

# The Vocal Music of Ana Sokolović: Love Songs for the Twenty-First Century

## La musique vocale d'Ana Sokolović : des chants d'amour pour le xxi<sup>e</sup> siècle

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Article abstract

Enchanted by the vocal music of Serbian-born Canadian composer Ana Sokolović, Tamara Bernstein visited the composer at her home in Montreal. Sokolović's music draws on several sources, including the theatrical world and the culture of the Balkans. The extended vocal techniques in Sokolović's music are rooted not in the avant-garde music of the twentieth century, but in the oral traditions and poetic voice of Serbia. It seems that the more the composer returns to her cultural roots, the more she embraces the universality of the human soul.

# The Vocal Music of Ana Sokolović : Love Songs for the Twenty-First Century<sup>1</sup>

Tamara Bernstein

A woman stands alone on stage, dips her hands in a bowl of water, claps them together—lightly, rapidly—and invisible doves’ wings flutter through the hall. Now her voice leaps from language to language, from vocal colour to vocal colour, like a young mountain goat—shooting out percussive, accentuated whispers one moment, then slipping into a sing-song of such primal innocence and unbridled freshness that the word *Sprechstimme*, laden with the baggage of early twentieth-century German decadence, simply won’t do to describe this strange, wildly exuberant and exuberantly wild hymn to love... The pitchless sound of a desert wind comes out of nowhere (it turns out to be air blown into clarinets and flute, while a pianist lightly sweeps a small card, or her fingernails, across the keys without depressing the latter); simultaneously, a mezzo soprano, singing on the edge of her breath, spins a spider web of melody in an African dialect spoken by only a handful of people while soft, hypnotically asymmetrical pizzicatos on a cello create the illusion of an old phonograph player, the needle circling endlessly in the centre of a spinning record.

Welcome to the vocal music of Ana Sokolović—a universe where words may at any moment detach themselves from meaning and become pure sound; where women’s voices take the word ‘enchantment’ back into their ancient sources; where a vocalist may be asked to sing in a “crystal voice, oriental renaissance style,” or to let her voice slide down in pitch, “not because she wants, but because of emotional density.”<sup>2</sup>

Sokolović was born in Belgrade, in the former Yugoslavia, in 1968; she has lived in Montreal since 1992, when she left her shattered homeland to

1. An earlier version of this article was originally published in *Musicworks* (<[www.musicworks.ca](http://www.musicworks.ca)>), issue 103 (2009). Reprinted with permission.

2. Ana Sokolović, “O Mistress Mine,” from *Love Songs* (2008). Performance indication at top.

3. *Sirènes* is an abbreviated title of *Six voix pour six reines/Six Voices for Sirens* (2000; English title: *Six Voices for Sirens/Six voix pour sirènes*) [Ed. note].

pursue a Masters degree at the Université de Montréal. Sokolović swiftly emerged as one of the most exciting young voices among Canadian composers; she has received many of this country's major awards, including Grand Prize in CBC Radio's National Young Composers' Competition (1999), the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize from the Canada Council for the Arts (2005), and Quebec's Prix Opus for Composer of the Year (2008). Sokolović writes in virtually all genres and mediums—from a solo for E-flat clarinet, written for Lori Freeman, to major commissions for the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal and Esprit Orchestra. But I wanted to write about her vocal music for several reasons. The first is simply to draw attention to music that is not, unfortunately, available on commercial recordings at this time.

Secondly, I have had the good fortune to attend the premieres, in Toronto, of important vocal works by Sokolović, including *Sirènes*,<sup>3</sup> the opera *The Midnight Court*, and *Love Songs*. Each time I found myself asking: "Where on earth do all these riches come from?" Why do I fall wildly in love—not a common event at new music concerts, it must be said—with the musical 'objects' Sokolović creates—those unities of disparate musical gestures and colours that are so pure, distinctive and enchanting that you want to reach out like a child and touch every one of them? Sokolović seems to have an inexhaustible supply of them: in her music one delightful surprise succeeds another, the whole shaped by an instinctual, subtle feel for rhythm and form.

Ultimately, of course, there's no accounting for the sheer wonder of Sokolović's (or anyone's) musical imagination, and for the emotional immediacy of everything she writes. Still, Sokolović has recently become conscious of, and articulated, the profound and intuitive influence of Serbian and Balkan culture on her music. These influences are most obvious in many of her vocal pieces: in the "yelps," the micro-ornaments, the small downward slides at the ends of phrases (*Sirènes*; the last three *Love Songs*), not to mention those skull-buzzing major and minor seconds sung (*Sirènes*; the love potion scene of *Midnight Court*)—acoustically charged intervals that enabled Balkan peasant women to communicate with one another across large outdoor distances (see Figure 1).

There's also what I call the Pudding Factor. For you can't talk about Sokolović's vocal music without talking about the Toronto-based Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, whose founders/artistic directors, John Hess and Dáirine Ní Mheadhra (pronounced, more or less, "DOY-rina Nee VAH-ra") have commissioned and produced most of Sokolović's vocal music, including her first opera (*The Midnight Court*), and another in progress. Puddings' bare-bones, abstract, highly physical staging aesthetic suits Sokolović's music

FIGURE 1 *Sirènes*, mm. 1-8.

♩ = 60 folcloristico

*ff senza vibr.*

Six voix six voix

grace note with throat voice (t.v.)

S.1

(a)

S.2

Voix

grace note with throat voice (t.v.)

(a)

S.3

Voix

six voix

grace note with throat voice (t.v.)

S.4

Six voix

grace note with throat voice (t.v.)

M.1

Six voix

grace note with throat voice (t.v.)

six voix[a]

M.2

Voix

six voix

[a]

5

S.1

six voix - ci

(i)

S.2

(a)

six voix - ci

six voix

S.3

six voix

(i)

S.4

six voix

[a]

i

M.1

(like Monteverdi)

six

M.2

six voix

(j)

six voix

[a]

4. All quotations from Ana Sokolović are taken from an interview with the author in Montreal in December 2008 [Ed. note].

perfectly. And Hess's and Ní Mheadhra's high standards; their constant search for, and training of, top Canadian vocal talent has created a pool of young singers—most of them female—who can and will do just about anything a composer asks for. Sokolović describes working with Hess and Ní Mheadhra as “a dream.” Everything, she says, “is so easy—it's incredible! They understand everything I tell them... Every time I have an idea, if I convince them artistically it's OK. They [have] never refused anything I asked.”

The ongoing story of Sokolović's music-theatre pieces, in other words, includes the story of what happens when a gifted creator finds an ideal producer-interpreter. I caught up with Hess and Ní Mheadhra in December 2008 in a café in Toronto's Roncesvalles neighbourhood; a week or so later, Sokolović generously spent the better part of a day with me in her Montreal home, scores spread across the dining room table; cups of white tea filled and re-filled many times.<sup>4</sup>

“I was part of this happy communist generation,” Sokolović said of her childhood. “It was economically very stable—we didn't have a lot but we had enough, and we had a very good education... We never locked our doors; we played outside late at night, all the time—it was just as in a dream. Of course now all that has *completely* changed!” As a child, Sokolović attended one of several music-focused public schools in Belgrade in the morning. But she also “adored theatre”: from grade three onward, she took classes at a state theatre school two afternoons a week. “What was great,” Sokolović said, “is that we didn't go to become actors. The goal was to develop our language, of course—but the most important thing was to develop our imagination. The teacher—Zora Bokšan—was a genius. What stimulates my musical imagination [today],” Sokolović said, “is very much as in these theatre classes.” In particular she recalls games where the children had to improvise stories from different objects or ideas. “If you have chair, table and plate, the story will be very easy to make but it will not be very interesting. But if you take, for example, chair, extraterrestrial and whatever, the story much more interesting! So I am working like this in my music.” And later: “I am a storyteller... My goal is not to tell you my dreams, but to make you dream.”

Sokolović ended up choosing music when entering university. “But I always thought about theatre... So when I finished university I was always connected to [Bokšan], and I wrote for her all the time music for her pieces for the theatre. I was always her assistant for staging. So I stayed in that world until I came to Canada.” It would be a long time, however, before Sokolović connected her love of theatre to vocal music. “When I was young, I didn't like voice—I didn't like vibrato; I didn't like opera; it was absolutely not

interesting for me. I was [of the] rock-and-roll generation!” she said. Nor, incidentally, was she interested in traditional Balkan music; like most people of her generation, she wanted to be part of the contemporary scene, whether of rock music or of the European art music elite.

It was Véronique Lacroix, artistic director of the Ensemble contemporain de Montréal (now called ECM+) and one of the first to bring Sokolović’s music to national attention, who nudged Sokolović into the world of voice. In 1996, Lacroix found that she needed an additional piece for a concert that featured two singers—“something short, and not difficult” is how Sokolović remembers the request—in order to ensure that the two singers had equal roles in the concert. Not having time to research a text, Sokolović took one of her own poems, and “wrote a good, short, three-minute piece,” she says. “And they played it and I said OK; it was nice.” *Pesma* (which means both “poem” and “song” in Serbian) is in fact a stunning ode to the power of music and love, and their shared ability to suspend time. Unlike Sokolović’s later music for voice, it has no “extended” techniques. The Slavic musicality of the text setting, and the distilled imagery—startling coming from a 28-year-old—might remind you a bit of Shostakovich’s late songs, while one or two glittering flashes of colour might conjure the ghost of Claude Vivier. But the combination of delicacy and explosive force, and again, those irresistible ‘objects’ made up of disparate elements, make it pure Sokolović. (I have been listening to a gorgeous archival recording from 2007 by the ECM+ with mezzo-soprano Michèle Motard, courtesy of the composer.)

Sokolović has identified those extremes of “finesse and audacity” as a fundamental tension, or axis, in her work; she relates them to ancient Serbian bardic literature, a magnificent body of aural poetry that survived thanks to collections made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It included epic, lyric, and combined epic-lyric poetry; in the lyric texts, Sokolović said, “you can have such abstract images, that you cannot find in the most modern literature! It’s like lace, it’s so beautiful, and of course it’s all about love: maternal love; love between people; love between animals...” The epic poetry, in contrast, recounts atrocities of battles with gruesome, Homeric detail: “You cannot imagine how it can be *rude*!” Sokolović said, using the word in its French sense of unrefined; brutal; rustic. And often, she said, there is no transition between harsh and the lyrical. “And I realized eventually that this is really how my music is,” the composer continued. In a lecture she gave in Montreal in 2006, Sokolović expressed this beautifully: “I want to take care of my musical space with attentive and delicate gestures, and I want at the same time, to violently open this space, with force. I want to work with the details of lace

FIGURE 2A Pesma, "Ughniyya" (Arabic movement), mm. 53-69.

fl. *♩ = 76, 80* *and.* *sempre ff* *coups de langue français en soufflant*

cl. 1 *and.* *sempre ff*

cl. 2 *and.* *sempre ff*

pno. *ff* *♩ = 76, 80*

voce *ff* *sempre vibr.* *avec la gorge - anche vibr. parle*  
*Al - - - - - ah - - - - - ya - - - - - du minn ju - - - - - did*  
*sur le côté du chevalet (bruit blanc)*  
*sur le côté du chevalet (bruit blanc)*  
*sur le côté du chevalet (bruit blanc)*

vln. *ff* *sempre vibr.*

vfa. *ff* *sempre vibr.*

cel. *ff* *sempre vibr.*

\* de mes. 53 à 109 les appoggiatures sont sur le temps

fl. *flaut.* *f* *and.* *fp* *sfz*

cl. 1 *ff* *f* *fp* *sfz*

cl. 2 *ff* *f* *fp* *sfz* *f*

pno. *sfz* *♩ = 76, 80*

voce *ff* *chanté senza vibr.* *yu dhub - - - - - alhi - bo dak - kk - kk hil i - - qi i mib - si - qo tá - -* *... molto vibr.*

vln. *f* *and.* *\* ..... senza vibr. and.* *fp* *sfz* *f*

vfa. *ff* *f* *fp* *sfz* *f*

cel. *ff* *f* *fp* *sfz* *f*

and embroidery in my music, and at the same time I want to pursue the raw, gross and barbarian material. I do not seek to flee this contradiction; I want to confront it.”

At the same time, Sokolović stresses that the Serbian-Balkan elements in her music “are not studied; I do not think about them when I compose. It is just a part of who I am,” she said in our conversations. The finesse-audacity axis is even more evident in the expanded version of *Pesma*, again commissioned by Lacroix for the ECM+. Sokolović had her poem translated into four languages—Arabic, French, Kifuliiru (a dialect spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo) and Lagu (a near-extinct language once spoken in parts of the Solomon Islands). Each translation inspired a completely different setting, in response to the sheer musicality of the languages: the Arabic receives a splendid, violently explosive setting (Figure 2a); the French begins with comic syllabic repetitions that seem to imitate a speech impediment (Figure 2b); Kifuliiru inspired the dreamy, broken phonograph effect described near the opening of this article (Figure 2c). The expanded *Pesma* is a masterpiece; one can only hope the ECM+ will record it commercially soon.

**FIGURE 2B** *Pesma*, “Chanson” (French movement), mm. 106–113.

respiration ad lib. - 126

les traits notes ressortent

soffler de façon ordinaire

chuchotement fort, comme la voix poindue

ouvrir la bouche seulement

poco a poco cresc.

mā - ci - qū

sur le côté du chevalier

comme gratter

bla - bla

la

bla - bla-bla-bla - bla-bla - bla - bla

sur le côté du chevalier

bloquer les cordes avec la main

quasi guitarra

comme gratter

*attacca*

Back when *Pesma* was still a one-movement piece, Ní Mheadhra listened to a recording of it while rooting around for young composers for Puddings' next show. "I remember thinking very clearly by bar nine: 'God: I don't have to listen to any more!'" Ní Mheadhra said. (The singer, I might mention, enters in m. 10.) "You knew this was a composer with something to say! It connected with you emotionally—and there was a marvelous elasticity in the composition. So we asked Ana to write this piece for six unaccompanied female voices."

Cut to the Enwave Theatre at Harbourfront Centre, a few days before the summer solstice in 2000. As a seamless, 70-minute show of staged new music pieces reaches its grand finale, six of Canada's most brilliant young singers, arms linked, are slowly moving towards the audience. They are dressed in comically extravagant 'queen' costumes (by Charlotte Dean), and the theatre is literally buzzing as their voices, rubbing closely against one another, unleash sounds unlike anything you have heard before. It's something like what you'd hear from a Bulgarian women's choir, but wilder, and more unpredictable. Their voices have set up a forcefield of sound, on which they play fearlessly, like shamans dancing on flames. The women appear to be

having the time of their lives, and in a way, so are you, though as the distance between them and the audience closes, the effect is both thrilling and slightly alarming.

The piece is called *Sirènes*; it ended up being the title piece of Puddings' bilingual show that featured new works from seven young composers from French and English Canada. "When you start working on the score, it's just your 'New Music' piece, with these slightly extended techniques," Hess said. Then came the "Aha!" moment ("Oh, hang on: it's the Balkan thing!"). "It was fantastic, because the piece has this blend of highly conceived contemporary music combined with some really rustic, simple musical elements," Hess notes. "Once you figured that out, you understood the quality of sound: slightly nasal; absolutely fearless and uncompromising—it's really a take-no-prisoners kind of piece—it's easier to come up with metaphors for how the sound should be. So it changed how we worked with the singers." When rehearsing Sokolović's music, he says, they'll tell singers things like, "Use the voice you use when you're yelling at a football game here."

Puddings left the choice of librettist for *Sirènes* up to Sokolović; she chose the French-born, Montreal-based writer Nathalie Mamias, figuring that their joint immigrant status would satisfy Puddings' requirement that the piece in some way "reflect Canadian reality." Mamias presented her with a delicious, subversive text that crackles with energy and wit, largely through homonymic word-play: *Sirènes* = sirens but also *six reines* (six queens); *reines sans chaîne* = queens without chains but also *reines s'enchaînent* (queens intertwine); *rejoindre l'éther* = return to the ether but also *rejoindre les terres* (return to earth), and so on: after a while language itself starts to drift clear of its moorings. These women, you feel, are sorceresses of language who can use the power of words to transport themselves anywhere in the universe. Sokolović took the ball and ran with it: *Sirènes* is a joyous, whimsical, dizzyingly virtuosic (one wants to say *feminosic*) celebration of women's power. Even when the siren-queens contemplate the possibility of losing their voices at the end, the pitchless music they make from the word "*silence!*" is irresistible (Figure 3).

*Sirènes*' combination of power and playful, even self-mocking humour of *Sirènes* is highly unusual in contemporary music, and is very much part of Sokolović's music.

Puddings, meanwhile, was ecstatic. "It's the way her music makes you feel," Ní Mheadhra said. "It's so inarticulable—*Sirènes* is the complete meal: there's the sensory, there's the delicious, there's the humour, there's the sensuality; there's that thing at the beginning that makes you feel you can move mountains!"

FIGURE 3    *Sirènes*, mm. 140-144.

1 Et si nous perdions la voix? Qu'advient-il? Qu'advient-il de sirènes sans voix? Et d'une scène sans ses sirènes? Qu'advient-il si?

2 Et si nous perdions la voix? AAAA Qu'advient-il? Qu'advient-il de sirènes sans voix? Et d'une scène sans ses sirènes? Qu'advient-il si?

3 Et si nous perdions la voix? AAAA Qu'advient-il? Qu'advient-il de sirènes sans voix? Et d'une scène sans ses sirènes? Qu'advient-il si?

4 Et si nous perdions la voix? AAAA Qu'advient-il? Qu'advient-il de sirènes sans voix? Et d'une scène sans ses sirènes? Qu'advient-il si?

1 Et si nous perdions la voix? AAAA Qu'advient-il? Qu'advient-il de sirènes sans voix? Et d'une scène sans ses sirènes? Qu'advient-il si?

2 Et si nous perdions la voix? AAAA Qu'advient-il? Qu'advient-il de sirènes sans voix? Et d'une scène sans ses sirènes? Qu'advient-il si?

5-10" 5" 5-10" 5-10" 5-10" 5-10"

(vigorous inhaling)

murmur the words in each box without any order, but accentuating a few consonants by choice

wisper loudly (soloist), as if she has lost her voice/laryngitis (one time)

141 = 60

S.1

S.2

S.3

S.4

M.1

M.2

*mp* whispering Si Si - len - ce

*mp* whispering Si Si - len - ce

*mp* whispering Si Si - len - ce

*mp* whispering Si Si - len - ce

It's difficult to think of another 'contemporary music' composer who is exploring female power through traditional vocal techniques particular to women. Lawrence Cherney, of the Toronto new music presenter Soundstreams, hits the bull's eye when he paired Sokolović and Swedish composer Karin Rehnqvist (b. 1957) on a memorable concert at Toronto's Glenn Gould Studio on January 25, 2007. The heavy-hitters of the evening—and the reason, one can imagine, for the pairing of composers—were Sokolović's *Sirènes* and Rehnqvist's 1989 *Puksanger—Lockrup* (Timpanum Songs—Herding Calls) for two female voices and percussion.

In *Puksanger—Lockrup*, Rehnqvist makes powerful use of *kulning*—a traditional, female solo vocal technique from central Sweden; high-pitched and loud, it is used out of doors for herding cattle, and, the composer adds, for “communicating with each other over long distances.”<sup>5</sup>

5. Rehnqvist, 2007, n.p.

Like *Sirènes*, *Puksanger — Lockrup* celebrates the almost supernatural power of women through their voices. But where Mamias's playful, celebratory text pays men no heed, Rehnqvist's tackles misogyny head-on in its penultimate section—a recitation, mostly in twisted half-voice, of misogynist Finnish proverbs (from “Woman has long hair and a short mind” to: “A woman's opinion, a dog's fart”). Rehnqvist's answer is a hair-raising display of *kulning* to Blake's lines, “The Eternal Female groand! It was heard over all the Earth,” which subsides into a quiet close that brings no peace.

In 2000, meanwhile, Queen of Puddings was so thrilled with *Sirènes* that they asked Sokolović to write an opera. And that, finally, is when the penny dropped. “*Then* I understood: but this is theatre and music at the same time!” Sokolović recounts. “Incredible that it's so evident, but in my head I just didn't think about it [before]. Then I started to work on it and I *exploded*! Everything was: wow, how I like this!”

The opera was *The Midnight Court*—a romping adaptation, by librettist Paul Bentley, of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Gaelic satire on celibacy. I wasn't smitten by the story, with its ultimately tedious hammering in of compulsory heterosexuality. But Sokolović's witty, exuberant score was a delight, with its constant blurring of boundaries between the human voice and the ‘voices’ of the six-piece instrumental ensemble. Here too, words are liable at any moment to detach themselves from their everyday sense and become musical syllables soaring out of control—rather like the out-of-control hormones that drive the action.

Sokolović emphasizes that her extended vocal techniques do not come from the “new music” world. Rather, “they have existed for many centuries in traditional music: all kinds of onomatopoeic singings, cries, calls, tender

FIGURE 4 Love Songs, "Doves I," complete. Text: "I love you" in 40 languages, in alphabetical order from Afrikaans to Hebrew.

## Doves I

"I Love You " in Afrikaans, Albanian, Arabic, Armenian, Bambara, Bengali, Belarusian, Bisaya, Bulgarian, Cambodian, Cantonese Chinese, Catalan, Cherokee, Cheyenne, Chichewa, Corsican, Creol, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Elvish, Esperanto, Estonian, Ethiopian, Faroese, Farsi, Filipino, Finnish, French, Frisian, Gaelic, Georgian, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hiligaynon, Hawaiian, Hebrew

Ana Sokolovic

**♩ = 104 mysterious**  
melodic talk intonation approx.

**(mf)**

Ek het jou lief (f) Te du - a A - na be - hi - bak A - na be - hi - bek

5 Yes, kez si - ru - men M' bif(ffff) - e A - mi to - ma - ke

9 bha - lo - ba - shi Ya ta - be - ka - ha - yu Na - hi gu - gma

12 molto accentuato in p loud whisper

a - ko ka - ni - mo a - ka - ko ka - ni - mo Na - hi - gug - ma a - ko ka - ni - mo a - ko Na - hi - gug - ma ka - ni - mo a - ko ka - ni - mo ka - ni - mo

14 In

O - bi - cham te So - ro - lahn nhee ahhh Ngo - oiy ney a

17 In In

I' es - ti - mo Tsi - ge yu i Ne mo - ho - tat - se

20 **rit.** soft (lot of air) clap hands rapidly like dove's wings

Ndi - ma ku - kon - - - da

22 percussive sound, excessive Ex and In Ex In Ex Ex In Ex In

Ti - i ten - gu ca - ru, Mi a - i - me jou, Vo - lim te, Mi -

**FIGURE 4** *Love Songs*, “Doves I,” complete. Text: “I love you” in 40 languages, in alphabetical order from Afrikaans to Hebrew.

25 Ex Ex In Ex In EX until bar 30

lu - ji - te, Jeg Els - ker - Dig, Ik hou van jou, A-min me - la lle, Mi

28

a - mas vin, Ma ar - ma stan sind, Af - gre - ki, Eg el - ski - teg,

31 Ex In Ex <<<<< Ex In Ex <<<<<

Do-set da - ram, Ma - hal ki - ta, Mi-na ra - kas-tan si - nu - a, Je - t'aime, Ik hld fan - dy, Ta - gra

35 <<<<< <<<<<

a - gam ort, Mik - var - har, Ich - lie - be dich, S'ag - a - po, Hoo - thu - hay-prem ka - ro - o - choo,

38 just air

Pa - lang - ga ko i - kaw A - lo ha A - u I - a o - e(ee)

40 } <

A - - - a-lo-ha A-u I-a-o-e I-a-o-e

*rit. poco*  
each time gradually open mouth  
just air

A - lo - I - o - e

42 *a tempo* <

A - - - ni - o-hev ot-cha o - he-vet ot-cha ot-cha o - he-vet

*rit. poco simile*  
just air

ot - cha a - ni a - ni,

44 *a tempo* <

Gui - gu - i - na hi-gug-ma ko i-kaw hi-gug-ma ko i-kaw

*rit.* <<<<<

hi - gug - ma gu - i - na i - kaw

46 repeat if needed just air

ah - ah - ah - ah - ah - ah.

sounds, grace notes, murmurs, hummings, guttural sounds—everything you want you can find here! “As probably in a lot of cultures, in [the] Serbian countryside, peasants are telling stories, and very often they are doing onomatopoeic sounds, imitating animals, even violence, with their voice... It is always imitation, onomatopoea—and I think this is very pagan because we had this adoration of nature, trees...”

In her astonishing *Love Songs*—another Puddings commission—Sokolović pursues this aesthetic even further. For this piece, which premiered in 2008, the composer set 10 of her favourite love poems. (One has subsequently been deleted, in the interests of pacing.) But while most composers fixate on romantic love, Sokolović flings open the door to include love for one’s mother (Émile Nelligan’s *Ma Mère*); love between children; love for a daughter (the Gaelic *Dan do Lara* by Michael Hartnett); love shattered by grief (*Ma Morte Vivante* by Paul Eluard), and most harrowingly, love for a lost brother (Catullus). To cover the romantic side of things, Sokolović brought in Shakespeare, Walt Whitman and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and texts by Serbian and Sanskrit poets. Interspersed with the main songs are four movements that Sokolović calls “Doves,” in which the performer sings or speaks the phrase “I love you” in a total of 100 languages—including sign language and Elvish (Figure 4).

The first *Love Song* (not counting the opening Dove movement) opens with a terrific, jolting shout of the word “She!”, sustained on a high G without vibrato; 40 minutes later the piece closes with seven ritualistic mourning shrieks of “*atque vale*” (farewell) that rise approximately to the same pitch. For Sokolović, these two extreme vocal events inscribe the arc of a life, from the cry of birth to that of death (Figures 5a and 5b).

As the singer whispers, half-speaks, chants, speaks, ululates her way through *Love Songs*, the extended techniques amplify the geographic, linguistic and emotional expansiveness of Sokolović’s texts. Mezzo-soprano Lauren Phillips, who premiered the piece, went beyond virtuosity and entered into the various states of love with purity of heart as well as voice, and conveyed an exhilarating freedom and daring as she leapt from language to language—especially in the dizzying “I love you”s. (I have not yet had the opportunity to hear another brilliant Canadian singer, Shannon Mercer, perform the piece, which she has toured in Europe.)

Although Puddings subsequently replaced Brent Krysa’s staging with a more abstract choreography by Marie-Josée Chartier, in many ways I preferred the first version—especially the Pandora-like box that Krysa had Phillips open in the beginning: this image quietly transformed a misogynist

FIGURE 5A *Love Songs*, “She,” mm. 47-51.

FIGURE 5B *Love Songs*, “Catulle 101,” mm. 474-475.

myth into one that celebrates the braveness and exhilaration of female curiosity, and amplified the ancient Mediterranean roots of the music.

There is so much lightness in *Love Songs* that its harrowing ending—a setting of two Latin mourning odes that Catullus wrote on the death of his brother—caught me completely off-guard. The singer begins in her low register, circling modally around a small compass (another typical Balkan/middle-eastern musical trait). As the tessitura gradually rises, the voice becomes incantatory, and locks into the ancient voices of Mediterranean women keening their dead. In Krysa’s staging, Phillips held out a small silver bowl in which she circled a thin silver chain—a liberal interpretation of Sokolović’s instructions to brush a snare drum. For days afterwards I was shaken by Phillips’ ululation of the final words of the poem—“*Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale*” (Hail and farewell forever, my brother). Strong stuff from a composer who describes herself as “not a person for writing tragedies.”

It’s clear that Puddings has inadvertently reunited two parts of Sokolović’s creative self—music and theatre—that had been sundered when she moved to Canada; the energy of that fission appears set to burn brightly for a long time. At the time of our interview she was working on a second opera for Puddings, to be premiered in 2010. Titled *Svadba* (Serbian for “wedding”), it is scored for six female singers, and in a sense picks up where *Sirènes* left off.

“It will be the night before the wedding, when girls are with girls,” Sokolović said late in 2008. “I think all cultures have this: they’re talking, and they are preparing [the bride] for her wedding. And it finishes when she’s ready, and leaving.”

But there will also be “some moments where time stops—where there is just some fantasist elements,” Sokolović said; the libretto will be in Serbian, English and an imaginary language of the composer’s invention.

Sokolović shies away from feminist contextualizing of her work, but Hess doesn’t. “It’s going to be six women absolutely in control of their destiny, sitting around, having a grand old time, fooling around,” he said in 2008, while the work was in gestation. Its precedents, he said, lie in the comedies of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greek satirist Aristophanes, who wrote plays like *Lysistrata* in which “the men had clearly lost all concept, so it was up to the women to sort things out. And they do it with absolutely no doubt that they know how things have to go—but with enormous humour.” The Bulgarian-*Sirènes* element, he promised, will be “out of control!”

When *Svadba* premiered at the Berkeley St. Theatre in Toronto on June 24, 2011, the “Bulgarian-*Sirènes*” element was indeed thrilling. But subversive it ain’t—the six women were not going to overthrow male rule any time soon; in that sense, it’s a more conservative piece than *Sirènes*. Still, Stravinsky’s *Les Noces* will never sound the same after hearing this vocally stunning, all-woman, Balkan take on marriage.

The more Sokolović embraces her Serbian cultural roots, and the more conscious she becomes of their complex influence on her music, the more passionately and confidently she has reached out to a universal embrace. How else to explain the “hyper-linguism” of *Love Songs*? “We are all connected by love—all cultures,” Sokolović said. “All mother loves are similar; all brother loves; love to a child, or love to an equal, or love in grief. At the end of *Love Songs*, you have a Latin text but music inspired by Balkan folklore—and it works! This universal thing for me is absolutely incredible.” You can even feel this euphoria in some of Sokolović’s more arcane instruction to the performer: when asked what she meant by “crystal voice oriental renaissance,” the composer laughs and says she is convinced that Monteverdi would have heard non-Western music in Venice, and perhaps Mantova. “His ornaments are coming from [the Middle East]; from North Africa; the Balkans; from Sephardic Jews,” she said. “At the time it was probably evident. All music is so connected!”

For me, Sokolović’s music is ultimately a love potion—as it is literally, in one scene of *The Midnight Court*. Not the doomed, claustrophobic love of

Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, but something closer to the life-force itself, in all its wildness, delicacy, mystery, beauty and humour. It's heady stuff; don't miss an opportunity to quaff it.

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