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### Style and Form in Louise Talma's Early Songs

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## Style and Form in Louise Talma's Early Songs

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*An examination of Louise Talma's four earliest works for voice and piano, written between 1925 and 1928, and her first extant mature work, Fourteen Groundbass Variations on "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," explores the origins of the composer's early neoclassical style, tracing the development of specific compositional traits from pieces written before her study with Nadia Boulanger in France to works completed after herself becoming an instructor at the Conservatoire Américain de Fontainebleau.*

American composer Louise Talma (1906–96) frequently told colleagues and interviewers the story of how she had gone to the Conservatoire Américain de Fontainebleau in 1926 to study piano and harmony, and had been encouraged there by Nadia Boulanger to return the next year as a composition student.<sup>1</sup> However, Talma, who had also launched a career as a concert pianist,<sup>2</sup> had already begun studying composition seriously with Harold Brockway and Percy Goetschius at the Institute of Musical Art (later the Juilliard School) before traveling to France. In fact, her first extant compositions suggest that she was interested in neoclassic compositional techniques even before entering into study with Boulanger.<sup>3</sup> In this article I survey four of Talma's previously unknown works for voice and piano, charting her initial uses of techniques and approaches found in mature works from her first period (1925–52), and illustrate Talma's continued use of them in her *Fourteen Groundbass Variations on "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"* (1938) for three voices and piano.<sup>4</sup> These works illustrate her use of common neoclassic tropes, including small performing forces, the

<sup>1</sup> Madeleine Goss, *Modern Music-Makers* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1952), 384–85.

<sup>2</sup> "Reception for Miss Louise Talma," *New York Times*, April 1, 1925, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Carole Jean Harris, *The French Connection: The Neo-classical Influence of Stravinsky, through Nadia Boulanger, on the Music of Copland, Talma, and Piston* (Ph.D. Diss., SUNY-Buffalo, 2002), 56.

<sup>4</sup> Talma used some fragments and melodic lines of this 1938 work for her atonal setting of *Variations on "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,"* commissioned by Paul Sperry for tenor/soprano, oboe, flute/violin, and piano, which was completed in 1979.

use of counterpoint and an emphasis on rhythm, extended or otherwise non-traditional harmony, and the presence of the *grande ligne*. This final element, particularly stressed by Boulanger but also by other French composers, was an essential part of a successful composition. Aaron Copland, who studied with Boulanger in the 1920s, defined it as “the sense of forward motion, of flow and continuity in the musical discourse; the feeling for inevitability, for the creating of an entire piece that could be thought of as a functioning entity.”<sup>5</sup>

Talma’s first extant song, “Invocation to the Rain,” is dated 1925. Several other works, including three songs, “On the Surface of Things,” “When the Storm Breaks,” and “Song in the Songless,” and the chamber orchestra work *Isabeau Poème*, all date from 1925 to 1928. The songs, located in the Louise Talma Collection at the Library of Congress, have not been published, although they may have been the works that won the composer the Institute of Musical Arts Seligman Prize in 1927, 1928, and 1929.<sup>6</sup> Their performance history is unknown beyond a single 2011 performance of three of the songs: “Invocation,” “Surface,” and “Song.”<sup>7</sup> *Isabeau Poème*, written for a 1927–1928 Canadian Railways composition contest, is scored for chamber orchestra and uses several French and French Canadian folk songs as its basis; it has never been performed. The four songs for soprano and piano include settings of one English, one Irish, and two American texts, including a poem by Wallace Stevens, whose works Talma used throughout her career. As a whole, these texts demonstrate the origins of her preferences for works involving nature and metaphor. Talma’s compositional techniques in these songs also hint at those she would use in later works, including counterpoint and the privileging of text in shaping a musical line. Although previous scholarship on Talma asserts that her early style in particular owes everything to Boulanger’s influence,<sup>8</sup> these songs suggest that Talma was already working in a style compatible with the French neoclassic aesthetic favored by Boulanger before she became Boulanger’s composition pupil. They provide an important way of tracking Talma’s early development as a composer influenced by this artistic movement.

Talma, who was born in France and lived there on and off until she was about eight,<sup>9</sup> received a traditional early French education. She described her schooling as one that “took for granted strict training in music as well as many other subjects. I learned solfège, etc.,” noting that, “along

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Copland, “Nadia Boulanger: An Affectionate Portrait,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, October 1960, 50.

<sup>6</sup> “Alumni News,” *Fontainebleau Alumni Bulletin*, January 1929.

<sup>7</sup> These three songs were performed at Westminster Choir College on March 3, 2011, by Kathryn Stewart, soprano, and Dan Halbstein, piano.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Cohn and Dorothy Regina Holcomb, *Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, ed. Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1995), 454.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 181.

with my piano studies I learned harmony and counterpoint.”<sup>10</sup> It is clear that she was also exposed to the French neoclassic musical aesthetic of the time as well, attending concerts with her mother and her mother's colleagues.<sup>11</sup> Later, as a serious music student and emerging performer in 1920s New York, Talma would have been able to attend concerts given by the Franco-American Musical Society (later the Pro Musica Society) whose programs, as Carol Oja has documented, were “heavily French—initially [emphasizing] Debussy, Fauré, and Ravel, later Milhaud and Honegger.” She would also have been able to attend concerts of the International Composers' Guild, which emphasized works by Stravinsky and performed representative compositions by most of the members of *Les Six* and later the League of Composers.<sup>12</sup> These early exposures to French and Stravinskian neoclassicism left long-lived impressions on Talma, who expressly cited them as the primary influences of her early career, even comparing her work habits with those of Stravinsky.<sup>13</sup> Joseph Straus describes Stravinsky's music in terms that also help to parse Talma's sectional approaches and her use of what Carole Jean Harris describes as “suggest[ing] continuities while simultaneously maintain[ing] discontinuities.”<sup>14</sup> Straus states that Stravinsky

deploys strong centripetal forces, with each of the formal units asserting its own independence and integrity. But the centrifugal forces are equally strong, holding the sections together. The result in Stravinsky's music is not the gentle harmonious reconciliation of opposing tendencies, but rather a furious tension, at all levels, between the forces of integration and disintegration.<sup>15</sup>

The development of Talma's structural and harmonic use of block forms and (dis)continuous approaches are apparent in these early songs. As she progressed from using very mild manifestations of the approaches to more complex applications, Talma became more comfortable with her own compositional voice. This established the aesthetic for her “first period,” which lasted from 1925 to 1952, when she began to work with serial techniques. Talma's preference for composing vocal works can be seen throughout her career, with its large body of pieces for vocal soloists accompanied by piano, chamber ensemble, or orchestra, and her many choral works, including an oratorio and a full opera. Even in her second, serial period and her last

<sup>10</sup> Louise Talma, “Interview with Louise Talma,” interview by Margaret Fairbank Jory, transcript (New York: Rodgers and Hammerstein Archive, New York Public Library, 1967), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Louise Talma, letter to Thornton Wilder, March 19, 1954, Thornton Wilder Collection, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>12</sup> Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Louise Talma, letter to Thornton Wilder, July 26, 1957, Thornton Wilder Collection, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, *The French Connection*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Straus, *Stravinsky's Late Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xv.

period, which she described as “non-serial atonal,” Talma was invested in the creation of long melodic lines and careful text setting that allowed for full audience comprehension of the words.<sup>16</sup>

Talma’s first complete surviving work, dated April 1925,<sup>17</sup> is a setting of the text of a Hopi corn-planting song called “Invocation to the Rain” that was included in a number of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthologies of “women’s poetry”<sup>18</sup> and was also published as a poem in *Harper’s* magazine in 1903:

Yellow butterflies over the blossoming virgin corn  
with pollen painted faces chase one another in brilliant throng.  
Blue butterflies over the blossoming virgin corn  
with pollen painted faces chase one another in brilliant streams.  
Over the blossoming corn over the virgin corn wild bees hum.  
Over the blossoming corn over the virgin beans wild bees hum.  
Over your field of growing corn all day shall hang the thunder cloud.  
Over your field of growing corn all day shall come the rushing rain.<sup>19</sup>

Like many of her later works, Talma’s setting for “Invocation” is non-developmental, tonally ambiguous, contains abrupt changes in tempo and texture, and, like Stravinsky’s work, is composed in “discrete, highly sectionalized blocks.”<sup>20</sup> Although it is her first extant piece, the work already demonstrates the elements of (dis)continuity cited by Harris. Talma divides the poem into three sections, giving each an individual tempo, texture, and tonal–modal center: The first four lines are marked *allegretto*, the next two lines (“over the blossoming corn”) begin a new section marked *meno mosso*, and the final two lines (“over your field”) return to the original tempo. A sense of continuity is provided by the return to the original tempo as well as a repeated pattern in the dynamics of each section, starting softly and growing in volume, ending with *fortissimo* by the end of the work.

Throughout “Invocation,” the harmonic language shifts between modality and tonality. A recurring motif of quarter, eighth, and three eighth notes is presented first in the piano in measure 1 and is imitated by the voice when it enters in measure 5 (see Example 1); it establishes a rhythmic lilt that Talma later varies in the second phrase and in the third section of the song. The motif’s continued presence further illustrates Harris’s model of simultaneous

<sup>16</sup> Luann Dragone, “Interview with Louise Talma, January 21st 1995,” *Louise Talma: Biography*, <http://www.omnidisc.com/Talma/Biography.html#INTERVIEW>, accessed 5 January 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Louise Talma, “Invocation to the Rain,” Louise Talma Collection, Library of Congress, 1925.

<sup>18</sup> Society for the Study of American Women Writers, *19th Century Women’s Poetry*, <http://www.lehigh.edu/~dek7/SSAWW/writ19CenFolk.htm>, accessed 3 August 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Natalie Curtis, “An American-Indian Composer,” *Harper’s* 107, 631. The image of butterflies as women and girls is given in Michelle Wick Patterson, *Natalie Curtis Burlin: A Life in Native and African American Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 152.

<sup>20</sup> Straus, *Stravinsky’s Late Music*, xv.

*Allegretto*

Yel - low but - ter - flies

o - ver the blos - som - ing vir - gin corn with pol - len pain - ted fa - ces

chase one - an - o - ther in bril - liant throng

**EXAMPLE 1** Talma, "Invocation to the Rain," mm. 1–17. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

(dis)continuity, as it moves from a salon-like pleasantness through a minor variation and finally to a version that uses rhythmic and melodic elements from both major and minor versions, compressing them into shorter, more agitated phrases (see Examples 2a and 2b).

The first two lines begin with D pentatonic in the voice and D major in the piano with arpeggiated, dotted quarter-note chords moving in a pattern of I–IV–I–V, establishing the first of several harmonic progressions in which a more traditional movement of IV–V is interrupted by a I in root position

(a)

Blue but-ter flies o-ver the blos-som-ing vir-gin corn with

*leggiero*

(b)

o-ver your field of grow-ing corn all day shall hang the

*f*

*mf*

thun-der cloud o-ver your field of grow-ing corn all

*mf*

cresc.

day shall come the rush-ing rain

*ff*

**EXAMPLE 2** Talma, “Invocation to the Rain”: (a) mm. 20–25, motif in minor variation; (b) mm. 40–50, final version of motif. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

(seen in Example 1). Talma introduces scale degrees 2 and 7 into the melody only at the end of the first stanza in measure 12, creating a perfect cadence going into measure 13. At this point, Talma shifts the modality toward D Dorian, giving the voice C $\sharp$ s and F $\sharp$ s, and harmonizing the line with major tonic and minor dominant chords (see Example 3). Where the seventh scale

11 pol - len pain - ted fa - ces chase one - an - o - ther in bril - liant

16 through Blue but - ter flies \_\_\_\_\_

22 o - ver the blos - som - ing vir - gin corn \_\_\_\_\_ with pol - len pain - ted fa - ces

28 chase one - an - o - ther in bril - liant streams \_\_\_\_\_

**EXAMPLE 3** Talma, "Invocation to the Rain," mm. 11–33. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).



degree did not occur in the previous phrase until the cadence, here it is used frequently in its lowered form to signify the change in mode. Talma also changes the accompaniment slightly for these lines, marking the part *leggiero* and using quarter notes rather than dotted quarters to achieve a lighter texture. The change in the modality from the first two lines (“Yellow butterflies”) to the second pair (“Blue butterflies”) is heard as movement from a major to a minor inflection, made all the more noticeable by the minor dominants supporting the line. Where the first two lines rose to an E through steady vocal rhythms of repeated quarter-eighth cells and returned pentatonically stepwise to D, the second two lines fall from the E, with the introduction of duplets in measures 28 and 29 destabilizing the established 6/8 meter, as seen in Example 3.

While the first phrase could be turn-of-the-century salon music, the second phrase makes it clear that rougher waters are ahead and that the piece will not proceed as an ordinary, pleasant caprice. Again, Talma employs simultaneous (dis)continuity, in this case by using the same key center for both phrases while altering the modality. Talma’s pattern of destabilization is confirmed when, at measure 32, the harmony moves toward G Dorian and then unexpectedly introduces F# minor two measures before the *meno mosso* at measure 34. The increased chromaticism imbues the song with a building anxiety that is most fully realized in the *meno mosso*.

At the *meno mosso*, Talma not only unexpectedly introduces a new tempo but also changes the meter from 6/8 to 9/8. Taking the dotted-eighth/sixteenth/eighth rhythm from measure 9, she uses the minor second, not previously used in the melody, in the vocal line for the first time, instilling the text of “over the blossoming corn” with urgency and unease. The series of minor seconds in the vocal line is supported by a series of dissonant passages in the melody and piano that, through secondary dominants, eventually wend their way back to a key center of D for the return to Tempo I at measure 40 (see Example 4).

While the tempo and rhythmic material provide continuity from the beginning of the song, the minor seconds—now voiced a fourth higher than in the *meno mosso*—continue to subvert the expectation of resolution. The vocal line in this final section is in its most different incarnation from the original motif, and unexpected upbeat spans an octave provide the largest intervallic space heard in the voice anywhere in the work (see Example 5). Against this discontinuity, however, Talma returns fleetingly to D pentatonic in the voice’s final measures, as the piano part likewise modulates through leading-tone exchanges to D major.

In “Invocation,” Talma’s text setting suggests an approach influenced by the late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century French impressionist and neoclassic tendency to privilege the text above the music, as seen in Fauré’s late songs and in Debussy’s. The setting is almost entirely syllabic, and becomes increasingly more so as the song pushes toward its fretful

34

o - ver the blos - som - ing corn o - ver the vir - gin corn wild bees hum  
*mf* *cresc.*

37

o - ver the blos - som - ing corn o - ver the vir - gin beans wild bees hum  
*p* *cresc.* *mf* *p*

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 34-36) features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics and piano accompaniment in grand staff. The second system (measures 37-39) continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. Dynamics include *mf*, *cresc.*, *p*, and *mf*.

**EXAMPLE 4** Talma, "Invocation to the Rain," mm. 34–39. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

o - ver your field of grow - ing corn all day shall hang the  
*f*

44

thun - der cloud o - ver your field of grow - ing corn all  
*cresc.*

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 40-43) features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics and piano accompaniment in grand staff. The second system (measures 44-46) continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. Dynamics include *f* and *cresc.*

**EXAMPLE 5** Talma, "Invocation to the Rain," mm. 40–46. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

conclusion, contributing to the overall growing sense of urgency: The two-note melisma of the first section on "one another" in the first pair of lines are set syllabically when the words are repeated in the second pair, and the melismas of "brilliant" just before the *meno mosso* and "virgin" in the second section are the last words set like this until the pre-cadential "rushing" in measure 47 (see Examples 6a and 6b). This abandonment of lyricism gives the impression of faster movement to the final cadence, even as the tempo returns to the original *allegretto*. In all, the text is treated carefully so that stresses are mimicked by the musical rhythm and the clarity of the text is well preserved.

Like the text of "Invocation," Wallace Stevens's poem "On the Surface of Things" uses imagery and color to evoke natural elements. Stevens divides

(a)

chase — one - an - o - ther — in bril - liant —

(b)

o - ver the vir - gin beans  
cresc.

**EXAMPLE 6** Talma, “Invocation to the Rain,” two-note melisma settings: (a) mm. 28–30; (b) m. 38. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

his poem into three sections, indicated in Talma’s setting by the change of pitches in the left hand.

I

In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;  
But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four  
hills and a cloud.

II

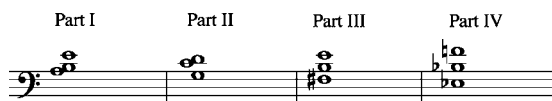
From my balcony, I survey the yellow air,  
reading where I have written,  
“the spring is like a belle undressing.”

III

The gold tree is blue,  
the singer has pulled his cloak over his head.  
The moon is in the folds of the cloak.

Talma’s setting of “On the Surface of Things,” like that of “Invocation to the Rain,” is tonally ambiguous.<sup>21</sup> As in “Invocation,” she frequently uses the minor second melodically in the vocal line while also positioning the melody against the accompaniment to create harmonic tritones and major sevenths. The song, which has no key signature, has four distinct harmonic sections; in keeping with the analysis of (dis)continuity, the sections maintain a static rhythmic quality while shifting pitches in close movement. Part I, in which the pitches in the left hand are A, B, and E, sets the text of Stevens’s first stanza; Part II, beginning at measure 14, sets the poem’s second stanza and is marked by a shift of the pitches to G, C, and D. Part III begins with the second half of measure 25 and sees a shift from an accompanimental pattern of a perfect fourth above a major second to quartal stacks of pitches, here F#, B, and E. Part III sets the first two lines of Stevens’s section III, with the final

<sup>21</sup> Louise Talma, “On the Surface of Things,” Louise Talma Collection, Library of Congress, 1926–1927.



**EXAMPLE 7** Talma, "On the Surface," reduction of the stacks of pitches used in the left hand. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

line of the poem set in Part IV to a left-hand stack of Eb, Bb, and F. The left-hand pitches that define each of the four parts of the song are presented in reduction in Example 7. Although Talma was not consciously working with serial techniques at this point in her career, all of the three-pitch groups she uses here are transpositions of prime form {027}, pitch class set 3-9, presaging her adoption of serialism in 1951.

Each block or section of the song suggests multiple key centers. The melodic line, a canon in which the piano first states the line and the voice enters ten beats later, adds to a sense of uncertainty through the use of melodic major sevenths and minor seconds that do not resolve in a traditional manner (see Example 8). In Part I, the left hand's sustained A, B, and E suggest tonal centers of both E minor and A minor, moving more firmly into A major with the introduction of F# and G# leading to A at the beginning of the second phrase in measure 9 (see Example 7). This centering on A is short lived, however, and by the end of the phrase, Talma has modulated

The image shows a musical score for the song "On the Surface" by Louise Talma. It consists of three systems of music. Each system has a vocal line on a treble clef staff and a piano accompaniment on a bass clef staff. The vocal line includes lyrics: "In my room, the world is beyond my understanding; But when I walk I see that". The piano accompaniment features a canon where the piano part starts ten beats before the voice. Measure numbers 1, 5, and 8 are indicated at the start of each system. Ten-beat intervals are marked between the piano and voice parts in each system.

**EXAMPLE 8** Talma, "On the Surface," mm. 1–10, showing distance of ten beats between the piano right hand and voice. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

into an area outlining C minor and G minor for Part II. At the second half of measure 25 (the beginning of Part III), Talma changes the focus in the left hand from centers of G and C to quartal chords, stacking F $\sharp$ , B, and E together under a melodic line that cadences on E and then A. Part IV, beginning on the last half of measure 32, places E $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , and F $\natural$  in the left hand; Talma assigns a variation on the song's opening to the right hand and then the voice, again using D $\sharp$  in the melody, which—as earlier—suggests a center of E but does not resolve to it (see Example 9). The voice cadences with a drop of a fourth from A to E while the piano continues to sustain E $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , and F $\natural$ , emphasizing the minor second common to the song's first harmonic section with the repeating tritone of its second half. Taken as a whole, the song sounds plaintive and a little raw. The motion of the voice against static accompaniments is restless, and the voice seems to seek a tonal home while wondering at the instability and beauty of the surrounding world.

The song is Talma's first extant work in which counterpoint helps drive the piece, and from this point forward contrapuntal writing occurs

31  
pulled his cloak o - ver his head.

una corda

pp

35  
The moon is in the folds of the

pp

38  
cloak.

dim

**EXAMPLE 9** Talma, “On the Surface,” mm. 31–40. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

with regularity in her pieces, including *Isabeau Poème* (completed in April 1928), "When the Storm Breaks" (likely from 1925 to 1928), and "Song of the Songless" (dated September 1928). The canon in "On the Surface" is simple: For each of the nine lines of poetry, the right hand of the piano states the vocal line ten beats before the voice enters. The consistency with which the canon's entries occur first creates and then fulfills the expectation that the voice will imitate the piano line with each entrance, while the distance of ten beats between the piano and vocal entrances removes any sense of metric stability indicated by the song's regular and unchanging 6/4 meter. Ties and slurs frequently group notes into irregular cells of five and seven beats, further obscuring the work's meter and creating elements of discontinuity that more accurately reflect the text's metrical constructions. While the left hand has steady dotted half notes, its static quality and perpetual dynamic of *piano* relegate it to a color more than a keeper of time.

As she did in "Invocation," Talma sets the text of "On the Surface" by composing music that fits the natural stresses and the rhythm of the words. Taken together, the songs even show similarities in setting individual words: "Yellow" is set the same way in both songs, as two units of time followed by a single unit. "On the Surface" is more melismatic than the earlier song, using melisma as a preparation for cadences. These too display (dis)continuity; each cadence includes a melodic fourth, but in ascending motion in the phrases up to and including the climax at measure 25, and descending on cadence points thereafter (see Examples 10a, 10b, and 10c).

Talma's setting of an anonymous Irish poem appears to date from the same time as "Invocation" and "On the Surface." "When the Storm Breaks" displays many of the same characteristics of the two earlier songs, including those that suggest her interest in French neoclassicism. The song is keyless and changes meter often to accommodate the text. As in the case of the earlier songs, it is composed in distinct blocks and uses Talma's now-familiar techniques of (dis)continuity.

When the storm breaks for him  
 May the trees shake for him  
 Their blossoms down;  
 And in the night  
 The night that he is troubled  
 May a friend wake for him  
 So that his time be doubled.  
 And at the end  
 Of all loving and love  
 May the Man above  
 The Man above  
 Give him a crown  
 Give him a crown  
 Give him a crown.

(a)

(b)

(c)

**EXAMPLE 10** Talma, “On the Surface,” melodic fourths in cadences: (a) mm. 6–7; (b) mm. 22–25; (c) mm. 28–29. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

Where “On the Surface” used imitation at the unison, “When the Storm Breaks” makes use of parallel octaves throughout the piano part, which is in counterpoint with the vocal line. Talma also uses a third voice in the bass to occasionally emphasize a dissonance, usually a whole step (see Example 11). The vocal line moves frequently from minor to major second, creating a melodic function of 2–1 rather than 7–1, descending to an individual line’s starting pitch or to an open fifth with the piano.

Talma stresses the melodic use of the second by repeating it, or repeating the phrases that contain it, as in the first two lines of the poem, which are set identically, beginning on C, then rising to G and dropping back to Db. Similarly, the first two lines of the second stanza repeat a motif moving from Db to Eb to C (see mm. 6–8 in Example 11). Like “On the Surface,” “When the Storm Breaks” is non-developmental, focusing instead on the counterpoint between the voice and piano. Its harmonic language is non-functional, and

The image shows a musical score for the song "When the Storm Breaks" by Louise Talma. It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the first four measures. The lyrics are: "When the storm breaks for him May the trees shake for him Their blos-soms down". The second system shows measures 5 through 8. The lyrics are: "And in the night the night that he is troub-led May a". The score is written in 3/4 time and features a mix of dotted rhythms and straight rhythms in both the vocal and piano parts.

**EXAMPLE 11** Talma, “When the Storm Breaks,” mm. 1–8. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

the two parts are entirely dissimilar apart from the use of major and minor seconds. The play with chromaticism and privilege of the *grande ligne* are integral parts of the song.

The text setting of “When the Storm Breaks” is primarily syllabic, and the frequent use of a dotted-quarter/eighth rhythmic construction in the vocal line creates a sense of repetition even as the text forces emphases on off beats and in unexpected places. The piano’s straighter rhythms set against the voice’s dotted rhythms create a tension resolved only in part in the final two measures of the song, when the piano line mimics the vocal line for the first time.

Dated “Fontainebleau, September 1, 1928,” “Song in the Songless” departs from Talma’s first three extant songs in that it appears to be a more experimental work than her previous pieces.<sup>22</sup> Setting a text by English poet George Meredith, “Song in the Songless” has no key signature or meter and is unbarred save for a single bar line after the first two lines of text, about one-quarter of the way through the piece.<sup>23</sup> The score notes that “accidentals hold only for the notes in front of which they are placed,” and the tempo is a

<sup>22</sup> Louise Talma, “Song in the Songless,” Louise Talma Collection, Library of Congress, 1928.

<sup>23</sup> Measure numbers here refer to a performing edition created by the author and are used for convenience of discussion.



dirge-like  $\text{♩} = 46$ . However, as with “On the Surface,” Talma creates a different section for each stanza, in this case four distinct parts of two lines each.

They have no song, the sedges dry,  
 And still they sing.  
 It is within my breast they sing,  
 As I pass by.  
 Within my breast they touch a string,  
 They wake a sigh.  
 There is but sound of sedges dry;  
 In me they sing.

Much like “Invocation,” “On the Surface,” and “When the Storm Breaks,” “Song” also frequently uses the minor second and tritone both melodically and harmonically. The song begins with an introductory section of stacked thirds moving in contrary motion between the two hands in a palindromic progression over seven beats (see Example 12).

This harmonic symmetry is replicated throughout the piece, particularly at the beginning of the final section, which is an introduction to the last two lines. Texturally, the accompaniment for the first and final stanzas is identical; stanza two is slightly more syncopated and the third stanza is supported by counterpoint over a pedal point. The palindromes create a sense of continuity and parallelism between the song’s beginning and end, and the pedal point present during the contrapuntal section grounds the song even as unexpected variations on the vocal motif of three eighths and a quarter note propel the work toward the return of the palindrome just prior to the final stanza.

Tonal centers are created by the use of the ascending melodic second with pitches functioning as scale degrees 7–1 in the vocal line at four cadential points: “still they sing” (G–G#, with underlying harmony of D–F–A–C#–G#), “pass by” (C–C#, with underlying harmony of D–A–C#), “wake a sigh” (G–G#, with underlying harmony of E–G#–D), and “in me they sing” (C–C#, with supporting underlying of D–F–A–C#–E#) (see Examples 13a, 13b, 13c, and 13d). These cadences are also created by the repetition of the scale degree 1 pitch and by the pause of the vocal line after these repetitions.



**EXAMPLE 12** Palindromes in “Song in the Songless” introduction. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

(a)

dry And still they sing

(b)

As I pass by With - in my

(c)

They wake a sigh

(d)

sed - ges dry In me they sing.

**EXAMPLE 13** Talma, "Song in the Songless," ascending melodic second at four cadential points: (a) mm. 3–4; (b) m. 6; (c) m. 8; (d) 14–15. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

**EXAMPLE 14** Talma, “Song in the Songless,” mm. 9–10. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

Talma also emphasizes the relationship of the fifth between the song’s tonal centers by beginning the first and final sections with an open fifth in the piano (A–D). The second section uses the open fifth as well as a tritone in the harmony, providing continuity while subtly destabilizing the expectation of the interval’s constancy. The third section continues the use of the tritone and the minor second while also varying the vocal motif in the piano part and introducing clusters of minor thirds (see Example 14). The result is a highly chromatic harmonic language that Talma would use frequently in her works prior to her adoption of serial techniques in the 1950s.

The vocal line is carefully crafted to fit the stresses of the text. Each even-numbered line is set to a motif of three static eighth notes that rise to a note a semitone higher of the length of a quarter note or longer (see Example 15). Because of its chromaticism, “Song in the Songless” is more technically demanding for the singer than the previous songs, calling on the performer to sing semitones apart from the piano and leaping into dissonances. While not necessarily a work for professionals only, the vocal line in “Song” is far more challenging than the lilting melody of “Invocation” or the canon in “On the Surface.”

A natural development seems to occur in Talma’s writing from “Invocation to the Rain” to “On the Surface of Things” and from “When the Storm Breaks” to “Song in the Songless.” The four songs demonstrate the growth of her ability and confidence in songwriting from the simple block chords and melody of “Invocation” to the far more complex “Song.” In particular, her work becomes more chromatic, reaching a peak with the 1928 “Song.” At this point, form becomes completely dependent on the text, rejecting the strophic guides of the first two songs.<sup>24</sup> The characteristics displayed in these four songs, including a pattern of (dis)continuity in the harmonic

<sup>24</sup> Works that immediately follow this, including her *Three Madrigals* of 1929, are not as harmonically wide-ranging or experimental in any sense, in part because she was asked to return to more conventional common-practice-period approaches by Boulanger.

3 Line 2  
dry And still they sing

6 Line 3  
As I pass by

8 Line 4  
They wake a sigh

14 Line 6  
In me they sing.

**EXAMPLE 15** Talma, “Song in the Songless” rhythmic cadential motifs. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

and rhythmic elements, rapidly changing tonal centers and moods, meticulous text setting, and an openness of form all foreshadow Talma’s more mature vocal compositions.

In a 1967 interview, Talma stated that her first period of composition, which included all of her works prior to 1952, was influenced by “the neo-classicists and the Stravinsky school of music à la Boulanger.”<sup>25</sup> These songs, however, particularly those that date from before 1927, indicate that she was already incorporating some of the approaches taught by Boulanger before becoming her student, perhaps due to Talma’s exposure to French art music while living in France as a child. Moreover, they show that Talma was comfortable with the harmonic language of French composers active at the turn of the century and the following few decades. Talma’s declamatory setting of text is highly reminiscent of Debussy’s own text setting, as well as the speech-like treatment found in Satie’s works. Her sparse accompaniments are also Satie-like, while the long melodic lines of “On the Surface” and “Song” exhibit Talma’s nascent craft in structuring the *grande ligne* demanded by Boulanger and by contemporary French aesthetics.

Fragmentary sketches from this period see Talma composing with other techniques popular among French composers, including neoclassical elements such as Baroque melodic figurations outlining harmonic progressions in instrumental works and vocal settings using chant melodies. However, the sketches also show Talma’s reluctance to adhere to traditional tonality. The sketches contain a number of examples of both extended functional harmony and non-functional harmony, as well as the use of contemporary methods

<sup>25</sup> Talma, “Interview with Louise Talma.”

for creating and changing tonal centers, including leading-tone exchange and the use of half steps and tritones to suggest tonal centers and to move from one to another. Her earliest sketches also reveal her method for setting text: She first wrote out the text and marked the stresses of the words, adding rhythmic notation beneath. She then created a melodic line for the text, which she set to the rhythm she had already composed. Works with multiple voices reveal that the long line, traveling throughout the work, took precedence over individual vocal lines; incomplete sketches show a single long line moving from voice to voice, leaving blank staves in the voices where the primary line is not present.

The development seen in these early songs suggests that, given other circumstances, Talma might have moved away from tonality and convention in a more radical fashion. By the time she composed “When the Storm Breaks” and “Song in the Songless” she had already abandoned traditional key and time signatures. However, her experimentation stops there, at least for a time. Talma’s notebooks for harmony, solfège, and composition lessons at the Conservatoire Américain dating from 1928 to 1932 show that she was focused on functional tonality and mastering the understanding of common-practice-period harmony through counterpoint, dictation, and other exercises. Her return to basics, along with the emphasis Boulanger gave to the music of Monteverdi, Bach, and Beethoven during this period, seems to have strongly affected Talma’s own compositional voice for several years.<sup>26</sup> Her works immediately following these songs were quite different from the formal freedom of “Song.” *Isabeau Poème* (1927–28) uses French Canadian folk songs as its basis, and the *Three Madrigals* (sometimes given as *Three Part-Songs*), composed in 1929 for women’s voices and string quartet, sets poetry by Thomas Wyatt that addresses desire and rejection: Both are strictly traditional, brooking no ambiguities in key. They are rhythmically staid, and have conventionally phrased and structured melodies. An unpublished piano sonatina in two short movements composed at Fontainebleau in 1932 and an incomplete setting of Psalm 42 for voices and piano similarly follow the rules of common-practice-period composition. It is not until the late 1930s that Talma, having studied with Boulanger for ten years and having been permitted to undertake analysis and dictation of more contemporary harmonic approaches, began to return to the freer harmonic language of her earliest songs. This is exemplified by her *Fourteen Groundbass Variations on “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,”* which is also her first complete extant work after the 1932 sonatina.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Kendra Preston Leonard, “‘Excellence in Execution’ and ‘Fitness for Teaching’: Assessments of Women at the Conservatoire Américain,” *Women and Music* 11 (2007), 45.

<sup>27</sup> Louise Talma, student notebooks, Louise Talma Collection, Library of Congress, 1939.

Having emerged from her apprenticeship with Boulanger, a transition acknowledged by the fact that Talma herself was asked to teach courses at the Conservatoire Américain starting in 1936, Talma seems to have come into her own as a composer during the late 1930s. She adapted her use of meter, allowing it to change frequently in order to support the natural stresses of the text, an apparent compromise between adhering to a regular meter throughout a work and abandoning it altogether (which she may also have realized was difficult for performers). Sketches from the late 1930s and beyond also show a return to the longer lines, irregular phrasing, and sparse accompanimental textures seen in "On the Surface," "When the Storm Breaks," and "Song in the Songless."<sup>28</sup> Talma's *Variations* for two sopranos, alto, and piano, another setting of poetry by Wallace Stevens, exemplifies her settling in to a style that employs both her early musical instincts and the conformity required by Boulanger.

*Variations* is sparingly textured, contrapuntal, and full of contrasting rhythms between the voices and piano. Each variation is set to a verse of the poem and is marked off by a change of texture and motif, particularly in the piano, although the meter remains 4/4 throughout.

I

<sup>1</sup>Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the black bird.

II

<sup>4</sup>I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

<sup>7</sup>The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

<sup>9</sup>A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

V

<sup>13</sup> I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,

<sup>28</sup> Several of Talma's other vocal works from this period, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1929), using the Keats poem; "Late Leaves" (1934), with the text by Landor; and "Never Seek to tell Thy Love" (1934), a setting of a poem by Blake, appear to be lost.

The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

VI

<sup>18</sup>Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow  
An indecipherable cause.

VII

<sup>25</sup>O thin men of Haddam,  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

VIII

<sup>30</sup>I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.

IX

<sup>35</sup>When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.

X

<sup>38</sup>At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in a green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony  
Would cry out sharply.

XI

<sup>42</sup>He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.

XII

<sup>48</sup>The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

<sup>50</sup>It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing

And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.<sup>29</sup>

In part because the variations are so brief, ranging from 3 to 9 measures each, they are essentially non-developmental. As in her earlier works for voice and piano, Talma places special emphasis on the major/minor second and the tritone, which permeate the work both melodically and harmonically.

After stating the ground bass using the pitch class set {G F E $\flat$  D $\flat$  C A $\flat$  B $\flat$ }, Talma begins the first variation by playing with unisons, fifths, and octaves, pairing together first the two sopranos and then the second soprano and alto in terms of pitch, while keeping all three in the same rhythm (see Example 16). The harmony suggests a tonal center of C through the use of

The musical score consists of four staves. The top three staves are for Soprano 1, Soprano 2, and Alto, all in 4/4 time. They begin with a rest for four measures, followed by a melodic phrase starting on G4. The piano part is in the bottom staff, also in 4/4 time. It begins with a ground bass consisting of a sequence of eighth notes: G $\flat$ , F, E $\flat$ , D $\flat$ , C, A $\flat$ , B $\flat$ . This is followed by Variation I, which features a melody of eighth notes in the right hand and a bass line of eighth notes in the left hand. The lyrics are: "twen - ty snow - y moun - tains, the on - ly mov - ing thing was the eye of a black - bird." The piano part includes a dynamic marking *p* and a fermata over the final chord.

**EXAMPLE 16** Talma, *Fourteen Groundbass Variations on "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,"* mm. 1–8, ground bass and Variation I. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

<sup>29</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Harmonium* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), 135–37.



the C–G relationship, but the minor and major seconds and minor sevenths obscure a clear key. For the most part, the harmony is non-functional, and the use of a restricted set of pitches in the ground bass hints at Talma's much later adoption of limiting techniques, including serialism. Talma outlines the first of many recurring minor/major second relationships in the ground bass in the first three measures: between E $\flat$  and D $\flat$ , D $\flat$  and C, and A $\flat$  and B $\flat$ . The vocal line is syllabic and matches the rhythm of the spoken text, separating “black” and “bird” in the final bar to emphasize the subject of the line.

Talma's treatment of the text occasionally includes word painting. In Variation II, measures 9–12, Talma sets the second verse text, “I was of three minds,” by coupling the two soprano lines together, the alto line with the inner right hand of the piano, and creating a third line in contrary motion to the alto in the left hand. At the same time, the top line in the left hand mimics the sopranos' rhythm, while the inner left hand and right hand provide contrast (see Example 17). The melodic lines move in half and whole steps, and the variation cadences with a harmonic minor second (C–D $\flat$ ), major second (C–B $\flat$ ), and tritone (G–D $\flat$ ). Also in Variation II, perfect fifths collapse to a passing tritone, which resolves to fifths; the unison of the two sopranos is broken as the second soprano moves to pair with the alto at the cadence. The vocal lines come together rhythmically on “three,” and are rhythmically in unison through text line 5, after which the first soprano solo of line 6 sets duplets against triplets in a manner similar to “Invocation.” In the piano part, a single long phrase is used for the entire variation and merges into the long phrase for the following variation as well.

Other variations also use approaches or techniques first seen in the earlier songs. Counterpoint drives a number of variations, as it did in “On the Surface” and “When the Storm Breaks.” Variation III employs imitation among the three voices, as do parts of Variations VI, X, and XII; as in “When

The musical score for Example 17, Variation II, measures 9–12, is presented in 4/4 time. It features three vocal staves (Soprano 1, Soprano 2, and Alto) and a piano accompaniment with right and left hands. The lyrics are: "I was of three minds like a tree in which there are three black-birds." The piano part consists of a single long phrase across all four staves, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a bass line. The vocal lines are syllabic and match the rhythm of the spoken text.

**EXAMPLE 17** Talma, *Variations*, mm. 9–12. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

17

A man and a

A man and a wo-man are one A

A man and a wo-man are one

19

wo-man and a black - bird are one. I do not

man and a wo-man and a black - bird are one. I

A man and a wo-man and a black-bird are one.

**EXAMPLE 18** Talma, *Variations*, Var. VI, mm. 17–20. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

the Storm Breaks,” the use of unisons and parallel fifths between voices is common. In Variation VI, fifths and major/minor seconds are the predominant intervals used to create the vocal lines, and partial imitation of the second soprano’s statement of the theme occurs at the fifth in the first soprano, which is doubled in the alto (see Example 18). The piano line, too, relies on seconds as well as octaves in creating melodic and harmonic tension.

Variation IX sets the text for second soprano alone in a section that recalls “Song in the Songless” in its declamatory vocal style and syncopation of the piano line. Talma places a harmonic perfect fifth and perfect fourth in the piano a semitone apart (E–B, C#–F#) against a melodic fourth in the voice (F#–B) in the first half of measure 42, then juxtaposes the piano’s C#–D# against the voice’s B–C# to emphasize the major second, avoiding a cadential

The image shows a musical score for Example 19, consisting of four staves. The top two staves are vocal parts, and the bottom two are piano accompaniment. The music is in 4/4 time and the key signature has one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "When the black-bird flew out of sight, it marked the edge of one of ma-ny cir-cles." and "At the". The piano part features a prominent ground bass line in the left hand and a more active line in the right hand.

**EXAMPLE 19** Talma, *Variations*, Var. IX, mm. 42–44. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

sound at the end of the variation when the voice moves from A to G# by including an F# in the piano (see Example 19).

Talma's practice of (dis)continuity, established in her early songs, is particularly easy to document in the *Variations*. The form naturally creates continuity via the ground bass and a discontinuity in the frequent changes effected by the variations, but Talma also works to create contrast in both the vocal and piano lines between each variation. Variation I employs unison rhythms in the vocal parts and a slow-moving line in the piano, whereas Variation II separates the vocal lines rhythmically into two entities and Variation III is for solo soprano with a faster-moving piano accompaniment in triplets. Variation IV uses imitation among the voices, while the piano line abruptly shifts from the triplets of the previous variation to dotted rhythms and staccato inner voices. These changes are for the most part unprepared from one variation to another, creating a greater sense of discontinuity than if each section were meticulously prepared harmonically or otherwise by the final measures of the one preceding it. At the same time, small motifs or textural elements are subtly carried over from one variation to another, creating an organic work that maintains comprehensibility from start to finish. In the transition from Variation VIII to Variation IX, the sense of syncopation in the piano part heard in measures 37 and 38 is continued in measures 42 and 43, and the *parlando* style of text setting and rising line in the alto in measures 40 and 41 continues in the second soprano in measures 42 and 43 (see Example 20). Seconds and tritones continue to be dominant harmonically and melodically, preserving the elements of the ground bass in multiple fashions.

The sparse texture of Variation XI is continued into Variation XII, although the vocal writing shifts from a breathless patter in all three voices to a slower, contrapuntal setting. The phrases in the vocal line are irregular

37 I know no - ble ac - cents and lu - cid in - es -  
I know no - ble ac - cents and lu - cid in - es - cap - able rhy -

39 cap - ab - le rhy - thms; But I know, too, the black - bird is in - volved In what I know.  
thms — But I  
know, too the black - bird is in - volved In what I know.

**EXAMPLE 20** Talma, *Variations*, Var. VIII, mm. 37–41. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

while the piano line has contrasting longer phrases traded off between registers. The final variation positions the second soprano and alto voices as a kind of *cantus firmus* against which the first soprano presents a series of fragmented melodic motifs and the piano's upper line plays broken octaves and elevenths while the left restates the original ground bass (see Example 21).

Throughout, the work demonstrates continuity through not only the melody of the ground bass but also the ways in which Talma uses its intervals both harmonically and between entrances of imitation and counterpoint. While the textures are rarely the same from variation to variation, the work maintains a continuity of sparseness in the piano part and simplicity in the vocal line, with text set for clarity and the preservation of natural rhythm and inflection. Talma only rarely makes all three voices and piano sound together, preferring to group them into smaller cells for most of the work, bringing them together only at highly significant textual points. More sophisticated and complex than her four early songs, *Variations* is a clear

48

sharp - ly.

He rode o - ver Con - nec-ti-cut In a glass coach.

50

Once, a fear pierced him In that he mis-took The sha-dow of his

In that he mis-took The sha-dow of his

Once, a fear pierced him In that he mis-took The sha-dow of his

52

e - qui-page for black-birds.

e - qui-page for black-birds.

e - qui-page for black-birds. The ri - ver is mov - ing

**EXAMPLE 21** Talma, *Variations*, Vars. XI, XII, and XIII, mm. 48–56. Reproduced with permission of The MacDowell Colony (© The MacDowell Colony, Inc.).

developmental step for Talma, but one that betrays its obvious ancestry in her earliest neoclassically influenced works for voice and piano.

Examined as a whole, these early pieces for voice(s) and piano provide an evolutionary record of the composer's formative years and the development of traits common to her oeuvre. Talma began to work with serial techniques in the 1950s, heralding her second period, and later entered into a third period, beginning in 1967 and lasting until her death, which she described as "non-serial atonal."<sup>30</sup> Regardless of her approach to tonality, however, Talma retained a number of neoclassic characteristics from these first pieces: These include the use of spare textures, often preferring to use small groups of instruments or voices even within works for larger ensembles; text setting that adhered to the natural contours of a spoken line, even to the extent of irregular phrasing; an emphasis on major and minor seconds and tritones; and the belief that the *grande ligne* was a preferable method of organizing musical ideas. Perhaps even more importantly, her practice of (dis)continuity, established in these works, remained a driving force in creating motion and contrast in her primarily non-developmental works. These works demonstrate that Talma's neoclassic compositional aesthetic and techniques were well established prior to her back-to-basics training with Boulanger, and although Talma acquiesced to writing works in a more conservative style during this training, it is equally clear that she quickly returned to the techniques and harmonic language of her earlier exploration once she had completed her initial studies with Boulanger.

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<sup>30</sup> Luann Dragone, *Stylistic Tendencies and Structural Design in the Music of Louise Talma* (Ph.D. Diss., City University of New York, 2003), 1.