minded women are not typically found in cowboy songs. Although Glenda Denise Secrest stated that Cowboy Songs is ”unique because [Larsen] presents the West from a feminine perspective, a woman’s caring perspective,” in reality, the characters throughout the work are portrayed as being emotionally weak.

The first song, “Bucking Bronco,” features the only text credited to a woman, Belle Starr, although many sources question whether she actually wrote the poem or had it written for

5Secrest, 27.
9Greenwald, 17.
10Secrest, 21.
her. 12 Regardless, it became her “signature” 13 piece at the age of 19 when she performed it in her parents’ Texas tavern wearing “black velvet and a plumed hat with guns strapped to her hips.” 14 Her performances took place around 1857, just before the beginning of the peak of the cowboy era, which is said to have been between 1870 and 1890. 15 This fact makes Starr the only author in the cycle to have lived during the era of the cowboy. The actual lyrics to the song vary in available sources. One example of the song ends with the woman being happy, 16 but in the text that Larsen chose, by the end of the song the cowgirl has regretfully given in to the wiles of a cowboy and has thus learned that it would be wise to stay away from such creatures. 17

The text of “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly,” the second piece in Cowboy Songs, actually originated from Larsen’s A Creeley Collection, which was published in 1989, six years before Cowboy Songs. 18 Robert Creeley was an American poet associated with post-modernism, far from the cowboy era. Creeley recalled that this particular poem, containing less than thirty words, was written during a trek through nine countries in Asia in 1976 and “is an echoing sense of [himself] as generic Christian in this various Sufi/Buddhist world.” 19 Creeley was surprised with the way Larsen set the text 20 since he “never had the experience of God.” 21 Nonetheless, her setting’s interpretation was valid since poetry can take on a completely different meaning when set to music, and the result is not always expected to coincide with the poet’s or novelist’s

12 Mona D. Sizer, Texas Bandits: Real to Reel (Dallas: Republic of Texas Press, 2004), 95.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 John Avery Lomax, Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads (New York: Macmillan, 1938), xv.
16 Sizer, 95.
17 Larsen, Cowboy Songs, 3-9.
19 Secrest, 26.
20 Ibid., 27.
thoughts. Given the text of the song,\textsuperscript{22} which portrays an individual stating a feeling of weakness ("cause my back’s sore"), it cannot be said that this work displays the "rugged individualism"\textsuperscript{23} of a woman in the West. Once again, any portrait of a strong-minded woman is missing.

The final song in the set, "Billy the Kid," is listed as being anonymously authored, however, in John A. Lomax’s early twentieth-century folk song collection, \textit{Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads}, it is reported that this version was written by Jim Marby and given to Lomax in 1911.\textsuperscript{24} While Lomax’s book may not be the only source for this text, this piece was probably not written by a woman. If Larsen meant to create the persona of a woman, since she chose a soprano voice type, this woman is not strong, but very scared of the famous outlaw\textsuperscript{25} as she repeatedly proclaims "Billy was a bad man!"\textsuperscript{26}

Beyond the variance of Larsen’s selection of texts, there are musical similarities between \textit{Cowboy Songs} and her other song cycles. It is from the vernacular of her chosen text that Larsen’s music “evolves organically and spawns other ideas,”\textsuperscript{27} thus giving rise to rhythmically free moments,\textsuperscript{28} vivid text painting,\textsuperscript{29} and recurring motives.\textsuperscript{30} Text-derived rhythmic ideas are what Larsen believes her “style can be recognized by… more than anything else.”\textsuperscript{31} While these compositional techniques are consistently present in the initial and final

\textsuperscript{22}Larsen, \textit{Cowboy Songs}, 10-12.
\textsuperscript{24}Lomax, 140.
\textsuperscript{25}Secrest, 27.
\textsuperscript{26}Larsen, \textit{Cowboy Songs}, 13-15.
\textsuperscript{27}Bezerra, 12.
\textsuperscript{28}Greenwald, 87.
\textsuperscript{29}Bezerra, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{30}Milhorn, ii.
\textsuperscript{31}Greenwald, 18.
works of *Cowboy Songs*, “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” lacks the frequent use of free rhythm, recurring motives, and vivid text painting that Larsen employs in other cycles.

Larsen consistently alters the meter to ensure the text is sung with proper stresses.\(^{32}\) Her use of free rhythm is a result of her experience with Gregorian chant as a child.\(^{33}\) This technique opens *Cowboy Songs* with “Bucking Bronco” featuring a rhythmic melody made up of triplets, sixteenth notes, and eighth notes for the first two measures (see Example 1). A version of this melody returns at the end of the piece in measures 34-35 and 39-40. Another rhythmically-free moment, which is more recitativo-like than the melody found in “Bucking Bronco,” returns in “Billy the Kid.” The singer is given a tempo marking of *meno mosso*, allowing for flexibility in measures 19-21 (see Example 2) as the pieces comes to an end. “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly,” however, is sung consistently over accompaniment and there is never a moment for the vocalist to take rhythmic control of the line being sung.

Along with the frequent use of free rhythms, Larsen strives to “create an environment for [words] to become even more active,”\(^{34}\) which she does through the creative use of text painting. Two examples of text painting in “Bucking Bronco” include a major seventh leap on the word “jump” in measure 12 and the first instance of a note sung above the staff on “high” in measure 19. Glenda Denise Secrest and Laura Greenwald, who have both done extensive research on Larsen’s song cycles, have pointed out these areas in their respective articles. Secrest also notes the variation of accompaniment between when the text is discussing the season of fall—legato—and when the text is discussing the season of spring—staccato.\(^{35}\) In “Billy the Kid,” Greenwald highlights the dynamic changes and melodic leaps as text painting on the word “rage” in measure

\(^{32}\)Ibid., 22.
\(^{33}\)Milhorn Stallard, 195.
\(^{34}\)Greenwald, 25.
\(^{35}\)Secrest, 26.
11 and the phrase “other folks [had] better hush” in measures 13-14.36 “Rage” is prolonged at fortissimo on eighth notes from D-flat to F to E-natural to B-flat, and two measures later “other folks [had] better hush” is sung at pianissimo almost two octaves lower.

“Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” differs from the other two pieces of the set in that the movement of the text and accompaniment creates a mood as opposed to painting a picture. The musical setting expresses the cowboy’s denial of leaving earth as the melodic line frequently descends in pitch and key area instead of the expected motion upward on each repetition of the words “lift” and “heaven.” At the same time, the piano accompaniment pushes higher and higher (see Example 3). The setting, therefore, provides a mood but not word painting.37

The use of motives is the best known “element of Larsen’s compositional style.”38 Typically in her song cycles, a consistent motive dominates the entire work, but that is not the case in this cycle. Instead, each piece has its own motive. “Bucking Bronco” has a similar melodic opening and closing, which consists of triplet sixteenth notes, an eighth rest, two eighth notes tied, and another eighth note, which, when heard, “gives the effect of a lumbering wagon.”39 The particular motive disappears in the middle of the piece as the text changes to emphasize the cowgirl’s encounters with the cowboy, but it returns as the woman is warning all “young maidens” to beware of him. “Billy the Kid” also starts and ends with a Western-sounding motive of primarily eighth notes in unison three octaves apart, which makes it sound as if Billy is “stomping around town.”40 For once, “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” can be said to

36Greenwald, 69.
37Milhorn Stallard, 207. In Example 4, “lift” is ascending, however, these are the only two instances of this word moving upward in this piece, and “heaven” still descends within the same passage.
38Milhorn, ii.
39Greenwald, 66.
40Ibid., 69.
have something in common with the other pieces, and that is a recurring motive. However, this motive, consisting of two sets of triplets tied to a half note, is not consistent throughout the piece. Instead, it is constantly fragmented, augmented, diminished, or altered at the intervallic level. It is as if the mood of each text repetition has an ever-changing emotion.

With all of the similarities between the initial and final works in *Cowboy Songs*, the inconsistencies of “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” make it difficult to believe any connection exists amongst the three pieces. However, the overall topic of the grouping—cowboy life—and the topics in traditional cowboy songs reveal a common thread. Cowboys were men who moved thousands of longhorn cattle from Texas to various markets in western states. In Lomax’s 1910 song collection, there are over 150 songs that were supposedly sung by genuine cowboys, although profanity was omitted for the published collection. Also, some of the songs are dated as being written after the cowboy era, including “Billy the Kid.” The genuine cowboy songs came into existence because the lifestyle of the cowboy called for music. Since the men were on the prairie from sun up to sun down, after which they would gather around a campfire and keep watch during the night, songs were used to pass time. It was considered a “dull day’s drive if [cowboys] didn’t add at least one verse.” Their songs were variations of well-known poems and would “tell tales of work, death, heroes, love, amusement, humor, and religion.” It is religion that is imperative to the inclusion of “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” in *Cowboy Songs*.

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41 Lomax, xv.
43 Lomax, 140. “Billy the Kid” was published in a later edition of Lomax’s book.
44 Ibid., xv.
Cowboys, while leading a rough and tough lifestyle, were Christian in their reasoning.\textsuperscript{47} Not really having a home, these men were not “church goers,” but they needed a strong faith, especially when they were out on the range facing unknown dangers. Their steadfast beliefs were prominently featured in their songs. In \textit{Heaven on Horseback}, Austin Fife focuses on “the use of the cowboy idiom as an expression of religious and transcendental ideas rather than upon the music.”\textsuperscript{48} Within this study, there is an extensive discussion about the different poems cowboys would sing to hymn tunes as well as the prayerful songs that painted heaven as the “ranch house in the sky.”\textsuperscript{49} Early twentieth-century researcher Joseph Cadlo stated in a 1947 \textit{Western Folklore} article that “to the cowboy, the glories and wonders of God were reflected in nature; the cowboy was close to God because he was close to nature.”\textsuperscript{50}

Since cowboys were firm believers in Christ, they often discussed heaven. Knowing this, it can be said that “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” is actually a more accurate cowboy song than the other two works. While cowboys did sing love songs about women, such songs never advocated promiscuity as is found in Starr’s song “Bucking Bronco.”\textsuperscript{51} Instead, cowboys worshipped the women they left at home and praised those women who were sweet and true; if a woman was un-Christian and unfaithful, cowboys looked upon her with “condemnation and scorn.”\textsuperscript{52} More un-Christian acts are exemplified in “Billy the Kid” as the overzealous cowboy outlaw does not follow the Christian value of loving thy neighbor. In reality, Billy’s death occurred as a result of his gunning down twenty men.\textsuperscript{53} “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly,”

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\textsuperscript{48} Fife, 1. \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 3. \textsuperscript{50} Cadlo, 240. \textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 337. \textsuperscript{52} Cadlo, 337. \textsuperscript{53} Secrest, 27.
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however, closely resembles actual cowboy songs, such as “Cowboy’s Heaven”\textsuperscript{54} and “Do You Think There’s a Prairie in Heaven?”\textsuperscript{55}

The text may initially seem to suggest that the cowboy is discussing the hardships of cowboy life, but placing this modernistic poem in comparison to actual cowboy songs, it appears that the cowboy is pleased with his life on the prairie. Given that cowboys appreciated the vastness of the western landscape, in Larsen’s song the cowboy is asking to go to heaven slowly because he regrets needing to leave the land he loves. There is a lyric in an authentic cowboy song that reinforces this idea: “If there’s not a prairie in heaven we’d never be happy there.”\textsuperscript{56}

The text “‘cause my back’s sore” is also a common theme in cowboy songs, although typically one where the cowboy is asking to go to heaven, which is depicted as a prairie: “the range in the Promised Land.”\textsuperscript{57} The next line of the poem states “and my mind’s thoughtful,” and in many cowboy songs the singer is gazing at the stars or the open land and contemplating life. Similar thoughtfulness is evident in “Rounded Up In Glory” from Lomax’s collection: “I’ve been thinking today/As my thoughts began to stray/Of your memory to me worth more than gold.”\textsuperscript{58}

Finally, the closing line of text, “and I’m not even sure I want to go,” relates back to the reason the cowboy is asking to be lifted slowly.

Since this song was originally a part of another song set, it is surprising that any Western connection can be made at all. However, there is an even stronger connection to cowboy life in the music of the piece. Because Larsen used the musical setting to create a mood in “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” as opposed to painting a picture, like in “Bucking Bronco” and “Billy the

\textsuperscript{54}Fife, 107.
\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{56}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{58}Lomax, 331.
Kid,” any hint of Western life in the second song is hidden. While Larsen did write this song using the D-flat blues scale with a “swinging jazz style,” the triplets alternating between the vocalist and pianist in almost every measure of the piece provide a slow “loping rhythm,” like that of a horse (see Example 4). As a result of the loping vocal line and accompaniment, the music aligns with a Western song. Larsen depicts the character longing for land and not heaven without actually saying he is a cowboy, thus catching him in a moment of weakness and desperation. The cowboy is allowed time to linger as the words are drawn out more and more with each changing repetition of the motive in the vocal line and accompaniment.

Going beyond the obvious features of the text and musical setting of “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” and examining the subjects of cowboy life, it is possible to find the connections this song has to the larger cycle. While the song does not necessarily fit with the other two pieces in Cowboy Songs, it provides a tender moment in the grouping, and it is a moment that is more accurate to cowboy life than the other two songs can boast. Exercising her creative authority as a composer, Larsen took liberties in placing this song between the other two, giving it a new life. Without “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly” within Larsen’s Cowboy Songs, the important religious inclinations of cowboys would have been omitted, and thus the song helps provide the grouping with a realistic depiction of cowboy life.

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59 Milhorn Stallard, 120.
60 Bezerra, 24.
61 Ralph Locke, “Larsen: The Cowboy Songs; Sonnets from the Portuguese; Try Me Good King,” American Record Guide 68 (2005): 120. A lope is the gait of a horse that has three beats.
Example 1: “Bucking Bronco,” measures 1-2

Example 2: “Billy the Kid,” measures 17-21
Example 3: “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly,” measures 3-4

Example 4: “Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly,” measures 7-8


