A performer's guide to Gwyneth Walker's settings of poetry by Lucille Clifton- No Ordinary Woman! and Three Songs for Lucille

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A PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO GWYNETH WALKER'S SETTINGS OF POETRY BY LUCILLE CLIFTON- NO ORDINARY WOMAN! AND THREE SONGS FOR LUCILLE

A Written Document

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in

The School of Music

by

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Finally, I am grateful for the authorization to reproduce portions of Dr. Walker’s songs in this document. Permission was granted by E. C. Schirmer.
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ABSTRACT

No Ordinary Woman! is atypical of Walker’s style in that the composer employs jazz elements as the building blocks for this composition. From ballads to scat singing, each song is representative of a different style of jazz. The cycle, consisting of five songs, explores the poet’s journey of contemplation regarding various aspects of her life, predominantly her physical appearance. In No Ordinary Woman! and Three Songs for Lucille, the poet reflects on and ultimately celebrates her physical appearance.

This document contains information about the lives and works of composer Gwyneth Walker and poet Lucille Clifton, the commissions, premieres, compositional processes, and comments regarding performance issues are included. A discussion of each poem and performance suggestions for each song in No Ordinary Woman! and Three Songs for Lucille is provided. Appendices include a discography of recordings currently available, a current listing of song cycles in the composer’s catalogue, and a list of current publishers of the composer’s songs.
INTRODUCTION

One of the most prolific American composers of our time—Gwyneth Walker—does not consider herself extraordinary. Even so, she is one of a handful of female composers supporting herself solely on commissioned works and she has done so since 1982.\footnote{Gwyneth Walker. Notes on No Ordinary Woman!, Website of Gwyneth Walker—Composer, http://www.gwynethwalker.com/morningi.html.} Walker began composing at the age of two. Rather than classical influences, she attributes elements within her unique style to the American idioms of rock, jazz, blues, and American folk music. Walker is known for accessible, energetic, and theatrical compositions. With over 200 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus, and solo voice, Walker’s catalogue is extensive and diverse. Within her vocal compositions, Walker often draws inspiration from poetic texts and enjoys setting contemporary American poets.

In the cycles No Ordinary Woman! and Three Songs for Lucille, Walker sets the poetry of Lucille Clifton, a distinguished American writer and educator. The recipient of multiple honors and awards, Clifton’s spare, yet elegant poetry has warranted much acclaim in the literary world. Her poetry topics often include the celebration of African American heritage, and feminist themes, with particular emphasis on the female body.

The purpose of this document is to provide a performer’s guide to American composer Gwyneth Walker’s cycles No Ordinary Woman!, consisting of five songs, and Three Songs for Lucille, consisting of three songs.

No Ordinary Woman! and Three Songs for Lucille are atypical of the majority of Walker’s solo vocal works. The jazzy nature of Clifton’s poems led Walker to focus on various styles of jazz in the creation of the cycles. Although written ten years apart, both works focus on the strength of a woman during various stages of life, as well as the celebration and ultimate
acceptance of her physical appearance. To enhance important words and evoke specific moods, theatrical and non pitched elements are employed.

Chapter One discusses Gwyneth Walker’s life, schooling, and career, also delving into what makes up her unique musical personality. Poet Lucille Clifton’s life and works are briefly explored in Chapter Two. Chapter Three provides information about the cycles, including the commission, premiere, interaction with Clifton, Walker’s compositional process, and the features of her unique “American Sound.” General performance issues are examined in Chapter Four. Poetic and musical connections are highlighted, and a discussion of each poem and song in No Ordinary Woman! and Three Songs for Lucille is provided, including performance suggestions for each piece. Musical examples are used to enhance explanations, showing motivic ideas, musical imagery, and specifics concerning the performance of each song in the cycles.
CHAPTER 1

GWYNETH WALKER’S LIFE AND WORKS

Biographical Information: Early Influences

The prolific composer, Dr. Gwyneth Van Anden Walker, is one of America’s most frequently performed composers with diverse works in demand across the country. Her catalogue includes over 200 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensemble, chorus, and solo voice. As inspirational sources over the years, Walker attributes three differing areas: her parents, her strong Quaker faith, and her love of nature.²

Born on March 22, 1947 to John and Adele Walker, Gwyneth was the youngest of three daughters. Given her innate musical capabilities, one would be correct in one’s assuming that Walker’s love of music is derived from familial influences. She credits her parents as her childhood musical inspirations. While both parents were musical, neither was a musician. Walker’s father, a physicist, descended from a family of inventors in science, but her mother’s family possessed a greater level of instinctive musical abilities, and Walker attributes her keen musical ear, along with her sense of music to the maternal side. Walker’s mother, Adele, never studied music yet she had the ability to harmonize any song, regardless of chromaticism.³ While Adele’s appreciation for music greatly influenced her daughter, Walker would soon begin to develop a deep enjoyment of science from her father, John. Walker’s love of inventing stems from her eccentric father, who was an inventor by trade. Remembering his great sense of humor and his love of building and creating, Walker fondly recalls an instance that displayed


her father’s eccentricity and sense of humor when family members opened the front door, only to have it swing back and close in their faces. Upon closer inspection, they discovered that her father had cut tennis balls in half and attached them to the bottom of the door as a buffer. During the process of invention, her father never followed instruction manuals. Instead, he enjoyed bringing into existence ideas born of creativity and imagination. Walker’s father preferred the music of Chopin, while her mother possessed a deep love and appreciation for all music, particularly opera. The family owned a piano, and Adele played melodies by ear on the instrument and sang. Even as her father invented countless gadgets, Walker combined each of her parent’s interests—music and inventing—and began creating music on the piano.

Walker’s first introduction to music took place at the age of two. Her older sister who was in first grade had just begun taking piano lessons. Gwyneth’s crib was in the bedroom located right above the living room where the piano was located. From the moment she heard musical sounds, Walker was smitten. She vividly recalls hearing her sister play Beethoven’s *Für Elise* on the family piano. She described the music as, “full of life and energy. I heard it leaping out of me. There was something almost physical about it.” The next day, she crawled to the piano and began attempting to recreate the piece. From that moment on, Walker was at the piano, emulating the pieces her sister played. Soon a natural evolution occurred and Walker

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5 Ibid.


began creating her own music. Not only did Walker’s love for music begin early but it also developed throughout her formative years. By the time she entered first grade, Walker had taught herself to put notes on a staff. From closely studying her sister’s assigned piano pieces, she learned that each composition included a title and her name in the upper right hand corner of the page. Once in school, Walker organized her friends into little orchestras to play the symphonies. After school she held “Musical Mondays” at her house. Friends would arrive and play assigned instruments: violin, piano four-hands, a set of drums, and toy instruments. Walker always conducted the pieces. Thus, a composer was born. While the little symphonies were fun for the children, Walker’s achievements soon began to draw the attention of her parents.

Recognizing their daughter’s musical capabilities, Walker’s parents enrolled their daughter in piano lessons. She began studying with her older sister’s instructor and the battle of wills commenced. During her first lesson, Walker learned proper hand placement. Her teacher assigned scales to practice and a short piece to learn for the following lesson. Walker found all of the tasks uninteresting to the point of boredom. She did not understand or agree with the hand placement learned, particularly the position of the thumbs. Walker returned to her lesson the following week without having practiced any of her assigned tasks. Instead, she presented her teacher with a new little composition. Walker informed the instructor that the piece she had been assigned entitled, “In the Swing,” did not sound like the title; however her piece did. Walker was sent home with similar tasks of practicing scales and learning new pieces at the lesson’s end. She returned the following week without having practiced scales but did play through the pieces assigned. Again Walker presented her instructor with a new composition. This series of events

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9 Ibid.
occurred during each lesson. After the fourth lesson, the instructor spoke with Walker’s parents and encouraged them to allow their daughter to learn on her own, not forcing her to study the style represented in the piano book. As a result, Walker continued to teach herself, cultivating her own “voice” and composing for her friends.  

With the exception of the four piano lessons, Walker continued to compose throughout childhood and adolescence without any formal training. She sang in choirs and played various instruments, all of which were self taught: the bugle, clarinet, guitar, and ukulele. Concurrently, Walker still held and conducted “Musical Mondays” during junior high with the same group of friends. They requested arrangements of the Everly Brothers songs so they could sing in harmony. Walker easily fell into the role of musician for hire at the age of twelve. While her involvement in musical activities continued to grow, it did not hinder the development of other interests, and the idea of becoming a musician would not enter her mind until college.  

Subsequently, Walker excelled at tennis and loved science. Over the years she has maintained a strong interest in both. She continues to play tennis regularly and is an electronic gadget enthusiast.

Walker remained largely self-taught until enrolling in a music theory course during her senior year of high school at Abbot Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. The girls’ academy had a strong music program and good singing groups, for which she arranged music. She recalls instances where she would lie underneath her bed at night, completing an arrangement by flashlight. As soon as the music was written down, the group would rehearse. During that time, Walker arranged mainly folk music. Her singing group began to receive invitations to perform at

\[\text{10 Brooks, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.} \]

\[\text{11 Ibid.} \]

\[\text{12 Constanzo, “Walker Celebrates Life of Composition”.} \]
a nearby boys’ school. Suddenly everyone wanted to join the group but not necessarily for musical reasons. Although she loved arranging and composing music for friends and various singing groups, Walker’s love of science ultimately influenced her decision to major in physics at Brown University. Her intent was to follow in her father’s footsteps and become a physicist, unaware she could actually study music. Based on past experiences, Walker assumed she must continue to teach herself. She viewed the catalog and discovered that many of the music course offerings piqued her interest. Walker’s final decision was to study advanced music theory, music history, and literature.

Faith

Faith has greatly impacted Walker’s approach to life, as well as her approach to music. When Gwyneth was a child, the family attended a congregational church in their hometown of New Canaan, Connecticut. Walker was actively involved and enjoyed attending services. Not until the age of fifteen would she learn her true religious identity and ancestry. To a degree, Walker was a tennis prodigy in adolescence and regularly attended tennis events in surrounding states. One particular summer, she participated in an event held on the grounds of a Quaker school in Pennsylvania. While there she attended a Quaker meeting and learned more about the Quaker faith. The origins of Quakerism or the Religious Society of Friends are found in seventeenth century England. Quakerism focuses on ordinary individuals’ own experience with Christ, which is an aspect of the faith that has greatly appealed to Walker throughout the years.

13 Brooks, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.
14 Ibid.
15 Constanzo, “Walker Celebrates Life of Composition”.
Walker’s consistent pursuit of a personal encounter with God ultimately led her to make the most important decision regarding her career, thus propelling her into a life of which many dream but very few realize.

In most branches of Quakerism, there is no music. Members gather and sit quietly for one hour a week, focused on allowing the voice of God to speak to their hearts.\textsuperscript{17} The search for that inaudible voice and the emphasis on one’s direct search for inner guidance expressly appealed to Walker. At the meeting, she felt an overwhelming sense of peace and made the decision to become a Quaker. After returning home, she discussed the experience with her mother. Through their discussion, Walker learned that several generations of her mother’s family, prior to her grandparents, had also been Quakers. Quakerism quickly became the center of Walker’s life and has, following her conversion, positively impacted every area of her life.\textsuperscript{18}

Principles of Quakerism include equality of the sexes, nurturing of strong, independent women and the encouragement of women to enter male-dominated professions. Quaker women participated in the Women’s Rights Movement of the 1840’s and the Suffrage Movement of which Walker’s grandmother was a member.\textsuperscript{19} Quakerism gave Walker the courage and support to study composition and ultimately led her into composing full-time. Undergirded by strong religious convictions, she entered the field determined and undaunted. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter three.

\textbf{College Years and Influences}

In kindergarten and first grade, Walker wrote instrumental pieces. She had not fully yet

\textsuperscript{17} Hoare, “Facts About Friends”.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Willis, “Gwyneth Walker: In Her Own Words”.

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begun to read and her comprehension skills were largely undeveloped, as is the case with children of that age group. As noted earlier, Walker eventually wrote and arranged vocal pieces while in junior high and high school but was later given even greater opportunities to arrange and compose vocal works during her college career at Brown University.\(^\text{20}\) By the time Walker entered college as a composition major, her musical language had developed as a result of consistent writing and arranging for friends. Rather than classical influences, exposure to several American idioms had the greatest effect on her style, including folk, rock, and traditional music, such as hymns. Walker played guitar and wrote the vocal arrangements for a folk/rock group and excelled as a guitarist in a rock band in undergraduate school.\(^\text{21}\) Characteristics of these American idioms are present in the majority of her works, which have been described as having an “American” sound. This will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.\(^\text{22}\)

During her undergraduate college career, Walker arranged compositions for the select choral group of which she was a member. She continued to compose and occasionally presented original vocal music; however the majority of her compositions were chamber works. Around the same time, Walker began to write and arrange music for the Brown University Orchestra. She was completely taken with composing orchestral works after hearing one of her works performed. Walker began to focus her creativity on chamber and orchestral compositions, with particular emphasis on the latter. Over time she would also make in-depth explorations of choral works and ultimately begin composing for solo voice.\(^\text{23}\)

\(^\text{20}\) Constanzo, “Walker Celebrates Lifetime of Composition”.

\(^\text{21}\) Brooks, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.


\(^\text{23}\) Brooks, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.
Walker acknowledges various influences as her writing inspirations, including both familial and American idioms. The development of her distinct musical language is not attributed to a particular teacher, but rather the years of experience of writing and arranging. She does, however, recognize her graduate professor, Arnold Franchetti, as having enhanced her compositional style and sparked creativity. As an undergraduate, Walker’s extensive experience in the aforementioned areas excused her from all ear training and theory classes; however, she was required to teach these same classes in graduate school. In preparation, Walker studied the assigned textbooks and ultimately taught herself the proper fundamentals of composition. A similar situation occurred during her professorship at Oberlin Conservatory. Walker taught courses from which she had been exempt during her college career. She entered college with the idea and desire to learn the essential structure of theory, yet Walker never fathomed that she would again teach herself just as in childhood and adolescence.  

Walker’s graduate education took place at the Hartt School of Music where she received both M.M. and D.M.A. degrees. At Hartt, she was under the tutelage of Arnold Franchetti (1911-1993), a well-known composer who was the son of Alberto Franchetti (1860-1942), a well-respected, successful Italian opera composer. Walker describes the situation thus, “It was the case of a maestro from Italy meeting a folksy New England composer. He taught me a lot.” Walker remembers Franchetti as an eccentric man who greatly enjoyed writing music. He supported her desire to write and praised her originality, just as his father had done with him. His father, Alberto Franchetti was an Italian-born Jewish nobleman of substantial wealth. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was able to dedicate all of his time to writing instead of teaching

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24 Ibid.

25 Constanzo, “Walker Celebrates Lifetime of Composition”.

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composition or working other jobs for financial support. His independent wealth afforded the unique opportunity to see his operas produced and performed under the best possible conditions. Franchetti studied in Turin and Venice, then later in Germany with Rheinberger in Munich and Draeseke in Dresden. His operas contain massive epic scenes that display his comfort in working with large-scale forces and huge masses of sound. Franchetti’s opera style combined Wagernism and the traits of Meyerbeer with Italian verismo. The influence of Meyerbeer and Wagner is particularly noticeable in his most celebrated operas Asrael, Cristoforo Colombo, and Germania. He was often referred to as the “Meyerbeer of modern Italy.” While Alberto enjoyed success mainly amongst European audiences, his son Arnold would eventually experience notoriety within the United States.

Arnold Franchetti studied composition and piano with his father during adolescence. He went on to pursue physics at the University of Florence, music at the Salzburg Mozarteum, and then moved to Munich where he studied composition and orchestration with composer Richard Strauss for three years. Franchetti arrived in the United States in 1948 and was befriended by Aaron Copland, who helped the young composer establish a professional name by arranging performances of Franchetti’s chamber music in major cities such as New York and Washington D.C. In 1950 Franchetti was appointed to the composition faculty of the Hartt School of Music where he remained until his retirement in 1979.

Franchetti composed in all genres including orchestral, symphonic wind ensemble,
chamber music, solo music, and theatre works, including opera. Throughout his career in the United States, Franchetti received honors and awards for his compositions from prestigious organizations such as the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. His successful composition students have included: Barbara Kolb, Michael Schelle, Gwyneth Walker, Robert Beaser, Jonathan Kramer, Jack Elliot, Robert Lombardo, and Henry Gwaizda.\(^{29}\)

**Career Turn**

In graduate school, Walker only saw composers who were teachers. Teaching appeared to be the logical path, although there was a part of her that fervently disagreed and remained hopeful of a different outcome. Walker’s professors encouraged her to find a teaching position just as they had done. Upon earning her D.M.A., Walker followed the advice of her teachers and entered academia, accepting a teaching position at the Oberlin College Conservatory. To her great dissatisfaction, teaching did not allow enough time for composing. Walker had written consistently since the age of three and considered it unhealthy to maintain a job that would not permit time for the exploration of creative expression through writing. She began to notice that other professors on faculty were unable to write during the school year. While she enjoyed teaching, Walker realized that she would experience true joy and fulfillment in composing full-time. The idea of leaving the security of a teaching position was frightening. More terrifying still was to imagine not accomplishing her dream of becoming a full-time composer.\(^{30}\)

At Oberlin, requests for her compositions and arrangements continued. As commission requests were made, Walker began to consider the possibility of writing full-time. A few years

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Willis, “Gwyneth Walker: In Her Own Words”.

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later, she spent several months in London attending multiple concerts daily. Again the idea to leave her faculty position seemed like the right decision, particularly as performances of her works occurred more frequently. The few compositions that she was able to write during the teaching week were being performed throughout the country. Walker began flying out to the premieres of her works every other weekend. Her life was divided, and she realized the necessity of choosing between the two professions. Walker was torn, yet remained steadfast in thoughts regarding each career. She enjoyed teaching; however, writing appealed more to her, despite the lack of steady income. Ultimately Walker chose the latter course, believing that she would always regret the decision to remain in academia. After sharing with others her decision to begin a new career path, Walker’s resolve was met with apprehension and criticism. She was told by many that concentrating solely on composing was selfish, yet Walker persisted. The search for that inner voice and Walker’s commitment to it is an important aspect of her character. In keeping with her strong Quaker faith, she sought God’s guidance in her heart. Walker had repeatedly heard an inner voice and knew she was meant to become a full-time composer. In 1982, Walker resigned from Oberlin Conservatory to dedicate her time to writing.

Walker attributes a colleague at the Hartt School with helping to launch her composition career. Gerald Mack, the director of the Worcester Chorus, began programming her music at the Hartt School. At the conservatory, there were many chamber music students and music majors that later became choral directors. Within ten years, they held music positions across the country. Walker was contacted whenever the need arose for new choral pieces for their ensembles.

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31 Ibid.


33 Constanzo, “Walker Celebrates Lifetime of Composition”.
Initially she accepted each commission, writing for very little. Later she began charging a small amount. Since then, Walker has turned down commissions due to the sheer number of requests. She has done what most of her colleagues could not: abandon the security of a college-level post to pursue composing full time.\textsuperscript{34}

CHAPTER 2

LUCILLE CLIFTON'S LIFE AND WORKS

Biographical Information

Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) was a distinguished American writer and educator from Buffalo, New York. Likened to Gwendolyn Brooks, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson in style, Clifton’s poems are spare in form, deceptively simple in language, complex in ideas, and reflective of the commonplace, the everyday. Her poetry topics often include the celebration of her African American heritage, and feminist themes, with particular emphasis on the female body.\(^{35}\) Clifton’s elegant, yet sparse poetry has warranted much acclaim in the literary world. She was the recipient of multiple honors and awards including an Emmy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Coretta Scott King Award, the Shelly Memorial Award, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, and Creative Writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1999, she was elected as Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She served as Poet Laureate for the State of Maryland and Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary’s College of Maryland. The Robert Frost Medal—the Poetry Society of America’s highest honor—was awarded to Clifton for distinguished lifetime achievement in American poetry posthumously, at the National Arts Club in New York City on March 25, 2010.\(^{36}\)

Thelma Lucille Sayles Clifton was born in Depew, New York to Samuel L. and Thelma Moore Sayles. Her father worked for the New York steel mills; her mother was a launderer, homemaker, and avocational poet. Clifton was the second oldest of four children-three girls and


\(^{36}\) Ibid.
one boy. Neither parent was formally educated, yet they provided their children with an appreciation and an abundance of books, particularly those by African Americans.\(^{37}\) From her father, Clifton developed a love of reading. Samuel Sayles was born in Bedford, Virginia in 1902. He left school in the second or third grade and could barely write more than his name, but he was an avid reader. He changed his name from Sayle to Sayles after reading a section in a textbook in which the plural was explained. Samuel knew that the day would come when he would marry and have children, so he added an \(s\) to his name.\(^{38}\) He believed, the day of his marriage to Thelma Moore came, along with the birth of his daughter and son, Lucille and Samuel.

Lucille and her mother share the same first name. In \textit{Generations: A Memoir}, the mystery is explained.\(^{39}\) Her parents initially thought to name her Georgia after each of their mothers. Upon laying eyes on his beautiful infant daughter, Samuel decided that Thelma would be more befitting a name. Her mother did not agree but suggested that another name be given in addition. Clifton was given the same name of her aunt and her great grandmother—the first black woman legally hanged for manslaughter in the state of Virginia—Lucille. From the ancestral stories told by her father, Clifton would eventually learn more about her great grandmother, tracing their lineage to Africa.\(^{40}\) Ultimately she discovered and later identified with the strength and pride of her people.


\(^{40}\) Ibid.
Career Turn

Clifton was the first person in her family to graduate from high school. At sixteen she was awarded a scholarship that enabled her to attend college. At Howard University in Washington, D.C. she studied drama for two years. Her Howard associates included such intellectuals as Sterling A. Brown, A.B. Spellman, Chloe Wofford (now Toni Morrison), who later edited her writings for Random House. After leaving because of poor grades, Clifton studied at the State University of New York at Fredonia in 1955 and began working as an actor. While participating in The Buffalo Community Drama Workshop, Clifton was introduced to Fred James Clifton, a professor of Philosophy and African-American studies at the University of Buffalo. They were married in 1958, and Lucille gave birth to six children in six and a half years. During this time, she held state and federal government positions in New York and Washington D.C. In 1967, the Clifton family moved to Baltimore, where Lucille’s writing career began to flourish. Clifton had written poetry since childhood, but her first volume, Good Times, was not published until 1969. Having four children in diapers at the same time was partly the reason she did most of her writing in her head until the age of thirty-three. Good Times, praised for its craft and its evocation of urban black life, received much critical acclaim and was listed by The New York Times as one of the year’s ten best books. It launched Clifton’s prolific writing career. She went on to write nine other collections and twenty-three children’s books. Clifton

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41 Moody, “Lucille Clifton”.


43 Nelson, “Lucille Clifton”.

became the first poet to have two of her books, *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir: 1969-1980*\(^{45}\) and *Next: New Poems*\(^{46}\), chosen as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize.\(^{47}\)

**Poetic Style**

After transferring to the New York State University at Fredonia in 1955, Clifton pursued a career in acting and began to cultivate in poetry the minimalist characteristics that would become her professional signature. Similar to other prominent Black Aesthetic poets consciously breaking with Eurocentric conventions, Clifton developed such stylistic features as concise, untitled free verse lyrics of mostly iambic trimeter lines, occasional slant rhymes, anaphora and other forms of repetition, puns and allusions, and a lean vocabulary of rudimentary, yet evocative words.\(^ {48}\) Her writing style is very unique in that, at first glance, one is struck by what is missing: capitalization, punctuation, long and plentiful lines. Clifton is noted for saying much with few words and her poems are compact and self-sufficient.\(^ {49}\) In an *American Poetry Review* about Clifton’s work, Robin Becker commented on Clifton’s lean style: “Clifton’s poetics of understatement—no capitalization, few strong stresses per line, many poems totaling fewer than twenty lines, the sharp rhetorical question—including the essential only.”\(^ {50}\)

**Poetic Themes**

The themes and language of Clifton’s poetry are shaped by her concern with family history and relationships, with community, with racial history, and finally, with the possibilities


\(^{47}\) O’Connell, “Woman of Words, Woman of Music”.

\(^{48}\) Moody. “Lucille Clifton”.


\(^{50}\) Ibid.
of reconciliation and transcendence.\textsuperscript{51} Clifton’s early poems are celebrations of African American ancestry, heritage, and culture. Her initial publications commend African Americans for their historic resistance to oppression and their survival of economic and political racism.\textsuperscript{52} The optimism that shapes her poetry is sustained by deep spiritual beliefs. Clifton’s poems contain strong characters, as well as historical and biblical figures. Two of the strong characters present in her poems were influenced by ancestral stories shared by her father, a wonderful storyteller. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Clifton’s father recounted the history of the strong women in the Sayles family, attributing their strength and perseverance to Dahomey warrior women. Inspired by a rich family history, she adapted a genealogy prepared by her father in \textit{Generations: A Memoir}, an ode to the survival of the African American family. The memoir is indebted to Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” for its inscriptions and its structure. Most of the biographical sketches in \textit{Generations} are written from a first-person perspective in which various family members are represented as narrating their own stories. Clifton’s prose maintains a familial and cultural tradition of storytelling. It traces the Sale/Sayles family from its Dahomean ancestor who became known as Caroline Sale Donald (1822-1910) after her abduction in 1830 from West Africa to New Orleans, Louisiana.\textsuperscript{53} Caroline, later known as Mammy Ca’line, was sold into slavery at eight years of age. While enduring countless hardships and loss, she remained proud and resilient. This pride and tenacity was instilled within her children and grandchildren by constantly reminding them, “Get what you want, you from Dahomey


\textsuperscript{53} Moody, “Lucille Clifton”.

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women.”54 From childhood, Clifton would hear her father, who was raised by Mammy Ca’line, and mother proudly direct this phrase towards her. Once an adult, the need to discover the factuality of these stories occasionally dominated Clifton’s thoughts. This genealogical quest for concrete answers would lead to the startling, yet empowering revelation of her ancestors, the Dahomey warrior women.

Formerly under French control, the country of Dahomey is located on the western coast of Africa. The training of women soldiers was the most singular Dahomeyan institution. Initially armed only with banners, they were organized to fill out the ranks of the army, thus creating the illusion of a larger, more formidable force in battle. The first female soldiers were criminals pressed into service rather than execution. Eventually the corps became well respected for their skill, bravery and perseverance often in the face of insurmountable odds. Earning the king’s attention, they became the elite soldiers of the kingdom’s army and among the most feared soldiers on the entire continent. The women warriors were formidable and became known as Amazons. Starting from an early age, Dahomey warrior women built their bodies into lethal weapons through intense physical training. As prestige grew, the most physically fit wives of the king and daughters within the kingdom comprised the corps. Observers frequently noted Amazons’ solidly muscled frames and superior strength, and even conceded that the women warriors were more powerful than their male counterparts. Easily the equals of men they fought alongside and against, Dahomey warrior women consistently proved to be superb fighters. They were unafraid of men and considered themselves equivalent in every way.55 Not only did the warrior women possess an air of superiority but so did other women within the kingdom.

Ultimately, this fierce prideful dominance was transmitted to their female descendents, one of which was Lucille Sale, known as Lucy. She was one of Caroline’s oldest children. Just like her mother, she was a proud, quiet woman that possessed the same air of superiority as the Dahomey warrior women. Although Lucy did not marry, she gave birth to a son named Gene, who fathered Samuel, Clifton’s father. Gene was the product of an affair with a white, married carpetbagger, Harvey Nichols. Following the war and the emancipation, Nichols moved his family to Virginia in order to capitalize on the economic hardships of the South. He purchased a house close to the Sale place and eventually met Lucy. Shortly after Gene’s birth, Lucy and Harvey arranged to meet under the cover of night. As he rode up to meet her, Lucy—for reasons unknown—cocked a stolen rifle, shooting and killing Harvey. She remained by the body with the rifle in hand until the crime was discovered. Later, she was found guilty of manslaughter in a legal trial and hanged. Lucille, the lady whose name was given to Clifton like a gift, was the first black woman to be legally hanged in the state of Virginia.  

Throughout Clifton’s lifetime, she pondered the events of this particular story, drawing resolve, courage, and inspiration from her Dahomey ancestors. Clifton’s great great-grandmother and her great grandmother evoke images of survival and endurance on one hand, and avenging spirits on the other. By locating herself within this family history, Clifton not only laid claim to an African past, a recurrent feature of many of her poems, she also defined herself as a poet whose task was to keep historical memory alive. At the same time that Clifton accepted the weight of this history, however, she refused to be trapped or defeated by it. Not only did she maintain a strong-willed sense of optimism but also spiritual resilience, particularly in years following her mother’s untimely death at the age of forty-four. 

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57 Miller, “The Themes and Language of Lucille Clifton”.
Thelma Moore Sayles, Clifton’s mother, was another familial source of poetic inspiration. Some of her most complex and effective poems mourn Thelma’s epilepsy, mental illness and premature death when Clifton was twenty-three. Clifton grew up in a blended home where her mother bore two children, a boy and a girl. Her father was the father of four and had three daughters by three different women: his first wife who died young, Clifton’s mother, and the lover he took when Clifton’s mother was a bride. The three women had been friends, and subsequently Thelma raised all of the children, but she experienced a close, special bond with her daughter which was evidenced at Clifton’s birth. Clifton was born with hereditary polydactylism, an abnormality associated with having extra digits. Inherited from her mother, this genetic defect would later pass down to Clifton’s firstborn daughter. Mother and daughter shared similar interests. One of which would ultimately lead Clifton into a prolific career in the world of literature—poetry. As an avocational poet, Thelma had not been educated past grade school but was an accomplished poet. As a child, Clifton would sit on her mother’s lap and listen as she read poetry. Clifton learned to love words and the power of words. While Clifton wrote most of her poems in her head, her mother recorded poems in a notebook, writing in private until the day she was offered the chance to collect her work in a book. Her father forbade Thelma to do so. Following an argument that ensued from Thelma being offered this rare opportunity, Clifton recalled her father forcing her mother to burn every page of poetry in the furnace. Clifton remembered the deep, unverbalized anguish endured by her mother at the loss of such a cherished treasure. Heartbroken and crushed in spirit, Thelma never recovered. 58 Poetry was Thelma’s only avenue of expression, and Clifton’s appreciation and love for writing developed from her. Due to her parent’s tumultuous relationship, Clifton and her mother often spent much

58 Ibid.
of their time together. Clifton was considered a nervous child. With her parents constant battles, she felt obligated to make things right yet but was unsure how. She made repeated attempts to reconcile the two by appealing to her mother, anxious to restore peace. Later in her writings, Clifton testified to the pain of oppression manifested in her parents’ tortured marriage. In Clifton’s poetry, her mother is remembered as a beautiful, yet pathetic woman. Thelma was not considered strong like the Dahomey women within her husband’s ancestral lineage, but rather she was thought to be magical. Clifton believed that her mother possessed magical wisdom. Not a wisdom that pertained to the world, but instead, it was a type of improvisational resourcefulness that stemmed from a childhood and adolescence of rearing younger brothers and sisters. Moving directly from her mother’s house to begin life with her new husband, Thelma was never afforded the opportunity to experience life on her own. A lifetime of constantly caring for and tending to the needs of others, coupled with a tormented marriage left Thelma mentally and physically exhausted. At age thirty-five, she began experiencing epileptic seizures that worsened over time. On February 13, 1959, one month before the birth of Clifton’s first child, Thelma Moore Sayles passed away. The loss of Clifton’s beloved mother became the theme in several of her poems, as she believed life was the proper subject matter for poetry. Further, the spiritual dimension of Clifton’s poetry deepened following the death of her husband at age forty-nine on November 10, 1984. In 1987, Clifton published *Next: New Poems*. Many of the poems are constructed as “sorrow songs” or requiems. Some lament personal losses, such as the deaths of her mother and husband.

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60 Ibid.


62 Moody, “Lucille Clifton”.
Fred Clifton, unlike the men in her family, brought a saving and triumphant wholeness to Lucille’s life and her family history. In her poem “The Message of Fred Clifton,” her husband teaches from his fatal illness that ‘the only mercy/ is memory,/…the only hell/ is regret.”

Driven by the lessons learned from her husband, Clifton found the courage to write about the sexual abuse suffered from the hands of her father during childhood. She referred to the abuse in several poems. In “Moonchild” (2000), Clifton wrote of her girlish longings and her unspoken relationship with her father. When one of her girlfriends bragged about her boyfriend teaching her how to French kiss they asked Clifton: “who/ is teaching/ you? how do you say; my father?”

In “Shapeshifter poems” (1988), she asks “who is there to protect her from/ from the hands of her father.” In the title poem of The Terrible Stories (1996), Clifton asks of her mother, whom she otherwise idealizes, “they are supposed to know everything/ our mothers what did she know/ when did she know it.” Although Clifton was abused by her father, she refused to view him as anything other than an individual, a flawed but whole person. In a 1996 interview with Jean Melba of The Baltimore Sun she explained, “I identify myself in many ways. Victim is not one of them. One goes on if one can.”

Clifton, empowered by the strength and promise of her Dahomey ancestors, summoned from within the sheer will to continue. It was this tenacity that would carry her through some of the most difficult moments of life that were yet to come.

Clifton was thought to have possessed nine lives. Undergoing a kidney transplant and fighting many bouts with cancer in various parts of her body, she never saw herself as a victim, but, rather, as a survivor. In her later works New Poems (2000) and The Terrible Stories,

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64 O’Connell, “Woman of Words, Woman of Music”. 
Clifton wrote about life-changing events, in particular her struggle with breast cancer. After undergoing a mastectomy, Clifton identified with the Dahomey warrior women on an even greater level, as many of the warriors would remove one breast to provide efficiency in operating bow and arrow weaponry. Her poetry is graphic in the depiction of her changed body and the fear she battled as the cancer returned. These are poems of survival. Of her work Rita Dove remarked,

Lucille’s laugh is like her spirit—large and full, warm and open. And her poems, for all their surface compactness, burst at the seams with this generous spirit. There are the early ones whose revelations resemble the epiphanies of childhood, when one’s lack of preconceptions about the self allowed for brilliant slippage into the metaphysical, a glimpse into an egoless, utterly thingful and serene world. Her more recent work has grown darker, yet even in the contemplation of illness and death, her taut and quietly fierce poetry achieves a Zen-like clarity of understanding which can guide us through tragedies that would otherwise prove overwhelming.

On February 13, 2010, Thelma Lucille Sayles Clifton died of complications in an emergency surgery. During the years following her mother’s premature death, Clifton struggled with the fear of a similar fate but defied the odds. At the time of her death, she was seventy-three years old, outliving her mother by twenty-nine years and accomplishing in the world of literature what her mother was never afforded: the chance to dream and to live fully. The last paragraph of *Generations* reads:

And I could tell you about things we been through, some awful ones, some wonderful, but I know that the things that make us more than that, our lives are more than the days in them, our lives are our line and we go on. I type that and I

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66 Ibid.

67 Nelson, “Lucille Clifton”.

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swear I can see Ca’line standing in the green of Virginia, in the green of Afrika, and I swear she makes no sound but nods her head and smiles.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{68} Clifton, Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir: 1969-1980, 276.
CHAPTER 3

WALKER’S COMPOSITIONAL APPROACH

Commission and Premiere

Walker’s first introduction to the poetry of Lucille Clifton occurred while she was living in Connecticut, just prior to her move to Braintree, Vermont. In 1992, Walker received commissions from the choir directors of Farmington and Simsbury high schools for a work for chorus and strings. She decided to compose only one song that each ensemble could premiere. Determined to, “find something new, something fun, something jazzy and something with spirit and message,” her search ended at the New Canaan public library after reading two of Clifton’s poems, “Dreams and Dances” and “Bones, Be Good.”

The conciseness and directness of the poetry greatly appealed to the composer. Of poetry Walker explains, “One has to remember that a lot of good poems aren’t singable. There’s an audience sitting there listening, and you can’t lose them. Lucille Clifton uses words in a very powerful way without needing to be buried in them. She’s also got a sense of humor, and that’s important.” Walker’s composition was well received by audiences at both high schools. Subsequently, Walker received a commission from Miss Porter’s School in Farmington specifically for a composition for girls’ voices. Once again, she turned to Clifton’s poetry for inspiration and ultimately chose “Sisters” from An Ordinary Woman, never imagining that she would one day have the opportunity to meet, work with, and befriend the poet whose works she had now set several times.


70 O’Connell, “Woman of Words, Woman of Music”.

Eventually, a work was commissioned for soprano and piano by Denise Walker, Gwyneth’s second cousin by marriage, and Estrid Ecklof. Once more the composer drew inspiration from Clifton’s poetry. Walker selected poems from two of the award winning poet’s books: *An Ordinary Woman*\(^ {72}\) and *Two-Headed Woman*\(^ {73}\) to create a song cycle stylistically atypical of any of her previous works for solo voice. The resulting commission was a cycle comprised of five songs, containing various jazz styles and elements ranging from swing to ballads to scat singing. The cycle, *No Ordinary Woman!* premiered at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island on December 5, 1997. As with the premiere of *Sisters* at Miss Porter’s school, the man who played the pivotal role in bringing together composer and poet also attended the premiere of *No Ordinary Woman!* Rennie McQuilkin, an accomplished poet and the 1998 Director of the Sunken Garden Poetry Festival, had, over the years, greatly admired the works of both Clifton and Walker over the years. McQuilkin, after reading Clifton’s collection, *The Terrible Stories*, had wanted to invite the celebrated poet to the festival for quite some time.\(^ {74}\) Throughout the fourteen years of Walker’s residency in Connecticut, McQuilkin attended many events where her music was performed. Subsequently, he became a supporter of her compositions and strongly believed that Walker and Clifton would enjoy meeting one another. He decided that bringing the two artists together, “seemed like the natural thing to do.” McQuilkin, following the premiere performance of *No Ordinary Woman!,*, seized the opportunity to speak with Walker. He invited the composer to attend the final event of the Sunken Garden

\(^{72}\) Ibid.


\(^{74}\) O’Connell, “Woman of Words, Woman of Music”.
Poetry Festival on September 2, 1998 at the Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington where Clifton would read poetry selections from her latest collection. Delighted, she agreed to participate in the event.\textsuperscript{75} Upon learning that she would meet Walker at the festival, Clifton quickly mentioned that she had a childhood friend by the same name and inquired about the coincidence. As it turned out, the women had not grown up together, yet they would share a deep appreciation and respect for one another, both as artists and ultimately as friends.

**Interaction with Clifton**

Featured at the Sunken Garden Poetry Festival, the gifted and prolific artists, Clifton and Walker met for the first time immediately before the evening program, conversing and laughing like old friends. While Walker had set Clifton’s poems for close to a decade earlier, the poet had not been exposed to Walker’s music and was both excited and honored.\textsuperscript{76} The program was arranged so that Clifton would recite each poem prior to the performance of its musical setting. Walker’s choral works were performed by CONCORA, Connecticut Choral Artists, under the direction of Richard Coffey, and *No Ordinary Woman!* was performed by Denise Walker and Estrid Ecklof. Upon learning that Walker would be one of the featured artists, Coffey remarked, “Gwyneth has a real ability to capture the essence of the text, and to me that’s the sign of a great composer.”\textsuperscript{77} The night was magical, abounding in poetry and song. Each time Clifton read, it seemed as though the words came to life, each dancing with music. Her voice was rich and powerful; her friendly demeanor and cheerful disposition were magnetic, and she possessed a distinct humility that made those in attendance hang on her every word. In description of the

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
evening, Ecklof states, “Often there are over 1,000 in the audience, sitting out of doors on the beautiful lawns of this estate. Lucille’s voice and the depth of her messages were moving to all—she was afforded a grand ovation.”

**Compositional Process**

The creation of a Gwyneth Walker composition takes places in three different locations: outdoors, her desk, and the piano. She plans the piece by asking herself questions regarding the type of piece she would most like to write. This initial stage of forming the shape and length of the composition involves physical activity. According to Walker, “It is the most exhausting time because I try to form the entire concept in one sitting.” Formation of the piece often occurs as she walks up and down the road in close proximity to her dairy farm, pacing the deck of her home, or if the weather is unsuitable, pacing her home—thinking and writing a plan of action. Once a plan has been devised, Walker sits at her desk, writing down more about the music and often sketching out the shape of the work. Finally she moves to the piano and begins working on musical ideas. At the height of her compositional process, Walker is most likely moving back and forth between the desk and the piano, working on a chord or a passage at the piano then returning to her desk to write it down. She is often sitting at her desk by the time orchestration of a work begins.

Discussing her compositional process, Walker explains:

> When I create any of my works, whether with texts or without, I aim to employ both sensitivities (emotions) and my intelligence to create a work of meaning and logic. In other words, I try to have a message in my music, whether that is in

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78 Estrid Ecklof. E-mail interview with the author, September 29, 2011.

79 Willis, “Gwyneth Walker: In Her Own Words”.

80 Brooks, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.

81 Willis, “Gwyneth Walker: In Her Own Words”.
expressing a text, my feelings about the text, or simply a musical message. And, I
endeavor to shape the music so that the message can be most effectively
delivered.  

When composing a song, Walker’s primary inspiration is the poetry. Finding the right
poetry for a particular commission can prove to be a daunting task, yet it contributes to
her effectiveness as a composer. Walker spends a considerable amount of time reading
through many collections of poems. She searches for beautiful, interesting poems that
move her in some way. By asking herself questions such as, “What is the poem saying to
me?” Walker finds the essence of the poem then conveys it through her distinct musical
language. Love of contemporary American poetry has led to the creation of some of her
most celebrated and most often performed works, song cycles. Such song cycles are
based on the settings of poems by E.E Cummings (Though Love Be A Day, 1979), May
Swenson (Mornings Innocent, 1993), (Three Songs on Poetry of E.E. Cummings 2006),
and Emily Dickinson (The Poet’s Heart, 2009). Not only is Walker’s poetry selection
textually based, but also with careful consideration to the comprehension of the audience.
In her opinion, not every good poem can be sung in a manner that maintains the attention
of the audience members. Given that many of the people attending performances are not
poets or even poetry readers, she is conscientious in selecting more straightforward
poetry and treating complexities by utilizing the musical language to support and enhance
the poem’s meaning. How Walker gives birth to her musical setting of poetry offers
insight into her compositional process.  

Walker remarks:

When I set poetry to music, I focus on the central images in the poem. To me,
poetry is not words. It is the images that the words create. And thus, with the

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82 Walker, Response to a letter from Marcie Bullock, August 27, 2004, Website of Gwyneth Walker—

83 Brooks, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.

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musical setting, it is important that the images in the poetry translate into musical imagery. Often, the accompaniment is the central means of creating the imagery. The world of the poem may be established within the opening measures of accompaniment. The vocal lines, while also participating in the musical imagery, have a primary function of conveying the words.\textsuperscript{84} 

Nature is also an important aspect of Walker’s creative process. Walker believes that there is transference of energy when writing; the composer is always giving out, creating a need for the restoration of energy exerted. Each time she looks out the window, she is inspired and renewed by the beauty of nature. It provokes within her the desire to write and sparks the imagination. Describing nature’s affect on her, Walker states, “The outdoors is so overwhelmingly majestic, you have to feel the spirit of God.”\textsuperscript{85} Her love of the outdoors began in childhood, and it is no coincidence that she lives on a dairy farm with cows as her closest neighbors. After leaving her teaching post at Oberlin, Walker decided that living in the country would best suit her writing needs. Walker remembered falling in love with Vermont over the summers during childhood when she attended Camp Aloha in Fairlee. Deciding to move to Vermont in 1983, she began the journey to find a peaceful venue for composing, a place in the country within close proximity to musical events. During her visits, Walker’s excitement grew at the discovery of how many of the small towns held musical performances. Ultimately, her search ended on a dairy farm in Braintree, close to Randolph. Now, Walker believes that she has the best of both worlds. She lives in the country, surrounded by cows, yet there is a concert hall within ten minutes driving distance from her home. The Braintree Meeting House, which regularly holds concert series, offers performances by musicians of every skill level, and Walker’s music is often performed at this venue. In fact when her works are performed locally,

\textsuperscript{84} O’Connell, “Woman of Words, Woman of Music”.

\textsuperscript{85} Brooks “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.
Walker derives great satisfaction from the reactions and responses within her supportive, non-affluent community. While the beautiful landscape and the local people are two wonderful aspects of living in Vermont, Walker believes that the most important aspect is her sense of closeness to God through a quiet, country way of life. Walker describes herself as a “composer of faith.” Above all else, God is her greatest source of energy and inspiration for music. Without His presence in her life, she would soon lose energy. Walker believes, “If you write only for yourself or other people, there’s some satisfaction. But if you write maybe with an eye on something a little higher or maybe feeling like you might be in touch with something larger, you have incoming energy and inspiration.”

As has been noted, Walker’s unwavering faith influences every area of her life, particularly within her musical characteristics. Directly influencing her approach to commissions, themes, and text settings, principles of Quakerism are evident.

**Walker’s Compositional Themes**

Walker attributes the Quaker faith in bringing about the realization that composing is what God has called her to do. Throughout the years, she has gained much confirmation of her calling through fellow believers. Viewing music as a gift from God, Walker is indebted to Quakerism and to its beliefs. Quakers are egalitarian, believing that men and women are equal. This is an aspect of Walker’s faith that has repeatedly undergirded her career decision and is recognizable within her commission choices. Because Walker believes in the equality of all people, her philosophy with regard to commissions is “first-come-first-served.”

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86 O’Connell, “Woman of Words, Woman of Music”.

87 Keuffel, “A Prolific Poet in Music”.

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creates incredible diversity within her catalogue, ranging from concertos for professional soloists and orchestras to folk song settings for school choruses. Walker’s faith is also apparent at times in her poetry selections. She not only enjoys setting secular contemporary American poetry that contains elements of humor and wit, but also poems that contain spiritual dimension and emphasize the qualities of her faith. In particular, Walker enjoys the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier, an influential American Quaker poet, and Thomas Merton, one of the most well-known Catholic writers of the 20th century. Quakerism also affects the composer’s choice of themes. 88 She describes herself as “a gentle, country Quaker.” 89 As a result, neither anger nor belligerence can be found in her compositions. Instead, Walker employs dissonance as a heightened development of certain ideas that most often lead to a resolution. Although the presence of anger is nonexistent in Walker’s works, the theme of love abounds. The majority of the poems set, both secular and sacred, contain a love theme in varying degrees. The strength of female characters is a textual theme in Walker’s solo and choral pieces. Her great great-grandmother was a suffragette, and Walker proudly acknowledges women’s contributions in the advancement of society. The strength of women has inspired the setting of works by tenacious poets such as Lucille Clifton and May Swenson. 90

The “American” Sound

Words such as “accessible,” “distinctly American,” “energetic,” “original,” and “theatrical” are frequently used to describe Walker’s style of composition.


89 Ludwig, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.

She has been praised for her ability to evoke different moods—moods which can best described as artistic in their artistic antecedent. 91 Carson Cooman writes:

Her work is characterized by a tremendous sense of energy and a strong sense of humor. Even in her most calm and serene pieces, there is a constant undercurrent of energy—a lifeblood that ties the music together. Many personal stylistic traits appear throughout her work including elements that have often been classified as characteristic of “American music” (including the strong rhythmic sense, open sonorities, and influences of rock, jazz, blues, and American folk music). She is strongly in the American tradition of composers such as Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein—but is a slave to no compositional school or prescribed style. Her music is recognizably her own and thoroughly original.92

Because Walker did not receive formal training during her formative years, her style is not inspired by classical musicians. Instead she recognizes a background in folk music as an influential source. Enjoying the music of James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, and the Beatles, Walker describes herself as eclectic. As previously mentioned, she began composing at the age of two, and no one specific composer’s style is attributed as being influential. Walker explains, “Surely, I borrow sounds of what is around me, but I do not hear a particular composer and decide I need to write like that person.”93 Over the years, Walker’s sound has repeatedly been likened to that of Aaron Copland, well known for creating a distinctly direct, unadorned American style which incorporated widely spaced chords and vigorous rhythms. However, she continues to dismiss his music as instrumental in the shaping of her style. While she does acknowledge Celtic and Italian influences, Walker states, “My style was formed before I heard Aaron Copland’s music.”94

91 Constanzo, “Walker Celebrates Lifetime of Composition”.


93 Brooks, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.

94 Ibid.
The immediacy of Walker’s music captures audiences and performers alike. With the audience and performer at the forefront of her mind when writing, her approach is to create music that communicates to others. Walker views this approach as a gift, as a means of personal expression. Describing herself as joyous and sensitive with plenty to say, Walker conveys these qualities within her works and compares her compositional style to that of E.E. Cummings writing style. Cummings utilizes commonly known language, presented in new ways within poetry. Similarly, Walker shapes familiar musical materials into a message that is both unique and individual. Her ultimate objective is the creation of a “piece of music that is structured and to the point, a work that holds together well and says something.”

Walker’s aim is to develop a sense of theater on the concert stage and admits being unable to refrain from incorporating unusual activities into her music. With theatrical ideas occurring as early as her adolescent and young adult years, she resisted the integration of such eccentricities until her fears were overridden by the persistent impulses of her imagination. To Walker’s delight, these extra-musical elements began to capture the imagination of the audience as well. Walker, for example, combined a love of music and tennis in the creation of Match Point, an orchestral work with collaboration from tennis champion, Billy Jean King. The maestro conducts with a tennis racket instead of a baton and the timpanist uses tennis balls in place of mallets. Not only is Walker’s theatrical touch evident in orchestral works, but also in vocal compositions. Coffey states, “She’s got a very vibrant theatrical style—in her choral works, the singers don’t just stand there, holding books.” In her choral setting of Clifton’s poem Sisters, the singers become the characters and perform the type of hand-clapping common amongst

95 Weber and Goldberg, “An Interview with Gwyneth Walker”.

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schoolgirls, thus enhancing the poem’s “me and you” refrain. Furthermore, the individual performer is required to execute staging directions within a portion of Walker’s solo vocal works. Particularly within her setting of Clifton’s poetry, various staging instructions appear. *No Ordinary Woman!* and *Three Songs for Lucille* are comprised of choreography, non-pitched elements, scat singing, and spoken text to enhance the drama or for word emphasis.

Although these unconventional elements appear in the aforementioned cycles, they are stylistically atypical of the majority of her solo song output. These elements will be cited with examples in Chapter Four. Walker’s irrepressible streak has finally developed into the merging of genres referred to as a period of exploration. Moreover, the composer discerns four phases within her artistic development: an “academic period” during her scholastic years, an “early period” (1975-1990), and her “middle period” (1991-2008). Beginning in the summer of 2008, Walker initiated a fourth phase in her development, the “exploratory period,” in which the evolution of theatrical elements occurs. Phase one, Walker’s “academic period,” occurred during her college career at Brown University and Oberlin. Because Walker was afforded opportunities to arrange pieces for the university orchestra and for the female choir, the majority of her compositional output from this period is choral and orchestral. As Walker played the guitar during undergraduate studies, she wrote several American folk-inspired works for solo guitar. In her early and middle periods, the components of Walker’s style (melody, harmony, rhythm, accompaniment, and texts) were developed into the distinct sound by which she is presently identified. Her unique approach to each component and to the dedication of its evolution has made Walker one of the most widely performed American composers of our time.

96 O’Connell, “Woman of Words, Woman of Music”.

97 Constanzo, “Walker Celebrates Lifetime of Composition”.

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Similar to folk and pop veins, the melodic lines within her vocal works are accessible and singable. The melodies generally display little chromaticism, moving stepwise or in small leaps. Fluctuating between tonality and modality, harmonies are comprised of shifting tonal centers and are often complicated by a lack of key signature.\(^98\) Further, Walker’s individual style is reinforced by the fusing together of familiar musical materials. Rhythm, another component, is often used in a quick, repetitious manner to fill works with energy and vitality. Several of Walker’s songs are considered rhythmically challenging. The utilization of metric shifts or metric uncertainty supports the text, as well as the mood of the songs.\(^99\) The accompaniment is employed in the depiction of poetic imagery. Many of Walker’s solo vocal works begin with a piano introduction, thus establishing the atmosphere of the song. The accompaniment also highlights poignant words and makes musical commentary upon the text.\(^100\) As has been noted, the music of each vocal composition is inspired by the text. Walker often adapts the poetry to enhance comprehension of the audience. For emphasis, the composer utilizes frequent textual repetitions for greater understanding of each poem.\(^101\) Finally, musical devices are employed to intensify dramatic effect. To emphasize important words in the poetry, Walker frequently uses dynamic contrast and accents. Extended vocal sounds such as percussive noises, vocal slides, and \textit{Sprechstimme} are applied. To further enhance musical style and dramatic effect, scat is employed, and on occasion specific stage directions are given to the singer.\(^102\) Not only are the aforementioned compositional devices present in Walker’s “early” and “middle periods,” but


\(^{99}\) Ibid.


\(^{102}\) Ibid., 123.
also in her “exploratory period.” Through the discovery and further development of theatricality, her desire is to concentrate on every aspect of the drama by involving all in attendance, including the audience. Of her “exploratory period, “Cooman notes:

Dr. Walker has frequently explored aspects of performer drama in her music that one does not often find in the works of most composers. . . . Over the past few years, Dr. Walker has been working primarily on music that blurs all the distinctions between instrumentalist, vocalist, actor, narrator, and audience. All of these things become brought together as in certain pieces they take on the duties or attributes of the others. . . . [Her] works share the attribute that an active "drama" is part of the fiber of what is required of every participant. There is no just "sitting there and playing or singing your part." Everybody (even sometimes the audience!) is called upon to do something, and this becomes a part of the music. Though these elements have always been a part of her style, they are now coming to the fore as her primary preoccupation compositionally. . . .

This is the area of her work (these pieces which are "dramatic" in every sense) which will be pursued primarily in the future, and is perhaps one of the most interesting and unique areas she has ever explored. Genres will be blurred and everybody will be asked to take on new and exciting challenges.103

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103 Cooman, “Gwyneth Walker: An American Original”.

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CHAPTER 4

NO ORDINARY WOMAN! AND THREE SONGS FOR LUCILLE

Discussion of the Poems and Songs, with Performance Suggestions

As has been noted, No Ordinary Woman! and Three Songs for Lucille are song cycles set to the writings of American poet, Lucille Clifton. Walker employs conventional style elements for which she is commonly known. These include an accessible quality for performer and audience alike, a strong undercurrent of energy, humor, and text painting. Yet, the utilization of unconventional elements separates the cycles from the majority of her song output. Jazz, choreography, non-pitched elements, and spoken text are all features utilized by the composer to further enhance the jazzy atmosphere of the poetry.

Originally conceived as a work for soprano in 1997, the composer created an additional version for mezzo-soprano and piano. In 2004, the work was commissioned by the Concertante di Chicago under the direction of Hilel Kagan for the soprano, Jonita Lattimore. For the creation of the cycle, the American idiom of jazz is attributed as Walker’s primary inspiration. From ballads to swing to scat singing, each of the five songs is representative of a different style of jazz music. The piece—emphasizing the strength of a woman—focuses on the female poet’s perception of her body and life. Walker notes:

These songs might have been subtitled “Songs of Reflection.” For they present the poet musing about her own life, and specifically her physical appearance. One imagines the poet looking in the mirror with amusement, horror, and a strong sense of her own history. Thus, the songs range from an energetic first impression (“Bones, Be Good!”) to philosophical reflection (“Turning”) to humor and pride in the body itself (“Homage to my Hips/Hair”) to a more serious summation (“The Thirty-Eighth Year”). A strong and colorful woman emerges.  

104 Field-Barthlomew, 62.

105 Walker, Notes on No Ordinary Woman!
Walker’s decision and search to find “new, jazzy” poetry, ended with “Dreams and Dances” and “Bones, Be Good.” Five years later, the success of Walker’s compositions subsequently led to the creation of _No Ordinary Woman!_ and would ultimately lead to the creation of an unpublished cycle, _Three Songs for Lucille_. The latter cycle was composed as a special “surprise gift” on the occasion of the Artist Co-Residency of Clifton and Walker at the New York State University at Fredonia on April 2, 2007. Of the cycle, Walker comments:

The poems are autobiographical—the first referring to the poet’s special hands (she was born with six fingers, a trait which she traced back to her African-Dahomean ancestors). Then, in the mirror, she affirms herself as a “city of a woman,” overcoming negative self images from her past. And, her favorite childhood memories are those associated with her sister—similar girls/women, and yet different. Whereas her sister is a singer (“_only where you sing_”), Lucille is a poet (“_i poet_”).

Similar to _Bones, be Good_, the final song of the cycle, _Different Sisters_, was initially set for a women’s chorus and entitled, _Sisters_. Walker, after hearing the easeful style with which Clifton read the poem, decided to rewrite the song. By setting the poem over a “gentle tango” rhythm, Walker successfully captured the poet’s mellow tone.

**Walker’s Application of Clifton’s Poetry**

Walker uses Clifton’s poetry as inspiration and at times excludes various portions; however, Walker chose not only to embellish the text but also to change the title from _the poet_ to _Bones, Be Good!_ Preceding each song discussion, a comparison of Clifton’s poem and Walker’s modifications will be presented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>the poet</em></th>
<th><em>Bones Be Good</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i beg my bones to be good but</td>
<td>I beg my bones to be good but they</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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106 Walker, Notes on _Three Songs for Lucille_
107 Poems reprinted with permission of BOA Editions, Ltd.
they keep clicking music and
i spin in the center of myself
a foolish frightful woman
moving my skin against the wind and
tap dancing for my life.

just keep clickin’ music,
click, click, click, click
clickin’ music,
Bones be good! Bones be good!
Bones be good, be good, be good.
They just keep clickin’ music.

I spin in the center of myself,
a foolish, frightful woman.
Movin’ my skin against the wind,
and tap tap tap tap dancin’,
dancin’ for my life,
for my life.

ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta
ta ta ta ta ta ta
tap tap tap dancin’,
tap tap tap dancin’,
tap tap tap dancin’,
tap tap tap dancin’,

Bones be good! Bones be good!
Bones be good, be good, be good.
They just keep clickin’ music.

Ba ya ba ya ba ba ya ba ba ba ba

Movin’ my skin against the wind,
and tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap
tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap
tap tap tap dancin’,
dancin’ for my life, for my life.
Movin’ my skin against the wind,
click click clickin’ music,
a foolish, frightful woman,
just a foolish, frightful woman,

just a foolish, frightful woman,
just a foolish, frightful woman.
ba da ba da da
1st Song “Bones, Be Good”

Basic Characteristics

- Vocal line: predominantly built stepwise in scale-like passages; contains leaps at points of high emotion
- Range: A₃ – B♭₅
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: simple duple (2/2) and simple complex (2/4)
- Key Scheme: C major to Eb major to C major
- Rhythm: swing rhythm; half note equals 88
- Accompaniment: fairly sparse texture
- Level of Difficulty: I suggest this song be reserved for singers with considerable experience singing and performing jazz. The piece contains lengthy portions of scat. I would not consider assigning it to any undergraduates or even graduate students that do not have a substantial jazz background, as the approach would be incorrect. Ultimately the composer’s intentions would be lost.

Song Overview

In each stage of life our bodies experience many changes. The most apparent changes typically occur physically. As time marches on, some hardly recognize the reflection staring back in the mirror and begin to wonder where the time has gone. The years seem to have flown by. While some, afraid of growing older, take extraordinary steps to counteract the inevitable process of aging, others choose to live to the fullest, embracing every single day as a gift.

*Bones, Be Good!* is an amusing poem that discusses and ultimately celebrates the changes that occur within the body during a specific time of life. The narrator, who is in the twilight of her life, notices that her bones have begun to make clicking and popping sounds whenever she moves. While she makes light of the situation, there is a serious undertone of fear associated with the aging process. Eventually she is able to even poke fun at herself for being afraid: “a foolish frightful woman.” Ultimately she regains control by using humor to dispel any fear. The
narrator believes that her existence depends on her ability to continue moving: “tap dancing for my life.”

This song is lively and upbeat with a jazz-like texture. It begins with fourteen-measure introduction that contains one of Walker’s unconventional elements: choreography in the form of finger snapping, ending immediately before the voice enters. (Example 4.1.)

Example 4.1 Unconventional element: finger snapping mm. 1-4

The bareness of accompaniment, coupled with the snapping creates a light, buoyant atmosphere, which prepares the listener for the following humorous text: “I beg my bones to be good but/ they just keep clickin’ music”. The composer initially establishes a jazz-like mood by using syncopation in both piano and voice.

Throughout the song, Walker employs arpeggiated figures in the right hand of the piano line to perpetuate movement and to sustain the mood of the piece. (Example 4.2.)

The accompaniment also plays a dominant role in illustrating the poetry through text painting. Walker instructs the accompanist with words such as “click” (m.21), “spin”(mm.43-44), and “tap” (m100-102) to describe the action of the narrator’s creaking bones. The treble clef portion of the piano line represents the wind as well: “movin’ my skin against the wind”. (Example 4.3.)
Another unconventional feature is the use of the syllable “ta.” Found in the vocal line, it is utilized in a syncopated, percussive manner to reinforce the cheery, jazz-like mood. (Example 4.4.)

Walker employs a striking characteristic towards the middle of the song. As the narrator moves throughout her day: “clickin’ music”, she begins to scat, a vocal jazz improvisation. This portion is not found within Clifton’s poem, nor is the second scat portion, found later in the song.
It is interesting to note that both sections are lengthy. The first is seven measures and the second is ten. The composer has instructed “scat singing”

Example 4.4 Use of monosyllable “ta” displaying jazz style mm. 62-65

ad lib.” (sic). It is important for the singer to have significant jazz vocal experience or to commit to cultivating it, in order to demonstrate the appropriate vocal style. The end result must be a carefree, lighthearted vocalism which should be performed as if created on the spot. (Example 4.5.)

Example 4.5 Scat singing mm. 129-132

Performance Suggestions

The singer should pay close attention to the pronunciation of the text. It should be sung in a soulful, southern dialect, given the poet and the text. Pronounce words such as “I” and “my” in
this southern manner. For practice, I suggest speaking the text as if conversing. Becoming more familiar with the flow of southern vocalism while speaking will enable her to sing the song with confidence and ease. This type of practice is also important in finding the correct vocal placement of each word and discovering the appropriate mood of the narrator within each section.

The jazz style of the piece requires an approach that is not entirely classical. In order to create an appropriate atmosphere, I suggest that the singer choose various phrase beginnings where she will slide up to the note instead of singing each beginning note in the center of the pitch. This jazz technique will do much to create the jazz style the composer intended. It is also recommended that the singer slide on the initial syllable of words on sustained pitches. To slide, the singer should sing a half step lower than the pitch written, then quickly scoop up to the written pitch while performing without vibrato, a technique closer to a jazz style approach. This combination of performance will be effective when adding the color intended by the composer.

Example 4.6 Jazz approach on initial syllables of sustained Pitches mm. 18-20

Walker uses text painting to symbolize the spinning and moving of the narrator in the phrases “I spin in the center of myself” and “movin’ my skin against the wind.” Each should be a
legato contrast to the preceding measures filled with accents, *staccati*, and syncopation.

(Example 4.7.)

Example 4.7 Legato mm. 41-44

The initial measure of each scat singing section contains two or three syllables. These are merely intended as suggestions. While it is permissible to use the syllables written, I recommend that the singer choose syllables that will best highlight her voice. This will require dedicating more time to each of these scat sections. Initially sing through each section an octave lower than written. After learning the notes, I suggest singing the passage on one syllable multiple times. As the singer becomes more and more familiar with the music, a natural tendency will occur, causing the singer to experiment with various syllables within each register of the voice. It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong syllable when scatting, but rather, syllables should be chosen based on comfort and ease. As the singer works on the syllables, her approach to these sections will continue to evolve. The singer is encouraged to remember that ultimately the singer does not sing scat. Scat sings the singer. (Example 4.5)

There are two almost identical passages to which the singer should pay very close attention, as they are deceptively challenging. The difficulty lies in the quick transition between the dissimilar, connected phrases. The first phrase ends at a point of high emotion on the
sustained pitch, G₅ (or optional B♭₅). The second challenging phrase immediately follows and begins on E₄, descending scale-wise to A₃. The key is in learning to sing the phrases in an effortless manner with a consistent timbre. In order to achieve this, I suggest the singer end the sustained pitch two beats early to allow time for the following phrase to be sung, using only chest voice, almost speaking the phrase in order for the voice to sound in the low register.

(Example 4.8.)

Example 4.8 Transition from high to low registers mm. 54-57

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>turning</th>
<th>Turning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>turning into my own</td>
<td>Turning, turning,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turning on in</td>
<td>into my own self at last.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to my own self</td>
<td>Turning, turning,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at last</td>
<td>into my own self at last.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turning out of the</td>
<td>Turning out of the white cage,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white cage, turning out of the</td>
<td>turning out of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lady cage</td>
<td>lady, lady cage,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turning at last</td>
<td>turning at last.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on a stem like a black fruit</td>
<td>The white cage,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in my own season</td>
<td>the lady, lady, lady cage,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at last</td>
<td>turning at last.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turning, turning,
into my own self at last.
Turning on a stem like a black fruit
in my own season at last.
like a black, black fruit,
in my own season,
in my own season,
in my own season,
at last!

2nd Song “Turning”

- Vocal line: fluid, simple melodic line
- Range: C₄ – G₅
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric organization: frequent meter change tied to poetic stress
- Harmony: tonal; striking harmonies that illustrate the text
- Key Scheme: C minor
- Rhythm: gently flowing; quarter equals ca. 80
- Accompaniment: fairly sparse texture
- Level of Difficulty: I would assign this song to a graduate student, as most undergraduates may have a tendency to push or misuse the voice in an attempt to create sound in the middle voice.

Song Overview

“Turning,” is philosophical reflection on a woman’s metamorphosis into the person she was always intended to be. She disentangles herself from negative cultural and gender based stereotypes, along with others’ opinions that attempt to dictate the type of woman she should be. With a sense of accomplishment and pride, the narrator declares:

turning at last
on a stem like a black fruit
in my own season
at last (8-11)

The narrator celebrates her blackness and her personal acceptance, comparing herself to a ripe, black fruit that has successfully endured the intense rays of the sun and the often dangerous insects which threaten the fruit’s ruin. She, like the black fruit, has turned over and again and yet
managed to arrive at the perfect ripeness for the picking. The song begins with an eight measure keyboard introduction with right hand only. Here, the instruction offered to the pianist is “starting slowly and accel. (sic) into a blur.” Arpeggiated figures in the keyboard establish a sense of movement and the image emerges of a woman deep in thoughtful self observation. (Example 4.9.)

Example 4.9 Four measures of introduction with precise instruction for the pianist mm. 1-4

The voice enters following the eight measure introduction. Walker uses a broad-lined, lyric melody to complement the reflective state in which the narrator finds herself: “turning into my own self/ at last”. Overall the melodic line is fluid and simple, setting an initial mood of expectancy and change.

To reinforce the heightened self-awareness of the narrator, a short, recurring melodic pattern is found both in the voice and accompaniment throughout the piece. Found in measure 25, this ascending, one-measure motive, symbolizes the narrator’s mental awakening. I shall call
it the Awakening Motive because it represents the narrator mentally stepping out of the “cage” that imprisoned her for so long. (Example 4.10.)

Text painting is used to illustrate the words of the poem. At points of high emotion, the composer employs a two-measure motive to depict the narrator’s deliberation. I shall refer to it as the “Turning” Motive. This motive contains an interval of a perfect fifth (C5 to G5),

Ex 4.10 Awakening Motive mm. 25-26

generally related to the word, “turning”, followed by a descending line. The “Turning” Motive evokes an image of the narrator’s thoughts constantly revolving, just as the black fruit slowly rotates on the vine, ripening beneath the sun’s powerful rays. (Example 4.11.)

Example 4.11 “Turning” Motive mm. 19-20
Alternating rhythmic patterns are employed throughout the accompaniment and serve several functions. They perpetuate movement and create an atmosphere of excitement and tension. The patterns also support the text, as well as the underlying anticipation of completion of the narrator’s stunning metamorphosis.

Example 4.12 Flexible rhythmic patterns mm. 41-43

As mentioned earlier, arpeggiated figures in the right hand are utilized throughout the majority of the song. The left hand remains mostly chordal until the last five measures, symbolizing the narrator’s quiet resolve: “in my own season/ at last”. The narrator understands the necessity of this crucial transformation. The chordal movement functions as the stabilizing backbone underneath the anxiety, excitement, and fear of change, which is represented in the right hand. The texture is somewhat sparse, creating a sense of strength amidst turmoil.

(Example 4.12.)

**Performance Suggestions**

In the initial phase of learning this piece, I suggest first examining the accompaniment, which establishes the atmosphere and the mood of the narrator. The examination will enhance the singer’s understanding of the text, thus enabling access to the subtleties within the poetic texture. The first phrase begins on a pitch in the middle voice that carries over into the next
phrase. Approach it in a gentle manner, allowing continued air flow. This will maintain pitch integrity and develop a nice, even spin. (Example 4.13.)

Eighth-note rests are found in several of the phrases within the song. They are intended for text illustration. I suggest the singer take a luftpause or “Air break” instead of breathing on all eighth-note rests within phrases. The application of this practice will maintain the movement of the piece by fostering continuity of the line. (Example 4.14)
Example 4.14 Luftpause mm. 13-16

The “Turning” Motive appears at various times throughout the song. One may have the tendency to oversing in the upper middle to high registers. Resist the urge. Instead, the singer should pay close attention to the dynamics. At the beginning of the phrase, breathe calmly and remained focused on fostering a tranquil state. I suggest a slight crescendo to the fifth above the C₄. I also recommend the singer employ straight tone on the eighth note portion of the phrase, merely touching the highest note. Incorporate vibrato only on the last two notes of the measure. This will align the entire phrase and preserve the legato line. (Example 4.11.)

Staccati markings appear on the words “white cage” beginning in measure twenty-six. The singer should understand that these markings serve to highlight the text. They should not be performed exactly as written. I recommend that the singer slightly elongate each note marked staccato. (Example 4.15.)

Example 4.15 Staccati m. 34

Measures 40 through 43 are to be hummed. A healthy balance between piano and voice can prove challenging if the singer hums with her mouth closed. I recommend forming ‘ng’ as in
the word “hung.” The singer’s mouth should form into a faint smile. Leave the lips slightly parted to allow the sound to travel. (Example 4.16.)

The “Turning” Motive returns at the end of the song, but here, the motive, appears in quarter notes instead of eighth notes and, for the first time, denotes the completion of

Example 4.16 Humming Approach mm. 40-43

the narrator’s metamorphosis. Her journey has ended: “in my own season/ at last”. A ritardando appears in the previous measure, which is followed by the composer’s instructions, “more slowly.” The singer must allow the full blossoming of the voice as a metaphor for her arrival at the fruition of the narrator’s transformation. (Example 4.17.)

Example 4.17 Vibrato utilization mm. 60-61
The final note is a whole note tied for four measures with a \textit{fermata} and a \textit{ritardando} in the last two measures. The singer must sustain this pitch for a minimum of sixteen counts. For proper breath management, I suggest beginning the phrase \textit{pianissimo} with a gradual \textit{crescendo} to \textit{forte} in the final measure. (Example 4.18.)

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Example 4.18} Breath management mm. 65-66
\end{quote}

\textbf{Walker’s Application of Clifton’s Poetry}

While it is clear that Walker has taken liberties in adding to Clifton’s poem, she also omits lines seven and eight.

\begin{center}
\textbf{homage to my hips}$^{108}$
\end{center}

\begin{center}
these hips are big hips
they need space to
move around in.
they don’t fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don’t like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.
I have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top!
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Homage to my Hips}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
These hips are big hips.
They need space to move around in.
They don’t fit into little petty places.
These hips are free hips.
These hips
These hips these hips, these hips,
They go where they want to go,
and do what they want to
do do do do do do do
do do do do do do do
These hips are free hips.
al la la la la la la la la la
al la la la la la la la la la
al la la la la la la la la
ah They go where they want to go

\footnotesize{$^{108}$ Poems reprinted with permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.}
and do what they want to
do do do do do do
do do do do do do
These hips are mighty hips.
These hips are magic hips.
I have known them to put a spell on
a man and spin him like a top!
la la la la
la la la la la la la la la

3rd Song “Homage to my Hips

Basic Characteristics

- Vocal line: fluid melodic line; uses large intervals for dramatic emphasis
- Range: G₃- Ab₅
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: simple duple (2/2)
- Key Scheme: Gb major
- Rhythm: at a gentle swaying tempo; half note equals 66
- Accompaniment: varied, sparse and chordal
- Level of Difficulty: I would assign this song either to a student with a lot of
  showmanship or as an etude for a student in need of more showmanship.

Song Overview

In the third piece Homage to my Hips, it is as if the narrator is gazing at herself in a full-
length mirror. Rather than shock and horror at what she sees, she meets her less-than-perfect
reflection with humor and pride: “these hips are big hips/ they need space to/ move around in”.
The narrator admires her hips, remarking on their fullness and how: “they don’t fit into little
petty places‖. They seemingly cannot be controlled: “they go where they want to go/ they do what they want to do”. In the poem, the narrator boastfully recounts a particular instance when her hips become magical: “I have known them/ to put a spell on a man/ and spin him like a top”. The song begins with a “gentle swaying tempo” with particular emphasis on the word “swaying” to metamorphically represent the constant, almost hypnotic to-and-fro movement of the narrator’s hips. The motive, appearing in the left hand of measure 2, which I shall call the “Swaying” Motive appears throughout the song and serves to sustain the mood of the narrator and to perpetuate motion. (Example 4.19.)

There is no key signature at the beginning of this song and it contains unexpected modulations. Accidentals and four distinct motives repeat throughout the piece to establish coherence. First, Walker employs a recurring descending chromatic eighth note pattern to represent changes in the narrator’s thought process. Found only in the right hand of the accompaniment, this motive functions as a transition between sections and is used to achieve a successful modulation. I have chosen to call it the Transition Motive. (Example 4.20.)

Example 4.19 “Swaying” Motive mm. 1-3
The second motive, the Mood Motive, is an ascending eighth note pattern appearing first in the keyboard accompaniment and ultimately in the vocal line, illustrating the text and describing the cheerful mood of the narrator. The Mood Motive prepares the listener for the narrator’s joyful expression: “These hips are free hips”. (Example 4.21.)

Walker consistently employs motives as the song continues. As the key center changes, the Transition Motive reenters in measure 27. Immediately following is the introduction of the sequence of the second motive in the piano, a two measure, ascending eighth note line. Similar to the function of the second motive, it symbolizes the carefree attitude of the narrator as her
musing continues: “they go where they want to go”. An example of what I shall call the Carefree Motive appears below. (Example 4.22.)

![Example 4.22 Carefree Motive mm. 38-39](image)

The last motive contains a familiar unconventional element found in the first song of the cycle, *Bones, Be Good!* Walker employs a jazz element in this fourteen-note, descending, chromatic line. It symbolizes the magical, mesmerizing quality of the narrator’s hips, along with their unpredictability. I call it the Magical Motive. (Example 4.23.)

![Example 4.23 Magical Motive mm. 41-43](image)

There is also evidence of text painting. In measure thirty-five, Walker composes an octave leap in the vocal line to emphasize the text: “these hips”. She paints the
word “free” by utilizing a melodic pattern of a minor third, F₅ to Ab₅, sustained over six measures to symbolize the narrator’s exuberance over her freely moving hips. (Example 4.24.)

![Example 4.24 Text painting in voice mm 46-49](image)

Text painting is also found in the accompaniment as the narrator describes the affect her powerful hips have had on one particular man. To capture the casting of a spell, Walker uses a three-note, thirty-second figure in the right hand of the piano. It is followed by an arpeggiated figure containing a half note trill, conjuring the image of a top spinning, even as the man spins under the spell of the narrator’s seductive hips. (Example 4.25.)

![Example 4.25 Musical imagery of “casting of a spell” mm 79-81](image)

**Performance Suggestions**

I suggest the singer approach this song by starting at the end and working her way backwards. The singer should pay close attention to each chromatic line, beginning at the end of
each phrase and working backwards. Be sure to concentrate on the rhythms then the notes. In order to capture the essence of the character’s personality, both the rhythms and the chromatic vocal line must ultimately appear to be sung in an effortless and carefree manner. (Example 4.26.)

Example 4.26 Chromatic line mm. 87-88

Once the singer is able to properly execute all of the chromatic passages, she should focus her attention on the sections where the accompaniment is either sparse or non-existent. These sections are difficult because the initial pitches of the phrase are completely unsupported by the keyboard and the preceding measures do not contain the pitch. The singer must either memorize the correct note through repetition or through memorizing the interval between the last note of the proceeding phrase and the initial note of the proceeding phrase. (Example 4.27.)
Example 4.27 Initial sparse accompaniment followed by no accompaniment of vocal line mm. 70-72

In measures 76-78, one can see another example of sparse or non-existent accompaniment. Here, the three-note, thirty-second figure may be used to reestablish the pitch. This will require the singer to listen intently to the section over and again, training her ear in preparation to quickly hear the initial note, G$_5$, of the figure. (Example 4.28.)

Toward the end of the piece, the singer will encounter one of the lengthier phrases of the song- a six measure sustained phrase on the word “free,” on the pitches F$_5$ – Ab$_5$. With no dynamic indication, one could employ a *messa di voce*, to assist in maintaining sufficient breath energy for the entire phrase. In addition, the singer will also notice the accents on each Ab$_5$. Here, the singer should slide between pitches while, using straight

tone. By approaching each Ab$_5$ in this manner, the singer will create the buoyant, whimsical texture intended by the composer. (Example 4.24.)

In the fourteen note chromatic line of the “Magical Motive,” I suggest the singer employ straight tone for the duration of the phrase, as Walker intended it to contain a jazz-like texture. I
encourage the singer to consider breathing immediately before the chromatic line to ensure that she has enough breath to sustain the length of the phrase. (Example 4.23.)

As the narrator in the poem considers the characteristics of her hips, beginning on the text: “these hips”, she absentmindedly repeats the phrase four times. The phrases sit in the lower register of the soprano vocal range; therefore, I recommend the singer almost speak the notes of this section. This approach can produce a forward sound, creating a sufficient amount of volume. (Example 4.29.)

The voice enters in measure five, as the narrator proudly exclaims: “these hips are big hips”. Here, the single word “big” should be emphasized with the phrase and may be achieved by accenting it upon arrival on the downbeat of measure 7. This emphasis highlights the narrator’s intended sassiness found in the text. (Example 4.30.)

Example 4.29 Approaching notes in the lower register mm. 31-33

Example 4.30 Word accents mm. 5-7
Walker’s Application of Clifton’s Poetry

After a brief side-by-side comparison of the two texts, it is clear that Walker has once again used Clifton’s poem as inspiration. Her treatment of this poem is similar to the first song of the cycle in that she embellishes the text as well as omits portions; however the treatment is dissimilar with regard to the title. In the first song, the title was changed but in the remaining four songs, the titles are unchanged.

**homage to my hair**

when I feel her jump and dance  
I hear the music! my God  
I’m talking about my nappy hair  
she is a challenge to your hand  
black man,  
she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens  
black man,  
she can touch your mind  
with her electric fingers and  
the grayer she do get, good God,  
the blacker she do be!

**Homage to My Hair**

When I feel her jump and dance,  
When I feel her jump up and dance,  
When I feel her jump up and dance,  
I hear the music, my God!  
I’m talking about my hair,  
my nappy, nappy hair.  
She’s a challenge to your hand,  
my man,  
she’s as tasty on your tongue as  
good, good greens.  
She can touch your mind with  
her electric fingers.  
And the grayer she do get,  
the grayer she do get,  
and the grayer she do get, good God!  
the blacker she do be!  
Ooo ooo Ooo ooo  
I’m just talking about my hair!

4th Song “Homage to My Hair”

**Basic Characteristics**

- Vocal line: disjunct with interval leaps up to an octave
- Range: F3-Ab5
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: simple duple meter (4/4)
- Key Scheme: F major
- Rhythm: Lively; quarter note equals 112
- Accompaniment: sparse
Level of Difficulty: I would assign this song to upper-class undergraduates and graduate students, particularly those with fuller, richer sounds in the middle voice.

**Song Overview**

Similar to the first two songs, likewise the fourth song describes and pays homage to a part of the narrator’s body, her hair. “Homage to My Hair” finds the narrator expressing the various characteristics of her “nappy” hair with admiration and joy. She refers to her hair as a person, using the pronoun “her” instead of “it.” When the narrator feels her hair “jump up and dance,” she hears music. One can imagine her with an afro pick in hand, standing at the bathroom sink in front of the mirror, hearing the popping and snapping as she runs the comb through her kinky hair. At one point, she compares it to food: “she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens”. In another verse the narrator attributes to her hair mental powers: “she can touch your mind/ with her electric fingers…”. The narrator ends her description exclaiming, “the grayer she do get, good God/ the blacker she do be”. Meaning, that as her hair changes from black to gray; it becomes coarser, drier, and kinkier, much more like that of many African-American’s hair in a natural state.

The song begins with the instruction offered to the accompanist, “Freely, as an introduction.” A lively atmosphere is instantly established with the arpeggiated figure played in the higher registers of the piano. This figure also symbolizes the jumping and dancing motions of the narrator’s hair. (Example 4.31.)
Example 4.31  Arpeggiated keyboard figure of introduction, m.1

*Homage to My Hair* differs from the other songs within this cycle as it does not begin with a lengthy introduction. Only one measure precedes the vocal entrance, matching the spirited enthusiasm of the arpeggiated figure: “When I feel her jump and dance”.

![Example 4.31](image)

Example 4.32  Text painting in voice mm. 2-3

Walker employs text painting in the voice as well on the words “jump” and “dance,” setting each on a the upper note of a perfect fifth interval. (Example 4.32.)

The rhythmic patterns of the accompaniment function to reinforce, as well as unify the poetry and music. It seeks to imitate the energetic sounds of the narrator’s African American hair. The rhythm also perpetuates movement within the song and further enhances the celebratory mood of the narrator. (Example 4.33.)

![Example 4.32](image)
Example 4.33 Energetic rhythmic patterns of the accompaniment mm. 7-8

Walker responds to the upbeat mood of the poem and musically illustrates the text “jump and dance” in the keyboard accompaniment by employing various piano figures: broken chords, arpeggiated figures, and rolled chords. These musical figures change throughout the song, signaling different musical sections. One of the figures appears in a recurring pattern that begins in the piano and ultimately is shared in the voice at the end of the song. The syncopated “Hair”/“Jump” Motive, appearing in measure 11 represents the narrator’s enthusiasm and deep satisfaction with her kinky locks. (Example 4.34.)

Example 4.34 Syncopated “Hair”/ “Jump” Motive mm. 11-12

This cycle contains various unconventional elements such as scat singing and choreography. Following the introduction of the “Hair”/“Jump” Motive, Walker introduces one of those unconventional elements for the first time in this cycle, that is speech. The instruction offered to the vocalist is “spoken (in a lively manner),” as the narrator boasts: “i’m talking about my nappy hair!” (Example 4.35.)
Broken chords appear in measure seventeen, signaling a different musical section. (Example 4.36.) The piano line contains thirty-second note figures in the right hand and eighth note figures in the left hand, creating a flurry of sound and motion beneath the narrator’s description of the characteristics of her hair:

she is a challenge to your hand
she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens
she can touch your mind
with her electric fingers

spoken (in a lively manner)

Example 4.35 Unconventional element mm. 14-16

Example 4.36 Piano figures used to depict movement of hair mm. 19-21
Performance Suggestions

I recommend the singer first listen to the accompaniment several times before learning the vocal line. By familiarizing herself with the piano part and reading the text, the singer can develop a clear idea of the moods associated with this song. Pay close attention to the text, pronouncing it in a southern dialect, much like the text of *Bones, Be Good!* Once the singer learns the correct pitches and rhythms, she can begin singing through the song. For her first entrance, I suggest the singer take her inspiration from the excitement displayed in the accompaniment, particularly in measures 4 and 5.

![Example 4.37 Mood of song created in accompaniment mm. 4-6](image)

Walker has given the singer an opportunity to interpret the majority of each phrase by excluding accent markings. In order to capture the energetic quality of the narrator’s hair, I suggest the singer accent each note of the triplet figure in measure 5: “jump up and dance”. (Example 4.37.)

It is also recommended that the singer place *staccati* markings over the first four eighth notes in measure 7. This will further enhance the buoyant mood of the piano line. (Example 4.33.)
In measures 9 through 11, the tone of the song briefly changes. The phrase: “I hear the music, my God” finds the narrator relishing her beautiful hair. The singer should approach this phrase with an indulgent tone, a direct contrast to the previous spirited mood. The singer can create this brief change in mood by singing the phrase in a *molto legato*. I recommend that she slide down without vibrato from C₅ to F₄ in measure ten. Walker has written an *appoggiatura* followed by a half note *fermata* then a whole note. To maintain the mood of the narrator and highlight importance in the text, the singer should accent the *appoggiatura* by elongating the note. As she moves from the *fermata* to the whole note, I suggest the singer slide down using vibrato. (Example 4.38.)

![Musical notation for measures 9-11]

**Example 4.38** Establishing a new mood through appoggiatura and fermata mm. 9-11

Initially, the unconventional element of speech might prove to be difficult for the singer. In order to capture the appropriate style, she must practice speaking the words within the measures allotted. It is important that she find a way to project her voice through correct placement, so the sound will carry without straining her vocal instrument. Here, I recommend the singer practice speaking the text in a higher placement than her natural speaking voice with energy and good breath support. (Example 4.35.)
In measure 21, the composer instructs the singer to slide from the first to the second note on the word “good”. I suggest the singer also slide from the second note down to the third to emphasize the deliciousness of the narrator’s comparison between her hair and “good greens”. (Example 4.39.)

Also seen in musical example 4.39., the narrator continues to describe the unusual characteristics of her hair, boasting of its magical powers: “she can touch your mind/ with her electric fingers”. The word “touch” is set on a quarter note, but I recommend the singer sing this note *staccato*, lightly touching it without vibrato, and thus enhancing the meaning of the text. (Example 4.39.)

![Example 4.39 Vocal slide to emphasize text mm. 21-23](image)

I suggest the singer breathe in measure twenty-eight before “good God” in order to sustain the sound through the second *fermata* and to effectively use the breath as part of her dramatic interpretation. (Example 4.40.)
Ex 4.40 Effective breathing for dramatic interpretation mm. 28-30

The Hair Motive returns at the end of the song and is found in both voice and piano. I recommend the singer perform these measures using straight tone. Pay close attention to each Ab₄, emphasizing each one of them by holding them slightly longer than written. This approach is appropriate to the jazzy style the singer is seeking to capture and the sassy attitude of the narrator. (Example 4.41.)

Example 4.41 Hair Motive in voice and piano mm. 31-33

the thirty eighth year

the thirty eighth year of my life,
plain as bread
round as a cake
an ordinary woman.

The Thirty-eighth Year

The thirty-eighth year of my life,
plain as bread,
as round as a cake
an ordinary woman,
an ordinary woman

I had expected to be smaller than this,
more beautiful,
wiser in African ways,
more confident,
i had expected
more than this.

I will be forty soon.
My mother once was forty.
I will be forty soon.
my mother once was forty.

my mother died at forty four,
a woman of sad countenance
leaving behind a girl
awkward as a stork.
my mother was thick,
her hair was a jungle and
she was very wise
and beautiful
and sad.

I have dreamed dreams
for you mama,
more than once.
I have wrapped me in your skin,
and made you live again,
more than once,
more than once,
I have taken the bones you hardened
and built daughters.
And they blossom and promise fruit
like African trees.
I am a woman now,
an ordinary woman.

In the thirty-eight year of my life,
surrounded by life,
a perfect picture of blackness blessed,
I had not expected this loneliness.

If in the middle of my life
I am turning the final turn
into the shining dark,
let me come to it whole and holy.
Let me come to it unafraid,
out of my mother’s life,
out of my mother’s life,
into my own.

I had expected more than this.
I had not expected to be
an ordinary woman.

if it is western,
if it is the final
Europe in my mind,
if in the middle of my life
i am turning the final turn
into the shining dark
let me come to it whole
and holy
not afraid
not lonely
out of my mother’s life
into my own.

i had expected more than this.

i had not expected to be
an ordinary woman.

5th Song “Thirty-eighth” Year

Due to the length and complexity of the song, I have chosen to divide it into three sections: Section 1, mm. 1-32; Section 2, mm. 33-63; Section 3, mm. 64-94.

Basic Characteristics of Section 1 mm. 1-32

- Vocal line: very fluid with changes of direction
- Range: C₄- G₅
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: frequent meter change tied to poetic stress
- Key Scheme: Bb major
- Rhythm: at a moderate tempo; quarter note equals 80
- Accompaniment: fairly linear texture with measures of marked sparseness
- Level of Difficulty for entire song: Because of its emotional intensity, this song is more appropriate for a graduate student. The climactic parts of the second and third sections may prove too challenging for an undergraduate, possibly causing stress on the voice from improper technique in an attempt to produce the proper dynamics and to create a warmer color in the higher register.

Song Overview

The poems used for the second and fifth songs are both self-reflective. “The Thirty-Eighth Year” is a serious summation of the narrator’s life. One envisions a woman on the cusp of forty, seated wearily at the kitchen table, utterly consumed by emotions and thoughts surrounding the different aspects of her life: present, past, and future. Discontentment with her present physical state is very apparent:

Plain as bread
round as a cake
an ordinary woman.

I had expected to be
smaller than this,
more beautiful,

The narrator’s acute disapproval of herself ends with the culminating statement, “I had expected/more than this”. Abruptly her thoughts shift to the past as she spirals deeper into her daydream.

Her mother’s sudden death at forty-four weighs heavily upon her mind as she recalls the strong bond and kinship she had with her mother:

I have wrapped me
in your skin
and made you live again
more than once.

Clifton’s mother was uneducated by the world’s standards yet wrote beautiful, insightful poetry. The narrator’s pain is unmistakable as she tries yet fails to distinguish her life from that of her mother’s, afraid that the similarities will lead to her own untimely demise as well. Briefly she shakes herself back to reality, the present, and surveys her life with an attitude of gratefulness:

in the thirty-eighth
year of my life,
surrounded by life,
a perfect picture of
blackness blessed,

But this glimmer of hope fades as she sinks into despair, “I had not expected this loneliness”. Abruptly her thoughts shift again, catapulting her into the future where she experiences emotions of anxiety and fear that ultimately transform into determination and hope:

if in the middle of my life
i am turning the final turn
into the shining dark
let me come to it whole
and holy
not afraid
out of my mother’s life
into my own.
into my own.

Emotionally spent, the narrator repeatedly expresses disappointment with herself, her life: “i had expected more than this/ i had not expected to be/ an ordinary woman”. Once more in the present, she has come full circle.

In the first section the narrator deals with present issues of disappointment, frustration, and discouragement. Her mood is reflective. The section begins with an almost eight measure introduction. As the voice enters, the first motive appears. I shall refer to it as the “Thirty-Eighth Year” Motive. (Example 4.42.)

Example 4.42 “Thirty-Eighth Year” Motive mm. 8-10

Broken chords and arpeggiated figures in the keyboard accompaniment serve to perpetuate movement and to establish the narrator’s solemn tone. They also prepare the listener for the narrator’s hypercritical remarks: “plain as bread/ round as a cake/ an ordinary woman”.

In previous songs, Walker’s use of unconventional elements has been discussed. In this song she employs the more conventional element of recitative.

Beginning in measure 11, the composer instructs, “quasi recitative—free tempo.”
Although Walker also set other songs in the cycle by closely approximating speech rhythms in the vocal line, this is the only song where instructions exist regarding this specific style of vocal articulation. (Example 4.43.)

Recitative and lyric recitative comprise approximately half of section one. While the predominant accompaniment figures consist of rolled chords and arpeggiated figures, they do not perpetuate motion. These figures function mainly to support the recitative line by providing some form of support.

Example 4.43 Conventional element: recitative mm. 11-14

Walker employs a one measure motive in the right hand, consisting of an interval of a fourth in an alternating half step pattern. This two-note motive creates tension and illustrates movement. I shall call it the Tension Motive. (Example 4.44.)

Example 4.44 Tension Motive m. 15
The “Thirty-Eighth Year” Motive returns in the keyboard accompaniment in measures 16, 17, 27, and 28. The motive is employed as a small transitional device, representing the narrator’s shifts in thought. (Example 4.45.)

Example 4.45 “Thirty-Eighth Year” Motive used as a transitional device mm. 27-28

As the narrator moves from self reflection to thoughts of her mother, she spirals deeper into her daydream: “I will be forty soon/ my mother once was forty”. The piano figure shifts from rolled chords to an arpeggiated figure. It evokes a dream-like atmosphere that sustains the mood of the song and serves as a foreshadowing of the darkness that ultimately threatens to consume the narrator’s mind. The Tension Motive reappears in the last measure of the section. It is found an octave above its initial appearance, D₆-E♭₆. The musical setting helps to evoke a mental image emerges of a troubled woman dangerously teetering on the edge of an enormous chasm. (Example 4.46.)
Example 4.46 Dream-like figure and return of Tension Motive mm 31-32

**Performance Suggestions of Section 1 mm. 1-32**

In preparation for understanding the musical setting, I encourage the singer to read Clifton’s original poem then Walker’s version several times before learning the song. This will give the singer greater insight into the emotional makeup of the poem and the composer’s intentions. It will also enhance her interpretation and understanding of the proper approach.

After familiarizing herself with the text, I recommend the singer go through the entire song, attaching an emotion to each section. Section one begins with the “quasi recitative, free tempo” found in measures 11 through 14. I suggest the singer accent the beginning word of each of these measures. This will create a natural-sounding speech pattern that reinforces the rhythm and the bitter tone of the speaker. (Example 4.43.)

I recommend the singer approach the second “quasi-recitative” section, measures 17 through 27, in the same manner as the first, noting that Walker excludes breath markings in this cycle, for dramatic effect. I suggest the singer breathe after “beautiful” in measure 19 and not breathe after “ways” in measure 21 for dramatic effect. (Example 4.47.)
In the second section of the song, the accompaniment creates a dream-like state where the narrator is overwhelmed by memories of the past. Here, I imagine she is searching for her true identity and, at the same time, fearing that she has become her mother. Initially she yearns for her mother’s approval, attempting to justify her life. To express this emotional turmoil, I recommend the singer attempt to become the person she is describing in the text. The singer must emotionally invest in the entire song, but most particularly in this section. Within the text lies unverbalized anguish. The performer should not be afraid to delve into any character, particularly one as complex as the narrator. If the singer is unable to identify with every emotional facet of the narrator, it is my hope that she will be able to relate to several.

Example 4.47 Suggested breaths mm. 19-21

Measure 25 descends into the lower passaggio as the narrator’s tone moves from frustration to bitterness: “I had expected/ more than this”. To create evenness between the registers, I suggest the singer approach measure 25 using the chest voice without incorporating the head voice. It is also recommended for the singer to emphasize or sing through the “m’ of the word “more” to find proper placement of the voice. (Example 4.48.) This practice will also enable the voice to sound in the lower register.
Example 4.48 Lower register approach m. 25

**Basic Characteristics of Section 2 mm. 33-63**

- Melody: fluctuates between stepwise, scale passages and disjunct motion with interval leaps up to an octave
- Range: C₄- Ab₅
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: frequent meter change tied to poetic stress
- Key Scheme: Bb major
- Rhythm: quarter note equals 112 with motion
- Accompaniment: linear with very dense, contrapuntal sections

Sustained triplet arpeggiated figures supply forward movement and maintain both the reminiscent atmosphere of the section and the nostalgic mood of the narrator as she remembers her mother. The figures also depict the constant churning of the narrator’s thoughts. I shall refer to this triplet figure as the Dream Motive. (Example 4.49.)

Example 4.49 Dream Motive mm. 34-35
In this text, the narrator has subconsciously shed the present and has slipped into another place, another time-the past:

i have wrapped me
in your skin
and made you live again
more than once.

The arpeggiated triplets of the Dream Motive continue to perpetuate the ruminating thoughts within the narrator’s mind. The figures also now represent the narrator’s instability and steadily growing agitation. She attempts to justify her life, searching desperately for the approval of her now long deceased mother:

i have taken the bones you hardened
and built daughters
and they blossom and promise fruit
like afrikan trees.

As her turmoil deepens, the narrator loses control. In the midst of heightened confusion, she is no longer able to distinguish between herself and her mother. The narrator continues to be gripped by the paralyzing fear that she may possibly meet the same untimely fate as her mother. Descending quintuplet figures in the right hand of the keyboard accompaniment counter the ascending Dream Motive of the left hand. (Example 4.50.) This contrapuntal motion creates an atmosphere of chaos and turbulence and symbolically represents the narrator’s sense of utter despair.
Example 4.50 Quintuplet figures and Dream Motive in contrasting motion mm. 47-49

The “Thirty-Eighth Year” Motive returns just as darkness threatens to overtake the narrator’s mind. The narrator counters these thoughts by forcing herself back into the present, and a glimmer of light illuminates the darkness. Beginning in measure 59, the piano figures shift abruptly to block chords. From a musical perspective, the figures denote a change in the narrator’s thought process, offering a ray of hope in a seemingly bleak situation. Fully awake now, the narrator surveys her life with a heart of gratitude: “surrounded by life/ a perfect picture of/ blackness blessed”. The sparseness of the accompaniment with the block chords evokes mental clarity and signifies the narrator has regained control of her thoughts. (Example 4.51)

Example 4.51 Sparse accompaniment through block chords mm. 59-61

After the brief moment of clarity, a new thought captures the narrator’s attention, once again pulling her out of a peaceful state: “I had not expected this/loneliness“. This painful realization propels her thoughts down a dark and uncertain, yet inevitable path-the future.
Performance Suggestions for Section 2

As previously stated, the composer has not included breath markings, allowing the singer to breathe in places that seem logical and do not disrupt the flow of the text or music. Typically a singing actress will search through the music for commas within the text for possible breath indications; however, this may not always yield the best results. Measure 35 contains a comma after the word “skin.” Breathing there will interrupt the flow of the line. I suggest the singer breathe at the end of the phrase. (Example 4.52.)

Example 4.52 Acceptable breaths m. 38- 40

Measure 41 presents a similar dilemma to that just described. I suggest the singer breath between the words “once” and “I” to maintain continuity. The breath is only the length of a half note rest but must be deep and calm so that the singer can prepare for the next extended phrase. I suggest the singer begin piano and slowly crescendo to the end of the phrase. (Example 4.53.)

The narrator’s thoughts continue to spiral uncontrollably. To symbolize the narrator’s mental instability, Walker employs fluctuating rhythmic patterns within the
accompaniment, beginning in measure 46. Long, legato phrases with occasional
octave leaps evoke the narrator’s heightened mood as she attempts to justify her existence: “and
they blossom and promise fruit/ like afrikan trees” (m. 47-48). This is a challenging vocal
passage it begins in the lower range, touches the middle range then leaps an octave to the high
register (A₄- A₅), which is immediately followed by descending stepwise pitches. The vocal
phrase is long and the accompaniment is dense. I suggest the singer end the four-count note of
the preceding phrase one to two counts early to allow time for mental and physical preparation of
this passage. Begin piano and follow the dynamic markings within the score. The
accompaniment swells during the first full measure of the phrase and continues to grow. While it
is tempting for the singer to produce an equal amount of intensity and volume, I advise against it.
Doing so will cause improper breath management, and it will most likely result in unplanned
breathing. There is an area in measure 47, after the word “fruit”, which appears to be an
appropriate place to breathe. Resist the urge, as a breath there will upset the legato line.
(Example 4.54.)
After this climactic passage, the narrator briefly returns to the present, expressing gratitude: “a perfect picture of/ blackness blessed”. The chordal movement of the accompaniment supports the narrator’s tone and the mood of the phrase. Here, I suggest the singer should emphasize the first syllable of the words “blackness” and “blessed” by slightly elongating the first beat of each word. (Example 4.55.)

Example 4.54 Phrase Approach mm. 47-49

Example 4.55 Word emphasis to support mood mm. 60-61
The narrator’s mood turns from grateful to sad as she remembers another aspect of the present: “I had not expected this/ loneliness”. This passage lies in the lower register of the voice, ending on a sustained C₄ and is marked piano, yet the voice still must carry in the this register just as it does in the middle and high registers. I suggest the singer’s approach to this phrase be similar to that of measure twenty-five, as the notes and are generally the same. Use chest voice only and sing through the “l” of “loneliness” for emphasis and correct vocal placement. (Example 4.56.)

Example 4.56 Difficult passage approach mm. 62- 64

This three measure phrase with the fermata on the last note (C₄) should be sung “more slowly, freely,” as instructed by the composer. I advise against breathing within the phrase. The singer must not be intimidated by this. Understanding proper breath management will enable the singer to negotiate phrases of this length or longer with ease. To practice, begin the phrase at the instructed dynamic level and crescendo slightly on the first syllable of “loneliness.” As the line descends, I suggest a small portamento from the syllable “lone” to the syllable “li” (F₄ to C₄). As the last note of the phrase is sustained, crescendo to forte. (Example 4.56.)
Basic Characteristics of Section 3 mm. 64-94

- Melody: fluid; stepwise, scale passages
- Range: C₄- G₅
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: frequent meter change tied to poetic stress
- Key Scheme: C major
- Rhythm: quarter note equals 112 with motion
- Accompaniment: dense with thick chords with moments of linear texture

A five measure interlude connects sections two and three of the piece and figures in the piano set the emotional mood of the song. It comments on the preceding music by referencing a minor third interval in the left hand to foster tension, uncertainty and ambiguity of the narrator’s future. Shifting piano figures create an atmosphere charged with apprehension. (Example 4.57.)

Example 4.57 Piano figures set emotional mood of song mm. 65-68

The Triplet Motive returns within the five-measure interlude, to provide musical agitation, reinforcing the narrator’s reeling thoughts. She contemplates the future with trepidation. Similar to her daydream of the past, the narrator is fearful, yet there is also an unmistakable sense of determination. Half note, dotted half note, and whole note figures in the
left hand of the piano denote the narrator’s timely resolve: “if in the middle of my life/ i am
turning the final turn/ into the shining dark”. (Example 4.58.)

Example 4.58 Text illustration in piano figures mm. 72-74

Undergirded by courage, the narrator verbalizes one of her deepest desires regarding her
imminent fate: “let me come to it whole/ not afraid”. Flexible quadruplet and quintuplet rhythmic
patterns function to emphasize motion, reinforce the text, and establish an atmospheric change of
growing apprehension. (Example 4.59.)

The narrator’s struggle to free herself from the fears associated with her mother’s
untimely fate builds with the text: “out of my mother’s life”. A descending two measure
sequence repeats in the left hand, evoking a mental image of the narrator stepping out of the fear
that has imprisoned her mind since her mother’s death. (Example 4.60.)
Example 4.59 Flexible rhythmic patterns mm. 75-78

The composer instructs an “accel.” (sic) that begins in measure 82 and ends in measure 84, immediately ending before the narrator’s triumphal moment on the word “own”. Quintuplet figures in both hands of the piano mark the fiercest portion of the narrator’s mental struggle. The movement conjures a mental image of a captured bird, beating its wings against the walls of its prison, never surrendering the

Example 4.60 Two measure sequence mm. 80-81

hope of freedom until it soars once more against the wind. A sustained whole note chord beneath the commotion denotes this degree of tenacity within the narrator. (Example 4.61.)

Example 4.61 Quintuplet piano figures mm. 83-84
Piano figures shift again in the climactic passage (mm. 85-89). Block chords and broken chords create a sense of release, symbolizing the narrator’s victory. She has overcome fear and darkness. (Example 4.62.)

Example 4.62 Text illustration in accompaniment mm. 85-88

However, the narrator’s victory is short lived. There a brief pause, as she returns to the present. Once more the narrator finds herself angry and discontent: “I had expected more than this/ I had not expected to be an ordinary woman”. Dust from the battle has settled. The narrator’s mind is clear. Sparseness in the accompaniment reinforces the bitter tone of the narrator, moving abruptly from a chordal to a linear form. She has conquered the past. This expressive conclusion appears to present that the narrator has made peace with her deepest fears and now finds herself on the brink of another battle of the mind. (Example 4.63.)

Example 4.63 Unaccompanied portion evokes clarity mm 89
**Performance suggestions of Section 3**

Measure 73 presents another ambiguous place for an awkward breath. To create continuance of the phrase, avoid the possible breath after the word “turn” in the measure, not taking it until measure 75, after “dark”. This breath will occur within a phrase yet will not disrupt the line. (Example 4.64.)

![Example of music notation](image)

**Example 4.64** Acceptable place to breathe mm. 73-75

In this section the narrator becomes courageous and moves away from the tormenting thoughts that have caused her to believe she will share the same fate as her mother: “out of my mother’s life/ into my own”. In measures 83 and 84, the descending quintuplet pattern in the right hand of the accompaniment set against the ascending quintuplet pattern in the left hand, evokes the fierce battle waging in the narrator’s mind.

The same measures are the densest section of the song and, if not approached correctly, can prove to be vocally taxing. When confronted by a dense accompaniment, singers often attempt to match the intensity of the piano and to overwork the voice for fear of not being heard. The singer should remain focused on legato singing, a calm approach, breathe deeply, and not allow her body to become tense in response to the turmoil initiated in the keyboard accompaniment. To foster a sense of calm, the singer must know precisely where to breathe. In
this case, I suggest breathing after the word ‘into’ as adequate breath inhalation is required for the lengthy phrase that follows. (Example 4.65.)

**Example 4.65** Difficult passage approach mm. 83- 84

Furthermore, ending this phrase on a well-sung G₅, sustained for over four measures, requires careful planning. In addition to the breath intake discussed, I recommend beginning the phrase *mezzo piano*, continue to *crescendo*, and then *fortissimo* until the *ritardando* in measure 88. (Example 4.66.)

**Example 4.66** Dynamic suggestions mm. 85-88
Walker’s Application of Clifton’s Poetry

_Three Songs for Lucille_ is an unpublished cycle comprised of three of Clifton’s poems that were also chosen from her _Ordinary Woman_ and _Two-Headed Woman_ collections. The poems are autobiographical. The first poem title, _I was born with twelve fingers_, was renamed _fantastic hands_ in Walker’s cycle. It is loosely based on the poem, containing very little of Clifton’s original poetry, yet the poet’s intent remains clear. Upon reading Clifton’s poem, one learns that at least one female in her family from the last three generations of women was born with twelve fingers: Clifton’s mother, herself, and one of her daughters. This unique trait descends from Clifton’s ancestral home, Dahomey, located in the Republic of Benin, West Africa. Dahomean women were fierce warriors of noble blood, trained to fight alongside the men in defending their land and in conquering neighboring tribes. Many of these women were believed to possess magical powers.

_i was born with twelve fingers_  

```
i was born with twelve fingers  
like my mother and my daughter.  
each of us  
born wearing strange black gloves  
extra baby fingers hanging over the sides of our cribs  
and dipping into milk.  
somebody was afraid we would learn to cast spells  
and our wonders were cut off  
but they didn’t understand  
the powerful memory of ghosts.  
now we take what we want  
with invisible fingers  
and we connect  
my dead mother  
my lively daughter  
and me  
through our terrible shadowy hands.
```

“fantastic hands”

```
if our grandchild be a girl,  
I wish for her fantastic hands,  
twelve spikey fingers  
symbols of our tribe.  
She will do magic with them,  
she will turn personal abracadabra,  
abracadabra,  
remembered from dahomean women  
wearing extravagant gloves.
```
6th Song “fantastic hands”

Basic Characteristics

- Vocal line: fluid, sustained phrases; large intervals used for dramatic emphasis
  Range: Eb<sub>4</sub> – Ab<sub>5</sub>
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: frequent meter change tied to poetic stress
- Key Scheme: Gb major
- Rhythm: Quickly quarter equals 120
- Accompaniment: moderately linear
- Level of Difficulty: I would assign this song to an upper class undergraduate or a graduate student.

Song Overview

As the song unfolds, one imagines the narrator is a grandmother talking excitedly about the upcoming birth of her grandchild. While the sex of the unborn child is unknown, she remains hopeful that this new life will be female. And above all, the narrator’s wish is for the unborn babe to possess an unusual trait that has appeared throughout the generations of this family: “fantastic hands, twelve spikey fingers symbols of our tribe”. She believes that these extra fingers are magical, describing them as “extravagant gloves”.

Fantastic Hands begins with a prelude of six measures, followed by a brief introduction of one and a half measures. Unlike previous songs in this chapter that contain introductions, the music of the prelude appears only in the opening and ending measures. While the prelude and the introduction share similar rhythmic patterns, the music differs. A familiar, yet unconventional element employed within the former cycle returns here for the singer, choreography. The composer instructs, “Singer admires her fingers, moving them in time with the music.” Rolled chords capture the movement of the fingers, evoking a mental image of the narrator weaving
magic with her hands. A recurring triplet pattern begins in the third measure and continues through measure 17. I shall refer to it as the “Hands” Motive because it illustrates the continuous movement of the narrator’s fingers and captures her excitement about her unborn grandchild. The “Hands” Motive also establishes an atmosphere of expectancy and serves to perpetuate the motion of the song. (Example 4.67.)

Example 4.67 “Hands” Motive mm. 1-3

The narrator carefully studies her hands, gliding her fingers through the air in a bewitching manner. No longer able to contain her enthusiasm, she exclaims: “If our grandchild be a girl/ I wish for her fantastic hands”. The piano line maintains the narrator’s anticipatory mood as it, through the triplet figure, consistently fosters movement throughout. (Example 4.68.)

Example 4.68 Piano figures illustrate hand movement mm. 7-9
The narrator confidently shares more of her hopes for the child: “twelve spikey fingers, symbols of our tribe”. To further illustrate the text, Walker repeatedly sets an identical accompaniment from measures 7 to 14. It continues in the right hand until measure 18. Measure 18 denotes a change in the narrator’s mood. Her nervous chatter ends abruptly as she contemplates the future. Hope rises as the narrator’s thoughts shift to the possibility of unimaginable greatness possessed within this child. The linear texture of the accompaniment within the measure evokes the clarity and wisdom of the older woman. (Example 4.69.)

Example 4.69 Linear textural support mm.17-18

Sustained block chords capture the grave mood of the narrator as she professes in hushed tones: “She will do magic with them/ she will turn personal abracadabra”. An eighth note cluster conjures an image of the casting of a spell. (Example 4.70.)

Three unaccompanied measures follow. The narrator speaks proudly of her ancestry: “abracadabra/remembered from dahomean women/ wearing extravagant gloves”. The image arises of an older woman seated erect. Her steady gaze is focused on
Example 4.70 Text painting in piano mm. 19-20

an image visible only to herself, as if speaking prophetically over her grandchild. (Example 4.71.)

Example 4.71 Unaccompanied measures mm. 22-24

The “Hands” Motive returns in the five measure postlude, preceding a measure of rolled chords. The composer has instructed, “Singer moves fingers in time with the music.” Broken chords appear for the first time as the narrator’s fingers glide effortlessly through the air as if
pronouncing enchantment. An illusion arises of the imperceptible weaving of magic. (Example 4.72.)

Example 4.72 Postlude mm. 26-29

**what the mirror said**

listen,
you a wonder.
you a city
you got a geography
of your own.
listen,
somebody need a map
to understand you.
somebody need directions
to move around you.
listen,
woman,
you not a no-place
anonymous
girl;
mister with his hands on you
he got his hands on
some
damn
body!

“**what the mirror said**”

listen,
you a wonder.
you a city of a woman.
you got a geography of your own.
listen,
somebody need a map to understand you.
somebody need directions to have around you.
listen,
woman,
you not a no-place anonymous girl,
a no-no-no-no place anonymous girl;
mister with his hands on you
he got his hands on
some
damn
body!
7th Song “what the mirror said”

Basic Characteristics

- Vocal line: unmelodic with wide intervallic leaps
- Range: E₄- G₅
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: frequent meter change tied to poetic stress
- Key Scheme: A minor
- Rhythm: quarter note equals 72
- Accompaniment: linear texture
- Level of Difficulty: This song can be performed by a undergraduate or graduate student.

Song Overview

*What the mirror said* takes place as a woman prepares for the day, carefully dressing and grooming in front of the mirror. While doing so, her reflection assumes a life of its own and begins to speak. It affirms the woman:

```
listen,
you a wonder.
you a city
of a woman.
```

As the woman studies herself, her reflection encourages her, reminding her that she is unique:

“you got a geography of your own”. One can imagine the woman’s intense perusal of her reflection, fighting with negative self-images from the past. Just as they seem to overtake her thoughts completely, her reflection again demands her attention:

```
woman,
you not a noplace
anonymous
girl;
```

The song begins with a four measure interlude, consisting of broken chords. An unconventional element employed in this cycle and in *No Ordinary Woman!* reappears: choreography. The
composer instructs, “Singer admires herself in the mirror” in the first two measures. In measures 3 and 4, the composer instructs, “She primps.” (Example 4.73.)

The structure of the melodic shape is atypical of the stepwise melodic passages present in songs previously discussed. There is no stepwise motion. The melodic line moves in intervals of thirds and fifths, supporting the narrator’s vocal inflections, in recitative fashion. The sparseness of the accompaniment symbolizes the confidence and control of the narrator as she scrutinizes her reflection in the mirror. She quickly counteracts feelings of self doubt and negative body image issues with optimistic appraisal of herself:

listen,
you a wonder.
you a city
of a woman.

While the accompaniment is sparse, the dissonance within the harmonic texture is utilized to sustain the dramatic tension of the narrator and to control forward movement. Chromatic alterations of chords emphasize tension within, creating a fluctuation between stress and relaxation, as well as a sense of expectancy. (Example 4.74.)
The piano figures shift between broken chords, staccato eighth note chords, sustained block chords, and rolled chords as the narrator’s inner dialogue continues: “you got a geography/ of your own”. (Example 4.74.)

The rhythmic structure of the vocal line reinforces the text. It is patterned

Example 4.74 Functions of dissonance mm. 7-8

after speech. As a result, there are frequent changes in meter. In certain passages, metric shifts occur every measure. Fluctuations of the rhythmic structure also function to create tension within the song. (Example 4.75.)

Example 4.75 Metric Organization mm.13-14

The narrator affirms herself, recognizing her value: “you not a no-place/ anonymous/ girl”. Chromatic alterations embellish the melody further painting the text. The disjunct melodic
line supports her growing agitation with intervals ranging from a third to a seventh.

(Example 4.76.)

As mentioned earlier, declamatory and lyric recitative comprise the major portion of the song, closely approximating speech rhythms. Measure 19 presents an element that appears for the first time in this cycle: speech. The composer instructs, “spoken, not on pitch.” (Example 4.77.)

The two measure postlude (m.21) is a moment of reminiscence as the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic material of the prelude return. There is also a reappearance of choreography. One imagines the narrator observing herself with self adoration and confidence. (Example 4.78)

Example 4.76 Chromatic alterations mm. 15-17

Example 4.77 Element of Speech mm. 19-20
Example 4.78 Staging directions for the singer mm. 21-22

Performance Suggestions

This recitative-like passage demands careful attention to Walker’s setting of the words in order to capture the word flow and emphasis on certain words that she intended. The singer is encouraged to observe precisely the pitches, rhythms and meter changes until they are thoroughly and accurately memorized. In so doing the singer will discover the dramatic content envisioned by the composer. To ensure sufficient sound within the lower register of the voice, humming these passages might enable the singer to find easily the proper vocal placement.

As the singer begins working through the song, I suggest paying close attention to several passages that can prove challenging. In measure 5 the voice enters unaccompanied. The difficulty lies in finding the correct starting pitch. The singer must either memorize her beginning note or train her ear to find the note within the final broken chord of the left hand in the preceding measure. I suggest the singer alternate between playing the four-note figure then her beginning pitch until she is able to find it without the piano’s assistance. (Example 4.79.)

Measure 15 presents the singer with the challenge of finding an appropriate breath within the phrase. The passage begins in measure 14 with a *ritardando* and
Example 4.79 Initial pitch approach mm 4-5

crescendo in measure 16. There is also a fermata over the last note of the measure. I advise the singer to breathe between the second and third beats of measure 15. The sparse accompaniment allows the singer to perform the song at a comfortable tempo. I recommend setting the tempo at a slightly slower pace than the prelude. Doing so will provide the singer enough time to take an adequate breath in measure 15. (Example 4.76.)

sisters
me and you be sisters.
we be the same.
me and you
coming from the same place.
me and you
be greasing our legs.
touching up our edges.
me and you
be scared of rats
be stepping on roaches.
me and you
come running high down purdy street one time
and mama laugh and shake her head at me and you.
me and you
got babies

“different sisters”
me and you be sisters.
we be the same.
me and you coming from the same place.
me and you be greasing our legs
touching up our edges.
me and you be scared of rats
be stepping on roaches,
roaches, roaches, roaches.
me and you coming running,
down purdy street one time
and mama laugh and shake her head at me and you
me and you got babies
got thirty-five
got black,
black,
got thirty-five  
got black  
let our hair go back  
be loving ourselves  
be loving ourselves  
be sisters.

only where you sing  
i poet.

8th Song “different sisters”

Basic Characteristics

- Vocal line: fluid; contains changes in direction
- Range: C₄–A₅
- Tessitura: middle voice
- Metric Organization: simple quadruple (4/4) and simple duple (2/2)
- Key Scheme: C major
- Rhythm: half note equals 60, as a gentle tango
- Accompaniment: fairly dense
- Level of Difficulty: I would assign this song to either an upper class undergraduate or a graduate student.

Song Overview

The last song of the cycle, Different Sisters, is originally entitled Sisters. The narrator recalls some of her favorite childhood memories, those associated with her sister and the many experiences shared throughout the years: “me and you be sisters. we be the same…coming for the same place”. She goes on to recount some of their likes and dislikes, fearful and fearless moments, and one particularly special memory involving their mother:

me and you  
come running high down purdy street one time  
and mama laugh and shake her head at  
me and you
The narrator moves from childhood memories to more recent ones. She talks of how she and her sister became adults, had babies and turned thirty-five. They also let their hair return to its natural state and each woman has learned to love and accept herself. While the similitude they share is great, there is one very distinct difference: “only where you sing i poet”.

“different sisters” begins similarly to the first song of the cycle, fantastic hands, in that each contains a prelude and an introduction. It opens with a four measure prelude followed by a four measure introduction. Piano figures of the prelude create a lighthearted atmosphere that coincides with the narrator’s happy mood of fond childhood memories. The composer instructs, “Quickly, playfully, as young schoolgirls.” (Example 4.80)

At measure 5 the composer instructs, “as a gentle tango.” Figures in the accompaniment shift, establishing a relaxed atmosphere and the cheerful mood of the narrator. A one measure sequence appears, representing the deep, easeful connection between the narrator and her sister. The rhythmic pattern of the sequence perpetuates movement. I shall refer to it as the “Tango” Sequence. (Example 4.81.)

Example 4.80 Prelude mm 1-4

The “Tango” Sequence continues as the narrator begins reminiscing of fond, childhood memories: me and you be sisters/ we be the same”. The melodic line of
Example 4.81 “Tango” Sequence mm 5-8

measures 9 and 10 are almost identical to measures 11 and 12, denoting the sameness of the girls.

Text painting is employed in the narrator’s recounting of specific adolescent occurrences. A descending vocal line, along with a rolled chord in measure 21 suggests the action: “greasing our legs”. Staccato quarter notes in the voice precede the composer’s instruction, “random dyads up the keyboard” illustrate the activity: “touching up our edges”. An ascending melodic line in measure 24 indicates a fear of rodents as the narrator remarks: “you and me be scared of rats”. A descending line symbolizes the girls: “stepping on roaches”. A repeated interval of a minor third appears on the word “roaches” throughout measure 27, evoking an image of the girls attempting to stomp on the insects. (Example 4.82.)

Example 4.82 Text painting mm. 21-23

The narrator describes one of her warmest childhood memories: “me and you come running high down purdy street one time/ and mama laugh and shake her head”. Descending
quintuplet figures in the piano and ascending sextuplet figures in the voice illustrate the running of the girls. (Example 4.83.) Text painting also occurs on the words “high”- two tied half notes on A₅- and “down”- a descending triplet pattern.

![Example 4.83 Quintuplet figures m.32](image)

In measure 42, piano figures shift from the “Tango” Sequence to block chords. The shift occurs at a significant dramatic point in the text and announces the beginning of a different musical section. The figures evoke a sense of maturity as the childhood innocence represented by the “Tango” Sequence disappears. They also capture the contemplative mood of the narrator as her mind wanders to more recent memories: “me and you/ got babies/ got thirty-five”. (Example 4.84.)

The narrator comments further on her and her sister’s similarities as the dense texture of sustained chords creates an atmosphere of warmth and signifies the narrator’s heartfelt sincerity and love for her sister. Intervals of a fifth are employed at phrase beginnings in measures 46 through 50, denoting the strong emotional bond between the women. The application of the intervals also serves to illustrate the word
Example 4.84 Predominant piano figures mm. 42-44

“loving” and signifies the women’s similitude. (Example 4.85.)

Example 4.85 Text painting in vocal line mm. 46-48

Performance Suggestions

As in the previous song, *what the mirror said*, the beginning pitch of the vocal line can prove challenging to hear. I advise the singer to pay close attention to the eight measures that precede the entrance of the voice. Find each measure that contains the starting pitch. Play those measures to decide which one will best assist in helping the singer begin on the correct pitch. I suggest the singer focus on the third measure. The measure begins and ends with the singer’s entering note. The linear texture of the measure will provide the singer with timely, precise note identification. Upon securing the note, I recommend the singer lightly hum it until one measure before the entrance of voice. The singer may also choose to memorize the pitch if that presents a more effective solution. (example 4.86.)
Example 4.86 Proper pitch identification mm. 2-4

The composer utilizes each component of style to illustrate the text and to create imagery within the song. To further emphasize the text, I suggest the singer accent the word “greasing” by slightly elongating the initial pitch and by singing the line in an exaggerated legato, almost sliding between pitches. (Example 4.87.)

Measure thirty-three begins a four measure passage that requires proper breath management to sustain. Two sextuplet figures open the phrase and precede an ascending line containing two tied half notes on A₅. Breathing after the four-count A₅ may initially seem correct; however, it will disrupt the flow of the phrase. I advise the singer to begin the passage piano, slightly crescendo to mezzo-piano in measure 34, then allow the voice to fully blossom on the A₅ and into the descending triplet pattern. (Example 4.88)
Example 4.88 Breath management mm. 33-35

At points of high emotion the composer employs striking interval changes within the melodic phrase to stress important words. As previously stated, each initial phrase of measures 46 through 50 contains intervals of a fifth. I suggest the singer approach each one in the following manner. The highest pitch of each phrase is an accented G₅ marked *forte.* (Example 4.85) There is a tendency to oversing the note in an attempt to express the emotional mood of the narrator within this particular section. To avoid an incorrect approach, I recommend the singer begin each of the phrases *mezzo-piano* and crescendo into the upper note. To accent the G₅, slightly elongate the note and emphasize the initial consonant “l” singing it on pitch. Doing so will properly align the instrument and discourage any improper usage.

Throughout the song, the narrator recalls various similarities between the women, ranging from childhood to adulthood. The last two phrases of the vocal line indicate another similarity. Each sister expresses herself, yet there is one significant dissimilarity: “only where you sing/ i poet”. To enhance the text of measure 53, I suggest the singer utilize a straight-tone approach, incorporating vibrato on the whole note at the end of the phrase. (Example 4.89.)
The “Tango” Sequence returns in the postlude of measure 57, recapturing the easy, playful atmosphere established in the opening measures. Choreography appears for the first time in the song. The composer instructs, “Singer pretends to write a word of poetry, and then... dots an ‘i’”. (Example 4.90.)

Example 4.89 Interpretive approach mm. 53-54

Example 4.90 Postlude mm. 57-60
CONCLUSION

After intimately studying both cycles, it is evident why Gwyneth Walker’s compositions are enjoyed by performer and audience alike. Each of her compositions is crafted with the utmost care and consideration. Her melodic lines are accessible and energetic. In her compositions for solo voice, the accompaniment is utilized to evoke specific moods and in the depiction of poetic images. Walker has an exceptional ability to capture the essence of the text, unearthing the layers of emotional depth of which Clifton wrote. Within each song, textual themes of love, beauty, and humor represent a joyful, sensitive composer who attributes God as her most important source of energy and inspiration.

The happy collaboration between composer, Gwyneth Walker and poet, Lucille Clifton, has resulted in two song cycles that joyfully celebrate aspects of womanhood. Clifton’s disarmingly frank poems examining her life and her body, serve as a rich palette of colors from which Walker can weave her equally sumptuous musical setting. Her departure into a jazz style, punctuated with choreography serves as an etude for those classical singers interested in exploring the jazz genre or in introducing variety into a recital program. Teachers may also find these works a useful vehicle for helping their more self conscious or withdrawn students to shed their inhibitions.
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_____. E-mail correspondence. Spring 2011.

Ecklof, Estrid. E-mail interview with the author. September 29, 2011.


Notes on *No Ordinary Woman!* Website of Gwyneth Walker—Composer.  

Notes on *Three Songs for Lucille* Website of Gwyneth Walker—Composer.  


## APPENDIX A

### COMPLETE LISTING OF SONG CYCLES IN CURRENT CATALOG AND DISCOGRAPHY INFORMATION

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<tr>
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<td>Handfuls of Love!</td>
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Gwyneth Walker’s Discography: [http://gwynethwalker.com/walkcat.html](http://gwynethwalker.com/walkcat.html)
APPENDIX B

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- **Homage to My Hips** mm. 1-3, 5-7, 13-14, 31-33, 38-39, 41-43, 46-49, 70-72, 76-78, 79-81
- **Homage to My Hair** mm. 1, 2-3, 4-6, 7-8, 9-12, 14-16, 19-21, 22-23, 28-30
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ORIGINAL PUBLICATION DATE: 1980

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On 5/10/2011 1:55 PM, ebony preston wrote:

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Sincerely,
Ebony Preston
VITA

Ebony Preston is a native of Richmond, Virginia. She received her Bachelor of Music in voice performance at the Rudi E. Scheidt School of Music at the University of Memphis, studying under mezzo-soprano Dr. Pamela Gaston. Ebony earned her Master of Music in voice performance at Louisiana State University, where she studied with Professor Patricia O’Neill. During her residency at LSU, she performed several leading roles with the LSU Opera Theater, including Mimi in La Boheme, Suor Angelica in Suor Angelica, Susannah in Susannah, and Meg in Little Women. She plans to complete her Doctor of Musical Arts degree in December 2011.

Other opera credits include Pamina in Die Zauberflöte, Donna Elvira in Don Giovanni, Susanna in Le Nozze di Figaro, Laetitia in The Old Maid and the Thief, Clara in Porgy and Bess, and Sally in A Hand of Bridge. She has appeared with the Alabama Symphony, Mobile Opera, Opera Memphis, Memphis Symphony Orchestra, Pensacola Opera, and San Francisco Opera Theater.

Ebony was a regional finalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, National Finalist in the Rose Palmai-Tenser Vocal Competition, and Grand Prize-Winner of both Opera Birmingham and the National Orpheus Competition. A scholarship recipient of the American Institute of Musical Studies Summer Apprentice Program in Graz, Austria, Ebony participated in a number of concerts and recitals throughout the area.

After a successful world tour of Porgy and Bess, Ms. Preston received raved reviews of her performances in the role of Bess. She returns to Europe in January of next year to perform Bess in opera houses throughout Italy.