

DEFATALIZING THE FEMME FATALE

The voice behind a stereotype

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Evelyn Smith Music Theatre | April 24th and 25th, 2013 | 7.30 pm

Program

1. *Twilight*, from "Euphonic Moods" by
Francoise Glorieaux

2. *From Dmitri Shostakovich's "Suite on
Poems of Michelangelo"

*Poetry, quotes, and prose

I. Истина (Truth)

I. Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's response to the
young Paul de Molènes's misogynist article, *Les
femmes poètes* (1842). *First Strophe*

II. Утро (Morning)

II. *Phenomenal Woman* by Maya Angelou
(excerpt)

III. Любовь (Love)

III. *I can only know that the past is beautiful...*
Virginia Woolf's quote

IV. Разлука (Parting)

IV. *By hook or by crook...*
Virginia Woolf's quote

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V. Гнев (Wrath)

V. *Battles* by Malvina Blanchecotte

VI. Данте (Dante)

VI. Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's response to the young Paul de Molènes's misogynist article, *Les femmes poètes* (1842). *Second Strophe*

VII. Изгнаннику (Exile)

VII. *Disillusionment* by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

VIII. Творчество (Creation)

VIII. "Eve and the Serpent," text by Phyllis Tribble

IX. Ночь/ Диалог (Night/A dialogue)

IX. *The Masochist* by Maxine Kumin

X. Смерть (Death)

X. Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's response to the young Paul de Molènes's misogynist article, *Les femmes poètes* (1842). *Third Strophe*

XI. Бессмертие (Immortality)

XI. *Caged Bird* by Maya Angelou
(excerpt)

3. Romantic Waltz, from "Euphonic Moods" by Francoise Glorieux

*Euphonium selections include excerpts from the following works:

"Euphonic Moods": *Twilight*, *Promenade*, and *Romantic Waltz* (Francoise Glorieux), *Fantasia* (Gordon Jacob), and *Soliloquies* (John Stevens).



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Defatalizing the Femme Fatale: The Voice behind a Stereotype

Brief origins

The concept of the *femme fatale* found its genesis in mass visual culture during the second half of the nineteenth century. During the emergence of feminism, women fought against the sexist standards of the Victorian period. Caricaturists illustrated parodies of women fighting for equal rights in printed media such as journals and magazines.

The idea of women clamoring for equality, turned into the creation of the femme fatale. It is important to understand that the femme fatale stereotype did not only oppose the submissive figure of the Victorian woman, but it also represented the fear of its creators during times in which women rebelled against sexual repressiveness and clamored for rights such as political freedom, equality of treatment, and control of their own sexuality. Thus, the idea of female emancipation and the emergence of feminism eventually turned into the creation of exotic female characters in poetry, literature, and painting. These characters featured attributes such as:

- Seductiveness
- Charm and sexual appeal
- Barrenness
- Inaccessibility
- Irresistibility

In general, the *femme fatale* represented the source of men's misery. In other words, any woman who showed the most minimal desire for equal treatment was considered evil or a "daughter of Eve."

Why Shostakovich and Michelangelo?

Neither Dmitri Shostakovich nor Michelangelo are considered antifeminist artists. The song cycle that has been chosen for this performance (*Suit on Poems by Michelangelo*, by D. Shostakovich) was not conceived under sexist parameters. Shostakovich's songs are representative of the composer's late style. He felt attracted by Michelangelo's philosophical ideas, and the pieces reflect the feelings and insights that the composer was going through toward the end of his life.

Michelangelo was a man way ahead of his time; his poetry contains political, social, and artistic value. Some of the poems that Shostakovich decided to use for this cycle refer to religious, political, and life concerns; some others are merely the poet's writing exercises (i.e. No. 2: "Love"). Thus, this song cycle relates to subjects such as death, the artist's function in society, justice, and love, but it has been decontextualized for purposes of this performance.

There are plenty of openly antifeminist art songs out there which could have been helpful to the creation of this performance concept. Nonetheless, the use of this kind of material could have been misunderstood as an aggression towards a specific artist. It is not the intention of this recital to attack a musician or a poet, but rather to point a social issue, and create social consciousness. This way, the conflict within Michelangelo's poetry has been transformed into rage against women.

The performance presents two characters:

- A male character. He blames his former significant other for his misery—he considers her to be a seductive, dangerous agent. He created a *femme fatale* in his head, exactly the same way poets, writers, and visual artists in the nineteenth century did.
- A female character. She has decided to put an end to a psychologically violent relationship and thus finding herself. This way, she is a representation of those women who rebelled against the social standards

established during the Victorian period. Her search for freedom and equal rights are read by the male character as a manifestation of evilness.

The writers

Every song in this performance has been paired with a feminist poem, text, or quotation. The writers that had been selected for this purpose are not only limited to women who lived during the Victorian period or witnessed the emergence of feminism (i.e. Marcelline Desbordes-Valmore and Augustine-Malvina Blanchecotte). Texts by women from different times, countries, and social contexts had been chosen in order to give a voice to those women who realized that society had faced and faces problems defining the role of women in society. These texts clamor for equality, not for superiority, and they represent the insights of women who understand feminism as an elemental part of humanism and fair treatment for everyone.

The message

Even when the idea of a *femme fatale* was originated in the nineteenth century, its stereotype has found its way to our times through visual culture (printed media, TV shows, movies, and art). The femme fatale has not only been assimilated and accepted by our society, it is also praised and celebrated as a figure of power, danger, and sensuality. Society does not tend to think about the negative connotations of this stereotype, as it reduces women to sexual objects, sources of danger and men's misery, and non-realistic standards of beauty.

It is somehow shocking that even in the twentieth-first century, there are still members of our communities who consciously or unconsciously think that the role of women in society is reduced to two different possibilities: either being submissive or being a sexual object—the first one of these possibilities responds to primitive standards established during the Victorian period, the second one was created as a response to the emergence of feminism and the clamoring for equal rights.

On the other hand, the acceptance and praising of the femme fatale figure has the potential to place a dangerous thought within youth's minds: Many young girls (and even young men), who are still finding their own identities and forging their personalities tend to admire the femme fatale stereotype as it is imposed by visual culture. We are surrounded by predesigned behavior patterns which are imposed to us through advertising and entertainment, and the femme fatale is not the only figure that has been force into our minds.

This way, the messages that this multidisciplinary performance intends to deliver is utterly simple: The stereotypes that had been forced into our society affect our behaviors and mold them into established standards; but one of the most inherent and significant human rights is that of freewill; thus, choose to be yourself.