

HERE BE SIRENS



Music Theatre in One Act

by Kate Soper

## Roles

- Peitho            Soprano. A Pre-Raphaelite, early Romantic-era-type siren. Actually in love with every sailor who washes up. Peitho is the least evolved of the three sirens and is initially innocent of the fact that being a mythological figure is incompatible with being alive. Her transformation over the course of the play leads her to adopt Polyxo's quest.
- Phaino           Soprano. Phaino embodies both the earliest recorded version of the Siren archetype (the deadly birdwoman) and the final stage in Siren evolution: complete sublimation into mythological identity, past which there is no personal desire or possibility of change. If she has inner thoughts or feelings, they are totally impenetrable.
- Polyxo           Soprano. Polyxo doesn't represent an existing Siren archetype but is in a nightmarishly self-aware stage between Peitho and Phaino. Trying to get off the goddamned island: trying not to understand how impossible this is. By the end of the play she has completed her evolution to join Phaino in apotheosization.

## Instrumentation

Three sopranos and piano (three performers total). The following additional items are required for the piano part: six rocks (two per performer); glass slides (one per performer; rocks may be substituted); a thin piece of sheet metal; one large timpani mallet; four heavily rosined long pieces of fishing wire. See *Appendix A: Performance Notes* for specific instructions on piano techniques by number.

NB: Twenty-two times during the opera, an air horn is played to signal the approach and arrival of a ship. A different "signaling" instrument may be substituted if an air horn small enough to be played indoors cannot be found (or if so desired, for staging reasons), for example: a cast iron dinner bell; a police whistle; a pre-recorded sound effect; etc.

## Setting

An island somewhere around the Mediterranean. A washed-out, bright grey day.

## Time

The past and future.

The pre-archaic Greek past and the post-apocalyptic U.S. future.

## List of Scenes and Musical Numbers

*Lyrics by Author and as indicated.*

*See Appendix B for translations/transliterations pronunciation of numbers with asterisks.*

### PROLOGUE

1. "The Myth of Er": text by Plato\*
2. "Concerning the Siren": text by Bishop Theobald\*
3. "Song"

### SCENE 1: SIRENS BREAK RANK

4. "Sirenbraid": texts by Homer (tran. Soper) and Carl Jung\*
5. "Naufragium": text by Erasmus\*

### SCENE 2: POLYXO EXPLAINS IT ALL

6. "Troubadour Song": texts by de Vacqueiras and Tibullus
7. "Phonebook Aria"
8. "Naufragium" (Ibid.)

### SCENE 3: ORIGIN SPECULATION 1

9. "Witch-Wife": text by Edna St. Vincent Millay
10. "Naufragium" (Ibid.)

### SCENE 4: THE ABDUCTION OF PERSEPHONE

11. "The Abduction of Persephone"
12. "Hymn to Neptune": text by Thomas Campion
13. "Naufragium" (Ibid.)

### SCENE 5: ORIGIN SPECULATION 2

14. "Muses Entr'acte"
15. "Siren Nomenclature"
16. "O Sailor"
17. "Naufragium" (Ibid.)

### SCENE 6: THE CONTEST OF THE MUSES AND THE SIRENS

18. "The Muses Elyzium": text by Michael Drayton
19. "Pythagorus 1": text by Iamblicus
20. "Across the Turbid Waves": text by Dante (trans. Soper)
21. "In a Silent Valley": text by John Milton\*
22. "Pythagorus 2": text by Iamblicus
23. "Naufragium" (Ibid.)

### SCENE 7: PEITHO RISING

24. "Sappho Fragments": text by Sappho (trans. Anne Carson)
25. "Here to Me from Krete": text by Sappho (trans. Carson)
26. "Naufragium" (Ibid.)

### SCENE 8: SIREN EVOLUTION

27. "Song to Odysseus": text by Homer\*

"Things themselves become so burdened with attributes, signs, allusions, that they finally lose their own form. Meaning is no longer read in an immediate perception, the figure no longer speaks for itself; between the knowledge which animates it and the form into which it is transposed, a gap widens. It is free for the dream."

-Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*

"ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?"

-Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*



## HERE BE SIRENS: Appendices

### Appendix A: Performance Notes

#### Performer Requirements

The piano part for *Here Be Sirens* is shared among the three sopranos with no additional performers. Piano parts may be distributed differently than as indicated in the score in all numbers/musical cues excepting *Waiting Theme*, *Muses Entr'acte*, and *Song to Odysseus*, depending on performer proficiency. The work is best executed with two performers who play keyboard at a beginner/intermediate level: a third performer must be able to find a handful of simple chords on the keyboard (for *Muses Entr'acte*). Additionally, all performers play “piano percussion,” including bowing, striking, and strumming the strings, playing the pedals, and other effects, for which memorization of rhythm and gestures is required.

#### Instrument Specifications

The piano must be a grand piano with a working sostenuto pedal. Both the lid and the music stand must be removed. Additional items required include: small rocks (two per performer, six total); glass slides (one per performer; rocks may be substituted); a thin piece of sheet metal about six inches square; one large timpani mallet; two wire brushes; four long pieces of fishing wire, heavily rosined with string rosin; and an air-horn or other signaling instrument.

#### Number-Specific Techniques

*Numbers not included do not have a piano part*

0. “Waiting Theme”: Piano plays a series of three gestures inside the piano, *ad lib*, usually underscoring dialogue or monologue from the other characters. Although some keyboard proficiency is required, this limited material could be learned by a performer with no previous keyboard experience.
2. “The Myth of Er”: players use various inside piano techniques, including scraping a low coiled string with a coin and scraping a glass slide or rock along the bolts at the top of the piano towards the keyboard. Players strum strings with fingers (in this and other movements in which strings are played by hand, latex gloves may be worn if there is concern about skin oils interacting with the piano strings).
3. “Song”: Contains an easy four-measure piano accompaniment that repeats.

4. “Sirenbraid”: Two performers play rhythmic “piano percussion,” one with a timpani mallet on the low strings, one with a wire brush on the high strings. A third performer must play a series of chord progressions (beginner/intermediate level).
5. “Naufragium”: For this recurring number, a thin piece of sheet metal is placed on the low strings immediately prior, to create a rattling sound. One performer hits this sheet with a timpani mallet; all performers scrape the strings or bolts; one performer operates the pedal and plays a short chord progression (beginner level).
7. “Phonebook Aria”: One performer plays a somewhat improvisatory piano accompaniment (beginner/intermediate level).
9. “Witch-Wife”: One performer plays a piano accompaniment (intermediate level).
11. “The Abduction of Persephone”: One performer plays a piano accompaniment (intermediate level). The two remaining performers play rhythmic “piano percussion” at the end of this number (strumming the strings with wire brushes).
12. “Hymn to Neptune”: One player operates the piano pedal.
14. “Muses Entr’acte”: All three performers perform the following actions: playing a series of chords on the piano (beginner level), precisely operating the pedal, and strumming the piano strings with a wire brush.
15. “Siren Nomenclature”: One or more performers may improvise an accompaniment.
18. “The Muses Elyzium”: One performer plays an accompaniment at an intermediate level, with techniques including operating the sostenuto and damper pedals and playing a plucked piano string accompaniment in addition to playing the keyboard. A second performer shares the keyboard accompaniment at a beginner/intermediate level. A third performer plays rhythmic “piano percussion,” strumming the strings with a wire brush.
19. “Pythagorus 1”: One performer plucks piano strings (beginner level).
20. “Across the Turbid Waves”: All performers play rhythmic percussion and “piano percussion,” including striking rocks together, and strumming strings. One performer plays the keyboard at a beginner/intermediate level and operates the sostenuto and damper pedals.
21. “In a Silent Valley”: One performer operates the sostenuto pedal and plays the keyboard at a beginner/intermediate level.
22. “Pythagorus 2”: One performer plucks piano strings (beginner level).
24. “Sappho Fragments”: One performer plucks a single note.

25. “Here to Me from Krete”: One player operates the damper pedals, all three bow individual piano strings with thin fishing wire, and one performer briefly plays the keyboard (beginner level). Four lengths of fishing wire of about 2-3 feet should be heavily rosined before the start of each show (the more coated the wire, the clearer the resulting sound). During the scene prior, these lengths are threaded underneath the piano strings for the specified pitches (D5, A4, G3, and C3) by the performer playing Phaino. (Folding a small piece of tape over the ends of each length of wire will facilitate maneuvering: tweezers may be used to pull each length of wire through the strings.) To bow the piano string, grasp one end of the wire in each hand, raise arms so that wire is taut, and gently “floss” the piano string.

27. “Song to Odysseus”: Phaino plays an accompaniment consisting of the gestures from *Waiting Theme*; Polyxo plays an inside-piano accompaniment consisting of two gestures (no keyboard proficiency required).