

Cassandra's Dream Song
By Brian Ferneyhough:
Conceptualizing a myth

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Introduction

Cassandra's Dream Song, Brian Ferneyhough's first solo flute piece, has been an interesting discussion topic for many years now. The piece is written in 1970, but it was only being premiered in 1974 by Pierre-Yves Artaud, since it was such a challenging – and in the seventies almost an impossible - piece to play.

During the mid-nineties, still not many flutists could play *Cassandra's Dream Song*. Two pioneers in this repertoire were Pierre-Yves Artaud and Harrie Starreveld. They both approached *Cassandra* with a very 'male' interpretation. This becomes clear in the way they connect the first to the second page, something I will discuss more detailed later on in this essay. Their approach, combined with the fact that a few decades ago, female flutists were still a minority, led to the following quote by Ferneyhough in an interview on February 23rd, 1993: “ *The lack of a consciously analytical approach to the piece – the solving of the middle ground- is where many performances, particularly by women, have been less than successful in realizing the work's formal and expressive potential.*” (Perspectives on new music: *Cassandra's Dream Song: A Literary Feminist Perspective*, by Ellen Waterman)

Although this quote dates from a few decades ago and Ferneyhough doesn't approve with this statement anymore (I asked him in March 2015, during a visit at UC San Diego), it is still interesting to think more thoroughly about this 'middle ground'. Herewith Ferneyhough means the glue between the overall form (the interpolations between page one and two) and the fine details, such as rhythm, dynamics and texture. That middle ground, that particular relationship between the gestures of page one and page two, requires a thorough analysis from the performer. Playing the rhythm and gestures in the 'correct' order doesn't make it a solid and logical performance.

But what makes it a solid performance? If we take a closer look to the first known performances of *Cassandra's Dream Song*, by Artaud and Starreveld, then we see that both of them use a mathematical approach to find that relationship between the two pages.

The first page contains six lines, to be played in that exact order. The second page has five lines (A to E) and can be played in any chosen order. After playing *line 1* from page one, the performer can choose which line from page two to play and so on for the rest of the piece. Ferneyhough structured the piece by dividing it into sections. Those sections are marked with rests or fermatas. If we take look at the first page, we can discover a symmetrical structure of increasing and decreasing sections: a palindrome.

This is a graphic for how the first page is structured:

Line 1	2 sections
Line 2	4 sections
Line 3	5 sections
Line 4	5 sections
Line 5	4 sections
Line 6	2 sections

Page two can be approached in the same way by ordering the lines by a big increase in sections, and therefore reaching to a climax. This is the interpretation that both Artaud and Starreveld have chosen.

Line C	4 sections
Line E	6 sections
Line D	8 sections
Line A	9 sections
Line B	11 sections

With this interpretation the interferences of the second page become increasingly longer and more active and powerful, with the climax on the high D (the highest note of the piece) at the end of line B.

This makes a lot of sense, but why should it be the 'correct' interpretation?

I found a recording of Artaud, from many years after his premiere in 1970, and he still arranges the second page the same way he did decades ago.

If Ferneyhough really wanted a fixed order, he would have written one (confirmed by him during his visit at UCSD in March 2015).

While practicing and researching this piece, I came across a paper, written by Ellen Waterman, a former student of John Fonville at the time Brian Ferneyhough was teaching at the University of California, San Diego. She wrote an essay about a more feminist approach towards of *Cassandra's Dream Song*, based on the novel 'Kassandra' by the German writer Christa Wolf.

This novel tells the myth of Cassandra seen from a female point of view and is less stereotypical than the original, very patriarchal, Greek mythological texts. I will explain this subject more thoroughly later on, but the strong feminist approach still stroke me as an archaic approach to music.

Waterman still divides the piece in a 'male' page and a 'female' page. She still suggests a fixed order of the second page; only this time the second page is not analyzed mathematically, but emotionally.

This made me wonder if there wasn't a possibility to get rid of the strong contrast between 'male' and 'female' elements. Why is a rational approach male and an emotional approach female? Should we still use this stereotypical division in the 21st century to clarify musical contrasts? In symphonies, we still call the first theme the 'male theme'

because of the rhythmic and vivid character, and the second theme the 'female theme' because it sounds lyrical and melodic. Isn't an outdated approach?

Personally, I never felt like a stigmatized female performer nor I ever recognized male flutists as typical male and strong performers. Why should an interpretation belong to a specific gender and why is a specific musical element categorized by stereotypical gender specifications?

In this essay, I would like to explain my non-gender specific view on this piece. It is a piece that is written, based on a Greek myth, but it is about so much more than just an ordinary bridge between male and female components. I would much rather prefer to present a conceptual analysis of this piece.

A quote of an interview with Francis Bacon really inspired me for shaping my own perception on this matter:

Interviewer: *"Since you talk about recording different levels of feeling in one image, you may be expressing at one and the same time a love of the person and a hostility towards them, both a caress and an assault?"*

Francis Bacon: *"That is too logical. I don't think that's the way things work. I think it goes to a deeper thing: how do I feel I can make this image more immediately real to myself? That's all."* (interview BBC, Francis Bacon and David Sylvester, 1963)

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