

it “drastically different from the political conversation surrounding the topic. Rather than setting up the libretto and characters to ignite one passionate belief over another, this work illustrated a real situation without imposing a decision on the audience... It allows for opinion without judgment, given that those having the conversation decide to converse instead of battle.”

LILY

Baxter’s greatest work, *Lily*, with a libretto by Lisa Van Allen, is based in part on Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. The opera focuses on the quest of a woman to find herself, find love, and become a woman independent of the imprisoning constraints set by the men around her. Andrea L. Copeland, the oboist in the premiere of *Lily*, has written an extensive blog post about the opera, saying that composer Baxter and librettist Van Allen “make it clear that women navigating a patriarchal society face tough odds, no matter the era,” but main character “Lily Bart has enough agency for the character to survive, rather than succumb to her circumstances. It is a nod to how far we’ve come in writing about women, but it is also a harrowing reminder of the precarity brought about by gender inequality.”

Katie Procell, who beautifully played the leading role of Lily, commented that she had experienced some similar situations as the character, so Lily resonated with her as she played the role. She wondered how many other women have found themselves in the situations that Lily found herself in and were able to “forge a republic” of her own.

In a Woman’s Voice

Baxter eloquently shares his belief in his ability to express a woman’s voice:

“I believe a man can articulate the thoughts and feelings of women only after sharing enough with them, individually and as a group, to understand what those thoughts and feelings are. Anyone can understand, to a certain extent, the thoughts and feelings of another whether they share the same sex, ethnicity, religion, age group,

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Libretto:
Lisa Van Allen
(Lisa VanAuken)

Lily

Act II, Scene II

Garth Baxter

Autumn at the Tremor house
The opening of this scene (in measure 358) can be done in front of the curtain.
Lily is sitting at her vanity, preparing herself for the evening’s festivities. A young woman attends her. The woman fixes her hair and helps her dress.

or sexual orientation, if they are thoughtful and listen openly to learn. The key is to listen to people willing to share.

Obviously, each person has a different personal story and background, which may add challenges to the effort of understanding the other person’s position. Personally, I have tried very hard to put myself in the place of others, to try to understand their struggles and interests regardless of our differences. The process is broadening.

In asking whether I feel I expressed women’s positions accurately in my compositions, I would point out very strongly that the words I use came from women poets and women writers. My job as a composer is to capture the emotion and feeling and put those words into a musical content that reaches the heart of the listener, so they can fully appreciate the words that were written. I feel I do that beautifully—perhaps better than most.”

Annie Gill, a soprano soloist in *A Pregnant Pause*, expands on Baxter’s comments, saying “women never get this kind of voice and platform, especially in opera. Our stories are always told through the male lens. This opera, *A Pregnant Pause*, actually lets us have a voice.... Garth has a very sympathetic view of women... He realizes that women’s thoughts and feelings

are not one-dimensional, but rather layered, complex, and ever-changing, and that all women are not the same... He has a tremendous amount of respect for women, and is a true advocate for women’s rights.”

Baxter’s musical style, particularly evident in *Lily*, reflects that “layered, complex, and ever-changing” processing. His melodic lines constantly intertwining, harmonies suspending resolution, instrumental timbres twisting and turning in a kaleidoscope of colors, all creating a ceaselessly undulating texture of unquenchable desire and unresolved longing. His ability to write in a woman’s voice is because he writes from a feeling of deep understanding and lyrical compassion.

You are invited to listen to *A Pregnant Pause* and to *Lily* at Garth

Baxter’s website, www.garthbaxter.org. His site has much information about his career as a composer, including a detailed listing of his compositions, publications, and recordings. There are reviews of *Lily* and other recent recordings: *Ask the Moon* (works for voice and piano), *Resistance* (instrumental works), and *Ask of Me What the Birds Sang* (variety of works). I believe he is one of America’s finest composers.

Composer and researcher Hollis Thoms has had a number of articles published in PAN PIPES over the years. He holds a Masters in Composition from Northwestern University, a Masters in Liberal Studies from St. Johns College, an EdS in Educational Administration from the University of Toledo, and finished the course work for a PhD in Composition from the Eastman School of Music. He was a teacher of English and Music and a school administrator for over thirty years. His musical compositions and research projects are in special collections at the Maryland State Archives, Folger Shakespeare Library, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, and Church Music Center at Concordia University-Chicago. View his website at www.hollisthoms.com

