

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: June 4, 1994, San Francisco, CA. Commissioned by San Francisco Girls Chorus and premiered as part of its 15th anniversary celebration.
Duration: 7'
Instrumentation: Treble voices

The collaged texts of Spinning Flax are ‘spun’ together from a broad historical range of source materials - court records, church and town records, neurological case histories, Medieval and Renaissance histories - which provide recorded utterances of young girls aged 12-20 in some state of visionary transcendence. The title is taken from a fifth-century quote by Melania the Younger of England: “From early dawn to the ninth hour I think from hour to hour while spinning flax. I wait patiently the other hours for my end with good hope.” In writing this work, I have found the prevailing, guiding image for me has been a young woman sitting and spinning flax for 1500 years, waiting for a time when visionary, creative expression for women can take a decisive form, meanwhile engaging in a transcendent and often dangerous life of the mind.

I was also fascinated with the idea that when many individuals sing as one instrument, they provide a sort of pluralized protagonist, often using the first person singular voice. These texts are the utterances of many individual young women, but in this piece they are considered as so many plural identities of one protagonist. The texture of this piece is contrapuntal and plays with contrasting levels of density, reflecting both the individuality of the young woman’s voice in history and the plurality of her suffering. It is an expectant mood which closes the piece - she has expressed her passions, her dreams, her fears, her needs, and now she is resolved to be patient while time spins ahead and discovers her again and again, and finds her inexplicable every time.

– Lisa Bielawa

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Text

“From early dawn to the ninth hour
I think from hour to hour while spinning flax.
I wait patiently the other hours
For my end with good hope.”

-Melania the Younger, 5th century

“My thoughts - I think them with my whole body
You’re going to laugh -
With my hands, my feet, with my whole body,
When I have a thought I think it in my head
But I feel it everywhere.”

-anonymous hysteria patient, 1903

“I travel everywhere at night
Tonight I shall come and find you
Even though you were to lock yourself in your room.
I have had a vision, a storm-tost sea,
A ship full of souls,
Beaten about by the tempest of unclean thoughts.”

-Charlotte Cadière, 1728

“I know you think my mind is wandering,
But I assure you it is not so.”

-anonymous nun, A.D. 675

“I shall give thee words and wisdom
None shall be able to withstand.”

-St. Catherine of Siena, 1370

“You will not believe me
I am counted as a dreamer
But when this dreamer is hanged
Then remember what I said to you:
If you had believed the voice
That spake to you, you had died
But seeing you spake to it
And resisted it,
It had not power to kill you.

-Mary Parsons, 1651

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