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Brenda Ueland, a free-lance writer, journalist, mother, teacher and feminist, lived for nearly a century. During her life, Ueland wrote two books: *If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit*, published in 1938, and an autobiography, *Me: Brenda Ueland*, published in 1939. In 1987, American composer Libby Larsen chose excerpts from Ueland's autobiography to serve as texts for a cycle of eight songs that represent episodic periods of Ueland's life.

This study compares Ueland's autobiography to that of Libby Larsen's song cycle *Me (Brenda Ueland)*. The order in which the text appeared in the song cycle was quite different from that of the memoir, and pivotal areas of Ueland's life are not included, most significantly, her daughter Gaby, and the life and death of Ueland's sister-in-law Julie. These and other discrepancies are discussed, as well as the instances in which the song cycle complements the book. A few examples are cited regarding the ways in which knowing the autobiography in its complete form may affect the dramatic presentation of the song cycle.

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BRENDA UELAND'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY
ME (BRENDA UELAND) TO THE SONG CYCLE
ME (BRENDA UELAND)
BY LIBBY LARSEN

by

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For My Parents

APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Purpose	2
Importance of Study.....	2
II. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY	4
Childhood.....	4
High School	4
College	5
Greenwich Village	6
Marriage.....	7
Work	8
Home Again	9
The Present.....	10
III. THE SONG CYCLE.....	11
Why I Write This Book.....	11
Childhood.....	12
Adolescence	15
Greenwich Village	16
Marriage...Divorce.....	19
Work	21
Art (Life is Love...)	23
The Present.....	26
IV. SUMMARY.....	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	29
APPENDIX: SONG TEXT FROM <i>ME (BRENDA EULAND)</i>	31

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Brenda Ueland was born October 24, 1891 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and died there on March 5, 1985.¹ Ueland was a mother, feminist, journalist, freelance writer, and teacher of writing. Her autobiography, *Me (Brenda Ueland)* recounts her life from her earliest memory to the year 1939, which was her forty-seventh year of life. She went on to live another forty-seven years, which coincidentally places her autobiography at the exact midpoint of her lifespan. Ueland wrote another book entitled *If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence, and Spirit*, as well as countless other articles, essays, and short stories accumulated while she was a freelance writer in New York and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Many of her accounts of living in New York and Minneapolis are present in Larsen's song cycle. After Ueland's death a collection of her essays were published in a book entitled *Strength to your Sword Arm: Selected Writings*.²

Composer Libby Larsen was born in Wilmington, Delaware on December 24, 1950. Larsen is one of the most well known composers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and countless major orchestras and artists around the world have premiered her works. Her awards and compositions are numerous, and *USA Today* stated she "is the

¹Patricia Hampl, Introduction to *Me: A Memoir*, by Brenda Ueland (Duluth: Holy Cow! Press, 1994), xiv.

²Ibid.

only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively.”³

Larsen was introduced to the autobiography *ME (Brenda Ueland)* by Bruce Carlson, director of the Schubert Club of St. Paul. Intrigued by Ueland’s wit and zest for life, Larsen excerpted episodes from the autobiography to comprise her song cycle.⁴

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to compare the autobiography of Brenda Ueland, entitled *Me (Brenda Ueland)* to that of Libby Larsen’s song cycle of the same name. The text of the song cycle is derived directly from the book; however, in some instances the order in which the text appears in the song cycle is quite different. This discussion will include aspects of the song cycle that complement the book, as well as those that differ.

Importance of Study

It is incumbent upon all students and teachers of singing to understand the historical background of the poem or text that is set to music. While it is possible to glean from the composer’s setting a legitimate interpretation of a given text, the complexities of the subject matter are revealed only through careful study of its original context. By presenting details from the autobiography that relate to each song text, this study will provide a performer’s guide to those who choose to sing or teach Larsen’s song cycle.

Chapter II presents foundational information from the autobiography that provides a deeper understanding of the song texts. Chapter II is presented in the order in

³USA Today, “Press Quotes,” January 24, 2010, <http://www.libbyslarsen.com>.

⁴Libby Larsen, “Me (Brenda Ueland),” January 24, 2010, <http://www.libbyslarsen.com>.

which it appears in the book, with chapter titles as subheadings. Ueland describes the past events of her life chronologically, with some digression.

More detailed discussion is found in Chapter III, where each song text in the cycle is presented, followed by information from the autobiography that is directly relevant to the texts. An Appendix has been provided that details the exact location in the book for each line of text in the songs, supplying the reader with a convenient reference for further clarification. A few interpretive suggestions are given to provide examples of the ways in which knowing the autobiography in its complete form can impact the dramatic presentation of the song cycle.

CHAPTER II

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Childhood

The first page of Ueland's autobiography was written July 6, 1938, and the book's final entry is dated February, 1939. In the opening chapter of the book, she reveals some of her family history. Ueland was born in a white wooden house on Lake Calhoun in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Soon after Brenda was born, her sister Dorothy died of pneumonia, leaving her without a playmate. She also had two older sisters and four younger brothers, of whom the most significant in her life was Sigurd, who later married her close friend Julie Plant. Ueland shares that she was initially embarrassed by being a part of a large family, but this feeling was later replaced by family pride.⁵

At the end of the chapter, Ueland discusses an experience that resulted in arresting her development and left her in a state of adolescence for many years to come. She describes being forced by her mother to attend a dancing school where she felt extremely out of place, and she laments the self-esteem issues that resulted from the experience which continued to haunt her throughout her adult life.⁶

High School

Chapter II of the book is entitled "High School." Larsen chose to exclude the chapters "High School" and "College" from the song cycle, and resumed with Brenda's

⁵Brenda Ueland, *Me (Brenda Ueland)* (Duluth, Minn: Holy Cow! Press, 1994) , 21. All future references to the text will be extracted from *Me*.

⁶*Ibid.*, 67.

life in Greenwich Village. “High School” cultivated Ueland’s feministic attitudes, and information gleaned from this chapter is important for the interpretation of Ueland’s character. As a young woman living in the early twentieth century, Ueland was an eccentric feminist. For instance, young women of this era believed if a girl were to allow a boy to embrace her, it would result in his lack of respect for her. It was of no consequence to Ueland, however, whether or not the boy respected her. If she wanted to kiss him, she would kiss him!⁷

College

Chapter III finds Brenda at Wells College in New York State, a school her mother thought would encourage her to become more social. At Wells College, Brenda was quite popular and well liked for her humor. Many regarded Ueland as quite the “card.”⁸ Wells was a women’s college, and Brenda mentions that she found the “incipient homosexuality” interesting.⁹ Eventually, Ueland decided to complete her degree at Barnard College in New York City. At Wells, Ueland’s father provided economic support; however, in New York she had to locate her own apartment and live on an allowance from her family. Ueland disliked asking for additional money, partly due to her father’s deportment with regard to finances. She states that he had a “violent temper, though it blew off quickly.”¹⁰ Although Larsen does not include in the song cycle Ueland’s continuous issues in regards to her finances, it is an underlying factor that affects Ueland’s choice to move back home in the song “Work.”

⁷Ibid., 74.

⁸Ibid., 86.

⁹Ibid., 88.

¹⁰Ibid., 91.

After graduation, Brenda moved back to her parents' home in Minnesota and obtained a job as the first female reporter for the *Minneapolis Tribune*.¹¹ There, she covered the events of the local women's clubs. Her mother wanted her to procure a social life, but instead, Brenda resolved that mastering a new skill would be more beneficial. She seemed to despise her job, partly due to having to ask others for assistance. This sentiment is one of many references to her fiercely independent nature.¹²

Brenda then accepted a job with the *St. Paul Daily News* that required her to walk six miles a day. This began her compulsion about daily exercise, which remained one of her defining characteristics throughout her life. She quickly grew tired of her job and was encouraged by her sister Anne to travel abroad. Brenda convinced her parents to allow her to join Anne and her husband, along with a young lady, Anne Herendeen, on a trip to Germany. After travelling throughout Europe during World War I, Brenda and Anne returned to New York City, where they shared an apartment in Greenwich Village.¹³

Greenwich Village

Ueland convinced her parents to allow her to stay in New York with Anne in order to study art. While living in New York, Ueland met her future husband, whom she refers to in the autobiography as simply "R." Ueland chose this pseudonym because she believed it unfair to use his name, and also because it would be too difficult to write about him.¹⁴

¹¹Frank Hennessey, *Brenda Ueland Papers*, January 24, 2010, <http://mnhs.org/library/findaids/00099.html>.

¹²Ueland, *Me*, 114.

¹³*Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 151.

Anne Herendeen introduced Brenda to R and his then wife at a local restaurant and the next day R sent a letter to Brenda, requesting a meeting with her about a drawing. He paid her ten dollars for the drawing, and there began their courtship. He told Brenda he and his wife were unhappy and were planning to separate and divorce.¹⁵

Art school lasted for one year and when summer emerged, Brenda returned home to Minnesota to reside with her family. By September, she was desperate to get back to New York to see R. She beguiled her parents into believing she had secured a job. Once back in New York, she obtained a position as a free-lancer for *Every Week*. Ueland's energy and focus was completely on R. She shamelessly persuaded R's wife, to give him a divorce.¹⁶

Marriage

Brenda and R were married in Goshen, New York. Ueland writes that "it was an odd anticlimactic feeling to be married, and I felt something like regret inside about it, an indescribable feeling of nothingness."¹⁷ Ueland describes giving up her job at *Every Week* to go to Cambridge, Massachusetts to be a housewife. Brenda's close friend Julie Plant had married Brenda's brother Sigurd, and they lived nearby while he was in law school at Harvard University. After living there a short time, R received a promotion and they were forced to relocate to Saxonville, Massachusetts. This was one of several relocations that eventually frustrated Brenda and contributed to her marital unhappiness.¹⁸

¹⁵Ibid., 152.

¹⁶Ibid., 165.

¹⁷Ibid., 165.

¹⁸Ibid., 189.

Soon after their move, Julie came to visit and an event occurred that impacted the rest of their lives. During a skiing outing Julie was injured, and subsequently became afflicted with inflammatory rheumatism. This chronic illness plagued her heart for the rest of her life, and many years later, precipitated her death.¹⁹

Ueland had begun doing free-lance work as a writer when she discovered she was pregnant. She was distraught at this turn of events because her marriage “seemed shaky and uncertain,” and she knew her husband did not want children.²⁰ She considered having an abortion; Julie prevailed upon her to have the child. Brenda and R moved back to New York City for R’s career and purchased a brownstone. Brenda gave birth to a baby girl whom she initially named Julie. In an act typical of Ueland’s occasional quirkiness, she later changed the name to Gabriel (Gaby), a name that for some reason she regarded as more suitable for a child with dark hair.²¹

Ueland’s love for her child is summed up in her reference to Gaby as “Miss Western Hemisphere.”²² Gaby is a central part of the latter half of the book, which leaves one to wonder why there is absolutely no mention of her in Larsen’s song cycle. Having a child changed Brenda, as indicated by the simple words in her memoir: “...having a child woke up in me my compassion. A burden of kindness.”²³

Work

As the sixth chapter begins, the family is once again required to move for R’s work. He started a bakery business in Connecticut, but unfortunately, it quickly failed and

¹⁹Ibid., 193.

²⁰Ibid., 198.

²¹Ibid., 201.

²²Ibid., 342.

²³Ibid., 201.

Brenda finally gathered her courage to seek a divorce. She decided that before asking R for a divorce she must find work, believing it was “unchivalrous” to ask him to support her and Gaby after having left him.²⁴ Brenda secured a job in Newark, then asked R for a divorce. He was quite amiable about the matter, however; he contentiously took a long time to move out of the house. The relationship mended, and eventually, Ueland believed neither party was to be blamed for the divorce.²⁵

The remainder of the chapter focuses on Ueland’s life as a single, divorced mother trying to support her only child. After her mother died in 1928, Ueland continued to live in Massachusetts with Gaby, struggling to work as a free-lance writer.²⁶

Home Again

Two years later, due to financial reasons, Ueland and Gaby moved back to Minnesota to live with Ueland’s father in her childhood home on Lake Calhoun. The chapter focuses mainly on Ueland’s relationship with her sister-in-law Julie. Julie and Sigurd had twin girls, Sandra and Jeanie, who were around the same age as Gaby. During that time Julie was very sick and was confined to her bedroom. Brenda would spend hours each day with Julie in her home discussing matters of fidelity, sex, love, and children, in addition to mulling over the works of Tolstoy and Blake, and the religious views of Gandhi and the Bible. Brenda stated in her book that Julie allowed her to be herself and her friend’s radiance warmed her more than anyone.²⁷ After suffering several

²⁴Ibid., 210.

²⁵Ibid., 227.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 293.

heart attacks, Julie came to live with Brenda and her father and died a few months later. Tragically, one year after Julie's death, Ueland's father passed away.²⁸

The Present

In a fitting conclusion for an autobiography, Ueland's book ends in "The Present." Ueland ponders the state of her various love affairs. She typically had an inclination toward men who were either married or geographically unavailable. February 9, 1939, is the final date of her autobiography, and at that point in her life, she was living in her childhood home with Gaby.²⁹

After the completion of the autobiography, Ueland married and divorced two more times, first to newspaper editor Manus McFadden and second to Norwegian artist, Sverre Hanssen.³⁰ In 1946, she was awarded the Knights of St. Olaf Medal by the Norwegian government while covering the Quisling trial after World War II. In her eighties, she set several swimming records. Towards the end of her life, Brenda shared her home near Lake Harriet in south Minneapolis with her beloved daughter Gaby and Gaby's husband Jim McIver.³¹

²⁸Ibid., 310.

²⁹Ibid., 363.

³⁰Frank Hennessey, *Brenda Ueland Papers*.

³¹Susan Allen Toth, Introduction to *Strength to Your Sword Arm: Selected Writings by Brenda Ueland* (Duluth, Minn: Holy Cow! Press, 1994), xv-xvi.

CHAPTER III

THE SONG CYCLE

Why I Write This Book

It is nearly ten o'clock in the morning, and it is July 6th, 1938....I sit here in my square room with green wallpaper. I look down on our front lawn spreading broad and green to the wooded bank. I look down on a thicket where criss-cross sumac rises, and above that a high leafy wall of elm trees and box elders. Below is the narrow, dark, smooth boulevard and Lake Calhoun. So here I am, trying to tell the story of myself. I quietly ask, pray, at intervals, to be truthful, simple, and not to put on airs.³²

The first song in the Larsen's cycle comes directly from the first page of Ueland's book. She describes the family home that her father built—the home she has known since her birth. Throughout the time she was writing her autobiography, she lived there with her daughter. When performing this song, it is important to internalize that this room with the “green wallpaper” was also her childhood home, and the lawn and areas surrounding Lake Calhoun have been a part of her life for the past forty-six years. Ueland was somewhat embarrassed to be writing her autobiography because she abhorred the thought of others' assuming she thought she was important or noteworthy.³³ This sentiment is reflected in the final sentence of the song text.

³²See Appendix for specific page numbers of the autobiography where each line of song text is found.

³³Ueland, *Me*, 4.

Childhood

This is my first memory...

...I am running up and down our long porch with a child of my own age...As I run I see my reflection in the windows...I am a tiny child, in a thin white dress-up dress. I have a round head of short black hair. I have a thin gold chain around my neck and there is a tiny gold heart on it.

This is my next memory...

...I am in my mother's room in our big baby carriage...Though I'm not the baby then... From the...carriage I looked into the mirror. I can see now what I saw plainly then. I had short ruffling black hair cut roundly like a boy's and dark eyes and tiny square teeth. And I felt disappointed about my looks...

I remember my first day at kindergarten...a lovely thing. The long low tables...the galumphing games on the shiny floor...We strung colored beads. We sewed with pretty wool on cards. We cut out colored paper and pasted it. A lovely thing!

...Mother had health ideas. She thought bananas were bad, and pie and vinegar. She thought we all should sleep late...and go to bed early... We swam in the lake...Oh, the lovely sunsets in the evening when the lake was yellow glass!...my parents and their friends would row on it. Their voices lifted up...mingling one boat to another (in "Good Night Ladies"). It came over the water with the slow, musical clunk of the oarlocks.³⁴

"Childhood," the next song in the song cycle, begins with Ueland's first memory of running up and down the long porch at her home with a child of her own age.³⁵ She goes on to discuss her impressions of herself at that age, small, dressed in white, black hair, and a gold chain with a heart on it around her neck. On that day, she lost the gold heart in the lock of the door, a significant memory worth noting; she was quite distressed over losing the heart, and for years afterwards she thought that the heart could still be in the lock of the door. This detail can lead one to interpret the *poco ritardando* that Larsen

³⁴See Appendix.

³⁵Ibid., 16.

inserts at the end of the phrase “there is a tiny gold heart on it” as one of wistfulness or melancholy.

Her next memory was playing in her brother Arnulf’s baby carriage. It was from the baby carriage that she looked into the mirror and first became disappointed in her looks.³⁶ This is important because throughout the book and at various points in the cycle, Ueland expresses her obsession with her appearance, mostly having been disappointed in what she saw. Brenda also revealed her self-esteem issues in describing her experiences during her fittings with the family seamstress. These fittings caused her to feel inadequate. She found her bust size to repugnant and she recalled that society viewed the large bust size to be “shockingly immodest.”³⁷ Ueland’s perpetual recognition of her failure to be that which she thought suitable for a girl of her own age is important for the singer to internalize, especially for the later songs, “Adolescence” and “Greenwich Village.”

A clearer picture of Brenda’s fond memories of kindergarten is painted when one learns that kindergarten took place at her home. In singing of this text one could picture a home school situation rather than a public institution. Her mother, an advocate her entire life for children and women’s rights, was the first to create a kindergarten model for children in the Minneapolis Public School District.³⁸

Later in the song “Childhood,” Larsen included the lines, “mother had health ideas...and she thought bananas were bad and pie and vinegar...she thought we all should

³⁶Ibid., 17.

³⁷Ibid., 61.

³⁸Jean Fideler, *Clara Ueland*, March 20, 2010, http://discovery.mnhs.org/MN150/index.php?title=Clara_Ueland.

sleep late and go to bed early.” In fact, Ueland’s mother had many idiosyncratic health philosophies. For instance, her mother would put Brenda out in the sun when she was a baby, and she would get sunburned. Her brothers were allowed to walk around “naked as cupids” on the lawn and occasionally her brother Rolf carried a tiny pink parasol and an Easter basket.³⁹ During this period, salad was prepared wet with vinegar and sugar on it. Her mother was opposed to this so she substituted it with French dressing and lemon. She also believed that the children should eat apples and oranges for snacks and should circumvent excitants such as tea and coffee. In retrospect, Brenda believed her mother was right.⁴⁰ While the children slept, Ueland’s mother would go into the children’s rooms and draw the shades down so that the children would have more time to rest and enjoy their childhood with play time. She thought the children would have more strength and valor later in life if they were allowed more freedom, and in retrospect, Brenda believed her mother was right.⁴¹

Ueland’s mother allowed the children to swim in the lake and Larsen included this in the song. The music expresses more of a freedom than they actually enjoyed, as the children were only allowed to go swimming every other day, for less than fifteen minutes (yet another “health idea”). When singing “mother had health ideas,” the performer could roll her eyes in rebellion to her mother’s rules. In the song cycle, Larsen sets the text about Ueland’s parents’ rowing on the lake with their friends and included the line “their voices lifted up...mingling one boat to another.”⁴² Ueland’s wording was

³⁹Ueland, *Me*, 28.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 29.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 29.

“mingling one boat to another, in “Good Night, Ladies.” Larsen merely hinted at these words by including the well-known melody in the accompaniment. Knowing that the singing of this song was an actuality, the singer might choose a facial expression that indicates she is hearing the song in the distance.

Ueland referred to herself as a “neglected child.”⁴³ She felt however this freedom caused her to be an independent person. In turn, this independence would lead Ueland to deceive others about her overeating, leading to the “Angst weh”⁴⁴ in the next song by Larsen.

Adolescence

There was to be a dancing school...I was to go to it...I think I rather looked forward to it...I wore my eighth grade graduation dress, the one with much lace insertion in it...and I felt stout and dumpy in it. Mother took me down there...we went on a street car...it was in the ballroom of the West Hotel...Nobody danced with me, unless led up forcibly by Mrs. Kingly, the teacher, a large colorless woman with huge...feet and a stentorian voice. We stood in a row behind her and copied her steps. Then the boys went to one side and the girls to the other. The whistle blew: “Boys choose partners.” No one chose me...They streamed across to this side and that of me. No one looked at me and came straight up. No one chose me. What made it worse was that Mother was there...This dancing school suffering was to last two or three years. Mother was so very kind and not in the least domineering. I do not know why she persisted in doing this to me. She did though.⁴⁵

“Adolescence,” a song that recounts Ueland’s first experience at a dancing school her mother required her to attend, is the third song in Larsen’s cycle. Brenda’s mother

⁴²Ibid., 33.

⁴³Ibid., 56.

⁴⁴Ibid., 19.

⁴⁵See Appendix.

thought her children should socialize with the children of her most cultivated friends.⁴⁶ Brenda's best friend was named Blanche, and she was larger in size than Brenda and considered to come from a lower pedigree. When Brenda was around Blanche, she believed she felt slimmer and more confident. At the dancing school, she felt her peers were above her rank, exposing her inadequacies and making her feel "dumpy."⁴⁷ Adding to one's understanding of the trauma of this experience for Brenda, is the fact that she would remain in the dressing room to avoid the ensuing embarrassment. Larsen sets a number of runs on the vowel "ah". For the first two runs Larsen gives instruction for how they are to be sung. The last run she only states to "pull back," but the singer could internalize that the character of Ueland wished she had remained in the dressing room that day through the use of facial expressions that reflect frustration and failure.

Greenwich Village

We were in New York. It was September. There began for me one of the gayest, most jokey, intoxicating, free and jolly existences... What fun. What larks... Young men began to really like me. There was a tall Princeton boy with a moustache... There was a red-cheeked teacher from Minneapolis... There was Gilbert Strunz. He thought I should study art. There was Bobby Gray. He was the art instructor. I cut my hair. I took up smoking. What fun. What larks. Swithin Johns, a small pink-faced socialist... took a shine to me... one night... when I had gone to bed, my unlocked door opened and Swithin came in. "*There are a lot of people in my apartment, so I decided to stay here.*" I was at once the battleground for excitement... shock... confusion. "*Well, all right. Sleep over there if you want to.*" It was a long room... the cots were at opposite ends of it. He went to bed... I lay on my cot... "*I suppose I should make love to you*"... "*You'd better not*"... There was no more talk. In February... my sister Anne wrote this to my mother:

⁴⁶Ibid., 63.

⁴⁷Ibid., 64.

“I’ve thought a great deal about Brenda. I don’t know what can be done except to see her as much as you can and wait for her to grow out of this stage.”⁴⁸

“Greenwich Village,” the fourth composition in the song cycle by Larsen, begins with the text “we were in New York.”⁴⁹ Upon reading Ueland’s book, one is made aware that “we” refers to Brenda and her friend Anne Herendeen. The two young women lived together in Anne’s apartment in Greenwich Village. This was the apartment that Swithin Johns visits. He was able to enter the unlocked apartment because there were no locks on the front of the building and Brenda puts no lock on the apartment door. She was not afraid of thieves or thugs and was too lazy to go to the hardware store to purchase a lock. She states: “I just didn’t want anyone to come in there as though I were a sexy Greenwich Villager. Ish.”⁵⁰

In the song, we learn that Gilbert Strunz thought she should study art, but an important factor regarding their conversation was excluded by Larsen. Ueland used Strunz’s advice to convince her parents to allow her to stay in New York City. Ueland studied art at Columbia University, but was not serious about the experience. She took an hour and twenty-five minutes to walk from Greenwich Village to Columbia University. By the time she arrived at Columbia, she was exhausted from her journey and from late nights with Anne; sometimes she would go up to the practice rooms at Columbia and play the piano rather than spending time developing her art or attending her classes. During her walk she would also stop and smoke, which women were forbidden to do in

⁴⁸See Appendix.

⁴⁹Ibid., 126.

⁵⁰Ibid., 141.

public. She discovered during this time that men were attracted to her, and Larsen selected this text for the song. Larsen writes in the score that the music should be performed in a Leporellic manner, referencing Leporello's "Catalogue Aria" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. As an early feminist, Ueland would have been pleased with Larsen's comparison of her to a famous Don Juan.

Brenda's father came to New York to authenticate her stories about her life in New York as an artist and was disappointed in what he found. Her hair was cut very short and her art work was limited. The text "I cut my hair,"⁵¹ is strengthened by knowing that she had specifically instructed the barber to cut her hair to look "like a boy." Ironically, Brenda was convinced the new haircut had made her more attractive, as it was the first time she received marriage proposals.⁵²

Through the statement "Young men began to really like me," the song correctly intimates that Brenda had a string of suitors. Her writing indicates that the three most important suitors were: Brenda's future husband (R); an anarchist named Raoul Hendrickson; and Merian Cooper, who would later direct the famous 1933 movie, *King Kong*. Brenda continued to see the string of suitors that are listed in the song cycle, but spent the most time with R. Gilbert Strunz, who was working on a portrait of Brenda, later destroyed the work when he realized her affection for R.⁵³

Throughout the book Ueland includes letters written by her or other family members; however, Larsen includes only a small portion of a letter from Brenda's sister

⁵¹Ibid., 136.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., 130.

Anne, which appears in the song “Greenwich Village.” In this section of the book, Ueland discusses how immature her letters were compared to those written by her siblings, especially Anne.⁵⁴

The last part of the song, Larsen focuses on a man named Swithin Johns. Larsen indicated that the part of Swithin Johns was to be spoken. His statement “I suppose I should make love to you,”⁵⁵ and Brenda’s response “You better not” are followed by the unaccompanied text “there was no more talk.”⁵⁶ After this line, a raucous piano interlude ensues and is abruptly interrupted by the comment about sister Anne’s letter to their mother. One might interpret this musical setting to mean that the evening resulted in a mutual sexual encounter by the two. Ueland, however, was actually quite angry that Johns suggested making love. She had simply allowed him to stay because her feminist leanings would not allow her to appear prudish. In the book, he immediately apologizes, “I should not have done this. I won’t do it again, Brenda.”⁵⁷ Then her book reads, “There was no more talk.”⁵⁸

Marriage...Divorce

... You have to love something outside and greater than yourself, or you are a goner... the sky... a great man... an abstraction like courage, honor, goodness, or what some people call God... You have to love something outside and greater than yourself... But it must be above your own pleasure and success... I felt it was not love unless there was something clear and truthful about it... you should walk about freely in each other’s souls and see everything and try to understand it and then to help each other... even if it is to become free of each other.⁵⁹

⁵⁴Ibid., 147.

⁵⁵Ibid., 140.

⁵⁶Ibid., 141.

⁵⁷Ibid., 140.

⁵⁸Ibid., 141.

⁵⁹See Appendix.

In the next song, “Marriage...Divorce,” Ueland reflects on her belief that there was “something underlyingly wrong” with her marriage.⁶⁰ Ueland writes that as a couple they treated each other kindly and many were amazed at how sweetly she spoke to R, catering to his needs. Philosophically, they were as different as night and day. She liked truth and heroism and he liked cleverness and plain facts. She liked to speak openly with candor and he preferred subtlety.⁶¹ According to Brenda, the initial breakdown of her marriage began when another woman informed her that R had propositioned the woman one day in New York, while Brenda was waiting for him to come home in Philadelphia. R had cocktails with the woman, telling her how attracted he was to her. Brenda was deeply hurt and the next day she decided she must become self-reliant, but failed to find a job. R had been away in Europe for two months and she was in New York becoming reacquainted with old friends like Anne Herendeen and gaining self-confidence. Brenda had an affair and she would only reveal that it made her realize “that there were other men who were more serious and kind than R.”⁶² When R returned home, Brenda forgave him, and it was then that they moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts.⁶³ As stated in Chapter II, the marriage survived unhappily for several more years before Brenda sought a divorce.

The musical presentation of this song is enhanced by knowing the historical background of the song. Though Larsen provides no text to support the history, the singer could internalize the history of Ueland while presenting the song, allowing it to serve as a

⁶⁰Ibid., 179.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 186.

⁶³Ibid., 189.

subtext. For example, Larsen sets a melisma on the vowel “ah.” The performer of the song could shape that phrase to represent Ueland’s expression of regret, coupled with an understanding of how things should have been.

Work

I come now to...five years that had a particular character. It was anxious business to make this money. I was always just a jump ahead of the spears in this free lance business. I worked every morning for hours and then, barelegged...I walked or ran around the Point...six miles...rain or snow....I was trying to make myself perfect.

Nov. 15, 1926 Work hard. Very depressed...Anger is a blessing in spite of my arguments for intellectual detachment. My story back from the Post...I am sunk.

Dec. 9, 1926 Wonderful running around the Point and with the dogs all with me, running when I say run.

Dec. 13, 1926 Ruin my perfect condition with cocktails.

Dec. 14, 1926 Lazy. Indecision. Boredom. Anger.

...my Mother came to New York to spend a few days with me. It was so nice to have her. Order and peace...seemed to spread around her. She made the waves still...I remember thinking: “Now if Mother could only live with me, then everything would be perfect.”

March 1st A telegraph boy came to the door and I read what he gave me. “Darling Mother killed instantly in automobile accident.”

...and so I began to think of going home and living there.⁶⁴

“Work” examines Ueland’s diary entries from 1926 and 1927. From the book we learn that Ueland was a recent divorcée and single mother. She was thirty-six years old and a free-lance writer for *The Ladies’ Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Ueland sold the home she shared with R and moved to another area of Stamford called Shippian Point with Gaby.⁶⁵ In the song “Work,” Larsen simply makes reference to the “Point.”

⁶⁴ See Appendix.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

Brenda's mother came to New York on business and visited Brenda and Gaby. It would be the last time Brenda saw her mother. Just before her mother's death, she received a letter from her expressing how important Brenda's letters were to her mother. After receiving the news of her mother's death "with shock and calm,"⁶⁶ she boarded a train with Gaby and her sisters, Anne and Elsa, bound for Minnesota. Brenda described the awkwardness of seeing her mother in a coffin and finally realizing "the death of any loved parent is an incalculable lasting blow."⁶⁷ Again, Brenda found solace in a love affair she wished not to propound.⁶⁸

In this song, Larsen uses the text "of going home and living there,"⁶⁹ implying that Brenda moved home soon after her mother's death. Larsen has taken some license with the actual story here, as Ueland's mother died two years before Brenda and Gaby moved back to Minnesota. During those two years Ueland had a love affair about which she would not elaborate, but did reveal a later affair she had with Norwegian explorer, Fridtjof Nansen. She continued to write articles but became increasingly frustrated at the lack of interest in her work. In 1929, the Great Depression made it difficult for Brenda to sell her articles and she surmised that moving home to Minnesota would be the best recourse for her and Gaby. She abhorred the idea of not being able to provide for Gaby, but realized that living at home with her Father would give her financial freedom to exercise around the lake, play tennis, work on writing, and enjoying fine meals and good company, especially with Julie, who lived nearby. When performing the song one could

⁶⁶Ibid., 231.

⁶⁷Ibid., 234.

⁶⁸Ibid., 235.

⁶⁹Ibid., 262.

allow the two years to serve as a subtext during the two and half measure interlude between the death of Ueland's mother and Ueland moving back to Minnesota. The audience may not know the thoughts of the performer but through facial expression the performer of could demonstrate a range of emotions from frustration to resignation.

Art (Life is Love...)

"Memento vivere."

...Van Gogh thinks that love is the creative thing...you love a man and you want to create him-have a child. Van Gogh loves the sky and has to paint it. We love beauty...then we...create it in music, in painting, in ourselves....Artists are lovers, and critics are haters. Artists see the bright imagined thing to do, the vision to love....Van Gogh loves the sky...

"Memento vivere."

A beautiful evening. The lake is a blue-gray shield of... light.... We walked slowly 'round the lake...it was spring....I seem to smell that day and remember...we stepped around soft muddy places....I cannot remember just how, but Father led 'round to the thought that we live after death...after death.... We walked slowly.... When we came back a beautiful...moon...sailed in...the...sky...like the halo of a saint. Whenever I think of Father that evening I can easily shed tears.

What do I believe then? That we live forever.... What do I believe? That love is the creative thing. That life is love. That is my belief. That perfection is in all and we should love it in all.

That is my belief. That I must love people. That I must love myself...that is my belief. That God is a person. That I must love people...that I must love myself...my reckless, arrogant...joyful self.

"Memento vivere."

I believe that we live after death again and again and again...To keep my face toward what is great and lovelier, and move toward it.⁷⁰

In the song, "Art (Life is Love...)," Larsen sets the opening text as "memento vivere."⁷¹ Near the end of the book, Ueland describes a letter to her sister Anne: "(I) tell her a little of the above...how walking around the lake I see the moon and am filled with

⁷⁰See Appendix.

⁷¹Ibid., 353.

horror and wonder that there *is* a moon, and what is it? “Remember to live,” was Goethe’s motto. *Memento vivere.*”⁷²

Earlier in book we learn that Ueland was fascinated with Van Gogh. Shortly after Julie’s death, she had been reading some of his letters and had what she believed to be a mystical experience. She suddenly realized that Van Gogh’s beliefs were summed up in the statement “that love is the creative thing.” She came to understand that the source of Van Gogh’s creativity was his “passionate love for things outside himself, for human beings, and for the meaning and beauty in whatever he saw...”⁷³

While digging dandelions and contemplating these things, she had a vision in which Julie appeared to her and spoke:

“Brenda, now you have it! This is it. Now what we talked of before” (all those endless conversations about love, fidelity, sex, Tolstoy, Gandhi, gossip, malevolence, children)... “that was fine, but this is really it. Now you have hit on it. Stick to that. As for this death business,” she seemed to be saying: “It is so ridiculously simple, easy. A cinch. If you only knew how simple and easy everything is. Wait until you see.” And she also seemed to say: “Have a glorious time, all of you. That is right. You cannot be gay enough. No one ever can.”⁷⁴

This was the experience that precipitated her description of Goethe’s maxim, “memento vivere,” and the sentiment that encompasses the entire song. Larsen sets “memento vivere” seven times and the word “vivere” an additional three times. Julie’s message to Brenda can serve as a subtext for the execution of the phrase “memento

⁷²Ibid., 353.

⁷³Ibid., 296.

⁷⁴Ibid., 297.

vivere,” in which Larsen has written long, sustained phrases in a high tessitura, indicating Julie’s ethereal advice to live and to live gloriously.

At the time, Ueland’s father had recently recovered from an operation, but was not flourishing. Ueland and her father took a walk and discussed matters of life after death. She says she believed there was life after death because she desired that for her father. Larsen’s use of Ueland’s comment about shedding tears the evening of the walk suggests that she was emotionally anticipating her father’s death. In the autobiography, Ueland was experiencing remorse for her Father’s loneliness. She believed that he wanted his daughter to suspend her social engagements to be with him. Ueland was intent on her engagements with friends, but in retrospect she felt guilty for not having given companionship to him.⁷⁵ It is likely that this is the actual reason for her tears.

Unlike that of previous songs, the text Larsen selected for “Art (Life is Love...)” is scattered throughout two chapters and spans sixty-six pages. There are two lines in the song that are questionable in terms of authenticity. The lines “and we should love in it all” and “that I must love myself” are barely implied by Ueland and unsubstantiated by the autobiography. In the song the line “we should love in it all” is preceded by the line “that perfection is in all.” In the autobiography the line is “I believe perfection is implicit in all, but it takes time for it to evolve.”⁷⁶ The line “that I must love myself,” refers to the recurring reference to Ueland having let go of her disgust with her appearance and her lack of maturity. She never states she has a love for herself, but a love for other people. The two lines, while suitable for the song, are less authentically Ueland.

⁷⁵Ibid., 302.

⁷⁶Ibid., 361.

The Present

It is now February 9th, 1939....It is twelve above zero, and there is a snowstorm, so there is no horizon. The world is drained of color and sound...there is just a prolonged flute note of wind on middle F....I sit here looking out the window. I have been working all night...I need a walk badly for I have been working much too hard and steadily under pressure for the past two months. And it is queer, I have not a touch of resignation, or nostalgia, or...mournfulness for...days that are gone. I seem to be entirely cheerful and full of anticipation. I seem to be always holding my breath with suspense, as though something wonderful were about to happen the next day and the next; and I wish everybody in the world could feel this way. And now good-by.⁷⁷

The last song, “The Present,” is based on the last two pages of the book. Ueland is describing a typical winter day from her childhood home from Minneapolis, Minnesota, which the performer could visualize while singing the opening text. The song ends with the word “good-bye,” exactly as the book ends. The context of the text as it appears in the book has not been changed, and is self-explanatory.

⁷⁷See Appendix.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

This study compared the autobiography of Brenda Ueland to that of the song cycle by Libby Larsen based on Brenda Ueland's text. Each chapter in the book and song cycle was examined in conjunction with the autobiography. Chapter I served as an introduction to the study of Brenda Ueland and Libby Larsen's *Me (Brenda Ueland)*. Chapter II focused on providing foundational information from the autobiography and Chapter III presented each song text followed by information relevant to the text.

Knowledge of the original source of a song text enhances the performance of the work. This study presents much information derived from the book that substantially supplements the interpreter's understanding of the text. For example, one learns that in the first song Ueland is not only describing her current residence, but the home in which she was raised. In the second song, Ueland reflects on her "Childhood," and the book reveals some of the deeper elements of her memories, such as the beginnings of her self-esteem issues. Ueland's "Adolescence" contributed to what she refers to in her memoir as the "sub-adolescence" that plagued her throughout her adult life. The story of the incident with Swithin Johns in "Greenwich Village" is clarified by the autobiography, and we also learn that in the song, Larsen neglects to mention Ueland's most significant love affair, that with her future husband, R. "Marriage...Divorce," excludes the impressively significant event of the birth of Ueland's daughter, Gaby. In the song "Work," the death

of Ueland's mother seems to precipitate Ueland's move back home, whereas in the autobiography, Ueland moved back home two years after her mother's death. Art (Life is Love...) does not reflect Van Gogh's ideas as the song text presents, but refers to Ueland's sister-in-law Julie speaking to her from the grave saying: "Have a glorious time, all of you. That is right. You cannot be gay enough. No one ever can."⁷⁸ The last song, "The Present," reflects on Ueland's current state, parting with a final adieu.

The meaning of the individual texts is supplemented by the dissemination of background information regarding specific facts; however, a potentially more significant outcome of the research is one's understanding of the developmental scope of Brenda's character throughout the cycle. As was stated earlier, Brenda Ueland underwent a transformation that was largely due to two factors in her life that were not referenced in the song cycle: the presence of a child in her life, and the influence of her dear friend Julie. Although we sense a personal transformation through Larsen's music, her text choices leave us as performers to choose performance styles that may or may not be authentically Ueland. This study provides a foundation that informs the important, more global aspect of the interpretation of *Me (Brenda Ueland)*.

⁷⁸Ibid., 297.

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Appendix

Song Text From *Me* (Brenda Ueland)

Song Text	Footnote
<p style="text-align: center;">Why I Write This Book</p> <p>It is nearly ten o'clock in the morning, and it is July 6th, 1938....I sit here in my square room with green wallpaper. I look down on our front lawn spreading broad and green to the wooded bank. I look down on a thicket where criss-cross sumac rises, and above that a high leafy wall of elm trees and box elders. Below is the narrow, dark, smooth boulevard and Lake Calhoun. So here I am, trying to tell the story of myself. I quietly ask, pray, at intervals, to be truthful, simple, and not to put on airs.</p>	<p>Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 3. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Childhood</p> <p>This is my first memory... ...I am running up and down our long porch with a child of my own age...As I run I see my reflection in the windows...I am a tiny child, in a thin white dress-up dress. I have a round head of short black hair. I have a thin gold chain around my neck and there is a tiny gold heart on it. This is my next memory... ...I am in my mother's room in our big baby carriage... Though I'm not the baby then... From the...carriage I looked into the mirror. I can see now what I saw plainly then. I had short ruffling black hair cut roundly like a boy's and dark eyes and tiny square teeth. And I felt disappointed about my looks... I remember my first day at kindergarten...a lovely thing. The long low tables...the</p>	<p>Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 15. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 16. Ibid Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 17. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 18. Ibid.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Greenwich Village</p> <p>We were in New York. It was September. There began for me one of the gayest, most jokey, intoxicating, free and jolly existences...What fun. What larks... Young men began to really like me. There was a tall Princeton boy with a moustache...There was a red-cheeked teacher from Minneapolis...There was Gilbert Strunz. He thought I should study art. There was Bobby Gray. He was the art instructor. I cut my hair. I took up smoking. What fun. What larks. Swithin Johns, a small pink-faced socialist...took a shine to me...one night...when I had gone to bed, my unlocked door opened and Swithin came in. <i>“There are a lot of people in my apartment, so I decided to stay here.”</i> I was at once the battleground for excitement...shock...confusion. <i>“Well, all right. Sleep over there if you want to.”</i> It was a long room...the cots were at opposite ends of it. He went to bed...I lay on my cot... <i>“I suppose I should make love to you”... “You’d better not”...</i> There was no more talk. In February...my sister Anne wrote this to my mother: <i>“I’ve thought a great deal about Brenda. I don’t know what can be done except to see her as much as you can and wait for her to grow out of this stage.”</i></p>	<p>Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 126. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 128. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 130. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 131. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 136. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 133. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 126. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 140. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 141. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 147. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Marriage...Divorce</p> <p>...You have to love something outside and greater than yourself, or you are a goner... the sky...a great man...an abstraction like</p>	<p>Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 179. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 180.</p>

<p>courage, honor, goodness, or what some people call God... You have to love something outside and greater than yourself... But it must be above your own pleasure and success...I felt it was not love unless there was something clear and truthful about it...you should walk about freely in each other's souls and see everything and try to understand it and then to help each other...even if it is to become free of each other.</p>	<p>Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 179. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 180. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Work</p> <p>I come now to...five years that had a particular character. It was anxious business to make this money. I was always just a jump ahead of the spears in this free lance business. I worked every morning for hours and then, barelegged...I walked or ran around the Point...six miles...rain or snow....I was trying to make myself perfect. Nov. 15, 1926 Work hard. Very depressed....Anger is a blessing in spite of my arguments for intellectual detachment. My story back from the Post...I am sunk.Dec. 9, 1926 Wonderful running around the Point and with the dogs all with me, running when I say run.Dec. 13, 1926 Ruin my perfect condition with cocktails.Dec. 14, 1926 Lazy. Indecision. Boredom. Anger....my Mother came to New York to spend a few days with me. It was so nice to have her. Order and peace....seemed to spread around her. She made the waves still....I remember thinking: "Now if Mother could only live with me, then everything would be perfect."March 1st A telegraph boy came to the door and I read what he gave me. "Darling Mother killed instantly in</p>	<p>Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 227. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 228. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 229. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 230. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 231.</p>

<p>automobile accident.” ...and so I began to think of going home and living there.</p>	<p>Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 262. Ibid.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Art (Life is Love...)</p> <p>“<i>Memento vivere.</i>” ...Van Gogh thinks that love is the creative thing...you love a man and you want to create him-have a child. Van Gogh loves the sky and has to paint it. We love beauty...then we...create it in music, in painting, in ourselves.... Artists are lovers, and critics are haters. Artists see the bright imagined thing to do, the vision to love.... Van Gogh loves the sky... “<i>Memento vivere.</i>” A beautiful evening. The lake is a blue-gray shield of... light.... We walked slowly ‘round the lake...it was spring....I seem to smell that day and remember...we stepped around soft muddy places....I cannot remember just how, but Father led ‘round to the thought that we live after death...after death.... We walked slowly.... When we came back a beautiful...moon...sailed in...the...sky...like the halo of a saint. Whenever I think of Father that evening I can easily shed tears. What do I believe then? That we live forever..... What do I believe? That love is the creative thing. That life is love. That is my belief. That perfection is in all and we should love it in all. That is my belief. That I must love people. That I must love myself... that is my belief. That God is a person.</p>	<p>Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 353. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 296. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 297. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 296. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 353. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 300. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 301. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 302. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 361. Ibid. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 296. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 305. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 362. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 361. This line is not found in Ueland’s memoir. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 362. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 353. This line is not found in Ueland’s memoir. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 362. Ueland, <i>Me</i>, 361.</p>

