ABSTRACT

Voices from the Killing Jar

Kate Soper

This dissertation presents an analysis of my work for voice and ensemble, Voices from the Killing Jar, which was written for the Wet Ink Ensemble in 2010-2011, and which takes as its subject seven female characters from literature, history, and myth. A musical analysis of each of the work's seven movements is accompanied by brief literary analyses of the characters and their sources. This is followed by relevant details of my history as a performer, composer, and Wet Ink Ensemble co-director, and a discussion of the unique instrumentation and performance practice encapsulated in this piece as a result of my close work with Wet Ink over the last several years. I conclude with an examination of my dual role as a composer and performer in this piece and in my work in general, and with a brief discussion of social and gender-theoretical issues that inform my work as a female composer.
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**Voices from the Killing Jar**

**Introduction**

A killing jar is a tool used by entomologists to kill butterflies and other insects without damaging their bodies: a hermetically sealable glass container, lined with poison, in which the specimen will quickly suffocate. *Voices from the Killing Jar* is a seven-movement work for vocalist and ensemble which depicts a series of female protagonists who are caught in their own kinds of killing jars: hopeless situations, inescapable fates, impossible fantasies, and other unlucky circumstances. Their jailers, the ones screwing the lid on tight, are sometimes friends or lovers, sometimes strangers, and sometimes themselves, their longings and ambitions and delusions. Among these women are housewives and teenagers and mothers and daughters, innocents and tragic heroines and *femmes fatales*.

We don’t know how all their stories end. Four will eventually die violently, while the rest may be young enough to change course. *Voices from the Killing Jar* visits these women only for a diary entry or a scene or a chapter in their lives, lets them speak for a moment, and then returns them to history and myth.

The world in which these characters live for the span of this piece is constructed from among the countless possible sonic environments of the seven-member Wet Ink Band. This is a piece written not for instruments, but for individual players with individual skill sets, from the typical (the saxophonist plays the clarinet) to the more peculiar (the
soprano also plays the clarinet). The transformation of the musicians, as they take up or trade instruments and occasionally move around the stage, is part of the mercurial landscape of the piece. Shape-shifting, the ensemble forms and reforms between and within each movement, moving through myriad textures, styles, and moods, following the path traced by the seven characters from 20th century Japan to ancient Greece to the French Revolution.

This paper begins with a musical analysis of each of the seven movements, including relevant textual and plot elements. Afterwards, issues of performance, including composer background and a brief history of the ensemble, will be explored. The paper concludes with a discussion of potentially enlightening gender theoretical issues relevant to the context and performance of the piece.

**VOICES FROM THE KILLING JAR**

**Music Analysis**

The seven movements of *Voices from the Killing Jar* are distinct from one another in structure, character, compositional style, and instrumentation, although some are more closely linked than others in these regards. Figure 1 is a table displaying the basic features of each movement, including: their source texts/characters; the instrument(s)
played by each of the seven performers; their basic formal structural; their treatment of
the text; and their approximate length.¹

The movements form various constellations depending on criteria. Formally, movements
I and III are broadly ABA; movements IV, V and VII consist of two or more contrasting
sections; and the symmetrically situated movements II and VI, the shortest movements,
present one single idea. The outer movements share a preoccupation with vocal range
expansion – in the first movement, outwards from the center, and in the last, upwards
from the bottom – while in movements VI and most of movement III the soprano remains
more circumscribed in tone and/or range. Movements II and IV contain no singing but
only speech, and spoken voice is also prominent, either in the electronics or within the
ensemble, in movements VI and VII. Harmonically, movements III and VI are most
prominently diatonic, although neither is tonal, and between them movement V
incorporates both original tonal fragments and wholesale D Major in an extended Mozart
quote. The harmonic material for the outer and center movements, I, IV and VII, is
unsystematic, richly chromatic, and interval-dense. Repeated instrumental gestures,
loops, and refrains are a prominent thread, appearing in very different contexts in
movements III, IV, V and VI.

The movements are performed one after the other with no pause. Transitional music or
vamping is necessitated by stage changes between the first four movements, while the
last three follow *attacca* on the heels of their predecessors. More often than not, with

¹ Timings for movements I-III are based on recent performances; the remaining four
movements have yet to be premiered, and their timings are estimates.
### Figure I: Voices from the Killing Jar at a Glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mvt</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
<th>Players</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II. Isabel Archer: My Last Duchess</td>
<td>Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady (novel); Richard Browning, My Last Duchess (poem)</td>
<td>Cl/speaker Bs flt Sax Vn/speaker Pno Pc</td>
<td>Process form: one continuously developing texture plus intro/coda.</td>
<td>Adapted from sources; spoken; in tape part as prelude and intermovement cues, briefly spoken live.</td>
<td>~4.5&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Palilalia: Iphigenia</td>
<td>Aeschylus, Agamemnon (play)</td>
<td>Sop/pno Flt Cl/sax Vn Pno Pc</td>
<td>Broadly ABA: 'A' sections strophic with regular pulse, based on F# Major triad/harmonic series; 'B' unmetered, static.</td>
<td>By the composer; strophic, metric, unhymed; sung.</td>
<td>~7.5&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Voilà Minuit: Lucile Duplessis</td>
<td>Diaries of Lucile Duplessis</td>
<td>Sop/pno Picc/flt/bs flt Cl/sax Vn/tpt Pno Pc</td>
<td>Four contrasting sections based on systematically repeating gestures.</td>
<td>Adapted from source material; prose; spoken (in French).</td>
<td>~7&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Mad Scene: Emma Bovary</td>
<td>Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary (novel); W.A. Mozart/Lorenzo da Ponte, Le Nozze di Figaro (opera)</td>
<td>Sop Flt Sax Vn Pno Pc</td>
<td>Part I: short loops of quasi-tonal, virtuosic material; Part II: adapted Mozart aria</td>
<td>Part I: vocalise. Part II, soprano: adapted from sources, sung; baritone; Mozart aria (verbatim).</td>
<td>~6.5&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. The Owl and the Wren: Lady Macduff</td>
<td>Shakespeare, Macbeth (play)</td>
<td>Sop Picc/flt/bs flt Cl/sax Vn Recorder Pc</td>
<td>Strophic, harmonically modal with some deviation, regular pulse; microtonally-distorted vocoder.</td>
<td>By the composer; strophic, metered, rhyming; sung. Spoken text by Shakespeare in tape part (largely unintelligible).</td>
<td>~3&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Her Voice is Full of Money (A Deathless Song): Daisy Buchanan</td>
<td>F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (novel)</td>
<td>Sop Flt/bs flt Cl/sax Vn/tpt Pno Pc</td>
<td>Through-composed, based on quasi-tonal melodic structure with heavily chromatic harmony.</td>
<td>Adapted from source material; prose; spoken and sung by soprano, spoken by percussionist.</td>
<td>~7&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
each new movement a completely new affect and sound world surges onto the stage.

What ties these disparate worlds together? The musicians must maintain the sense of continuity themselves, by their attitudes and bearing. While each member of the ensemble plays a role, freezing between movements and carefully changing instruments and seating positions without disrupting the tableau, it is the vocalist who is primarily responsible for tending the dramatic arc and who must stay intensely in character, and, during transitions, in-between character, for the duration of the piece. She occupies the most physical space, moving from the piano bench to a downstage chair to the upstage percussion setup and back, and takes on the most musical roles: she accompanies herself on the piano, takes up a clarinet, dons metal-tipped gloves to scrape at a cymbal, beats a drum, sings to herself or to the ensemble or to the audience, speaks, hums, shrieks. She is present at times as a silent body and at times as a disembodied voice, emerging from the speakers in the tape parts. Bit by bit, she spools out the narrative thread, an Ariadne-like Mistress of Ceremonies.

The piece begins with an announcement, an invitation—a quiet, ten second triangle roll—and then bursts into hushed, twittering life with the first movement.

I. Prelude: May Kasahara

In *Prelude: May Kasahara*, the titular sixteen year-old of Haruki Murakami's novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* speculates on the true nature of the force underlying human
covers a range of vocal and musical styles, though to a less extreme degree than in *Voices*. The choice to depict seven distinct women's voices, stories, and characters was of course an invitation for me to explore stylistic inconsistency in an inclusive form.

What is totally new in my compositional is the pastiche-like inclusion of the modal movement VI and, especially, the Mozart material in movement V. To account for these moments of explicit external reference, I can point to experience with other, more tonal styles of music in my background (which will be discussed further below), or to a directorial desire to situate my characters in their original environments. It may be more accurate, however, to simply say that in writing *Voices from the Killing Jar*, it seemed necessary for me to follow every artistic impulse to its logical, if bizarre, end, in order to create the kind of world in which these women could come to life.

**Voices from the Killing Jar**

**Performance Issues**

The circumstances of the creation of *Voices from the Killing Jar* and the backgrounds of those involved have resulted in a work that presents some unusual logistical and programmatic concerns. For one, it is difficult to classify: it is not a song-cycle, opera, or melodrama, though it shares characteristics with all of these. The score lacks the kind of involved staging and multi-media presentation that would mark it as music theatre, but the literary/theatrical concept and the drama inherent in the music set it apart from more traditional concert works. It has affinities with other dramatic pieces for solo voice and instruments, such as Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* or Peter Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs*
for a Mad King, but its musical and textual style is much more divergent from movement
to movement than in these classic works.

The difficulty of finding performance opportunities for a forty-five minute, quasi-
theatrical yet non-staged work is mitigated by Voices' modularity: movements may be
excerpted from the full work and presented in groups of two or more, and each may be
performed as a stand-alone piece (with the possible exception of VI). This fluid structure
is an essential part of the work's performance practice, allowing for both a multiplicity of
musical narratives, brought to life through particular groupings and juxtapositions, and
for possible inclusion of the work on programs of contemporary chamber music. The
most authentic experience of the work, however, will be the premiere of the full seven-
movement piece.

The biggest performance challenge of this work in general is the issue of the extremely
unorthodox doubling. As stated in the introduction to this paper, this piece was written
for the members of the Wet Ink Band, and takes full advantage of the unique talents and
strengths of these players. This is both in order to enrich and expand the sound world of
the piece and to define it as dedicated to these individuals. While additional players may
certainly be used to accommodate the doubling in the case of performances by other
ensembles, the most basic element of the work's construction, its instrumentation, will
always be connected to the players for whom it was written.

This is not to say, however, that any of the instrumental choices were arbitrary. The
trumpet would not have been used if the violinist did not happen to play the trumpet, but this fact makes this instrument no less essential to the noisy, declamatory moments in movement IV or to the heroic registral expansion in the second half of VII. The particular Mozart aria Vedrò mentr’io sospiro would not have been included had it not been in the repertoire of the electronics performer, but this does not complicate its status as uniquely qualified to stand up to Madame Bovary. The soprano’s multitasking has its origins in my own background as a piano-based singer-songwriter and my love of accompanying myself while singing, as well as in a brief clarinet stint in grade school, but the dramatic impact of this key player’s caprice is an equally valid explanation for her multiple instrumental roles. These aspects of Voices are simply extreme examples of the myriad ways in which writing for musicians whom one knows very well affects the work being written: the individual techniques and idiosyncrasies of each player make their way into the music itself, stamping it forever with personal meaning.

**VOICES FROM THE KILLING JAR**

**The Wet Ink Ensemble and Band**

The Wet Ink Ensemble was formed in 1998. Its mission is to present programs of exceptional new music, with a focus on underrepresented composers, new American music, and the European avant-garde. I joined the group as a composing member and co-director in 2006 and am currently Managing Director and vocalist. Wet Ink is distinguished from other new music ensembles in New York City by its uncompromising commitment to seeking out and performing music rarely heard elsewhere, by its
juxtapositions of very different kinds of music over a season or even within a single event, and by the status of its four co-directors as composer/performers. Its ability to move fluidly among various contemporary trends stems in part from the diversity of the directors, who have extensive backgrounds in such disparate fields as jazz, electronics, pop/folk music, theatre music, sound design, and many forms of improvised music, as well as cultivated interests and experience in the worlds of visual art, creative writing and literature, video art, and linguistics.

In 2010, during our most recently completed season, Wet Ink introduced a new seven-member group as an independent auxiliary to the full ensemble, which is of various instrumentation and which contracts and expands (up to about twenty musicians) according to programming. This smaller group was created in response to a need for a subset of reduced size and fixed instrumentation to facilitate performance and travel logistics for tours and residencies. The group members include the four composer member co-directors alongside three Wet Ink players who additionally participate in programming decisions, season planning, and administration. Its semi-official title is the "Wet Ink Band," a moniker that alludes to its collaborative nature, in which all of its members share creative control in rehearsals and performances and have influence over commissioning and engagement decisions. The Wet Ink Band performs most often without a conductor, fostering a sense of intense concentration and communication among the members during music-making.

Personnel choices for this group were made based on dedication to and history with Wet
Ink, rather than on practical ensemble concerns, which resulted in the unconventional instrumental combination of soprano, flute, saxophone, violin, piano, percussion, and electronics. As there existed no repertoire for this group other than pieces for smaller combinations of its members, Wet Ink has been active in commissioning and composing new works for this combination. By the end of our twelfth season we will have presented works for the group by Rick Burkhardt, George Lewis, Alex Mincek, Sam Pluta, Ian Power, Kate Soper, Katharina Rosenberger, Lew Spratlan, and Eric Wubbels, and commissions continue to be offered regularly. In order to allow for some composer preference, Band commissions obligate the composer to use every member, but in any capacity, not necessarily on his or her regular instrument: we have performed pieces in which the soprano played harmonica and guiro rather than singing and in which the pianist played accordion. This collective attitude of flexibility was an inspiration in the writing of Voices from the Killing Jar. The experience of performing a concert of all Band works, much like performing a concert with a rock band, has a special exhilaration that sets it apart from other types of events: the ritual of waiting in the green room while your colleagues perform is eliminated, and equal investment in the entire evening creates a unique mood of solidarity.

My own participation in Wet Ink, both in the Band and the regular ensemble, has had an enormous influence on my work in the last several years. Although I have been a performer of my own music in private since I began composing at an early age, I owe my current activities as a new music soprano largely to my involvement in the group.
My background and training as a singer is mixed, including many years of participation in choirs, including Columbia’s collegium, and a few years of private vocal study. Until joining Wet Ink, my main performance experience was as a singer-songwriter, and from 1999 to about 2002 this was my main compositional outlet as well, resulting in four full length albums of original songs self-produced from 1999-2004. Writing songs came extremely easily and naturally to me, in direct contrast with a frustrating and occasionally agonizing struggle throughout college and early graduate school to find the technique and style to create the kind of concert music I wanted to write. In addition to personal expression, songwriting offered an opportunity for innovative musical and lyric-writing technique, albeit within a fairly conventional, tonally-oriented genre. Equally importantly, it allowed me to perform as a pianist and singer, activities which, again in contrast with the perhaps more ultimately satisfying but unquestionably more demanding rewards of composing, has always been an uncomplicated source of profound pleasure.

It was my belief on graduating from college that I would have to give up this pleasure in order to become a “real” composer, and that, while I planned to continue writing vocal music as I was naturally inclined to do, I was unqualified for participation as a singer in my concert works due to my lack of operatic training and unconventional voice. Joining Wet Ink as a performer led to two realizations. One, that I could perform in a concert setting despite this non-standard vocal background, and that in fact there were composers besides myself writing music for which my voice was more appropriate than that of a trained singer. Two, that I could retain some of the performance and musical elements I

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35 In fact, I wrote several songs that alluded to or directly addressed this struggle—evidently missing the irony of writing music about not being able to write music.
most loved and missed from songwriting, such as lyric and text creation, singing from the piano, and communicating directly and expressively as a performer and composer, even as I lost interest in the genre. These have been the most significant personal artistic discoveries of my graduate school career.

Having embarked on a performance side career and joined with a group of outrageously talented colleagues, one of my goals as a novitiate composer/performer was to explore my limits as a singer and performer by acquiring as much technique and range as I could. *Voices from the Killing Jar*, the second work I have written for myself as vocalist, is thus partially a challenge to myself, which fact partially accounts for its extremes of register, wildly different singing styles, extended techniques, and considerable acting demands.

A non-musical part of my creative background that factored heavily into the writing of *Voices from the Killing Jar* is my involvement in writing, theatre, and literature. I began writing at least as early as I began making music, that is, earlier than I can remember, and for a long time felt it was equally plausible that I would go to school for and try to become a writer as a musician. As with performing, I was under the impression that my creative writing skills were not adequate for serious concert music. Thus, while I developed lyric control via my "non serious" pop songs, I maintained a constant investigation into the 20th century and contemporary writing scene, working with texts by poets and writers such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robert Frost, Charles Simic, Frank O'Hara, Thomas Merton, Sylvia Plath, Martha Collins, Christian Bök, Karen Volkmann, and Lydia Davis, and finding additional inspiration from contemporary poets and writers.
such as Anne Carson, Jorie Graham, Lauren Mullen, Jen Hofer, Steven Millhauser, David Markson, and David Foster Wallace, as well as non-contemporary writers. While I retain a passionate interest in these explorations, I have recently begun to reconsider my own writing as an appropriate basis for musical settings, and *Voices* is the first concert work of mine to include original texts.\(^{36}\) *Voices* provided me with the opportunity both to rediscover my writing skills and to pay tribute to a few deeply loved works of literature, as well as allowing me to indulge in the kind of literary analysis that might have been my lot had I pursued a different line of study.

Finally, my background in the theatre has reemerged as a significant force in my recent music, including *Voices*. The theatre has always been a presence in my work: my first paying job as a composer was writing incidental music for a local production in my hometown in 1995, and in addition to composing incidental music for other productions, I have had experience as a sound designer and as an actor in both plays and musicals. The incredible intimacy of live theatre at its best comes in part from a hyper-awareness of performing human bodies sharing space and air with the audience, forcing an empathetic connection with the actions and words that holds both performers and spectators in a kind of symbiosis that exists in no other art form. This physicality and direct performer/audience connection certainly informed the conception of *Voices*, and I expect a theatrical element to gain more prominence in my future projects.\(^{37}\)

\(^{36}\) I do not consider my lyrics to be stand-alone poetry, either for my earlier pop songs or for the movements of *Voices from the Killing Jar* with original text (I, III, and VI).

\(^{37}\) These projects include a half-program length staged work for three voices and piano, *SIREN*, for which I am writing/compiling the libretto, and a work for solo voice and electronics based on the *Roman de la Rose*. 
"Finding one's voice" is one of music compositions most eye-rolling clichés, but it is also often a real event. For me, this search included years of compositional writers block stemming from an intense dissatisfaction with the limited tonal language I developed in high school, followed by years of writing a kind of intensely difficult, complicated music that was somewhat self-consciously antithetical to those early impulses. This has given way in recent years to an acceptance both of my interest in complex and unpredictable textures, new techniques, and conceptual innovation, and of my need to feel moved and to move, my love of storytelling, and my natural inclination towards melody and a pitch-centered, if not tonal, harmonic language. Circumstantially, conceptually, and musically, *Voices from the Killing Jar* represents both a culmination of what I now consider to be the first stage of my compositional career and a new artistic path, which has opened new realms for me as both a composer and a performer, a path that I hope to continue along fruitfully during the next stage.

**Voices from the Killing Jar**

Conclusion: On Being a Female Composer

"I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one."

- Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (p.233)
"Where's the woman in all this lust for glory?"

- Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (line 935)

There is one final issue I would like to address in this paper: the issue of gender, as it relates to both the subject matter of the piece and to my experiences as a female composer and soprano. While *Voices from the Killing Jar* may certainly be understood and appreciated without particular attention to either its possible relevance to feminist theory or to the gender of its composer, the conception and realization of this piece have more to do with issues of gender identity than any previous work of mine, and these issues must be explored for a complete understanding of the work.

The women featured in *Voices from the Killing Jar* are in various situations of mortal, psychological, or spiritual danger that make a kind of Venn diagram of female entrapment: enduring marriage to an unworthy (or worse) husband, as are Clytemnestra, Isabel, Madame Bovary, and Daisy; suffocating from the infuriating uselessness of being an adolescent girl, as do May Kasahara, Lucile, and Isabel; or immobilized in a powerless position that prevents them from acting in self-defense, as are Isabel, Lucile, and Lady Macduff. The seven protagonists do not all inspire admiration. May Kasahara, Clytemnestra, and Daisy are guilty of the murder of an innocent person, and Madame Bovary is infamous for her crooked morals. In the sources and stories in which they are found, however, they do inspire our sympathy and the sympathy of those with whom they
interact—because they are innocent, or because they have been wronged, or simply because, like a butterfly in a killing jar, their beauty and charm is undiminished by their predicament.

These characters were selected for inclusion in Voices not out of sympathy but empathy, out of a feeling of recognition upon my first encounter with them and an accompanying desire to tell their stories, as a composer, and to speak in their voices, as a performer. Clearly, the lives of these women are in most ways unimaginably different from mine—and yet, there are aspects of their circumstances, personalities, actions or behavior with which I strongly identify, and which seem to me to speak to a specifically female experience. The influential critical theorist Judith Butler describes this sense of affinity despite vastly different life situations in her groundbreaking article Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.38

.....the feminist impulse, and I am sure there is more than one, has often emerged in the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me in certain unanticipated ways.

The women in Voices are bound together by their pain, their silence, their anger, their perception, connected not just via juxtaposition, but through their communal duress. As

the narrator of their stories, I empower them by resurrecting their voices, which echo and
forge connections across the movements, and by bringing them to life before an audience.
I inhabit these voices in part by recalling the emotions and mental states which are the
catalysts for their speech and song. This is not to say that I draw on personal experiences
in order to portray the characters, but rather that my sense of at least partially shared
consciousness with each of these seven women gives me unique access to them as both a
composer and a performer. In playing their roles, I interact with them in a deeper and
more meaningful way than in reading their stories.  

So much for the role of the performer/composer. What, if anything, does this piece have
to do more generally with being a female composer?

Judith Butler, in the essay quoted above, unveils what was to become an enormously
influential theory of gender as a socially-constructed performance. Rather than being an
essential, congenital part of self-identity, she claims that gender has always been instead
a socio-political tool, a set of learned behaviors that add up to a "right" or "wrong" way to

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39 Two interesting complications to this view of my role as performer in this piece exist:
firstly, the fact that the authors of the source material, with the exception of Lucile
Duplessis, are men; and secondly, the masculine point of view of the tape part in
movement II. In the first case, I would venture that (in keeping with Butler's article) the
concepts of "masculine" and "feminine" and more generally that of gender may have little
to do with biological assigned sex, and that the ability of, say, Henry James to create on
paper a twenty-two year old woman who is fully recognizable by me, a former twenty-
two year old woman, therefore does no damage to the authenticity of either his creation
or my reaction. Similarly, my ability to perform, in movement II's tape part, the role of
Isabel's male oppressor speaks to my ability and indeed obligation to portray and inhabit
a wide variety of gender roles, an issue whose relevance to my experience as a female
composer will be discussed below.
behave according to a binary system of man/woman. How well one fits into this system is a matter for serious concern:

.....as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished. ⁴⁰

The example Butler offers in her essay of someone "failing to do their gender right" is that of a transvestite, whose punishment is the rage and disgust of those who embody a discrete, acceptable gender. Reading this passage, however, brought me immediately to mind of a situation in which "incorrect" gender performance is required for inclusion and peer acceptance, while "correct" performance is grounds for mistrust or ostracization: that of being a female composer.

Music composition is a male-dominated field, and my experience of this fact, while perhaps on the extreme side, is by no means exceptional: at two universities and eight music festivals, I have had two female composition professors, and as a student I have most often been one of one or two women. The reasons for this lopsidedness are doubtless numerous and complicated, and it is not my intention in this paper to speculate on them or to offer solutions. Rather, I wish to illuminate the ways in which embarking on the composition and performance of Voices from the Killing Jar was motivated in part

⁴⁰IBID, p.522
by my desire to reclaim certain aspects of myself which, as a female composer, are normally off-limits to me at risk of alienation or prejudice.

Butler outlines, in her article, the possibilities offered by the theatre to challenge proscribed notions of gender performance. Unlike in other contexts, gender performances that deviate from the norm are acceptable when on stage because there they are designated as "not real," and thus whatever social dissonance they create may be ignored:

....it seems clear that, although theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions....In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real.41

To be a female composer, in my experience, is to be constantly putting on an act. In order to win confidences and friendships, and to avoid sexist rumors, one must occupy the non-threatening, non-suggestive position of "one of the guys." This is not to say that I am not myself when interacting with my overwhelmingly male colleagues and friends, but just that I am aware that only certain parts of myself are appropriate for these interactions. This mitigation of different selves is, of course, part of daily social life: there are ways in which we behave with our friends or families that are different from

41 IBID, p.525
how we behave with coworkers, or with students, or with strangers on the subway. The distinction I am making is that in this particular case, the lines between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable are largely based on gender, and are not drawn by me. In order to be treated the same way as my male counterparts, I must work to make sure they "forget" about my femaleness. I am therefore regularly classified as "not like other women," "basically a man," "accidentally female." This last, said not to provoke but in an (I believe) genuine attempt to sympathize, gives particular insight into the situation. That sentiment offers me a way out of my position: I am granted that, being "accidentally" female, my gender is "not my fault," "can't be helped," and has nothing, in fact, to do with who I am, and certainly not with what kind of music I write. Although I might have accepted this idea with gratitude at an earlier point in my career, I am no longer willing to do so.

While it is impossible to measure the impact that being a woman has had on my music, it would be equally impossible and indeed ridiculous to deny that being a woman has had much to do with my life experience. By virtue of that fact, it is useless to wonder whether my music would be the same if I were not accidentally female but rather (deliberately?) male: it would not be, as I would not be the same person. I am not generally interested in finding ways in which a composer's maleness or femaleness is manifested in his or her work: if anything, I suspect that the terms "masculine" and "feminine" might be usefully applied to music notwithstanding the gender of its creator if one considers those two categories, as Butler proposes, to evoke a set of characteristics which are divorced from biological sex. *Voices from the Killing Jar* is an exception in
that I acknowledge a gender-related impulse, not behind the details of the music exactly, 
but behind the original concept.

In writing *Voices from the Killing Jar*, with myself as title character, I have created a 
personal space for otherwise verboten types of expression. In "performing" May 
Kasahara, Isabel Archer, Clytemnestra, Lucile Duplesis, Emma Bovay, Lady Macduff, 
and Daisy Buchanan, I am not merely singing and speaking with their voices, but am 
giving myself free reign to perform the brazenness, girlishness, vindictiveness, 
sentimentality, sensuality, vulnerability, and coquettishness that are incompatible with 
my persona as a composer and are thus unavailable to me in most aspects of my daily 
life. Unlike these women, I am neither brutally oppressed nor under threat of danger. I 
enjoy the respect of, and respect in turn, my fellow composers. Nonetheless, the peculiar 
position of being forced to siphon off large parts of my personality in all aspects of my 
field except the solitary, creative one, has finally begun to chafe. Performing in *Voices* is 
a liberating antidote to this tedious compartmentalization, and taking the risk of 
presenting myself as a "real woman," even through the artificial reality of a work of art, 
feels refreshingly dangerous and subversive. It is as yet unclear to me how this new 
discovery of personal relevance in my work as a performer/composer will unfold in 
future projects in that area. Whatever developments lie ahead, *Voices from the Killing 
Jar* represents a synthesis of artistic, performative, and personal concerns I had not 
previously thought possible, and that fact alone is enough to mark it for myself as my 
most successful work to date.