

Narrator 1

When promised to Tereus by a father grateful for the rescue of his besieged city, Procne journeyed to Thrace content to fulfill her duty of uniting their kingdoms; But after five years away, Athens called to her yearningly; and Procne responded, pleading with her husband to bring her most cherished treasure: The gift of a glimpse of her dear sister, Philomel.

Tereus

Most content was I to satisfy my wife’s request.
But when I caught sight of radiant, young Philomel...
Words struggle to describe that moment, this creature, her effect.
Even Athen’s finest robes were mere supplicants
Lapping her exquisite limbs greedily.
The splendor of this unearthly grace set me afire,
And my thoughts raced.
Most content was I to repeat Procne’s request,
And of how she wept uncontrollably
 for her dearest little sister.
I also shed tears, adding poignancy.
So effective was my performance,
That innocent young Philomel began to
 plead for her delivery
Throwing her arms around her father’s neck, she begged,
kissing him over and over.
And my mind raced.

Philomel 1

The way he stared at me, even in Athens
Then as we sailed, he kept a steady gaze.
After we docked in Thrace, Tereus spirited
 me through foreign terrain,
Riding through a densely shrouded forest,
 we stopped at a stone dwelling
As we entered, I asked for my dear sister, Procne.
As he locked us in, his intent became clear.
I cried out for help to my sister, my father,
 and the gods, but alas, all was in vain.
Trembling, bruised,
I summon from the depths all my rage
I swear, Justice will be mine,
He shall be punished for his barbarity.
And all the world will know of Tereus’ crimes
And if rooted forever to this spot in the woods
The forest will echo thunderous with my cries.
Unsheathing his sword, he comes at me again.
I offer my throat, ready for death’s sweet release.
Instead, Tereus draws my head back,
 forces pincers into my mouth.
Cradling my tongue with metal maw,
 he tightens his grip- alas!

With swift steely snip
Mumble becomes jumble

Speech is rung, swung tossed
It slips, writhing slick
stuttering on the ground
straining, slithering, throbbing
inflamed, torn.
Stained, pillaged,
Grief spills out in torrents and floods.
Though no justice could sate this wrath
Vengeance shall be thrust upon the Thracian beast.
I promised this to him and will honor that oath.

Narrator 2

After a year of mourning, Procne is shown
 the unspeakable truth of Philomel’s absence
and Tereus’ crimes against her family.
This woven testimony gifts Procne the
 wile to rescue her dear sister and contemplate a
fitting response to Tereus’ humiliating violations.
At the palace, the sisters prepare a
 sumptuous feast for Tereus.
Enjoying his meal in blissful ignorance,
 Tereus calls for his child,
‘Itys! Where is that son of ours?
 Go fetch him, my love.’
Procne smiles, as she tells him that his
 dear son’s already within.
Confused, Tereus searches the room,
 underneath table and chair.
In comes Philomel, bloodied and triumphant...
Thrusting the head of Itys into the face Tereus,
Philomel opens her mouth with gleeful ferocity
 as Tereus shrieks in terror, agony.
His only child!
Wretched, sickened, Tereus claws at his breast,
 too late to save poor Itys.
Unable to contain his anguish, Tereus grabs his sword and,
calling upon the Furies,
Rages after the sisters.

Philomel 2

With Tereus at our heels, we race
 nimly towards the woods.
The pitter-pattering of our flutter-flighty hearts
Twittering and flittering in fits and starts
The air takes us suddenly, puffing-ruffling
 our skirts and tresses
Unfurling and hurling us upwards,
Swiftly lifting, insistently the breezes
 and eddies and gales of gusting blowing flowing
Wafting in the blustery atmosphere we hover,
then
sail
Buoyant, breezy, sprightly, ethereal
Our gossamer flight takes us whirling, twirling
Rejoicing our supernatural heights,
Ecstatic cries fill the skies, ringing the stars and heavens.

PROGRAM NOTES & TEXTS

(Italicized text is sung by the recorded voice)

Part I

(Philomel, chased into the woods of Thrace, struggles to find her voice)

(Ee...ee...ee...ee...ee!)
I feel—
Feel a million trees
And the heat of trees
 Not true trees--
Feel a million tears
 Not true tears—
 Not true trees—

Is it Tereus I feel?
Not Tereus; not a true Tereus—
Feel a million filaments;
Fear the tearing, the feeling
Trees, of ephemeral leaves
Trees tear,
And I bear
Families of tears
I feel a million Philomels----
 Trees filled with mellowing
 Felonous fame-
 Is it Tereus I feel?

I feel trees in my hair
And on the ground.
Honey melons fouling
My knees and feet
Soundlessly in my
Flight through the forest;
I founder in quiet.
Here I find only
Miles of felted silence
Unwinding behind me,
Lost, lost in the wooded night.
 Pillowing melody
 Honey unheard

My hooded voice, lost
Lost as my first
Un-honeyed tongue;
Forced, as my last
Un-feathered defense
Fast-tangled in lust
Of these woods so dense.
Emptied, unfeeling and unfilled
By trees here where no birds have trilled—
Feeling killed
Philomel stilled
Her honey unfulfilled.
 Feeling killed, unfulfilled

Philomel (1964), Milton Babbitt **(text: John Hollander)**

In America, the earliest electronic music studios at Bell Labs and at Princeton and Columbia were the proving grounds of technology, allowing for finer and finer articulation of compositional ideas derived from serialism. The master of the tools of serialist technique, Milton Babbitt (born 1916), gravitated to the Mark II RCA Synthesizer, a machine developed in the mid-1950s and turned over to the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in New York. This allowed him to realize with total precision his continuing goal of extending and deepening the mathematical relationships inherent in serial structures, and transforming those discoveries into significant musical works.

The intellectual density of Babbitt’s musical language has been a challenge for a number of musicians, but Philomel is one of those masterpieces that has earned respect, even love, from composers across the stylistic spectrum: it is at once formidably complex and infinitely humane. (Commissioned by the Ford Foundation, it was premiered in 1964 by the soprano Bethany Beardslee, one of Babbitt’s most skilled and devoted interpreters.)

With its pliant yet virtuosic vocal lines, its carefully segmented form, its dramatic sweep and highly charged text, Philomel resembles nothing so much as a Mozart concert aria in contemporary dress. Written to a specially commissioned text from the distinguished American poet John Hollander, it tells the ancient story of Procne and Philomela, most well known from its treatment in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: King Tereus of Thrace, married to Procne, has raped her sister Philomela and cut out her tongue to enforce her silence. She waves a tapestry to relate this deed to Procne, and together they exact a gruesome revenge on Tereus, offering him the limbs of his son Itys for dinner. When informed of the bill of fare, Tereus pursues the fleeing sisters into the forest, but when he is about to overtake them the gods transform them into birds: Procne the swallow, according to Ovid, and Philomela the nightingale.

Hollander’s poem lays out this story in three parts, a plan Babbitt respects in his music. The first section, gradually finding its voice, makes brilliant wordplay with sounds that form the names of Tereus and Philomel; the second is an “Echo Song” in which the final words of a question are mocked by its own echo. The final section is strophic, with a refrain, its formalized structure representative of Philomel’s queenly power in her new realm of song. At all times Babbitt’s synthesized sounds mix elegantly with the soprano’s tones, complementing their colors; a recorded soprano voice (that of Bethany Beardslee), embedded within the tape part, is used with increasing restraint as Philomel’s transformation becomes complete.

—Russell Platt

What is that sound?
A voice found?
Broken, the bound
Of silence, beyond
Violence of human sound,
As if a new self
Could be founded on sound.
The trees are astounded!
What is this humming?
I am becoming
My own song. . . .

Part II (Echo Song)

(Philomel has a dialogue with other birds in quest of her new identity).

O Thrush in the woods I fly among,
Do you, too, talk with the forest’s tongue?
Stung, stung, stung;
With the sting of becoming
I sing

O Hawk in the high and widening sky,
What need I finally do to fly
And see with your unclouded eye?
Die, die, die;
Let the day of despairing
Be done

O Owl, the wild mirror of the night,
What is the force of the forest’s light?
Slight, slight, slight;
With the slipping-away of
The sun

O sable Raven, help me back!
What color does my torn robe lack?
Black, black, black;
As your blameless and long-
Dried blood

O bright Gull, aid me in my dream!
Above the riddled breaker’s cream!
Scream, scream, scream,
For the shreds of your being;
Be shrill

The world’s despair should not be heard!
Fear and terror not be stirred:
The Gods who made this hubbub erred!
Bird, bird, bird!
You are bare of desire:
Be born

O green leaves!
Through your rustling lace
Ahead, I hear my own myth race.

Thrace, Thrace, Thrace!
Pain is unchained,
There is change
In the woods of Thrace!

Part III

(Philomel’s suffering is “redeemed in song” as her refrain repeats and her song - the nightingale’s - reigns)

Living, growing, changing, being in the hum always
Of pain! The pain of slow change blows in our faces
Like unfelt winds that the spinning world makes in its turning:
Life and feeling whirl on, below the threshold of burning.
I burn in change.
Far, far I flew
To this wailing place.
And now I range
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace

If pain brush against the rushing wings of frightened change,
Then feeling distills to a burning drop, and transformation
Becomes intolerable. I have been defiled and felt my tongue
Torn out: but more pain reigns in these woods I range among.

I ache in change,
Though once I grew
At a slower pace.
And now I range
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace

Pressed into one fell moment, my ghastly transformation
Died like a fading scream: the ravisher and the chased
Turned into one at last: the voice Tereus shattered
Becomes the tiny voices of night that the God has scattered.

I die in change.
Pain tore in two
Love’s secret face.
And now I range
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace

Love’s most hidden tongue throbbed in the barbarous daylight:
Then all became pain in one great scream of silence, fading
Finally, as all the voices of feeling died in the west
And pain alone remained with remembering in my breast.
I screamed in change.
Now all I can do
Is bewail that chase
For now I range
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace

Pain in the breast and the mind, fused into music! Change
Bruising hurt silence even further! Now, in this glade,
Suffering is redeemed in song. Feeling takes wing:
High, high above, beyond the forests of horror I sing!
I sing in change
Now my song will range
Till the morning dew
Dampens its face:
Now my song will range
As once it flew
Thrashing, through
The woods of *Thrace*.

Sequenza III (1966), Luciano Berio

Sequenza III is one of an extended series of solo works composed throughout Berio’s life, each of which exploits the technical and expressive possibilities of a different instrument -flute, harp, female voice, piano, trombone, viola, oboe, violin, clarinet, trumpet, guitar, bassoon, accordion, alto saxophone and double bass - to a high degree. Berio composed the vocal Sequenza for Cathy Berberian. For this work, he asked Markus Kutter for a text “Give me a few words for a woman to sing”. The result is a brief text (beginning with the actual words of Berio’s request) which can be read as a single sentence, but which the composer treats as the raw material of sound for all its phonetic possibilities. Consonants may be isolated into rapidly-repeated percussive passages; vowels can be isolated too, with an even wider range of expressive effect when combined with Berio’s precise indications for whispered or spoken, sung or muted tones, and “noises” such as laughter, coughing or sighs. Occasionally individual words can be heard, but at no point is Kutter’s text simply “sung”.

Give me	a few words	for a woman
to sing	a truth	allowing us
to build a house	without worrying	before night comes.

Berio notates the rhythm spatially (closer elements move quickly, those spread out more slowly). There are fiftytwo “measures” in the piece, with each measure a unit of ten seconds. The pitch notation is on a staff (with no clef) or shown relatively with high, middle and low around a single line. Berio also specifies forty-four different emotional indications (i.e. coy, dreamy, giddy, noble, urgent, whining, etc.) to guide the singer’s changing inflections. The resulting work gives the impression of being a spontaneous improvisation though it has actually been highly controlled by the composer.

— Lucy Shelton

Philomel (2010), Justine F. Chen **(text: Justine F. Chen)**

My very first exposure to the gruesome tale was as a freshman in music history where Milton Babbitt’s electronic masterpiece *Philomel* was required listening. I came upon his *Philomel* recording again, while researching the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center for my dissertation. A few years and a few operas later, I found myself drawn to the story, eager to delve into the daunting and fascinating task of dramatizing the extraction of the tongue as well as her wondrous transformation into a nightingale.

Though Prof. Babbitt served as gateway- and what a dazzling marriage of content and form to depict this story of transfiguration with electronics- my point of departure is theatrical: meant for realization by a live performer. This monodrama explores the stylistic textual and dramatic expanse between art song and opera. The text - my own adaptation, written after consulting translations by Martin, Hughes, Golding, and Miller - was fiendishly difficult to reduce to its final form. Many thanks to Ken Gass and Matt Boehler for sifting through my earlier drafts.

My main influences are e. e. cummings’ poem about confetti, Georges Aperghis’ Machinations and Récitations, Akutagawa’s multiple-perspective short story In the Grove (internationally renowned through Kurosawa’s Rashomon), and Britten’s Rape of Lucretia. It is perhaps bold to imagine that I was not influenced by Babbitt’s Philomel, and though I do not hear it or even sense it in the music or text, I do not doubt the wit and majesty of Babbitt’s own Philomel preside the psychic space of this cycle like perfume.

Philomel was commissioned and premiered by soprano Jennifer Zetlan and pianist David Shimoni at the Church of Christ and St. Stephen in New York City for the Marilyn Horne Foundation concert series “On Wings of Song”, March 8, 2009.

This septet version heard tonight was created specifically for the magnificent Lucy Shelton and Beta Collide. With this orchestration, I sought to benefit from the increased numbers of musicians and instrumental colors to amplify the moods, emotions, and drama of the text. Additionally, the vocal line was tailored to profit from the unparalleled arsenal of vocal techniques at Lucy’s command, while maintaining the original intent and tight construction of the piece.

— Justine F. Chen