

The Kapralova Society Journal

A Journal of Women in Music

Dame Vera Lynn: Voice of a Generation

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Special points of interest:

- Dame Vera Lynn

Inside this issue:

Dame Vera Lynn: Voice of a Generation / by <i>Erin Hackel</i>	1–6
An Analysis of Kaprálová's Song Cycle <i>Forever</i> , op. 12 / by <i>Cristina Castaldi</i>	7–9
Book review	10–11
Publications and CD releases	11–12

On March 23rd, 2012, I had the great pleasure of having a telephone conversation with Dame Vera Lynn. Dame Vera, as she prefers to be called, is now 95 years old and shows no sign of her age save an excellent first-hand memory of the past 70 years. Our conversation centered on her voice and her career, and was in many ways quite provocative. In her autobiographies and in our interview, there is an undercurrent of class struggle: Dame Vera was a working class girl, and her style of singing was considered to be less sophisticated than that of her classically trained peers. She has never had a voice lesson. She has never learned how to read music. She never warmed up before a show. She does not know that she used something now called a “belt voice.” Despite this, and more importantly, because of this, she is worth our attention. Take a moment and listen to one of her many recordings. Unexpectedly and despite all odds, here is a real, finished, polished artist. Her phrasing and her text treatment are delicate, refined and thoughtful. Her instinctive use of her belt mechanism uses perfect technique and is a model for healthy singing. Her signature, her calling card, if you will, is something that cannot be learned: perfect and genuine sincerity of delivery. A natural and astute business woman and a singer with a firm handle on what repertoire suited her style and voice, Dame Vera is a model for young, contemporary singers today.

A young performer

Vera Lynn was born in 1917, in East Ham, London to a working class family. Her mother was a dressmaker, her father did odd

jobs, and the whole family were enthusiastic, untrained singers. By the age of seven, she was singing professionally in local clubs, and had very little playtime or time to herself. She was considered a “descriptive child vocalist.” This meant she was expected to act out the text to her songs in a broad, gesticulating manner, in the British Music Hall tradition. Her voice was distinctive already, and she was billed as a “the girl with the different voice.”¹ In her latest autobiography, she says:

. . . my voice was of a rather unorthodox pitch for a little girl . . . As a matter of fact everything we sang at school was pitched too high for me . . . The school disliked my singing voice so much that ironically I was only allowed in the front row of the choir because I opened my mouth nice and wide and it looked good.²

She would sing in the large halls of the men’s clubs that provided entertainment. The club chairman and committee of the club would sit in the front row, where they would gauge the audiences’ applause, and decide whether or not the singer could perform an encore. This was key. An encore ensured not only an extra shilling and sixpence, but also a probable future engagement at that club.

Even then, Vera had a clear idea of the repertoire that appealed to her: she was drawn to the uncomplicated ballads. She would haunt the publishing companies in Charing Cross Road to find songs that suited her voice, which was “loud, pene-

Dame Vera Lynn

trating, and rather low in pitch for my age.”³ It was an era when publisher’s offices would give music to singers they knew were performing publically. She would then take that music to a transposer, who would give her just the treble portion of the piano part. This could then be handed to any of the accompanists in the clubs; all of them could create an entire accompaniment from that, and most could transpose on the spot, as needed. By the age of twelve, Vera was an established singer providing much needed income for her family; in some weekends she would earn in two nights what her father earned in a week. Although she didn’t gain much enjoyment from singing during those years, she never questioned that she needed to earn as much as possible for her family.

Class and popular music

*My voice and the sort of singing I was doing were much looked down on.*⁴

Class structure in early 20th century Britain was extremely stratified. In 1940 the British author George Orwell wrote: “England is the most class-ridden country under the sun. It is a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and the silly.”⁵ The class of the vast majority of Englishmen could be determined by a glance at their clothing, mannerisms and accent. Dame Vera, who spent her singing career trying to minimize her Cockney accent, was a product of the working class, both in her immense personal work ethic and in the style of music she was exposed to as a child. She did not sing in a classical children’s choir, instead she sang in Madame Harris’s Kracker Kabaret Kids, a paid juvenile troupe that specialized in tap, ballet and acrobatics. The club circuit her mother placed her into was not the venue of the upper-class, and the style of singing she had to adopt to be heard over the noisy patrons was almost certainly a penetrating belt voice rather than the cultivated light mechanism used by classical singers. Even her East Ham primary school was disapproving of the type of clubs she provided entertainment in during the evening hours.

Although we now see a clear demarcation between classical and popular song, the gap between the two genres was not very wide in the early 19th century. Schubert and Schumann’s lieder, though later recognized and appreciated by discriminating audiences, existed easily alongside the parlor songs of the day. Beethoven was equally as fluent with symphonic material and folk song arrangements. The shift to a real divergence and demarcation of style happened with the rise of serious opera in the 19th century. Audiences for a Wagner opera were expected to sit quietly and applaud only at appropriate moments, while audiences for a Johannes Strauss Jr. concert

were allowed to converse, socialize and clap during the music, much as audiences behaved during Haydn and Mozart symphonies 100 years earlier. Audiences further diverged as vaudeville and operetta sprang forth in direct response to the seriousness of heavy opera. The late 19th century’s Tin Pan Alley and Charing Cross publishing companies widened the chasm between cultivated versus vernacular, classical versus popular. Art song of this time, such as the work of Fauré and Wolf, was precisely notated and written for singers and pianists of great skill. In contrast, the popular song composers were aiming for as many sales as possible, with the primary aim being entertainment and accommodation of amateur singers and pianists.

This demarcation was clear in 20th century Britain, where classical music was finding large new audiences as the War years approached. The BBC had begun their own choral group, called the Wireless Singers (later the BBC Singers) that performed the works of the most renowned composers of the day. They also employed guest conductors such as Sir Edward Elgar, Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. Operatic soloists like Nellie Melba had enjoyed huge popularity at Covent Garden, and oratorios, performed by singers such as Scottish Soprano Isobel Baillie, were drawing large audiences. The BBC Symphony performed frequently, and the classical pianist Dame Myra Hess had begun a series of acclaimed concerts at the National Gallery. Popular musicians existed alongside their classical peers, but there was an underlying current that they were “second class citizens,”⁶ despite their popularity and commercial successes.

The cultivated belt voice

Vera Lynn had left school by age 14, and by 15, she was doing a cabaret spot at a local club. She was also about to try out her first microphone; Dame Vera calls it a pivotal point in her singing career. As a Descriptive Child Vocalist, she had been employing the broad gestures and facial expressions so common to early 20th century popular music singers, but her success on the club circuit had led to a successful audition as the singer for a dance band. The performance practice was quite different for a band singer: she had to stand still, use a microphone and nothing but the emotive powers of her voice and face. In describing her experience using a microphone, she says:

It was the microphone itself, however, that was the revelation. I’d sung in some big places without one—none of our cinema gigs with the juvenile troupe, for instance, had ever involved a micro-

phone—and had developed a pretty piercing sort of delivery. I learned very quickly to lower my volume, but I found out at the same time that also meant lowering the pitch: as I reduced the pressure on my voice, so it simply dropped into a lower key.⁷

In order to project her voice to the back of a noisy club without amplification, it seems likely that she had been using a full belt-voice as a child vocalist. With the change of her technique to accommodate a microphone, she seems to have modified her sound into a mixed belt voice you can hear in her early recordings. If she had maintained the same keys she used as a full frontal belt voice singer, the reduced pressure would have forced her into her head voice on the higher pitches. This was not the cohesive sound she wanted, so she had to lower the keys.

The mixed belt voice Dame Vera cultivated with the microphone is a voice of great warmth, color and expression, and it is one she developed independently; she was a completely untrained and intuitive singer. When asked about her vocal training, she laughs and describes her one and only voice lesson, where a teacher, after hearing her sing, told her disdainfully that she was using a “freak voice,” not her “true voice,” and it was “against (her) principles to train a voice of that type.”⁸ Her “freak voice” was, of course, a belt voice. Her wartime recordings, the time this aborted lesson would have occurred, show a singer with a clear, very beautiful light belt. It is mixed, not a full-frontal belt sound. In our interview, she says this:

I always felt that people with my kind of voice were the poor relations . . . Did it stop me? . . . No, not at all. No, I refused to change my voice, and, because I was doing very well with what I had, and people seemed to like it, and they always recognized me if they heard me on the radio, they would know who I was immediately.⁹

The class distinction that existed between classical and popular singers is quite clear here, both in Dame Vera’s words and in the story she relates of the voice teacher: belt voice singing was low class.

There was a name given to Vera’s type of singing: she was a “crooner.” This was a derogative term used to describe popular singers who sang with dance bands. It was not an uncommon sentiment, and was even conveyed in the press. *Radio Times* wrote in 1941: “I do not as a rule care for crooners, and have learned after due trial to avoid listening to them.”¹⁰ The *East Ham Echo* wrote: “To many people “crooning” has become an insidious word relative to immediate action in switching off the wireless, walking out of the cinema or smashing up the gramophone.”¹¹

These sentiments did not deter her, or alter the career path she had been on since she was a child. She also did not take singing or repertoire advice from anyone, not even the band leaders who employed her: “I wouldn’t allow anyone to tell me how to sing a song. I would just stick to my own way and my own phrasing and my own diction . . . I wouldn’t allow anyone to change my natural way of singing.”¹²

I think it is here we have the true reason for Vera Lynn’s success. Dame Vera modestly attests that she was simply lucky to be singing things that resonated with the era in which she was performing. This is one element, but perhaps more important was her quiet determination to maintain her vocal style, controlling her repertoire to things that suited her emotionally and technically. On top of this, she was an instinctive businesswoman, showing good sense and making smart choices. It was common practice then for singers of her caliber to take “plug money” from publisher’s houses in exchange for singing one of their tunes on the air. Vera never accepted these offers, as she saw them as ethically dangerous and a poor long term career bet: singing songs that did not suit her voice for a short term payoff would hurt her in the long run.

By the age of 18, she was working her way up the popular band ladder very quickly, always maintaining control over what she would sing. She began broadcasting with Charlie Kunz, then with the Bert Ambrose band, known as the best dance band in England at the time. She was well liked by these band-leaders not for her sense of performance, which was still unsophisticated, or for her musicianship skills. Indeed, she was unable to read music at all. What these musicians respected and hired her for were her impeccable pitch, her diction, and her unique style.¹³ This is a sentiment that she brings up again and again; though her voice might sound conventional to our modern ears, at the time, it was considered different, unique. She says:

So, what did I have? A voice which gave the impression of being higher than it actually was; arising from a need to have most songs transposed down into unusual keys—which automatically gave them a “different” sound; a very accurate sense of pitch, which apparently I’d been born with; clear diction, which might have been my way of compensating for what I knew to be a rather cockney speaking voice; and a genuine respect for simple, sentimental lyrics which I could sing as if I

Dame Vera Lynn

believed in them because I DID believe in them.¹⁴

Historically, popular singers who preceded Vera Lynn were either full belters, or strictly head voice/crossover artists. Most had come from the same Music Hall tradition as Vera Lynn, and had cultivated a piercing belt voice that would then transition abruptly, if at all, to a lighter mechanism. Her closest contemporary, Gracie Fields, did a great deal of head voice work, as well as some full-frontal belt singing. Ms. Field's singing in some of her most popular wartime songs, such as "Wish Me Luck as You Wave me Goodbye," show a voice that is either in full belt voice, or as she sings higher, in a clean head voice with a more classical execution. It's no wonder then that Vera Lynn's voice was considered "different." She intuitively and without training mastered a beautiful, warm, light mixed belt voice. Combined with her instinctively sensitive text treatment and a commitment to delivering a sentimental message without irony, Vera Lynn was an irresistible commercial singer.

Singing through the Blitz

Her genuine love of sentiment was to serve her well as World War II broke out across Europe. She was becoming a true success: she was earning enough money to purchase and learn to drive her own car (highly unusual for women at the time), and she bought a house. She was not quite twenty years old.

1939 marked the arrival of World War II to England. This was the same year that Vera Lynn met her husband, Harry, a clarinet player in Bert Ambrose's band. With most of the band, including Harry, enlisting in the army, she found herself pushed into becoming a solo act for the first time. It was during this period, as she frequented the publisher's houses, that she came across the song that was to become her signature tune, "We'll Meet Again." She says:

Its lyric seemed to me to be a perfect example of what you might call the greetings card song: a very basic human message of the sort that people want to say to each other but find embarrassing actually to put into words. Ordinary English people don't, on the whole, find it easy to expose their feelings even to those closest to them.¹⁵

In our conversation, she professes that the lyrics were the first thing she looked at when choosing a song. If the lyric did not suit, it did not matter how beautiful the melody was, she would not sing the song. Once again, her instinctive way of preserving her distinctive style drove her to success. She fiercely defended her choices of songs, often deemed overly

sentimental even at the time. On being called "sincere," she says this:

On the whole—and it was certainly true in 1941—a popular singer uses other people's words, and she hasn't necessarily been through the experiences she's describing . . . So she has to use her imagination, which is not a matter of sincerity so much as conviction . . . If she can believe in the song, it doesn't matter how trite it is as a piece of literature: its message will come across.¹⁶

Vera was performing frequently in and around London during the War Years, driving herself to gigs with a little helmet on the passenger seat of her car in case the Air Raid Siren went off. She and her fellow performers would keep singing, even as bombs dropped nearby, and it became second nature to ignore the deadly assaults. As always, she was actively pursuing repertoire that suited her voice, and it was during this time that she found a Latin American tune set to English lyrics that appealed to her. The song was called "Yours," and was to become one of her biggest hits, and an inspiration for the title of her controversial radio program for the troops.

Sincerely Yours

*Dear boys . . . it used to be very easy to answer your letters, because what most of you used to say was, "Please send me your autograph." But since I started my Sunday broadcasts you've written to me very differently—as though you know me well, and as though I'm your friend . . .*¹⁷

Vera Lynn's radio show, a 30-minute spot that would be like a letter to the servicemen, was titled "Sincerely Yours," a play on her newest hit song. Vera would speak as if she were sitting by her fire at home,¹⁸ and sing the songs she loved best, "Yours," "We'll Meet Again," "The White Cliffs of Dover," all sentimental, all delivered with her signature honesty. She would also travel to hospitals to visit servicemen's wives who had just had babies, then deliver the news of their births on the air. Unsurprisingly, the response from the troops was overwhelming. She received thousands of letters a week from soldiers, with the message that her simple songs about better times were giving them moments of great joy.

The BBC, however, felt differently. Minutes from one of their meetings said, succinctly: "'Sincerely Yours' deplored, but popularity noted."¹⁹ She faced a barrage of complaints from MPs and retired military personnel that she was

making the troops soft and sentimental; more martial fare would be far more appropriate than the crooning about home that was her stock in trade. The BBC went even further by forming an Anti-Slush committee to regulate what was appropriate to broadcast to troops fighting abroad. This committee was meant to eliminate programming that was “slushy in sentiment,” “insincere performances by female singers,” and “numbers based on tunes borrowed from the classics.”²⁰ As Dame Vera says, “some of the critics of my type of singing were very hurtful at the time,”²¹ and the unspoken class distinction between her classical peers and a crooner such as herself was completely clear. Despite the unwelcome scrutiny, the British public had spoken: over Bing Crosby, Judy Garland and Deanna Durbin, she was voted the British Expeditionary Force’s favorite singer. Vera Lynn was the Force’s Sweetheart, and a huge commercial success.

After the War, Dame Vera heard from hundreds of people from Occupied countries such as Norway, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands. They told her stories of how they would huddle over clandestine radios to hear the news from London, then risk their lives to stay tuned and listen to her sing and send messages of home and regular life to British soldiers. Having been told by the Germans that London was in flames and England nearly defeated, her simple radio show gave them hope that things were not as bad as the Germans had reported.

Entertaining the troops

*Sometimes I think that I never quite got over that period of my life. My memories of the wartime years are strongest when I think of Burma.*²²

In 1944, Vera spent 5 months visiting the troops in Burma, a trip both harrowing and fulfilling. She travelled with one pink performance dress, her accompanist and a piano that was so jolted about on the back of trucks that its case fell apart. At each performance, soldiers would volunteer to hold it together while they performed. She stayed in grass huts and endured mosquitos, snakes and jackals. She bathed every morning by dumping a bucket of water over her head, and recalls the horror of visiting injured soldiers in a hospital in Dimapur, the smell of gangrene so overpowering she could hardly breathe:

At one point, suddenly sickened by the smell of gangrene, disinfectants and the sense of desolation at the thought of life ebbing away all round me, I was overcome by it all, and sat down on somebody’s bed, feeling weary and ill and futile. I asked for a glass of water. “We’ve no drinking water,” someone said gently . . .²³

She performed in hospitals, for groups of thousands sol-

diers without the aid of amplification of any kind, for soldiers returning from jungle missions that first had to be de-loused and cleaned, and on improvised stages made from crates. Beetles as large as birds would fly into her hair as she sang, and she wore no make up at all, as it would just pour off with perspiration as she performed. She performed up to three times a day, with jungle travel in between. She says of that time:

. . . I find it difficult to imagine the young woman I was then: twenty-six years old, barely married, never travelled anywhere and suddenly in the middle of the jungle in Burma, a stone’s throw from the fighting. It was a strange and wonderful experience that has lived with me for the rest of my life.²⁴

Post War efforts

Vera Lynn returned home soon after D-Day, and settled back into a steady routine of performing. She and her husband Harry bought a large, rambling house in the Sussex countryside, and her only daughter, Virginia, was born shortly after the end of the war. She took a short break from performing, then attempted a return to recording. Here she encountered difficulty with the changing times: she was told by the Head of Variety at the BBC that she would have to change her style and her “sob stuff” repertoire if she wished to do any more broadcasting. Dame Vera’s response was true to character:

. . . I didn’t see why I should have to switch over to completely different material—which wouldn’t fit me—at the whim of a man who just happened to be responsible for the hiring and firing of entertainers. He was simply not interested in engaging me and, having rationalized his dislike, he added a final, patronizing insult: he had a programme he could put me into—somebody else’s—in which I would be allowed to do “one bright song.” The interview didn’t last long after that. As I say, I don’t often get annoyed, but in effect I told him what he could do with his one bright number, and walked out.²⁵

Her commitment to knowing her own voice and sticking to repertoire that worked for her shows remarkable foresight and bravery. It paid off: Vera left the BBC and started broadcasting with Radio Luxembourg, which led to a regular guest spot on Tallulah Bankhead’s American radio program, *The Big Show*. In 1950, she

Dame Vera Lynn

Voice of a Generation

had the biggest hit of her career, a sentimental tune called “Auf Wiederseh’n, Sweetheart,” recorded with soldiers, airmen and sailors singing the chorus. After topping the charts with that song, both in the UK and in the United States, she fielded numerous offers from American broadcasting companies, all of which she turned down. The BBC had finally come around, and signed her for a two-year radio and television contract.

By the late 1960s, she was about to begin a new television series, and for the first time, found herself adapting her repertoire to suit an audience that had just been introduced to *Star Trek*, David Bowie and the Woodstock music festival:

. . . there had been an improvement and a new type of song had come in, which, while it was quite different from what I had been used to singing, at least had the virtues I was familiar with—strong melodies and lyrics that had some logic to them . . . the metre of the new songs was different, and the construction of the lyrics less formal: they were much more like prose poems. The types of story the new songs told were different, too, and very varied, and I had to be careful that they were right for me . . . I had to know how far I could “lean out” from my old self.²⁶

By 1984, she had recorded and released twenty original albums, three of them charted. She slowly began focusing on charity work rather than her performing career, especially her charities involving breast cancer research and cerebral palsy in children.

Her last public performance was at the age of seventy-eight, in 1995 at the Golden Jubilee of VE Day at Hyde Park. At the age of 92 she re-released many of her classic songs in the album: *We’ll Meet Again: The Very Best of Vera Lynn*, which reached number one in the UK. She says that she never sings now, as her voice is not the same as it was. Her legacy, however, withstands the test of time: sing repertoire you connect with that suits your voice, work hard and wait for the right opportunities. These are ideals that work for performers of all genres, and continue to be applicable to singers today.

. . . I came from a time that was so much more innocent. I think people looked at me as one of them—an ordinary girl from an ordinary family with a voice that you could recognize. It’s that simple.²⁷

Known primarily as the voice that defined wartime Britain, Dame Vera has, for many years, languished in our collective memories as a sentimental singer of World War

II era ballads. Pleasing, but simple: a singer of uncomplicated melodies with lyrics that resonated with the people of a very specific time and place. She was certainly that singer; she took great care in selecting that repertoire, songs that suited her temperament and her technical skills, but she was also so much more. In an era where classical singers were considered socially elite, Vera Lynn was a passionate singer of popular music, utilizing a contemporary vocal technique, solely in charge of her repertoire choices and a young business woman, far ahead of her time.

Notes:

1. Vera Lynn, *Some Sunny Day: My Autobiography* (London: Harper-Collins, 2009), 50.
2. *Ibid.*, 40.
3. *Ibid.*, 35.
4. *Ibid.*
5. George Orwell, “England Your England,” in *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, eds. T. R. Fyvel and George Orwell (London: Secker and Warburg, 1941), section I.
6. Vera Lynn, phone interview with the author, March 23, 2012.
7. *Some Sunny Day*, 58.
8. *Some Sunny Day*, 143.
9. Vera Lynn, interview.
10. Vera Lynn, *We’ll meet again* (United Kingdom: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989), 127.
11. *Some Sunny Day*, 59–60.
12. Vera Lynn, interview.
13. *Some Sunny Day*, 90.
14. *Ibid.*, 143.
15. *Ibid.*, 120.
16. *Ibid.*, 140–141.
17. *We’ll Meet Again*, 128.
18. *Some Sunny Day*, 145.
19. *Ibid.*, 147.
20. *Ibid.*, 148.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 193.
23. *Ibid.*, 187.
24. *Ibid.*, 193.
25. *Ibid.*, 232.
26. *Ibid.*, 276.
27. *Ibid.*, 305.

About the author

Dr. Erin Hackel is head of the Vocal Area at the University of Colorado, Denver, where she directs the award winning contemporary a cappella ensembles, MIX and the 9th Street Singers. Her research and publication areas encompass the pedagogy of contemporary singing styles and early, female popular artists. A passion for demystifying the belt voice and teaching it in a sustainable, healthy and functional way have led her to a little discovered area of vocal study, and her lectures and master classes on high belt have been selected for presentation at both the Mile High Vocal Jam and SoJam, two of the largest a cappella festivals in the country. Dr. Hackel’s previous publications centered on 19th century Norwegian women Agathe Backer Grøndahl and Nina Grieg. She has recently received grants to travel to Oslo in May of 2013 to research early cabaret singer Bokken Lasson.

An Analysis of Kaprálová's Song Cycle *Navždy*, op. 12

Cristina Castaldi

Navždy, op. 12 is a cycle of three songs composed by Kaprálová between November 1936 and February 1937, during her final year at the Prague Conservatory while she was still under the tutelage of Vítězslav Novák. Together with her stand-alone song *Sbohem a šáteček*, op. 14 (Waving farewell), the three songs of the *Navždy* cycle have been the most frequently performed of all her art songs on today's concert stages, which attests to their high quality.

The *Navždy* songs are grouped in their reversed chronological order: the first of the songs, the title song "Navždy" (Forever), was in fact composed last, on February 13, 1937. The middle song, "Čím je můj žal" (What is my sorrow), was finished a day earlier, on February 12, 1937. The last song, "Ruce" (Hands), is the oldest of the three; it was composed on November 21, 1936. The poetry of the first two songs is by Jan Čárek, while Jaroslav Seifert's poem has provided words for the third song. There are also two settings of "Navždy"—a voice and piano version, composed in February 1937, and an undated, orchestral version, scored for voiceband, flute, oboe, B-flat clarinet, horn, triangle, small drum, harp, violins and cellos. The orchestral version is set to the same text but the music is different.¹

The approximate performance time of the cycle is 7:30 minutes. The cycle is dedicated to Milada Kunderová, a friend of Kaprálová's family. Interestingly, Kaprálová also singled out "Ruce" as a stand-alone song under the title "Píseň jednoho večera" (Song of one evening) so that she could dedicate it to another friend, Vladimír Materna (the dedication of this re-titled song reads "To my sweet little darling his little sweetheart"). The cycle was first performed on Prague Radio, on October 3, 1937. It was published by Prague sheet music publishers Edition HM (1949) and Amos Editio (2005).²

While *Navždy* has the designation of "cycle," the term has taken on a different meaning with respect to 20th century art song compared to earlier examples (i.e., having been unified by one poet and a main theme throughout). The *Navždy* songs are set to words not by one but two different poets, and each song is motivically unique. As mentioned earlier, the songs were grouped for performance in a reversed order to that in which they were composed. Musically, they are quite different from each other. Whether or not intended by Kaprálová, however, an interpretation of the poetry demonstrates a sequence of events and moods that connect these songs.

One could surmise that there is an evolution in the story

being told in these three songs. Perhaps it was the intention with which Kaprálová grouped the songs in the very order she did. As an interpreter, I find it necessary to look for a character through which the text and music speaks and communicates to the audience. I believe that the character in *Navždy* remains the same throughout the three songs. Although the works of two poets are used, and the third song is also a stand-alone piece, it is obvious that each poem inspired Kaprálová for different reasons. The desire of change (*Wild geese are flying south / someone will leave again and again will return / someone will leave and will never return*); the pain associated with change (*What is my grief against your seas / what is my pain against the sand of your deserts?*); and the intimacies left behind as a result of change (*The world fell with us to the abyss / we did not hear the knell / we drank the last drops of wine / that still remained in Canaan*) are the underlying messages of these songs. Change, although exciting and necessary, can also be difficult, and these poems reflect the mixed emotions associated with it. As Kaprálová must have been thinking about her future after graduation, one could assume that she was experiencing many of the same feelings about the next adventures in her life.

Why did Kaprálová entitle the cycle "Forever?" Perhaps she believed that her home would always and forever be a part of her no matter where she would live. In 1937, the political and cultural situation in Czechoslovakia prompted her decision to study abroad, as there were very few other avenues open to her to advance her studies at home. She chose France, as Czechoslovakia of the 1920s and '30s was closely connected to French culture, and Czech students in particular benefitted from the cultural exchange between the two countries. The most talented among them relied on French government scholarships to advance their education, and Kaprálová was one of them—she was awarded a French government scholarship to study at the École normale de musique in Paris, and moved there in the fall of 1937, the year she finished *Navždy*.

Kaprálová's music and text are intertwined; in the words of Dr. Timothy Cheek, "Kaprálová is already following in the tradition of Wolf and Debussy, composing intricate piano parts that are wedded to beautifully sung and declaimed words."³ Many of Kaprálová's songs are not vocally designated by voice type but are best suited for soprano, mezzo or tenor. The cycle is specifically written for "vyšší hlas" (higher voice). Although the tes-

Kaprálková's opus 12

situra of these pieces is medium-ranged, special considerations are needed for singers not comfortable in the lower voice register.

No. 1 – Navždy

*Wild geese are flying south / someone will leave and again will return / someone will leave and will never return. / I don't know if somewhere the sky is more beautiful than here / but here you would not count anywhere more stars / when the night is clear, clear.*⁴

“Navždy” is written in an overall ABA form which was Kaprálková's favorite song form next to through-composed. The A sections could further be divided into two parts. A (14 bars); A' (9 bars); B (20 bars); A (14 bars); A' (11 bars). There is no actual key signature but its tonal center is loosely based around “C” with a significant use of raised 4ths. The vocal range is from E4-A5 with the tessitura being medium-medium/high. The melodic line is a mixture of conjunct and disjunct intervals (leaps less than an octave) and the text is set syllabically. There is an extensive use of polytonal harmonies and alternating use of major and minor. The harmonic rhythm changes rapidly. The B section is more tonally centered around B Major when the text describes the character's home sky. The use of ascending octaves (mm. 25 and 31) represents looking up to the sky. Typical of Czech music, particularly from Janáček to Kaprálková, the phrases are of uneven length, most likely to accommodate the text and text rhythms that she so brilliantly and comfortably set. The meter alternates between 2/4 and 3/4 throughout this piece, creating phrase structures of uneven length. Non-native Czech singers can be confident in being able to sing first-syllable word accents properly because Kaprálková masterfully writes into the vocal line the natural inflection of the Czech language.

The piano and vocal lines are intertwined and interdependent. The vocal line is included and supported in the accompaniment but the support is hidden and unobtrusive. The piano line, which is very pianistic in nature, is linear. When there are chordal passages, the texture is neither dense nor overpowering. The piano line is appropriately supportive of the vocal line and adds to the emotionality of the text. The piano line provides musical cues to the vocal line, particularly after an interlude, to help the singer find the correct pitch; for example, supplying the A-natural prior to both vocal entrances of the word “Divoké” (Wild).

Dynamically, there are very few indications for the voice or piano. The vocal line, although soaring in places, is not given an indication of whether the dynamic should remain *mp*, which is the first and only vocal line dynamic marking. Does the composer want the vocal line to remain *mp* throughout, or follow what the voice would do naturally? It

seems that when Kaprálková set the text on the higher sustained notes, she was taking into consideration that the voice would naturally “speak” at a louder dynamic level and therefore did not feel the need to write a specific dynamic marking. The accompaniment dynamics range from *pp*-*mf*. The only forte is at the end under the vocal line's word “nevrátí” (will not return).

There are motives that exist in both the vocal line and accompaniment. The vocal line contains many falling major 2nds highlighting certain words “odejde” (will leave); “vrátí” (will return); “nevrátí” (will not return); “u nás” (here [sung twice]) and “jasná” (clear [sung twice]). The accompaniment motives involve a constant rocking pattern using intervals of 3rds, 6ths, 7ths with the upper note repeated (mm. 27–29; 34–39). This motive could represent the flapping of the wings of the geese. The climax of the song is in m. 35 on the word “jasná” (clear). Kaprálková nicely sets the high notes on the “ah” vowels, thus allowing the voice to soar.

No. 2 – Čím je můj žal

What is my grief against your seas / what is my pain against the sand of your deserts? / Merciful trees and obedient ears of grain / the rippling surface of the waters, you gave these to my dreams. / It is possible that one time the torch thrown in the mud will go out / the wings of bats swirl / the hard clay of the days overwhelms hearts, beating hearts, hearts. / Perhaps one time you will wave your palms with your breath / ah, the leaves of stars will fall. / Oh tempest of adoration, bend to the earth the grains of my pride.

“Čím je můj žal” is in ABAB form. A (14 bars); B (19 bars); A (9 bars); B (10 bars). The range of the vocal line is C4-G5. Lower-note vocal challenges arise in the B second, particularly in mms. 28–33, as the melody line dramatically leaps from octave to octave. The piece is polytonal, there is no key signature and there are constant alterations of tonal centers. The opening is declamatory with a sparse, chordal accompaniment. The undulating accompaniment of open fifths in between the questions of grief by the sea and desert (mm. 5–7 and 13–14) add to the unrest and is representative of the waves of the sea. The probing repetition of the C-sharps in m. 15 changes the intensity of the mood. The triplet motion in the accompaniment changes from the expansive seas to the penetrating rippling of water. The repetition of the C-sharp carries through mm. 16–18. The vocal line is almost always supported within the accompaniment. The text is set syllabically throughout.

The B section (mm. 15–33) is highly chromatic. The meter actively alternates between 4/4, 2/4 and 3/4. The vocal line is unsettled rhythmically as it struggles to remain steady among the constant triplets in the accompaniment. The vocal line, which had been more linear, changes to a mixture of conjunct and disjunct. The amount of interval leaps of 7ths and octaves increase and challenge the lower range of a higher voice. There is a steady crescendo and harmonic climb to the climax and the return to the A section. The repetition of the word “srdce” (hearts) on the leading tone to “F” adds to the pain, drama and momentum to the climax which returns to the A section. The accompaniment mirrors this unrest and becomes much more expansive, percussive and chromatic. There are challenges for the pianist in the alternate octaves (mm. 29–33).

The return to the A section includes more countermelody in the piano part as well as a rhythmic change in the vocal line on the words “proti tvým” (against your). Those differences are found in mm. 3 and 36 with the rhythm changing from a duple rhythm to that of eighth notes. The word “pouští” (deserts) is also rhythmically altered between mm. 11–12 and 41–42 from a dotted rhythm to duple. In both instances, the choice is to narrow or lessen the time value around these words.

The texture of both the vocal line and accompaniment in the short return to the ending B section is not as dense as before. In m. 46, the word “dechem” (by means of breath) is separated by two eighth rests. The ending sentence is recitative-like in nature. It is an invocation for reprieve from pain and grief; an appealing end to an otherwise vocally dramatic piece.

No. 3 – Ruce

The five fingers of my hand are a lyre / gentle and shy / for a little while a lyre and for a while a comb / your hair fell to your forehead. / The five white half moons of fingernails / I kissed penitent / while the stars, full of resin / glowed with deep red flames. / The world fell with us to the abyss / we did not hear the knell / we drank the last drops of wine / that still remained in Canaan.

“Ruce” is the shortest and most intimate of the three songs. It contains a tempo suggestion in Czech which the other two did not. There is no key signature, similar to the other two songs, but the tonal center hovers around D, particularly at the end. As in the other two songs, the vocal line is wide-ranging from C4–A5. The tessitura for the most part lies medium-ranged but the ending is dramatic, requiring an ease and ability to sustain the high notes freely and passionately. The time signature alter-

nates between 2/4 and 3/4, sometimes as frequently as every bar, reflecting the rhythm and emphases of the text.

The accompaniment and vocal line are interdependent. Once again, Kaprálová has disguised the vocal line in the accompaniment. The piano does not double the vocal line but there are embedded notes as pitch cues to aid the singer.

There is interplay between the text and accompaniment. The poem begins with “Pět prstů ruky mé” (Five fingers of my hand). The piano part is a continuing flow of quintuplets (mm. 1–10). These five-note groupings could represent the five fingers plucking the strings of a lyre. In m. 6, there is a *ritard* on the word “nesmělá” (shy). The remaining eighth notes of the bar have tenuto markings over them implying the shyness or perhaps tentativeness of the character. The accompaniment then continues to provide an underlying current or undulating motion under the parlando vocal style. This parlando suggests the feeling of an intimate conversation as well as sensuousness. Perhaps this is the last night together before the character leaves? The piece is through-composed which adds to the intensity of someone sharing intimate thoughts and desires. This is a departure from the other two songs, suggestive of a sensitive and loving vulnerability. Note in m. 25, the descending passage in the piano represents the poetry of the world falling into the abyss. The left hand chords (mm. 26–29) represent the sounding of the bells.

The song has a sweet and quiet beginning but as the chordal texture thickens so does the intensity and momentum. The overall arc of the piece is a continual thrust and crescendo to the ending fortissimo climax.

Notes:

1. Karla Hartl, “Vítězslava Kaprálová: An Annotated Catalog of Works,” in *The Kaprálová Companion*, ed. Karla Hartl and Erik Entwistle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Book, 2011), 169.
2. Ibid.
3. Timothy Cheek, “Navždy (Forever) Kaprálová: Reevaluating the Czech Composer through Her Songs,” in *The Kaprálová Companion*, ed. Karla Hartl and Erik Entwistle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 70.
4. English translation of song texts is by Dr. Timothy Cheek, as published in Vítězslava Kaprálová, *Songs: Voice and Piano, Complete Edition* (Prague: Amos Edition, 2005), 129–30.

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Hartl, Karla and Erik Entwistle, eds. *The Kaprálová Companion*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011. 228 pp. ISBN 978-0-7391-6723-6 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-6724-3 (electronic).

Book review by MICHELLE LATOUR

On her way to becoming a successful composer and conductor when she died abruptly at the age of twenty-five from tuberculosis, Czech composer Vítězslava Kaprálová's impressive cross-genre oeuvre remains largely unfamiliar to the majority of the musical public. *The Kaprálová Companion* is the first English text published on this composer. Long overdue, the volume is a comprehensive, well-written, and insightful guide to the life and work of Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940). Editors Karla Hartl and Erik Entwistle collected an impressive set of biographical and analytical essays by distinguished scholars in the field of Czech music, who provide a unique insight not only into Kaprálová's life and work but also into Czech history between the two world wars. The essays delve into both her personal and professional life, from her early studies in Brno and Prague to her sojourn and eventual exile in Paris.

The book is organized into two parts, with a foreword and introduction preceding the two sections. The foreword is written by New York University Professor of Music and Chair of the Music Department, Michael Beckerman, author of several books on Czech topics and recipient of the Janáček Medal from the Czech Ministry of Culture. He sets the stage for scholarly analysis and inquiry. The introduction is provided by Karla Hartl, founder and chair of The Kapralova Society, a Canadian arts organization that supports projects that make available Kaprálová's music, in addition to building awareness of women's contributions to musical life.

PART ONE is comprised of five chapters, each of which examines a different genre of Kaprálová's output, with the exception of *Chapter One*, "Kaprálová in the Context of Czech Music," which discusses the history of Czech music and Kaprálová's role in it. Jindřiška Bártová, Professor of Music and Chair of the Department of Music History at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno, Czech Republic, expands upon material set forth by Hartl in the introduction.

Chapter Two delves into Kaprálová's piano compositions which span her entire career and demonstrate her developing style. It is written by Entwistle, a musicologist at the Longy School of Music at Bard College, who has devoted much of his scholarly efforts to the music of

Czech composers, especially Bohuslav Martinů. It is fitting to begin musical analysis of Kaprálová's oeuvre with her piano works, since "an examination of Kaprálová's catalog of some fifty compositions reveals the piano's central role in nearly all of her works" (p. 27). The piano was an essential compositional tool for Kaprálová, and her solo piano pieces demonstrate the pinnacle of her achievement. She was able to experiment with small and large forms and refine her harmonic and melodic languages through her piano works. Entwistle discusses the *Sonata appassionata*, op. 6, which Kaprálová wrote while a student at the Brno Conservatory, the *Dubnová preludia*, op. 13, which was composed while she was continuing her studies at the Prague Conservatory, and the *Variations sur le carillon de l'église Saint-Etienne du Mont*, op. 16, which she composed in Paris under the tutelage of Martinů. "These works demonstrate Kaprálová's rapidly evolving musical style, from an earlier emphasis on romanticism blended with impressionism to a more distinctive and acerbic modern idiom" (p. 27).

Chapter Three focuses on Kaprálová's vocal works, and is written by Dr. Timothy Cheek, Associate Professor of Music at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He has published several books on Czech music, including *Singing in Czech: A Guide to Czech Lyric Diction and Vocal Repertoire*. A strong advocate for the music of Kaprálová, Dr. Cheek has presented lectures and recitals of her music nationally and internationally, published a CD in 2003 of Kaprálová's vocal music, and in 2005, edited a critical edition of her songs. He is considered by many to be one of the foremost scholars on Kaprálová's songs. Here he discusses the composer's distinct vocal style, and examines the song cycle *Navždy*, op. 12 (Forever) in depth; Cheek describes it as one of Kaprálová's best songs and uses it in order "to see what it reveals about her and her time" (p. 75).

Numerous qualities make Kaprálová's vocal music distinct. Arguably her most impressive compositional trait is her ability to create mood and atmosphere, which stems from her treatment of harmonies. Kaprálová shows a fondness for unexpected modulations and shifts in sonorities, sometimes even writing in an impressionistic vein. Additionally, her predilection for motivic writing in her

accompaniments is often derived from the natural inflection of important words in the text. In this way, the accompaniment and melody are truly intertwined. Another characteristic feature is her careful and accurate attention to setting the text, in part due to her lifelong interest in poetry. Kaprálová is incredibly skilled at matching musical and poetic inflection, creating memorable and singable melodies that also remain true to “the natural stress, vowel-lengths, and inflection of the Czech language” (p. 71).

In *Chapter Four*, “Kaprálová and the Czech Tradition of Melodrama,” Judith Mabary, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on the subject of Czech melodrama, examines its impact on Kaprálová. Although melodrama may not be exceedingly popular today, Mabary feels that understanding these works can further aid in understanding Kaprálová’s vocal style and treatment of text in general. Several preliminary sketches exist wherein Kaprálová develops ideas for possible melodrama compositions, some of which are second settings of previously composed songs.

The *Chapter Five*, also written by Mabary, analyzes Kaprálová’s orchestral works. Despite the fact that Kaprálová’s works for orchestra are fewer than her vocal and piano compositions, Mabary is adamant that an examination of her orchestral works is vital in order to fully understand her compositional style: “Her orchestral compositions are essential to examining her style in its entirety, revealing not only the manner in which she addresses a large ensemble but also how she adapts pre-existing approaches to suit her own musical language” (p. 93). This chapter analyzes three orchestral compositions which represent distinct facets of Kaprálová’s evolving style. *Vojenská symfonieta* (Military *Sinfonietta*), op. 11, utilizes a neo-romantic orchestra, whereas *Suita rustica* (*Rustic Suite*), op. 19, incorporates folk tunes. And finally, *Partita*, op. 20, adopts neo-Baroque style “to create a piece with an ancestry in the distant past” (p. 93).

PART TWO of the book is comprised of five sections in which Karla Hartl provides an encyclopedic chronology of Kaprálová’s life and works. Section One is an annotated chronology of the composer’s life broken down year-by-year. Next is an annotated catalog of her compositional output, followed by a comprehensive bibliography. Section Four lists all published works by Kaprálová, and the final section provides a comprehensive discography.

The Kaprálová Companion is a welcome addition to the body of texts on women composers. Vítězslava Kaprálová’s music is beautiful, haunting, and distinct, and deserves to be heard more frequently on concert hall stages across the U.S. One hopes that this long-awaited and superbly-written book will provide inspiration and motivation to those who are interested in learning more about this composer.

Dr. Michelle Latour, soprano, is active as a performer, teacher, author, and adjudicator, in addition to being a member of the full-time voice faculty at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. This review first appeared in the IAWM Journal 18, No. 2 (2012):32–33, and is reprinted here by permission.



The **Škampa Quartet** is among the very finest of an outstanding group of current Czech string quartets. Through its mentors, the legendary Smetana Quartet, the ensemble traces its roots to the earliest quartets, such as the Bohemian Quartet, in a land described in the 18th century as the Conservatoire of Europe and the very cradle of European chamber music. The ensemble has enhanced this heritage with its own well-informed research of the folk song, rhythms, and dances from which Czech national music grew—to the extent that their recordings of the quartets by Smetana and Janáček are considered the benchmarks against which other performances are being measured.

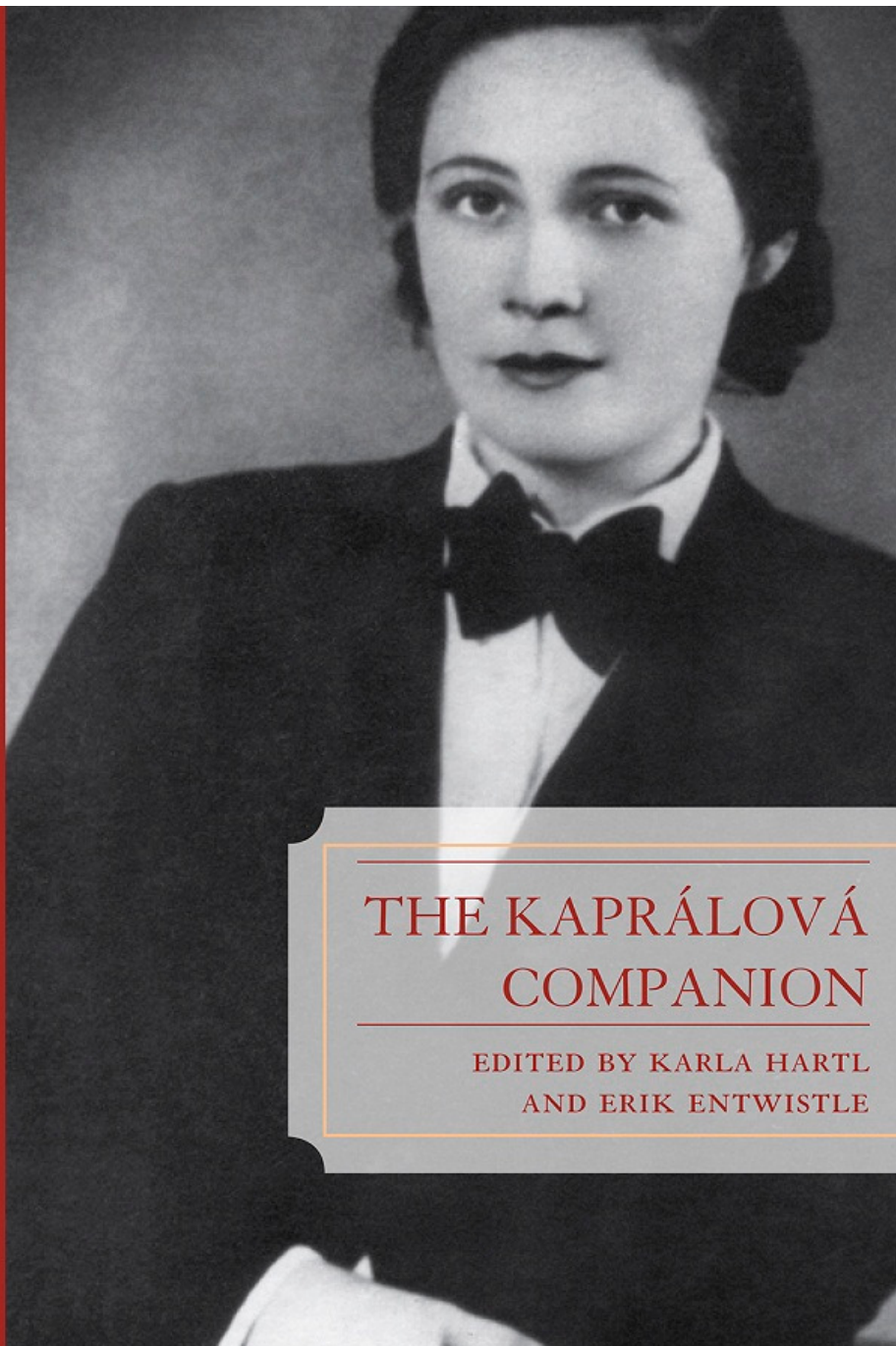
Prizes at international competitions, awards from the Royal Philharmonic Society, and an appointment as the first-ever resident artists at Wigmore Hall attested to the competence of the ensemble’s early years and provided recognition which led to invitations to perform at major festivals worldwide, including Prague, Edinburgh, Schwetzingen, Schleswig-Holstein and Melbourne. From the start, the ensemble established close relationship with the BBC Radio 3, resulting in regular broadcasts from Wigmore Hall, St John’s Smith Square, LSO St. Luke’s and the Chamber Music Square, LSO St. Luke’s and the Chamber Music Square. Teaching has also been an important part of the ensemble’s work, and one that they find particularly rewarding. The members of the Škampa Quartet have taught in many places around the world but most importantly at the Royal Academy of Music in London where in 2001 they were appointed Visiting Professors of Chamber Music.

The Kapralova Society

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THE KAPRÁLOVÁ COMPANION



THE KAPRÁLOVÁ
COMPANION

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