Gwyneth Walker

The Laughter of Women
and other songs

based on the poetry of Lisel Mueller

for Soprano, Violin and Piano
The texts for The Laughter of Women are found in Alive Together, the 1997 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poems by Lisel Mueller. This poetry encompasses a broad spectrum of mood: reverent, irreverent (!), witty, poignant, independent, reflective and triumphant.

The musical interpretations aim to explore the imagery evoked by the poetry. For example, in the opening song, “The Laughter of Women,” the jagged patterns introduced in the violin might be suggestive of laughter. And the glissandi which occur mid-way through the song are associated with the text of “wipes the spectacles of the old,” to be heard, perhaps, as “wiping” motives. The image of fire in this song is suggested by swirling patterns in the piano, later adopted by the violin. And daylight shines through, perhaps, in the violin harmonics.

In general, the voice presents the lyrics, the piano offers the underpinning, and the violin is the primary image-translator, offering motives which endeavor to reflect the words. The piano occasionally joins in this activity as well, “scampering” up the keyboard when the words “they laugh as if they were young again” are sung. The listener might therefore enjoy detecting possible correlations between the poetry (as expressed by the singer) and the musical accompaniment.

The poems presented in this work were selected in chronological order from Alive Together. Certainly, “The Laughter of Women,” with its energy and triumph, appeals as a strong opening selection. And, “There Are Mornings” closes with its own form of triumph – the transcendent beauty of when “the sky opens and pours itself into me.”

Notes About the Composer

Dr. Gwyneth Walker is a graduate of Brown University and the Hartt School of Music. She holds B.A., M.M. and D.M.A. Degrees in Music Composition. A former faculty member of the Oberlin College Conservatory, Walker resigned from academic employment in 1982 in order to pursue a career as a full-time composer. She now lives on a dairy farm in Braintree, Vermont.

Walker’s catalog includes over 120 commissioned works for orchestra, band, chorus and chamber ensembles. The music of Gwyneth Walker is published by E.C. Schirmer of Boston (choral/vocal music) and MMB Music of St. Louis (orchestral/instrumental music).
The Laughter of Women

The laughter of women sets fire to the Halls of Injustice and the false evidence burns to a beautiful white lightness.
The Laughter of Women

fire to the Halls of Injustice.

The Laughter of Women sets fire, fire, fire, fire,

and the false
B slower

evidence burns to a beautiful white lightness.

B slower

accel. a tempo

The laughter of women sets

accel. a tempo

fire, fire, fire, fire, fire to the Halls of Injustice.

The Laughter of Women
It rattles the Chambers of Congress and forces the windows wide open, wide open... So the fatuous speeches can fly out...

The laughter of women sets...
fire, fire, fire, fire, fire to the Halls of Injustice.

fire! random clusters scampering up keyboard

The Laughter of Women
The Laughter of Women

...wipes the mist from the spectacles of the old.

...wipes the...
The Laughter of Women

mist, mist, mist from the spectacles of the

old; it infects them with a happy flu, and they

laugh as if they were young again, young again.

random clusters scampering up keyboard
The laughter of women wipes the mist, mist, mist

from the spectacles of the old.

Prisoners held in underground cells im-

The Laughter of Women
Sul IV harmonics gliss ad lib.

Again that they see daylight when they remember the laughter of women.

It runs across water that divides, and reconciles two unfriendly shores like

flares that signal the news to each other.

The Laughter of Women
What a language it is, the laughter of women, high-

fly-ing, high-fly-ing, high-fly-ing and subversive

Long before law and scripture

We heard the laughter, we heard the laughter, we
accel.

What a language it is, the laughter of women

twice as quickly

The Laughter of Women
The Laughter of Women

Duration: 4' 15"

A triumphant laugh

Ha!
Interlude I

Freely $q = 132$
$p$ throughout, dreamlike

a tempo $rit.$

Pedal stays into next song

Duration: 30”

Things

Sprightly $q = 144$

Pedal stays from previous Interlude until
happened is we grew lonely, living among the

things. lonely, so we gave the
clock a face, the chair a back, the
table, four stout legs, which will

never suffer fatigue.
We fitted our shoes with tongues as smooth as our
own and hung tongues inside bells so we could listen to
their emotional language.

and because we loved

graceful profiles
51
Vln.  
\[\text{\textbf{E}}\text{\textit{pizz.}}\]
S  
the pitcher received a

57
Vln.  
\[\text{\textbf{E}}\text{\textit{pizz.}}\]
S  
the bottle a long slender

63
Vln.  
\[\text{\textbf{F}}\text{ Slower } q = 138\]
S  
neck.

68
Vln.  
\[\text{\textbf{F}}\text{ Slower } q = 138\]
S  
what was beyond us

72
Vln.  
\[\text{\textbf{F}}\text{ Slower } q = 120\]
S  
the storm an eye

Things
so we could pass into safety.

countryside a heart, the storm an eye, the

cave a mouth so we could pass into safety.

Duration: 2'20"

Things
Interlude II

\[ \text{\textit{a tempo}} \]

Duration: 30"
[Piano pedal stays until midway through reading]

TEARS
(read by Soprano)

The first woman who ever wept
was appalled at what stung
her eyes and ran down her cheeks.
Saltwater. Seawater.
How was it possible?
Hadn’t she and the man
spent many days moving
upland to where the grass
flourished, where the stream
quenched their thirst with sweet water?
How could she have carried these sea drops
as if they were precious seeds;
where could she have stowed them?
She looked at the watchful gazelles
and the heavy-lidded frogs;
she looked at the glass-eyed birds
and nervous, black-eyed mice.
None of them wept, not even the fish
that dripped in her hands when she caught them.
Not even the man. Only she
carried the sea inside her body.
FUGITIVE
(Optional reading by Pianist or Violinist)

My life is running away with me;  
the two of us are in cahoots.  
I hold still while it paints  
dark circles under my eyes,  
streaks my hair gray, stuffs pillows  
under my dress. In each new room  
the mirror reassures me  
I’ll not be recognized.  
I’m learning to travel light,  
like the juice in the power line.  
My baggage, swallowed by memory,  
weighs almost nothing. No one suspects  
its value. When they knock on my door,  
badges flashing, I open up:  
I don’t match their description.  
“Wrong room,” they say, and apologize.  
My life in the corner winks  
and wipes off my fingerprints.
SOMETIMES, WHEN THE LIGHT
(Optional reading by Pianist or Violinist)

Sometimes, when the light strikes at odd angles
and pulls you back into childhood

and you are passing a crumbling mansion
completely hidden behind old willows

or an empty convent guarded by hemlocks
and giant firs standing hip to hip,

you know again that behind that wall,
under the uncut hair of the willows

something secret is going on,
so marvelous and dangerous

that if you crawled through and saw,
you would die, or be happy forever.
### Interlude III

**Violin**

*Sprightly* \( \frac{4}{4} \) \( \text{c.} 132 \)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{p} \\
\text{mf}
\end{array}
\]

**Piano**

*Sprightly* \( \frac{4}{4} \) \( \text{c.} 132 \)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{p} \\
\text{mf}
\end{array}
\]

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**6**

*rit.* \( \text{gliss. on harmonics} \)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{p} \\
\text{mf}
\end{array}
\]

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**11**

*a tempo* \( \text{rit.} \)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{p} \\
\text{mf}
\end{array}
\]

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**15**

*Slower* \( \text{rit.} \)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{mf} \\
\text{p}
\end{array}
\]

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*Duration: 40"*
Naming the Animals

Lisel Mueller

Gwyneth Walker

\(q. = 72\) as a rocking motion

\(q. = 72\) as a rocking motion

Un -

\[\sum \]

5

\[\sum \]

3

\[\sum \]

9

\[\sum \]
manes had not been invented.

black-note clusters

swiftness and grace were not married.

Until he named the

Naming the Animals
26

cow
“cow”,
no one slept standing

31
up,
no one saw through opaque eyes,

36
food was only chewed once.

Naming the Animals
Naming the Animals
After he named the fish "fish", did the
light put on skins of yellow and silver

Naming the Animals
and high-jump champion of the world,

just as latter he had to

name the woman “love”

Naming the Animals
fore he could put on the knowledge of who she was, with her small hands.

“horse”

“cow”

“fish”

“love”

Pedal stays into next song
There Are Mornings

spoken gently, with a sense of wonderment

Some mornings in summer I step outside and the sky opens and pours itself into me as if I were a saint about to die.
Even now, when the plot calls for me to turn to stone, the sun inter-

There Are Mornings
There Are Mornings
There Are Mornings
slightly slower, quasi recitative

plot calls for me to live, be ordinary, say nothing to anyone.

slightly slower, quasi recitative

In the house the mirrors...

rit. .................. G Slowly

accel. .................................................. a tempo (\textit{j} = 126)

burn when I pass.

accel. .................................................. a tempo (\textit{j} = 126)

rapidly, blurred

There Are Mornings
There are mornings, some
mornings, there are mornings,
There Are Mornings
There Are Mornings

Duration: 3’15”