

HERE BE SIRENS



Music Theatre in One Act

by Kate Soper

"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*

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.

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.

Instrumentation

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

NB: Twenty-two times during the opera, an "air horn" is played to signal the approach and arrival of a ship. In most cases a real air horn will be too loud and a different "signaling" instrument should be substituted, for example: a bike horn with the bulb removed which is blown like a trumpet; a conch shell; a gong, triangle, slapstick, or other percussion instrument; a police whistle; a pre-recorded sound effect; etc.

List of Scenes and Musical Numbers

Text by Kate Soper and as indicated.

See Appendix B for translations/transliterations 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 Raimbaut 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*

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 to accommodate differing performer proficiency in all numbers/musical cues excepting *Waiting Theme*, *Muses Entr'acte*, and *Song to Odysseus*. The work is best executed with at least two performers who play keyboard at a beginner/intermediate level: a third performer must be able to find a handful of 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 (baby grand ok) with a working sostenuto pedal. Both the lid and the music stand must be removed. Additional items required include: glass slides (one per performer); 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 a signaling instrument (the “air horn”). A plastic card (credit card or other) or coin may be more effective in producing a scraping sound from the low strings in “Prologue 2” and “Across the Turbid Waves:” experimentation is encouraged. If using a piano in which striking glass slides on the interior is not permitted, this technique may be substituted for striking two river rocks together close to the strings (in this case, two rocks per performer are needed, six total).

Number-Specific Techniques

Numbers not included do not have a piano part

0. Waiting Theme: “Phaino” plays a series of three gestures inside the piano, *ad lib*, usually underscoring dialogue or monologue from the other characters, with the damper pedal down *sempre*. Although some keyboard proficiency is required, this limited material could be learned by a performer with no previous keyboard experience.

2. Prologue Part 2 (Concerning the Siren): players use various inside piano techniques, including scraping a low coiled string with a slide (or coin or card) and scraping a glass slide 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. Prologue Part 3 (Song): Piano accompaniment (beginner level).
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 plays a series of chord progressions (beginner/intermediate level).
5. Naufragium: One performer hits a thin metal sheet lying on the low strings 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 piano accompaniment (beginner/ intermediate level, quasi-improvised rhythm).
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 damper 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 plucking the piano strings 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. Pythagoras 1: One performer plucks piano strings (beginner level).
20. Across the Turbid Waves: All performers play rhythmic “piano percussion,” including striking the interior of the piano with glass slides 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. Pythagoras 2: One performer plucks piano strings (beginner level).

25. Here to Me from Krete: One player operates the damper pedals, all three bow individual piano strings with thin fishing wire (one performer bows two strings simultaneously), and one performer briefly plays the keyboard (beginner level). Four lengths of very thin 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, “Phaino” threads these wires underneath the piano strings used in the song (pitches D5, A4, G3, and C3). To facilitate setup and performance, “handles” for these wires may be created by folding a small piece of masking tape over each end: tweezers may then 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 piano percussion and plucking the strings. If memorization of piano and vocal parts is too challenging, the piano parts for both players may be improvised, using the indicated techniques.

28. Waiting Theme 2: “Phaino” plays a series of three gestures inside the piano as before and hold down the damper pedal; simultaneously, “Polyxo” plays a set of two new gestures. Players are uncoordinated.

****NOTE:** for all numbers, whenever the indication “sing into the piano” appears: performers must lean into the cavity of the instrument so that their mouths are **no more than a few inches** from the strings, in order to fully capture the vocal resonance.