

I AM NOT A MUSE.

Silent. Passive. In service of another's creativity.

I AM NOT A MUSE.

A woman. A body. Animated only by the male gaze.

No. There is too much baggage here. From the nine goddesses of the Greeks, Dante's chaste infatuation with Beatrice or the self-mythology of Gala-Dalí, since time immemorial the artist-muse relationship has been gendered and wildly unequal. As Germaine Greer wrote,

The muse in her purest aspect is the feminine part of the male artist, with which he must have intercourse if he is to bring into being a new work. She is the anima to his animus, the yin to his yang, except that, in a reversal of gender roles, she penetrates or inspires him and he gestates and brings forth, from the womb of the mind.¹

She doesn't mean literal intercourse, incidentally; rather, a psychic penetration. But after the creative act, how do we find our couple? He lies back to admire his seminal new work and she is, what? Flexing an aching wrist?

Second-wave feminists did sterling work challenging the metaphor of the muse, and along with it many other dreadful archetypes. In her essay 'The Re-Vision of the Muse', looking specifically at the poetry of Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn and Olga Broumas, Mary J. Carruthers observes that:

Poetic tradition has not given women a language in which they can readily imagine their lives with integrity and completeness. From muse to mother to mistress, women in poetry supply what is missing to men. They are the Other term in the universal dichotomy of oppositions between which the male universe swings...²

How to escape this dichotomy? How to create a new language? For many female artists, the solution has been to annex the metaphor rather than abandon it, to become both muse and midwife to their own creative practices. As the feminist art historian Josephine Withers said of Lynda Benglis, 'No longer a handmaiden, mistress, or model, she has become her own inspiration and her own muse.'³

There is, however, a difference between the artist-muse relationship in visual arts or poetry and the artist-muse relationship between say, a choreographer and a dancer or a

¹ Germaine Greer, 'The role of the artist's muse', *The Guardian*, 2 June 2008.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/artblog/2008/jun/02/theroleofheartistsmuse>. Accessed 22 July 2023.

² Mary J. Carruthers, 'The Re-Vision of the Muse: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Olga Broumas.' *The Hudson Review* 36, no. 2 (1983): 293–322. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3856702>.

³ Joan Semmel, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Eleanor Antin and Josephine Withers, 'Musing about the Muse.' *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1983): 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177681>.

composer and a performer. A muse inspiring a painting or a poem is not required for the transmission of the finished art work: it exists, and the audience observes it. If I am a muse inspiring a composer with... my voice, I suppose... at what point in the process do I shift into the role of the performer? When does the passive role become active? And if my role is in fact active from the beginning, am I not simply being an appropriately engaged performer? Why call me a muse? Is it a compliment?

It's the sense of being boxed in that rankles. Muses are, at best, celebrated for having inspired someone else's creative output. (Take, for example, Alice Liddell who, at the age of 80, received an honorary doctorate for having inspired, when she was 10 years old and under pretty dodgy circumstances, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*). Rare are the instances of a muse who blooms into an artist in their own right.

In a recent email exchange, I asked Joan La Barbara what the word 'muse' meant to her. Her reply illustrates perfectly this straitjacketing:

Ah yes, being the 'muse' has its advantages and drawbacks. The primary problem — or quandary — is whether one stays in that category or reaches out and tries one's hand at putting one's own ideas out there in the arena, calling oneself a 'composer'. I did get hit with a few barbs when I began composing. Milton Babbitt, for instance, famously never called me a composer, rather preferring to use the term 'performance artist' indicating that it was somehow a lesser category and did not rise to the heights of being a 'real' composer.⁴

This may be your basic misogyny at work, but it is notoriously hard to escape the role of the muse; to cross over from muse to artist is somehow to transgress.

To be clear, no composer has ever referred to me publicly as their muse. This is a role foisted on me by third-party observers and it troubles me precisely because it fortifies the worst assumptions about the composer-performer relationship: it reinforces a tedious gender norm and a tired hierarchy that diminishes the agency of the performer. (Arguably, it therefore also diminishes the street cred of the composer!) Currently this archetype most often appears in conversation about my work with Rebecca Saunders. Is it because we're both women that people dare to give the word air? Does the word become any less problematic in that context? I suspect that Rebecca would shudder at its use for she is equally rigorous about getting to know the playing and the personality of every performer with whom she works. It is surely sound, above all, that is her muse, never a person.

The old binaries are falling away and we spend a lot of time within our musical communities discussing, and practising, messier, blurrier ways of making and working together. We are generally adept at interrogating the embedded tropes and hierarchies that no longer serve or adequately reflect our creative relationships, so why does this one persist? Does anything I have said so far surprise anyone? Do we not already *know* that to cast someone in the role of the muse is problematic? Perhaps it is just one more sign that classical music, certainly, and new music too, regrettably, are still working to shrug off the language of the past.

⁴ Joan La Barbara, email to author, 26 July 2023.

Language is a power tool: it conveys, bestows or denies power. For example, we are doing much positive dismantling of the old fixed hierarchies when we use terms such as ‘co-composition’ or ‘collaboration’ with precision. On the other hand, I would be reinforcing tiresome and inaccurate hierarchies were I to refer to Mark Knop as ‘my accompanist’. To cast someone in the role of the muse is to confer upon them the full burdensome imprint of this archetype.

Greer distinguishes between the muse and the subject. This is terminology I can get behind. A subject (rather than an object) is seen for what it is; indeed, it may be studied to be understood, its individual traits carefully examined and revisited over time. There is a slow craft at work, which implies commitment and respect. If somebody writes a piece of music for me, of course I am, in some way, ‘the inspiration’. I am completely comfortable with the idea of inspiring work — that is a beautiful thing to me, and anyway a thing that I cannot control — but I do not want to be objectified or mythologised. It’s the twenty-first century and I am a feminist: THE MUSE IS DEAD. (In fact, I thought Arlene Croce had killed her off in 1996⁵, but maybe it’ll take nine swipes to terminate this Gorgon.)

I AM NOT A DIVA.

Is this not simply the ‘whore’ archetype in disguise? The diva is expected to role-play, that’s for sure; a sexual advance is all too often hovering behind the handshake or the invitation to dinner, and money isn’t far behind in some people’s transactional mindsets. A diva is expected to be demanding, difficult and over-emotional. (Obviously she only gets away with that behaviour if she is also considered beautiful and/or sexy.) The diva is the method actor of the opera world: the role doesn’t stop when you come off stage; it’s relentless. It is also archaic: it is born of the intensely hierarchical and patriarchal structures of 19th-century opera. But since so many of those structures unfortunately persist in opera today, a feminist defence of the modern-day diva could hold water: sometimes making demands before one arrives or stamping one’s foot during rehearsals is the only way to avoid an intolerable or inequitable working environment.

Maria Callas remains a diva icon, one of the few prima donnas to be cursed with global celebrity, to carry social and cultural capital in equal measure. According to Vlado Kotnik,

Callas was a muse, but a misused one, overtaken by the fantasies of directors who, through her, were at once renewing opera and criticising it. The masochist in her — unsure of her own power and longing for protective guidance — consented to the exploitation.⁶

I wonder what she would say about that; it’s pretty loaded language. One imagines a diva as having quite a bit of power, but perhaps there isn’t all that much room to

⁵ Arlene Croce, ‘Is the Muse Dead?’, *The New Yorker*, 18 February 1996.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/02/26/is-the-muse-dead>. Accessed 27 July 2023.

⁶ Vlado Kotnik, ‘The Idea of Prima Donna: The History of a Very Special Opera’s Institution’, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 47, no. 2 (2016): 237–87.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44234972>.

manoeuvre at the top of a pedestal. If I were to become a diva, I'd be taking my cue from Giuditta Pasta. Listen to the contract she signed with King's Theatre in London in 1826:

In all the operas in which Madame Pasta will perform, she alone will have the choice of the actors and the distribution of the roles, the absolute direction for all that regards the rehearsals and all that concerns the mise en scene of the said operas. No one will have the right to intervene in rehearsals, nor to meddle in anything concerning the performance of those operas.⁷

She transcended the diva. She was THE BOSS!

So, we need a fresh campaign to kill the muse but apparently it's nothing new to kill off the diva. As Catherine Clément says:

Humiliated, hunted, driven mad, burnt alive, stabbed, committing suicide
— Violetta, Sieglinde, Lucia, Brünnhilde, Aida, Norma, Mélisande, Liù, Butterfly, Isolde, Lulu, and so many others... All sopranos, and all dead.⁸

ENTER THE WITCH

I've decided I want to be a witch. I realised with some horror that I'd spent about 30 years hoping to be a wife — not even a princess, just a wife! — but, now that I have behind me a goodly bibliography of feminist literature and have ahead of me the menopause, I've finally found my archetype. (As an aside, I did some naff online quiz about feminine archetypes whilst researching this essay and it told me I was The Queen. I was furious.)

This is all very zeitgeisty. Wise old women living on the margins abound in ancient stories across all cultures, but witches and hags are capturing the popular imagination again at the moment, at least in Britain. Giving them more airtime is all for the good — it's not new to observe that the obsession with youth over eldership and opinion over wisdom is to everyone's detriment. I spent a few intense weeks in 2021 thinking and feeling my way into the crone that is 'Mouth' in Beckett's *Not I*. That may have been a pivotal moment for me, along with reading *Lolly Willowes*⁹, a novel written in 1926 in which a very relatable woman experiences the onset of witchiness deep in the Chiltern Hills, a thoroughly respectable bit of middle England. A witch is a loner. A witch is an outsider, unbound by rules or mores: her retreat into the woods or the wilderness represents a rejection of society at large in favour of the community of the coven and a connectedness to the non-human. She is grounded, in tune with the natural world, and instinctive in her purpose. She is an agent of change, a trouble-maker and a healer; in Sara Ahmed's terms, most definitely a killjoy.

New music has huge potential in this regard. Many of us are weirdo onions: layer upon layer of misfittery. "You're into classical music? Weirdo! What? No tunes???"

⁷ Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera: 1815-1930* (Cambridge, 2006), 111.

⁸ Catherine Clément, *Opera: The Undoing of Women*, cited in Vlado Kotnik, 'The Idea of Prima Donna: The History of a Very Special Opera's Institution', *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 47, no. 2 (2016): 237-87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44234972>.

⁹ Silvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes* (Little Brown Book Group, 1926).

SuperWeirdo.” And yet here we are, gathered together in Darmstadt as a community of misfits. What if the witches amongst us were to form a network of covens, bringing some earthy, troublesome hagitude¹⁰ to the Venn diagram of intersectional ecofeminism and contemporary/experimental/weirdo new musics? What trouble could we make? What healing could we bring about?

I am born of many witches. They’re nearly all writers — Hélène Cixous (who commanded me to write, to write my body¹¹, even, and I obeyed), Ahdaf Soueif, Éliane Radigue, Deborah Levy, Donna Haraway, Rachel Carson, Sara Ahmed, Hildegard — all witchy in their own way, even the nun. For it turns out there’s a thin line between nun and witch: one’s in a cloister, one’s in the wild, but they are similarly disruptive. As Ahmed says, ‘When we refuse to be women, in the heteropatriarchal sense as beings for men, we become trouble, we get into trouble.’¹²

Hildegard von Bingen and Julian of Norwich were big trouble, each with a creative output so radical that it met with fierce resistance at the time and continues to overwhelm our tiny minds today. Great is the mystery of the creative act. In the words of Cixous:

A joyful force. Not a god; it doesn't come from above. But from an inconceivable region, deep down inside me but unknown, as if there might exist somewhere in my body (which, from the outside, and from the point of view of a naturalist, is highly elastic, nervous, lively, thin, not without charm, firm muscles, pointed nose always quivering and damp, vibrating paws) another space, limitless; and there, in those zones which inhabit me and which I don't know how to live in, I feel them, I don't live them, they live me, gushing from the wellsprings of my souls, I don't see them but I feel them, it's incomprehensible but that's how it is. There are sources. That's the enigma. One morning, it all explodes. My body experiences, deep down inside, one of its panicky cosmic adventures. I have volcanoes on my lands. But no lava: what wants to flow is breath. And not just any old way. The breath “wants” a form? “Write me!” One day it begs me, another day it threatens. “Are you going to write me or not?” It could have said: “Paint me.” I tried. But the nature of its fury demanded the form that stops the least, that encloses the least, the body without a frame, without skin, without walls, the flesh that doesn't dry, doesn't stiffen, doesn't clot the wild blood that wants to stream through it—forever. “Let me through, or everything goes!”¹³

I am not a muse. This strange work-love-life of mine is one long panicky cosmic adventure. It is active and exhausting, a sequence of intense communal exchanges and experiments. I have volcanoes on my lands, and it’s unclear what form the flow will take.

Juliet Fraser, 27 July 2023

¹⁰ Term coined by Sharon Blackie, as in her book *Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life* (September Publishing, 2022).

¹¹ Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’. *Signs* 4 (1976), 875-876.

¹² Sara Ahmed, *Living a feminist life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 255.

¹³ Hélène Cixous, ‘Coming to Writing’, *Coming to Writing and other essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 10.

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