

## Representations of Gender in Barbara Pentland's *Disasters of the Sun*

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### Résumé de l'article

Barbara Pentland (1912–2000) restera une figure de proue de la musique canadienne, même si elle considérait avoir durement acquis sa renommée. Elle concevait sa carrière comme une lutte à rencontre de la discrimination basée sur le sexe. Pourtant, bien qu'elle ait prôné l'égalité des droits et la justice sociale, Pentland préférait taire ces préoccupations. Elle prétendait en effet que les questions de genre détournaient l'attention de ses œuvres; c'était avant tout une compositrice, et ensuite une femme. Cette réticence connaîtra une exception : le cycle de chansons *Disasters of the Sun* de 1976, qui explore délibérément les relations entre les sexes. À cet égard, *Disasters* permet d'acquérir une compréhension affinée des opinions de Pentland en matière de différenciation et d'identité sexuelles.

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# REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN BARBARA PENTLAND'S *DISASTERS OF THE SUN*<sup>1</sup>

Janette Tilley

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Widely recognized as a leading figure in Canadian music, Barbara Pentland (1912–2000) will be remembered for her advocacy of modernism and highly individual style.<sup>2</sup> Her achievements were recognized in her lifetime both nationally and internationally as early as 1956, with a commendation from the International Society for Contemporary Music and later by two honorary degrees and appointment to the Order of Canada and the Order of British Columbia.<sup>3</sup> Despite widespread recognition of her work, Pentland saw her success as hard won. She was one of the few women composers in Canada of her generation to gain international recognition and viewed her career as a struggle against sexual discrimination. A long-time advocate of equal rights and social justice, Pentland nevertheless disliked discussing notions of gender and her vocation, claiming it drew attention away from her compositions: she was a composer first and a woman second.<sup>4</sup> Her reticence has a single exception, in her 1976 song cycle *Disasters of the Sun*. As her only work to explore explicitly gender relations, study of *Disasters* provides a step towards gaining greater insight into Pentland's attitudes toward gender identity.

Much has been made of Pentland's tenacity to pursue composition despite discouragement from family and critics. Pamela Margles' interview-article of 1983 draws attention to Pentland's perceived hardships even in its title, calling the composer's career an "arduous journey."<sup>5</sup> In her recollections of her childhood and youth, Pentland points to the disfavour that generally greeted women composers in the early decades of the twentieth century. Pentland was born in Winnipeg to a wealthy middle-class family in 1912. Her family

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the Tenth Annual Pacific Northwest Music Graduate Students Conference, Vancouver, B.C., 15–17 October 1999.

<sup>2</sup> In issue no. 20/2 (2000): 1–15, the Canadian University Music Review published a collection of memoirs of the three senior Canadian women composers who died in early 2000. These remembrances included an extended essay by John Beckwith about Barbara Pentland.—Ed.

<sup>3</sup> Pentland's honorary degrees were awarded by the University of Manitoba in 1976 and Simon Fraser University in 1985. She was awarded the Order of Canada in 1989 and the Order of British Columbia in 1993. Additional recognition includes the naming of "Pentland Place" in Kanata, Ontario and 12 September 1987 officially recognized as "Barbara Pentland Day" by the City of Vancouver. She was also the recipient of the Diplôme d'Honneur from the Canadian Conference of the Arts.

<sup>4</sup> Pamela Margles, "The Arduous Journey of Barbara Pentland," *Music Magazine* 6 (July–August 1983): 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

discouraged a career in music, believing music, and composition in particular, to be an unfit occupation for a young woman of her social standing. Consistent with conventional gender roles of the time, music lessons for girls were viewed as a desirable social grace but composition was inappropriate. Pentland recalls: “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.”<sup>6</sup>

Pentland felt she suffered from gender-biased expectations throughout much of her professional life and she frequently made references to the difficulties she faced as one of Canada’s few women composers in the 1940s and 1950s. 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.<sup>7</sup>

Pentland hoped to find a more open-minded atmosphere in Europe when she attended the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) conference in 1955, but was disturbed to discover the opposite:

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 thought only of myself as a composer, not as a woman. I was a professional ... I was horrified to find my interest in the music was entirely misinterpreted, so after that I kept more to myself.<sup>8</sup>

At a later international conference, this time at Stratford, Pentland recalled that prevailing attitudes had not changed. Upon receiving a copy of the papers entitled *The Modern Composer and His World* from the 1960 International Conference of Composers 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Pentland quoted in *Ubysey* (2 Dec. 1954): 6, in Sheila Jane Eastman, “Barbara Pentland: A Biography” (Master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1974), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Pentland in letter to Marie Vachon, 17 February 1973, in *ibid.*, 122.

<sup>8</sup>Pentland in interview with Eastman, 8 June 1974, in *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>9</sup>Letter to Mary Gardiner of the Association of Canadian Women Composers, 28 May 1984. I would like to thank Ms. Gardiner for sharing this letter with me.

Pentland's perception of discrimination toward female composers at the international level has echoes in local Canadian attitudes as well. As late as 1967, Sir Ernest MacMillan approached the notion of female composers with reservation, noting "men have more sheer creative ability than women."<sup>10</sup> He hastened to admit that given the increasing number of women composers his attitude may require re-evaluation.

Although Pentland acknowledged the presence of gender stereotypes and sexual discrimination throughout her career, she rarely spoke to her own feminist politics. 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."<sup>11</sup> Despite her advocacy of a "gender-neutral" reception of her music, she maintained that "a woman still has to be very much better than a man to achieve attention."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

Ridout praises Pentland's separation from the feminist movement; however, his assessment is not wholly accurate. Pentland was throughout her career a supporter of women's equality. She articulated some of her support by favouring female poets in her vocal works. As an indisputable advocate of gender equality and social justice, Pentland's attitudes conform to the basic tenets of feminism. In the 1970s, the women's movement changed focus and tactics, relying on lobbying organizations, consciousness-raising groups, and cultural initiatives.<sup>14</sup> For some, including Pentland, the pro-active organizations and demonstrations that characterized 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 much better,

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<sup>10</sup>Sir Ernest MacMillan quoted in Barbara Frum, "Music Makers Not Muses," *The Women's Globe and Mail* (16 March 1967): W1.

<sup>11</sup>Pentland in Margles, "The Arduous Journey of Barbara Pentland," 15.

<sup>12</sup>Pentland in interview with Eastman, 8 June 1974, in Eastman, "Barbara Pentland: A Biography," 124.

<sup>13</sup>Godfrey Ridout in interview with Eastman, 27 September 1972, in *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>14</sup>Roberta Hamilton, *Gendering the Vertical Mosaic: Feminist Perspectives on Canadian Society* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), 52–54.

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.<sup>15</sup>

Pentland's comments came shortly after the founding of the Association of Canadian Woman Composers (ACWC) in 1980. She was at first reluctant to join the organization, citing the segregation of women which she deplored. In a letter to the ACWC, she acknowledged that her distaste for such "ghettos" stemmed from "those ghastly parties where women discreetly separated from the men's 'important' discussion for their own trivial conversations."<sup>16</sup> Her opinion changed as she came to realize the important role the ACWC could play in providing support and role models for young composers. She became a member of the Association in 1983, sending the following comment with her membership fee: "Nowadays, judging by the many 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."<sup>17</sup>

Although she may not have viewed herself as a "card-carrying" member of the feminist movement, Pentland's actions and music speak to her commitment to the movement's goals. Echoes of these concerns may be found in her only explicit musical exploration of sexual oppression and gender issues: the song cycle *Disasters of the Sun*. *Disasters of the Sun* sets a collection of seven poems by the noted Canadian poet Dorothy Livesay (1909–96). Livesay sent the poems to Pentland in 1973 after hearing the premiere of Pentland's *Mutations* in Vancouver. Although she denies that the content of the poems was what initially drew her to the project, Pentland admits that her setting was inspired by an emotional reaction to the poetry.

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.<sup>18</sup>

*Disasters of the Sun* is one of Livesay's many collections of poems to explore changing sexual relationships. Throughout her oeuvre, the sun and moon served as important images in exploring relationships between the sexes. In her 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 1960s evoke the sun as a representation of sexual energy and ecstasy.<sup>19</sup> In later works, Livesay

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<sup>15</sup>Pentland in Rich MacMillan, "Vancouver Composer at 70 Concentrates on Chamber Works," *The Music Scene* 327 (1982): 6.

<sup>16</sup>Pentland in letter to Mary Gardiner, 31 May 1983. I would like to thank Ms. Gardiner for sharing this letter with me.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Pentland in Margles, "The Arduous Journey of Barbara Pentland," 12.

<sup>19</sup>Lee Briscoe Thompson, *Dorothy Livesay* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 109.

expresses the desire to be freed of the sun's oppressive power and she turns to the earth with a desire to be connected underground as a reference to women's companionship.<sup>20</sup> *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<sup>21</sup>

In *Disasters of the Sun*, the large-scale narrative of the song cycle traces the female poet's changing self-identity and relations with men, represented by the sun (see Appendix A). Through the seven songs, the poet searches for an identity rooted in humanity that will transcend notions of gender difference. In the first song, Livesay describes the sun as "gold garnered," suggesting brightness, glory, and power. The sun is also a creative force: "I'm totem carved / with your splayed / scalpel." The poet changes her view of the sun from giver of life to "tyrannical king" in the sixth song and finally the "black sun" disappears in the seventh. The fifth song explicitly contrasts the sun's dual role as grower and destroyer through the metaphor of a sunflower. The flower's ceaseless yearning for the sun's rays is fatal. Although the flower could "outstare" the June sun, it "wilted collapsed / under a pitiless July / sky." Likewise the poet feels threatened by the sun's August heat and offers a warning of its destructive power:

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

Pentland scored the cycle for mezzo-soprano and nine players grouped into three instrumental units: wind trio (flute, clarinet, and horn), string trio (violin, viola, and cello), and percussion trio including piano. Each song is, on the one hand, an independent musical unit based on a different twelve-tone row. On the other, the songs are integrated parts of the whole cycle that is unified by a variety of motifs and timbral effects. Pentland's use of serialism was never strict. In fact, she objected to the rigid application of musical systems and was

<sup>20</sup>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.

<sup>21</sup>Dorothy Livesay, "Dawnings," in *The Phases of Love* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1983).

more concerned with giving the impression of a twelve-tone row and equality of pitch than with strict adherence to serial techniques: "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."<sup>22</sup> In *Disasters of the Sun*, most songs open with a statement of a row whose identifiable intervallic combinations recur throughout the song. The opening measures thus provide the seeds from which the rest of the piece germinates. Pentland identified these germinal opening measures as the "initial impulse" in other compositions and noted that subsequent musical material is often an elaboration or development of these measures.<sup>23</sup>

The first song of the cycle introduces the central metaphor of the sun and explores its relationship with the female poet. The song begins with an instrumental introduction that contains a complete statement of the aggregate. As noted, Pentland makes much use of motifs and timbral effects to unify this cycle. In this first song, a tremolo cluster played on the piano accompanies the first occurrence of the word "sun" (example 1). This musical figure reappears as a reference to the sun in later songs and acts as a unifying motif throughout the cycle.

13

Piano

*f*

*acc*

*trem*

*tenuto*

*f*

*acc*

*trem*

**Example 1.** "Sun" motif. *Disasters of the Sun*, bars 13–15. Copyright © Barbara Pentland 1976. Used by permission.

Each stanza in this song presents a progressively narrower view of the poet, from the most general human existence to her identity as a woman. In the third stanza, the poet's human identity elicits a virile cry from the creator-gods:

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

Musically, Pentland's setting conveys a sense of climactic arrival at the end of this stanza with a quotation of Richard Strauss's *Don Juan* to accompany the

<sup>22</sup>Pentland in Margles, "The Arduous Journey of Barbara Pentland," 12.

<sup>23</sup>Pentland in John Adames, "The Art of Composition: An Interview with Barbara Pentland," *Performing Arts in Canada* 20 (Fall 1983): 41.

word “masculinity.” Whereas the poem merely establishes the connection between woman and “other,” Pentland’s quotation adds another dimension. On the one hand, the quotation refers directly to the word “masculinity” and draws attention to parallels between the womanizer of Strauss’s piece, and the masculine “sun” and gods of the poem. The poet’s feeling of inhumanity may stem from the cavalier attitude of the Don Juan figure for whom women are merely a sport and source of sexual gratification. On the other, the quotation has personal significance since Pentland believes her struggles as a woman composer have been directly related to men “trumpeting their ‘masculinity’.”<sup>24</sup>

Pentland refers to this quotation as that “very *machismo* theme,” suggesting that it in some way possesses masculine strength. She is quick to point out, however, that she distorts the quotation.<sup>25</sup> The melody appears fragmented between the winds and strings. Although identifiable fragments of the melody are clearly diatonic, the tonality 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 and repetitions. The result of these distortions is the weakening of the melody’s tonal assertiveness and ascent to its anticipated climax. Stripped of its tonal context, the quotation exhibits no urgency in achieving resolution. Furthermore, the quotation includes a complete statement of the aggregate. Thus, the excerpt not only fails to function within expected tonal goals, but is subjected to Pentland’s own imposed semi-serial ones. If the tonal drive toward 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 hindered her career through their masculine assertiveness, her manipulation of it expresses a desire to reverse the situation by weakening and thereby controlling them.

To further the link between the image of the sun and perceptions of masculine oppression, a fragment of the Strauss quotation appears again in the sixth song, this time accompanying the words “tyrannical king.” Pentland has noted that this quotation is a direct reference to men who throughout her career have tried to suppress her work.<sup>26</sup> In both this and the preceding quotation in the first song, the horn plays a significant role. While the horn is important to these songs that expressly confront patriarchal oppression and women’s difference, the instrument is conspicuously absent in the second and fourth songs which are concerned with feminine identity. In these songs, the flute plays a more important structural role, thereby establishing gender contrast through instrumentation.

In the second song, the flute’s opening melodic material returns at the end of the song to help portray the unity suggested by the text “the world is round.” Although the poem reveals a sense of wholeness in the collaboration of

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<sup>24</sup>Sheila Eastman and Timothy J. McGee, *Barbara Pentland*, Canadian Composers 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 106.

<sup>25</sup>Pentland in interview with Phyllis Mailing, recorded for broadcast “Music of Today,” CBC, 3 May 1977.

<sup>26</sup>Eastman and McGee, *Barbara Pentland*, 106.



The image displays a musical score for three instruments: Flute (Fl), Clarinet in B-flat (Cl (Bb)), and Horn in F (Hn (F)). The score is divided into two systems. The first system begins at bar 38 and includes markings for 'aperto', 'mp', 'mf', and 'stringendo'. The second system continues the music with markings for 'f' and 'mp'. The score features various musical notations including triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

**Example 2.** Quotation of Richard Strauss's *Don Juan. Disasters of the Sun*, bars 38–43. Copyright © Barbara Pentland 1976. Used by permission.

opposites and a mirror-like form, Pentland's setting hints at an underlying disunity. As noted, each of the songs in this collection opens with a complete statement of the aggregate in its instrumental introduction; the second song is the only exception. Furthermore, the appearance of the "sun" motif in the final lines of the song recalls the creator-sun of the first song and the poet's perception of marginalisation. The warning of the final lines of the song thus works against the unity that was suggested earlier in the song.

Whereas Pentland evokes the image of the heroic, "*machismo*" Don Juan in the first song, she plays on his image as seducer in the third. In the poem, Livesay describes a chance encounter between the poet and an acquaintance. Although nothing in Livesay's text explicitly indicates that the figure is male, save the line "pipe in mouth," Pentland makes a more explicit musical reference to gender by accompanying the descriptions of the unidentified individual with quotations from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. A phrase from the duet "Là ci darem la mano" played first in the cello and later the violin invokes the seducer's song. In Mozart's work, Don Giovanni attempts to seduce Zerlina

with his song. Confused by his advances, Zerlina eventually submits to his invitation. Although there is no overt suggestion of physical interaction in the poem, Pentland's quotation implies that there is a power dynamic at work—as in Mozart's opera—in which the male figure exerts his masculine charms to take advantage of the female.

In the final stanza of the third song, the haunting strains of Mozart's aria are played in harmonics on the violin, evoking a sense of distance or artifice. Unlike the strong and forceful quotation of Strauss's *Don Juan*, Pentland treats Mozart's *Don Giovanni* as a fading memory, suggesting that the relationship between the two characters in the poem is itself distant or unnatural. Moreover, the shallow timbre of harmonics, an artificial device, mirrors the superficial and manipulative character of the Don Giovanni figure.

While the third song centres on the characteristics of the unknown but presumably male individual in the airport, the fourth song is a calm and introspective reflection, relying on arboreal imagery to characterize the female poet. The song intimately explores the poet's physical identity and the changes she experiences with age:

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

The imagery portrays a process of aging as the poet's hands that were once soft like tender leaves have become aged and "gnarled." Leaves reach toward the sky and the sun for seasonal nourishment but roots search deep underground for more permanent sustenance and support in the earth. Here, the masculine sun takes on a dual role as both grower and destroyer. While leaves grow under the warmth of the sun, the poet recognizes the sun's destructive capabilities:

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

Turning away from the masculine sun she sought in her youth, the poet seeks a greater connection with the feminine earth, a theme that persists throughout the cycle. As noted, the flute plays an important structural role in this song, confirming its association with the female poet.

An important means by which Pentland captures the theme of aging is the use of pre-recorded material. The performance of this song requires that the vocalist prepare a tape so that during the performance, two voices may be heard simultaneously. In the first stanza, the singer's pre-recorded voice is heard recalling the first line of the song, "My hands leaves," while in live perfor-

mance 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 taped vocalist singing “gnarled in soil” simultaneously with the live singer’s “my hands / tender as green leaves.” In this instance, the poet’s age haunts the singer as she reminisces about her past beauty.

Following the introspection of the fourth song, the fifth warns of the sun’s destructive force while the sixth is a resolute and violent attack on masculine oppression. Whereas the fifth song relies on simple word-painting and extended performance techniques such as plucking the strings of the piano and preparing them with a metal ruler, the sixth employs more subtle means of expression. The beginning of the first stanza of the sixth song evokes the tyranny of the sun with a march rhythm that persists, with only a brief pause, to the end of the song. The relentlessness of the march serves two functions. It evokes the sun as militaristic “tyrannical king” that Pentland reinforces with another quotation of Strauss’s *Don Juan*. Moreover, its persistence is emblematic of the poet’s resoluteness. The quotation, furthermore, refers not only to Strauss’s tone poem, but also to the first appearance of the quotation in the first song of the cycle. Pentland thereby creates a link between the first and sixth songs, showing explicitly the poet’s change in attitude from insecurity to empowerment.

The cycle closes with an introspective reflection on the poet’s final desires:

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

The imagery opposes the celestial heights by seeking unity with the earth, water, and moon—all cool, life-giving imagery that is antithetical to the sun’s heat and destructive nature. Pentland sets this seventh song as a lament and quotes both directly and indirectly from one of the most famous examples of the genre, “Dido’s Lament” from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*. A direct quotation accompanies the word “subterranean” in the fifth line of the song. The imagery in the two passages is similar: Dido sings of her desire to be “laid in earth” after her imminent death while the poet seeks a strong metaphoric bond with the earth. An important difference with respect to motivation should be noted, however. Dido is the helpless victim of a supernatural plot to separate her from her lover Aeneas. She resigns herself to death after 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 locates the inner strength to reject the “tyrannical rule” of the masculine sun and through her own will looks to the earth, a strong feminine image, for connection. Neither does the poet reject men altogether. The closing stanza invokes a union of male and female:

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

Just as the ideal man would possess feminine qualities, Pentland suggests that the woman-poet likewise embodies masculine characteristics. In a radical reversal of instrumental imagery, Pentland assigns the quotation of Dido's lament to the horn which was previously heard only in songs that explore masculinity and gender conflict, particularly in the quotation of *Don Juan*. The horn is conspicuously silent in the introspective songs of the feminine poet. The masculine associations of the instrument that Pentland has constructed combine with the poem's feminine imagery to serve as a vehicle for the work's closing expression of gender unity.

"Dido's Lament" is often viewed in the tradition of songs of mourning; however, laments serve an additional cultural purpose. Jane Bowers notes that lamenting is, in most cultures, an exclusively female activity.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

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."<sup>29</sup> Laments sung at weddings express similar emotions about separation from the family and unfortunate circumstances in a woman's new home, serving thereby as a verbal tool for expressing feelings in a social structure that is disadvantageous for women.<sup>30</sup>

Viewed in this light, the closing lament of *Disasters* may be regarded not as an expression of mourning but one articulating resistance to gender stereotypes. In *Dido and Aeneas*, the lament serves to signal a woman's death, thereby perpetuating notions of women's passivity and victimization. In Pentland's work, the lament may initially appear similar to Purcell's through its calming mood and position at the end of the cycle. The poetry suggests a new beginning of

<sup>27</sup> Jane Bowers, "Women's Lamenting Traditions around the World: A Survey and Some Significant Questions," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 2 (1998): 125.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>29</sup> 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 *ibid.*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> 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), 113-14; in *ibid.*, 131.

unity rather than separation, oppression, or submission, however. Thus, Pentland reclaims the lament from its operatic paradigm and transforms it in her work into a symbol of strength and rebirth rather than one of resignation and death.

More important than the direct musical quotation of Purcell is Pentland's analogous organization of the song around a ground bass. Pentland's ground bass is a twelve-tone row stated in a three-part canon in the strings. Normally, a 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 a twelve-tone row 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 and even its canonic entries are not strict. This disintegration of a strict formal device helps to characterize the female poet's independence and desire to break with a controlling force.

The musical score for Example 3, Song VII Ground Bass, *Disasters of the Sun*, bars 455-66, is presented for six string instruments: Violin, Viola, Cello, Violin, Viola, and Cello. The score begins at bar 455. The Violin and Viola parts are marked *senza sord.* and *pp*, with the instruction *sul tasto* appearing above the staves. The Cello part is marked *pp* and features a descending line with various dynamics and articulations. The Violin, Viola, and Cello parts in the lower system are marked *pp*, *pizz.*, and *p* respectively. The Violin part is marked *ord.* and *p*, with the instruction *sul D* appearing below the staff. The Viola part is marked *p* and features the instruction *sul G* below the staff. The Cello part is marked *p* and features the instruction *pizz.* below the staff. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

**Example 3.** Song VII Ground Bass. *Disasters of the Sun*, bars 455–66. Copyright © Barbara Pentland 1976. Used by permission.

In the final stanza, Pentland again uses pre-recorded tape as a means of self-quotation. The words “If I’m a woman assure me I am human” from the first song are heard played back from a tape to accompany the closing lines:

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

This juxtaposition contrasts the poet's perception of difference that opened the work with the desire for a transcendence of gender that closes it. Furthermore, the quotation brings a sense of cyclical closure to the cycle and explicitly shows the poet's changing attitude toward gender and masculinity.

Although *Disasters of the Sun* is unique in expressing some of Pentland's most poignant and direct attacks on patriarchy, it cannot stand alone as a testament to her feminist politics. Certainly the work's conclusion echoes her career-long struggle to overcome the sexual discrimination she felt she suffered and points to an ideal transcendence of gender difference, seeking a reception of her work rooted in humanity rather than femininity. Why, then, did she claim she was not drawn to the poem's philosophical content? Was this a means of maintaining the façade that gender did not play a role in her composition? The piece raises important questions not only about her motivations and potential meaning in the work, but also broader issues of gender and reception in Canadian music. How well founded were Pentland's perceptions of sexual discrimination, and what evidence supports her claims? Certainly a history of music and sexual politics in Canada would shed some much-needed light on an important chapter in Canadian music history. Finally, to what extent is reception of Pentland's works still viewed through the tinted glass of gender politics, and can we hope to achieve the "gender blindness" that Pentland so strongly advocated?

## APPENDIX A

### DISASTERS OF THE SUN<sup>31</sup>

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

**Strauss *Don Juan***

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<sup>31</sup> Bold lettering indicates musical quotations in Pentland's setting.

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

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

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 duffed  
 labelled mine

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

**Mozart *Don Giovanni***

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

**Mozart *Don Giovanni***

iv

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

tape: "My hands leaves"

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

tape "gnarled  
in soil"

tape: "my hands tender as green leaves"

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*

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

**Strauss *Don Juan***

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

tape: "black sun"  
**Purcell *Dido and Aeneas***

tape: "if I'm a woman  
 assure me I am  
 human"

### **Abstract**

Barbara Pentland (1912–2000) will be remembered as a leading figure in Canadian music, but she regarded her success as hard won. She viewed her career as a struggle against sexual discrimination, and though an advocate of equal rights and social justice, Pentland nevertheless disliked discussing notions of gender and her vocation, claiming it drew attention away from her compositions: she was a composer first and a woman second. Her reticence has a single exception in her 1976 song cycle *Disasters of the Sun*. As her only work to explore explicitly gender relations, *Disasters* provides a step towards gaining greater insight into Pentland's attitudes toward gender difference and identity.

### **Résumé**

Barbara Pentland (1912–2000) restera une figure de proue de la musique canadienne, même si elle considérait avoir durement acquis sa renommée. Elle concevait sa carrière comme une lutte à l'encontre de la discrimination basée sur le sexe. Pourtant, bien qu'elle ait prôné l'égalité des droits et la justice sociale, Pentland préférait taire ces préoccupations. Elle prétendait en effet que les questions de genre détournaient l'attention de ses œuvres; c'était avant tout une compositrice, et ensuite une femme. Cette réticence connaîtra une exception : le cycle de chansons *Disasters of the Sun* de 1976, qui explore délibérément les relations entre les sexes. À cet égard, *Disasters* permet d'acquérir une compréhension affinée des opinions de Pentland en matière de différenciation et d'identité sexuelles.