

THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF JOAN TOWER: AN ENERGY LINE ANALYSIS  
OF *ISLAND PRELUDE* FOR OBOE AND WIND QUARTET

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This dissertation provides an analysis of *Island Prelude* based on a method of analysis prescribed by the composer. The method, Energy Line Analysis, is essential to an enlightened performance.

The content of this dissertation includes: biographical information, compositional influences, Joan Tower style periods, her works involving the oboe in a major role, and an Energy Line Analysis chart of *Island Prelude*.

*Island Prelude* represents Joan Tower's musical language, the understanding of which is essential in an interpretation of her music.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Joan Tower's music achieved prominence and recognition during the late twentieth century. Women's recognition in the arts and society in general is currently receiving acknowledgement sparked by the feminist movement in the United States of the 1970's. Therefore, any documentation relating to music of women composers is valuable. Tower's work has contributed to the perception of women as successful composers.

Many, major world orchestras have programmed Joan Tower's compositions. She has received numerous commissions, grants and awards including the prestigious 1990 \$150,000 Grawemeyer Award. She has also served a three-year residency with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra as Composer- In –Residence under Leonard Slatkin. These honors are among the many milestones Tower's career has surpassed. Although several theses have been written concerning Tower's music, none of these relate to the literature specifically concerning the oboe.<sup>1</sup> The rationale for this paper stems from the

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<sup>1</sup> The existing theses are:

1. Bonds, Nancy E. Leckie. "An Analysis of Joan Tower's *Wings* for solo Clarinet." (D.M.A. diss., Arizona State University, 1992).
2. Jones, Margo S. "Joan Tower's *Hexachords for Solo Flute*: an analysis and comparison of its flute writing to Tower's *Flute Concerto*." Ph.D. diss., University of North Texas, 1993. Photocopy. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1993.
3. Schloss, Myrna Frances. "Out of the Twentieth Century: Three Composers, Three Musics, One Femininity." Ph.D. diss., Wesleyan University, 1993. Photocopy. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International Dissertation Services, 1994.
4. Singleton, Glen R. "Contrast and Unity in *Silver Ladders* by Joan Tower." M.M. thesis, Baylor University, 1993.
5. Ford, Shannon Marie. "*Wings*: A Performance Analysis of Joan Tower's Work for Solo Alto Saxophone." M.M. thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1995.

necessity for research on Tower's valuable contribution to the oboe literature. *Island Prelude* joins a small group of monumental pieces in the late twentieth century written for woodwind quintet. In addition, this piece spotlights the oboe. It is fortunate that a revered prize winning composer of Joan Tower's stature has written such a work for the woodwind quintet literature with distinct allure for the oboist.

Born September 6, 1938 in New Rochelle, New York, Joan Tower was raised in the colorful musical cultures of South America.<sup>2</sup> Although the family moved often within the continent, music was always a priority for the young Tower, and her father always provided a piano teacher for her.<sup>3</sup> Tower claims the dance rhythms and percussive music native to South American culture are a significant influence to her writing style.<sup>4</sup> At the age of eighteen, she returned to the United States for her collegiate studies, attending Bennington College in Vermont and earning a Bachelor of Arts in 1961. Later, she enrolled at Columbia University where she received a Master of Arts in 1967 with a major in composition. Eleven years later she completed the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Composition from Columbia University. Co-founding the Da Capo Chamber Players in 1969, Tower developed much of her musical craft during her fifteen-year association as the pianist with that group.<sup>5</sup> This distinguished ensemble

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Lou Humphrey and David Wright, *Joan Tower-Composer Essay*[essay on-line](New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1996, accessed 31 January 1999), available from [http://www.schirmer.com/composers/tower\\_essay.html](http://www.schirmer.com/composers/tower_essay.html), Internet,1.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy E. Leckie Bonds, "An Analysis of Joan Tower's *Wings* for Solo Clarinet," ( D.M.A. diss., Arizona State University,1992), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Cohen, "Joan Tower," *The International Encyclopedia of Women Composers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2 vols., (New York: Books and Music (U.S.A.) Inc., 1987), II, 702.

specialized in the performance of contemporary music (especially Tower's), and won the Naumberg Award for chamber music in 1973.<sup>6</sup>

In 1972 she was appointed to the faculty at Bard College in Annadale-on-Hudson, New York, where she currently holds the Asher Edleman professorship and serves as the chair of the music department. It was through her involvement in Meet-the-Composer, Inc. (primarily a funding and advocacy organization) that sponsorship for Tower's three-year Composer-In-Residence program with the Saint Louis Symphony began in September 1985.<sup>7</sup> *Silver Ladders* (1986), Tower's first piece for large orchestra, written during her tenure in Saint Louis received the Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition.<sup>8</sup>

Her other numerous prizes include commissions, grants, awards and fellowships from: the Guggenheim, Fromm, Naumberg, Kousevitzky, and Jerome foundations; the New York and Massachusetts State Arts Councils; and Carnegie Hall. Others include Meet the Composer/ Reader's Digest; Absolut Vodka; the National Endowment for the Arts; American Academy of Arts and Letters; Meet the Composer, Inc.; Schubert Club; and Contemporary Music Society.<sup>9</sup>

Major organizations have programmed and performed Tower's works including: the New York, Los Angeles, and Tokyo Philharmonics; the Chicago, Saint Louis, San Francisco, National, Indianapolis, Dallas, Houston, Winnipeg, and Cincinnati Symphonies; the Philadelphia, Cleveland, Minnesota, Louisville, Berlin (Radio),

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<sup>6</sup> Humphrey, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Bonds, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Humphrey, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

(London) Philharmonia, Saint Luke's, and American Composers Orchestras; the Tanglewood, Aspen, Spoleto USA, and Banff festivals; the Muir, Cleveland, and Lydian string quartets; the Da Capo Chamber Players, Collage, Dorian Wind Quintet, Empire Brass Quintet, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Music Today, New York Chamber Symphony, New Music Consort, Twentieth Century Consort, the New York New Music Ensemble, Cleveland Chamber Symphony; and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet.<sup>10</sup>

Tower did not study composition until her collegiate years as part of the core curriculum for music majors at Bennington College.<sup>11</sup> During her years at Columbia University her composition teachers included: Jack Beeson, Benjamin Boretz, Chou Wen-Chung, Otto Luening, Ralph Shapey (privately), and Vladimir Ussachevsky.<sup>12</sup> Other teachers with whom she came in contact during the years 1968 to 1971 are: Henry Brant, Louis Calabro, Wallingford Riegger, and Darius Milhaud.<sup>13</sup> However, despite significant influences in her music from many of these composers, Tower considers herself self-taught.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, 702.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Valerie O'Brien, "Joan Tower: Musician of the Month," *High Fidelity/Musical America Edition* 32 (September, 1982),:8.

## INFLUENCES

Joan Tower admits to learning from and being influenced by many different sources, but mainly believes she has learned much about composing on her own. In an interview with Frances Harmeyer on January 9, 1976, in New York, Tower states when asked specifically about her compositional influences:

That's a question that I always find hard because I've been involved with so many composers on one level or another that it's very hard to pinpoint exactly where the main trends are although I would say Charles Wuorinen had a great deal of influence on me, ...he [is] a pianist-composer, which [makes] him similar to me in some respect. ...I would say that he is definitely one of my influences, both as a kind of a style of life he has put forward [and] as being [a] kind of all around composer. In other words he's a guy who performs, composes, [and] teaches.... And I think I, in a way, I imitated a lot of that kind of style of his. ...Varese was another big influence on me. I liked the power in his music, the dramatic scope of his music. In fact, one of the reasons I got so involved with contemporary music was hearing his music. It made a tremendous impact on me...<sup>14</sup>

She continues in the same interview:

... I studied with a lot of people, but I would say that composition is a very hard thing to teach. And I would say that what I learned from them was bits and pieces of little things here and there. Like some of them were very good at instrumentation, or ideas about style. But I would say that I have been very much of a learner of my own....Music is a very hard thing to talk about. Very hard. I would say, one of the people who is probably the best at that, Ben Boretz, who is the editor of *Perspectives in New Music*, ...came to Columbia my last year—he had a very big effect on me as a teacher. In fact, I would say that out of all the teachers that I studied with he had the most effect....So, I would say that on the whole I

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<sup>14</sup> Joan Tower, interview by Frances Harmeyer, 9 January 1976, transcript, *Oral History, American Music at Yale University School of Music*, New Haven, CT, 4-6.



learned more from him as a teacher than from all the other people I studied with.<sup>15</sup> (see appendix A)

Although, the material of Tower's music is traditional, she consistently writes music in her own style.<sup>16</sup> Tower "quotes" certain aspects of specific composers' pieces to create a language distinctively unique and individual.<sup>17</sup> When asked which teachers had the most impact on her writing in an interview with Nancy Bonds in Saint Louis in 1988 Tower stated,

Actually, none. I would say the composers had more impact-- the music that I played had more of an impact on my music. Music of Beethoven, music of Messiaen and specific pieces mostly, not just the music of Beethoven, but certain pieces more than teachers. The teachers actually taught me practical things, notational problems, orchestration problems--very practical things, the music world things like that.<sup>18</sup>

She attributes to Schoenberg one compositional aspect of her music (rising fourth intervals), which appears in *Island Prelude*, *Wings* for solo clarinet, and *Silver Ladders*, *Breakfast Rhythms*, and the *Clarinet Concerto*.<sup>19</sup>

She states in an interview with Myrna Schloss,

Actually, [Schoenberg,] who I don't like very much as a composer, [in] his *Chamber Symphony Op. 9*, [in] the second movement,... [has] this thing where all this incredible mess of activity stops, and there is this climbing fourth figure. This made a big impression upon me always, and [especially] when we [Da Capo Chamber Players] were playing that piece. So I have this climbing fourth figure that appears throughout my music, and that came directly from that [piece].<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Myrna Frances Schloss, "Out of the Twentieth Century: Three Composers, Three Musics, One Femininity" (Ph.D. diss., Wesleyan University, 1993 Photocopy, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Microfilms International Dissertation Services, 1994), 220.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>18</sup> Bonds, 195.

<sup>19</sup> Schloss, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 180-181.

Another large influence for Tower is Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, which Tower performed extensively with the Da Capo Chamber Players. She states in an interview with N. Bonds concerning the piece and Messiaen,

I really think that [it] is an important piece. And in the clarinet solo movement, I would sit back, you know I wouldn't play, and I would hear this wonderful clarinet solo. And what struck me was this incredible stopping of time. He would just stop everything and sit on this note, and it would just grow just magically. The clarinetist in our group, Laura Flax, could do it so beautifully. I'd always sit there through hundreds of performances and I'd wait for those magical long notes, and it was always so exciting to me. It never got boring. That became another stamp in my music....

...so that's another motive that comes directly from a specific piece and there are motives like that throughout my pieces.<sup>21</sup>

In a second interview with Bonds in Saint Louis, Tower comments on the significance of the long notes, "Yes, again Messiaen has some of the same general stylistic things that he is aiming for that are similar to mine, but I think the most important ones are the long notes. In that solo-- that is starting to be a trademark of mine too-- these long gestures-- long notes."<sup>22</sup>

Tower developed a fascination with rhythm as a result of the time she spent growing up in South America. She states,

Dancing is so important in South American culture, and when we lived in La Paz, my nursemaid-- who was an Inca woman-- loved to go to festivals, and used to take me with her... I would be given some percussion instrument to play, like the maracas or the claves, and I would dance too. So that's when I developed a love for rhythm, which later became the basis of my music, and percussion and dance. Actually, I now call myself a choreographer of sound.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bonds, 197.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>23</sup> Carol Neuls-Bates, ed., *Women in Music*, revised edition, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 344.

Naturally, due to her love of rhythm, Stravinsky's influence is felt and easily recognized in Tower's style. In an interview with N. Bonds' she states, "*Rite of Spring* in that you know... near the beginning where the strings go ba-ba-ba-ba in the E+/e<sub>b</sub> chord. Oh when I first heard that I just went bananas. Well, that is something that has been distributed throughout some of my pieces, that idea."<sup>24</sup> Schloss states,

The Stravinsky influence is, moreover, not restricted only to direct quotations. The rhythmic sense, contrasts of texture and timbre, and the energy of his works can be found in much of Tower's work. Numerous critics have commented on this influence. Nicholas Kenyon of *The New Yorker* refers to the jabbing chords and Stravinskian rhythms in Tower's first orchestral piece, *Sequoia* (June 1, 1981). K. Robert Schwarz of *The New York Times* refers to Tower's "Stravinskian rhythmic sense," suggesting it lends a propellant unifying thrust to... [her] music" ("Copland's Third: Language of Hope," *The New York Times*, April 19, 1987). Valerie O'Brien, in an article in *Musical America*, states that, "the textural contrasts in *Sequoia* are characteristic of ... [Tower's] work, as is the works Stravinskian rhythm and energy" [*Joan Tower*", *Musical America*, September 1982, p.7]. These qualities are present in many other Tower works, and... she openly acknowledges this debt to Stravinsky.<sup>25</sup>

Tower attributes influences from specific pieces to her three-fold experience as a player, listener, and teacher.<sup>26</sup> She states, "Because as I went along as a player, a listener, and a teacher I got involved with certain pieces at certain times, and I can trace a lot of my style accordingly."<sup>27</sup> Tower continues regarding Beethoven, "Beethoven is certainly the more important composer for me because of his incredibly strong sense of architecture; every phrase-- within a larger phrase, within a section, within a movement--

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<sup>24</sup> Bonds, 197.

<sup>25</sup> Schloss, 179.

<sup>26</sup> Neuls-Bates, 354.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

is tightly balanced and motivated.”<sup>28</sup> Tower lists several aspects of other significant composers’ works which appear in her music: Berlioz-- *Symphonie Fantastique* (chord in last movement), Philip Glass-- *The Modern Love Waltz* (repetitive rhythm), and the attack of sounds in the music of Joseph Schwantner.<sup>29</sup>

Despite Tower’s strong ties to the past her music possesses a distinctive language created to express her own personal style (color, texture and energy), which is very modern, popular and speaks to the twenty-first century audience.<sup>30</sup>

### JOAN TOWER’S STYLE PERIODS

Joan Tower’s musical style can be divided into two distinct types and time periods: pre-1974 (serial) and post-1974 (tonal). Her early period (pre-1974) employs serial techniques, and is dependant on the use of pre-compositional row forms generating four basic processes including: transposition, retrograde, inversion, and retrograde inversion of the original row form.<sup>31</sup> Tower’s thoughts on this period and her developments out of it:

Basically I used the serial technique on the loosest level because I really didn’t have the brain-power to go into that stuff. I just was an insecure kind of composer where I needed a pitch map of some kind, something very general-- like a twelve-tone matrix that I kind of arbitrarily threw together on a certain level, just so that I knew where my next pitches were coming from. Because when you compose you are

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Schloss, 181, 183 (cont.).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>31</sup> Margo S. Jones, “Joan Tower’s *Hexachords for Solo Flute: An Analysis and Comparison of Its Flute writing to Tower’s Flute Concerto*,” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Texas, 1993, Photocopy, Ann Arbor, MI University of Microfilms International, 1993), 3.

faced with such infinite number of choices that it is good to have some things that are sort of given. So I took the pitch domain and kind of set up what I thought was a coherent pre-compositional structure in order to give me more time to spend on the decision making process of rhythm, register, spacing-- all kinds of intricate decisions, other ones. But as time wore on I began to realize that map was arbitrary and it was actually working against the kinds of talents that I had. It was not a good map for me to have. But I needed to develop confidence in order to get out of it.

So as time wore on, I left it more and more and started developing my own pitch structures that are actually still simple.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, her style transition stemmed from the movement away from those composers who were influencing her, and eventually developed her own unique voice.<sup>33</sup>

Tower continues, “I discovered that I had a high energy kind of interest, and was good with rhythm and with rhythms that projected, and color which became stronger and stronger [in my works.]”<sup>34</sup> Tower applies the term “risk” to describe how the progression of her work moved from writing serial music modeled after successful composers to her own personal style.<sup>35</sup> Believing this transformation of style alone was an enormous risk for her, she states that as her work has progressed, it has become “riskier and riskier”, “that risk... [was] the one way into something... [I knew] how to push the feeling of risk.”<sup>36</sup> She continues,

Achieving an identity in music depends on risks. If you don't take any risks, your particular compositional talents never shine through. Of course, the word *risk* is a very complicated and subjective one, and it can lead you to compose music that is alternately aggressive, lyrical, simple, or complex. Creating *high-energy* music is one of my special talents; I

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<sup>32</sup> Bonds, 198.

<sup>33</sup> Schloss, 190.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

like to see just how high I can push a work's energy level without making it chaotic or incoherent."<sup>37</sup>

High-energy in Tower's music, specifically *Island Prelude*, features heightened intensities and plateaus created through the compositional use of timbre, orchestration, tessitura contrasts, meter changes, rhythmic gestures, tempo contrasts, and dynamic contrasts.<sup>38</sup> Yet, Tower has a deliberate expressive quality in her musical style that gives her work a broad audience appeal.<sup>39</sup> She composes with a primary idea of pleasing her audience. The fluid, rhapsodic expressive quality of *Island Prelude* is achieved through a distinct lack of rhythmic pulse throughout much of the work.

In 1974 Tower changed to her current tonal writing style. Her work *Breakfast Rhythms I and II* (1975) for clarinet and five instruments is considered to be a transitional piece between her two distinct style periods.<sup>40</sup> Tower states she moved from her twelve-tone style because it was "too gray for [me]—like dealing with the same soup all the time."<sup>41</sup> The tonal style (post-1974) is described by Tower as "organic"—the process of composing without any pre-compositional plan.<sup>42</sup> A compositional link between her two style periods can be found in the earlier reference to a lack of consistent pulse.<sup>43</sup> This earlier reference was discussed specifically concerning *Island Prelude*, however, it should be noted here that this is a distinct musical trait of Joan Tower's music.

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<sup>37</sup> Jones, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Bonds, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, 3-4.

Consequently, with Tower's changed style was a modification in the type of title she employed.<sup>44</sup> Compositions from her later period are characterized by descriptive titles-- *Red Garnet Waltz*, *Black Topaz*, *Sequoia*, *Silver Ladders*, and *Island Prelude*.<sup>45</sup> During her serial period her titles were mere generic labels. She states, "I do want a title, not just a label like 'Piece No. 12.' I want an image with an action."<sup>46</sup> Tower believes the title of a piece should not be programmatic but, should enhance the meaning of the piece.<sup>47</sup> She prefers not to have program notes, rather "just ...a nice title."<sup>48</sup>

Tower does not simply imitate or repeat the use of traditional elements in her music. Rather, she combines these facets in her personal fashion to create polytonality, modality and octatonic formations yielding her own unique musical language.<sup>49</sup> According to Schloss, "It is as if she takes some bricks from the works of Messiaen, Beethoven and Stravinsky, and builds entirely new works bearing no resemblance to the original constructions except for the similarity of the bricks."<sup>50</sup> Conductor Leonard Slatkin substantiates that Tower's works are rooted in the traditional playing repertory. He describes Tower's music as "a continuation of historical line, but... [distinctly being] late twentieth-century work."<sup>51</sup>

Tower is very vulnerable to audience response and states, "I want my music to be heard and received."<sup>52</sup> Schloss describes Tower's music:

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<sup>44</sup> Bonds, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Schloss, 186.

<sup>49</sup> Jones, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Schloss, 167.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bonds, 26.

The most memorable parameters of Tower's work are those things that she states she is most interested in. The motivation of the various parts of the piece--the action, the energy, the color, the texture and particularly the line--makes Tower's works unique and original.<sup>53</sup>

Tower is constantly trying to understand what she has just composed.<sup>54</sup> Due to the fact that her music evolves from itself, it is important to her to realize where the music has been. She states:

As a piece goes on it develops more and more past, it takes on more shape, and the more shape it has the more you know about where it's headed ... You have to be careful though. Even when a piece has a lot of shape there are still many choices to be made, and you always run the risk of cutting off what you've done. So I'm always looking to the left side [of my brain], making sure that the music's present is consistent with its past and with the future I have in mind for it.<sup>55</sup>

Her philosophy to her composition style in her own words:

I am working on the energy line of a phrase, of an action, of a motive, whatever you want to call it, and I'm working on continuity or which could better in more detail be described as motivated music; music that has a motivation rather than music that is just constructed. Music that has impulse, energy reason for being there at that phase at that level. That's what I work at.<sup>56</sup>

Due to this compositional attitude Tower considers herself a choreographer of sound.

Schloss explains:

As well as drawing some of her musical materials from already existing works, Tower perceives her own art as the manipulation of raw materials, an image more often applied to other art forms. She refers to dance and dance-like moving of her materials, for example, as if she were the choreographer. In an interview with Robin Epstein of the *Louisville*

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<sup>53</sup>Schloss, 189.

<sup>54</sup>Bonds, 25.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 199.



*Carrier Journal*, she states, “I consider myself a choreographer of sound, a dancer of sound. I am interested in what direction it goes.”<sup>57</sup>

In an interview with Schloss she reiterates, “...I guess I’m quite physical in my relationship to music—I’m very concerned with the rhythm of the line. [It is the rhythm] ...that in many ways defines its context and its action.”<sup>58</sup> Tower uses hand motions to help audiences understand the line and phrase of her pieces in lectures.<sup>59</sup> Bonds concept of Tower’s composition style:

Balancing gestures is a concern for Tower in her composing. Tower claims she spends a lot of time working out the action; Does it go up? How far up does it go? What is the speed? What happens after it goes up? Where is the fall-out? What is the timing? What is the space? Tower thinks very much in terms of physics-- of action and reaction. She is very concerned with the energy and choreography of a phrase.<sup>60</sup>

When asked her thoughts on her approach to a new piece, she states in an interview with Carol Neuls-Bates,

“[My approach to a piece comes]... from the inside. A piece is a completely organic process, based on itself; in other words, the starting ideas provide the fuel for the form of the piece. And for me, the whole process is one of listening very patiently to what that piece is trying to do rather than telling the piece what to do.”<sup>61</sup>

Further thought is continued in an interview with Nancy Leckie Bonds,

“I work from note to note very carefully and I try to build an organic structure from note to note. Some composers can compose this and then jump ahead and compose that and then jump ahead and compose that. I can no more do that then fly to the moon. I don’t know how we got from here to here.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Schloss, 184.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>59</sup> Bonds, 27.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Neuls-Bates, 354.

<sup>62</sup> Bonds, 216.

Due to Tower's organic style of composition the beginning of a work is extremely important.<sup>63</sup> She tells Frances Harmeyer in a 1976 interview, "The hardest part ... is the beginning. ... I guess it's because I'm carving out the world in which I'm going to inhabit."<sup>64</sup> She continues,

... I learned long ago that the beginning idea is very minimal, and it's what you do with the idea that makes the piece. After all, the opening motive of Beethoven's Fifth is quite trivial, but look at what Beethoven does with it! The context is everything for me; it shapes the idea and is the strength of the piece.<sup>65</sup>

In an interview with Jeanyne Bezoler Slettom for the *St. Paul Dispatch* in 1984, Tower discussed the use of an image as a starting point for a composition, "What I like about composing is that it starts with an image or idea. Then it is the composer's task to discover the identities and feelings of things and to give them musical shape and form."<sup>66</sup>

Upon hearing a work performed, either in a rehearsal or concert, Tower is not opposed to making revisions. She is also open to soloists input in the revising stage.<sup>67</sup> In fact, it could be stated that she considers revision part of the compositional process.

Tower's compositions after the 1980's, including *Island Prelude (1988)*, are distinguished by musical contrasts, rhythmic urgency, balanced gestures, and colorful impressionistic swirls.<sup>68</sup> Her most renowned orchestral works include *Sequoia (1981)*, *Silver Ladders (1986)*, *Concerto for Orchestra (1991)*.<sup>69</sup> Bonds describes these works:

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>64</sup>Harmeyer, 8.

<sup>65</sup>Neuls-Bates, 355.

<sup>66</sup>Schloss, 185.

<sup>67</sup>Bonds, 25.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid, 23.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

*Sequoia* is filled with musical contrasts and rhythmic urgency. It layers and balances musical line, rhythm, instrumental color, texture, register, and dynamics. *Silver Ladders* juxtaposes fluid solo line against huge rising scales of alternating half and whole steps and ascending arpeggios of fourths. A newer work, *Concerto for Orchestra*, jointly commissioned by the Saint Louis Symphony, the Chicago Symphony, and the New York Philharmonic, is a powerful, virtuosic work full of action.<sup>70</sup>

These works are a significant contribution to twentieth-century music.<sup>71</sup> The contrasting levels of energy progressing forward to achieve a sense of balance are major elements that make Tower's music unique and interesting to audiences.<sup>72</sup> As Abraham Veinus states in *The Concerto*, "A work is modern if, for one vaguely formulated reason or another, it is thought to reflect the emotional quality, the temperament, and tempo of contemporary life."<sup>73</sup>

### **JOAN TOWER'S MUSICAL LANGUAGE IN HER WORKS WITH OBOE**

Joan Tower has written for the oboe in a soloistic way in several of her works spanning both stylistic periods. The early works contain pointillistic and rhythmically complex serial music that characterized the music she performed in ensembles in the 1960's.<sup>74</sup> These works were scored for either solo instruments or chamber ensembles. The pre-1974 works involving the oboe are no longer in publication: *Composition for Oboe* (1965) [oboe solo], *Opa Eboni* (1967) [oboe and piano], *Prelude for Five Players* (1970) [flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and piano]. Visible in these pre-1974 works are various staples of her tonal (post-1974) compositional style: the energy and shaping of a

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Jones, 56.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Abraham Veinus, *The Concerto* (London: Hazell, Watson and Viney, Ltd., 1948), 267.

music line, color, the exploration of musical space, and the balancing of compositional gestures.<sup>75</sup>

In her post-1974 period *Silver Ladders* (1986), Tower's first piece for large orchestra, was written for her residency with the Saint Louis Symphony. This work contains a major oboe cadenza. (Example 1)

Example 1

*Silver Ladders*, oboe cadenza, mm. 377- 386

The image displays a musical score for the oboe cadenza in *Silver Ladders*, measures 377-386. The score is written for a large orchestra and includes parts for Flutes 1 & 2, Oboes 1 & 2, Clarinets 1 & 2, Trumpets 1 & 2, Percussion 3, and Percussion 4. The oboe part is the central focus, marked '1. solo CADENZA' and 'mf = 56 c'. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *mp*, *cresc.*, and *mf*. The tempo is marked 'freely' and 'Accel. poco a poco -- to ♩ = 63'. The score is in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines.

<sup>74</sup>Humphrey, 1.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

Example 1 (continued)  
*Silver Ladders*, mm. 377-386

She states that her objective in this piece was:

...to see if I could make the simple action of an upward-moving line an integral ingredient of the structure. By creating an architecture of line moving upwards at different speeds with varying degrees of intensities and surrounding textures, and juxtaposing these with opposite types of events--such as stasis--I hope to create a perspective on the feeling of moving upwards.<sup>76</sup>

The use of ascending scales in the first section coupled with the Schoenberg rising fourth motive of the third section are main compositional materials used to create the upward motion in *Silver Ladders*.<sup>77</sup> Typical of Tower's musical thoughts, these same principles are used in *Island Prelude* to create upward moving energy. The title, *Silver Ladders*, contains imagery of metal in two states: solid and molten.<sup>78</sup> Tower portrays these properties as heavy blocks (orchestra) and delicate filigree (solo cadenzas).<sup>79</sup> The four

<sup>76</sup> Susan Feder, Liner notes to the CD for Joan Tower: *Silver Ladders, Island Prelude, Music for Cello and Orchestra*, and *Sequoia*. Saint Louis Symphony, Leonard Slatkin, conductor, Electra/Nonesuch Records, 79245-2,4.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

cadenzas in *Silver Ladders*, including one for the oboe, provide a flowing contrast to the solidity of the orchestral ladder.<sup>80</sup> Contrasting and balancing the compositional elements of ensemble and solo cadenza provides the piece with changes in density, mood and injects static energy. This flowing contrast of the oboe cadenza in *Silver Ladders* is integral to the aura of *Island Prelude* (1988), which will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.<sup>81</sup>

Tower's latest work involving the oboe in a major role, entitled *Toccanta* (1997), still speaks the "oboe language" of previous works with complex rhythmic figures, scalar passages, and soaring notes.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> The oboe cadenza in *Silver Ladders* is arhythmic and contains octatonic scalar passages that are sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The oboe cadenza is approached and followed from long notes in the orchestra.

## CHAPTER 2

### JOAN TOWER'S PRESCRIBED METHOD OF ANALYSIS FOR HER MUSIC: ENERGY LINE ANALYSIS

Before an in-depth discussion of *Island Prelude* can be presented, Tower's ideas for mapping her work should be shared. In an interview with Bonds she answers the question: "What type of analysis would you suggest for your later works?" Tower replies,

Energy line analysis. There are not tools for that, and as far as I know it hasn't been explored in theory books or anything. But that would be a way of getting to my music. If I were doing an analysis of my music, I would start with something like a physics point of view. What direction is it going? There are three directions: one is up, one is staying, and one is down. There are three energy lines: one is up, one is staying, one is down. In other words, music can get more intense, get less intense, or it can stay the same. Those are your choices. That's it. I would take that as the bottom line. Then I would go "okay, this is energy line one, increasing in intensity how? Well, it's getting louder, it's getting higher, the instruments are multiplying, the rhythm is getting slower." There's different ways of creating intensity. How is that intensity increasing? On what level? Then I would map out a whole thing about that.

Then I would do a space analysis on top of that because the space you're in for me is very important. Are you up here? Are you up here? Are you covering this grid? Are you down here? Where are you in the spatial grid? Because the energy line has a lot to do with that. How does it shift? Is it short periods, is it long periods? Then there would be a pacing line. How long does this intensity build up? And how long is this one in relationship to this one over here? What is the space here in relationship to space over here? I mean there are all kinds of maps that you could create that are not pitch maps.<sup>82</sup>

Expanding on these suggestions in the Schloss interview she states:

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<sup>82</sup> Bonds, 211.

Motivation is the most important thing in any piece of music as far as I'm concerned, because if there is no motivation for anything, it doesn't matter how good the idea is, it's not relevant...I'm very interested in the energy of the line, whether it has an energy, a life, an action, something that makes it stand up. [In my music,] I have an energy,...a motion,...and a color. I'm interested in the space that I'm in [which leads to an interest in] the texture – the thinness, [and] the thickness of the space. But the most important thing I'm interested in is the context of [these] things.<sup>83</sup>

Tower is concerned with the musical line and the organic evolution of a piece from its minimal beginnings. Contrasts in energy are the components of a piece propelling its forward motion.<sup>84</sup> The contrasts reflect the energy, the musical line, the texture and the color.<sup>85</sup>

## **ENERGY LINE AND FORM ANALYSIS** *Island Prelude*

According to Tower, the first section of a work is the hardest to compose, “I guess it's because I'm carving out the world of sound that I'm going to develop and inhabit. And I find the beginning very hard.”<sup>86</sup>

Conceptually, the imagery of *Island Prelude* is more abstract than programmatic. One can imagine a tropical island with the oboe representing a brightly colored bird. The remaining instruments add musical color and character to the island, at times interacting

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<sup>83</sup> Schloss, 188-189.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Harmeyer, 8.



with the bird.<sup>87</sup> It is also available in two other versions: oboe and string orchestra, and oboe and string quartet.

Although the form is organic in nature and through-composed in *Island Prelude*, distinct sections have emerged in this analysis. This study will attempt to prove that the overall form is **A B transition C cadenza Coda**.

The piece begins softly in slow arhythmic motion. The clarinet, horn and bassoon lay the foundation of the tropical island with long, slowly moving intervals of a whole step. (Example 2)

Example 2  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 1-8

The musical score for Example 2 shows the first eight measures of *Island Prelude*. The tempo is marked as ca. 40. The Clarinet (Cl.) and Horn (Hn.) parts are the most active, featuring long, slowly moving intervals of a whole step. The Clarinet part includes triplets and dynamic markings of *ppp*, *pp*, and *cresc.*. The Horn part also includes triplets and dynamic markings of *ppp*, *pp*, and *cresc.*. The Bassoon (Bn.) part features triplets and dynamic markings of *ppp*, *pp*, and *cresc.*. The Oboe (Ob.) and Flute (Fl.) parts are mostly rests.

The notes A $\frac{7}{4}$ , B $\frac{7}{4}$ , F# sustain until the entrance of the oboe in bar 10. The first fourteen bars of the piece consist entirely of the first mode of the octatonic scale (a scale that

<sup>87</sup>Ed Matthew, "Artists On Repertoire II," *Chamber Music* (Spring 1990): 15.

consists of alternating whole and half steps). The octatonic scale in its three modes is a recurring motive of the piece:

Octatonic scale 1- ABCDE<sub>b</sub>FG<sub>b</sub>A<sub>b</sub>

Octatonic scale 2- A<sup>#</sup> BC<sup>#</sup>DEFGA<sub>b</sub>

Octatonic scale 3- AB<sub>b</sub>CD<sub>b</sub>E<sub>b</sub>E<sub>n</sub>F<sup>#</sup>G

The oboe phrase begins softly and arhythmically in a tessitura higher than the rest of the ensemble. (Example 3)

Example 3

*Island Prelude*, mm. 10-14

The musical score for Example 3 shows five staves: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The Oboe part begins at measure 10 with a dynamic of *ppp dolce* and features a melodic line with triplets and a crescendo to *mp*. The Flute part enters at measure 14 with a dynamic of *mp*. The Clarinet, Horn, and Bassoon parts provide accompaniment with various dynamics including *mp*, *ppp*, *p*, and *mf*.

All remaining instruments are written in low dark timbres enabling the oboe to float above in a low to mid tessitura using only three pitches for 10 bars (G<sup>#</sup>, E<sup>#</sup>, D<sup>#</sup>). The flute enters in bar 14, also in a range and timbre not in competition with the oboe (G<sup>#</sup>). All notes in bars 1-14 remain in the octatonic scale 1.

The first occurrence of instability in octatonic 1 (notes foreign to octatonic 1) emerges in bar 15 with a C# (bassoon). From this point the instability increases throughout section A. These additional foreign notes are harbingers to octatonic 2, which become apparent in beat 4 of bar 26 (flute), and bar 27 (oboe, flute, and clarinet).

(Example 4)

Example 4

*Island Prelude*, mm. 24- 28

However, in bars 27-28 the melody contains notes from both modes (octatonic 1 and 2) in close juxtaposition. A brief reference to the whole tone scale appears in bars 24-26 in the oboe part, adding further instability to octatonic 1 immediately before a high energy plateau (bar 27). This whole-tone reference is superimposed over octatonic 1 in the clarinet, octatonic 2 in the flute (A $\flat$ , also in octatonic 1 and 2), and octatonic 1 and 3 (concert E $\flat$ ) in horn.

Finally, in bars 47-58 the use of octatonic 2 becomes prevalent in all voices, yet the unstable quality is continued by the use of the tritone interval, traditionally an unstable interval, found in the top four voices from bars 54-58. The tritone interval stacked against rising perfect fourth intervals (Schoenberg influence), accelerated tempo and rhythmic gestures are used to create energetic tension through tonal instability before the B section begins. (Example 5)

Example 5

*Island Prelude*, mm. 51-58

The musical score for Example 5, *Island Prelude*, mm. 51-58, is presented for five woodwind instruments: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The score begins at measure 51 and includes a tempo change to *Poco accel.* at measure 48. The Oboe part features a complex melodic line with tritones and triplets, marked with dynamics *pp*, *p*, and *ff*, and a *cresc.* marking. The Flute, Clarinet, and Horn parts also feature tritones and triplets, with dynamics ranging from *mf* to *mp* and *cresc.* markings. The Bassoon part is marked with *mp*, *mf*, and *cresc.* The score is written in 3/4 time and includes various rhythmic gestures and articulations.

Bars 59-61 are transition between the A and B section. (Example 6)

## Example 6

### *Island Prelude*, mm. 59-61

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The score is in 3/4 time and covers measures 59, 60, and 61. The Oboe part starts with a fermata in measure 59, followed by a note in measure 60 with the instruction *poco rit.* and a fermata in measure 61. The Flute, Clarinet, and Horn parts feature triplet patterns in measures 60 and 61, with a dynamic marking of *ff*. The Bassoon part has a triplet in measure 60 and rests in measure 61.

These transition bars (59-61) of the A section consist of scalar fragment motives of the B section in rhythmic augmentation. The slow moving rhythm characteristic of the A section combined with scalar fragments of the B section create a seamless transition and flow. This seamless transition quality can be found throughout the entire piece.

The energy line, Tower's self-invented method for analyzing her music (discussed beginning on page 20), in the opening of the piece is fairly static through bar 21. The second big phrase of the oboe (bar 22) moves the energy line upward toward the first high-energy plateau of the piece, bar 27. (Example 7)

Example 7  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 22-27

The musical score for Example 7, mm. 22-27 of *Island Prelude*, is written for five instruments: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The music is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score shows a dynamic progression from piano (*pp*) to forte (*f*). The Oboe part features a melodic line with triplets and a *poco accel.* marking. The other instruments provide accompaniment with various dynamics and articulations. A tempo marking  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 50$  is present at the top right.

This upward energy level is evident in the change to a higher tessitura for the oboe and the ascending scalar motion leading to the soaring high  $E_4$  (bar 27). The intensity in this plateau is created by various effects: the oboe sounds the highest note in the piece (high  $E_4$ ), the accompaniment is in homorhythm for the first time in the piece, and the ensemble reaches a forte dynamic level. This intense energy level is sustained for 4 bars until a dramatic drop in tessitura in all voices (bar 31). (Example 8)

Example 8  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 27-31

• = ca. 50

Ob. *f* *ff* *mf*

Fl. *f*

Cl. *mf* *mp*

Hn. *mf* *mp*

Bn. *mf* *mp*

Gradually the energy line diminishes for the next five bars and each instrument fades away leaving three beats of silence in bar 35. (Example 9)

Example 9  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 31-35

Very slow

Ob. *mf* *pp*

Fl.

Cl. *mp*

Hn. *mp* *pp* *pp dolce*

Bn. *mp* *pp* *poco*

broaden

ca. 36

The silence gives a respite to the high-energy plateau level. As the piece resumes in the second half of same bar (35) the static energy from the opening of the piece resumes in the horn. (Example 10)

Example 10  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 35-42

The musical score for Example 10, mm. 35-42 of *Island Prelude*, is written for five instruments: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The music is in 3/4 time. The score begins with a rest for all instruments in bar 35. In bar 36, the oboe and bassoon enter with a *ppp* dynamic. The oboe part features a *poco accel.* instruction starting at measure 46 and a *poco accel.* instruction starting at measure 52. The bassoon part features a *ppp* dynamic and a *poco* instruction. The flute and clarinet enter in bar 37 with a *ppp* dynamic. The horn enters in bar 38 with a *pp* dynamic. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *pp*, *p*, *mf*, and *cresc.* (crescendo). Performance instructions include *poco accel.* (poco accelerando) and *poco* (poco ritardando). The score also features several triplet markings (3).

The enharmonic oboe reentrance in bar 39 also reflects the opening of the piece, and begins a slight increase in energy until bar 53 where the tritone motive (discussed earlier) resumes a surge in energy to the B section beginning in bar 62. (Example 11)



Example 11  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 53-62

A discernible rhythmic pulse is not present (arhythm) in the entire first section (bars 1-61). This arhythmic quality is also present in brief homorhythmic moments in 2, 3 and/or 4 voices (bars 6-7 & 21-23, 27) by the use of ties with triplet, quadruplet and quintuplet divisions of the beat. (Example 12)

Example 12  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 6-7, 21-23, and 27

The B section begins in bar 62 and makes use of all three forms of the octatonic scale. Here, small, scalar ascending groupings are presented in all three forms of the octatonic scale. Frequently, each grouping is delineated from another grouping by

descending larger intervals such as the tritone, a major third or a minor third (bars 59-67).

(Example 13)

Example 13

*Island Prelude*, mm. 62-67

These note groupings are made up of rhythmic figures including triplets, sixteenths, and quintuplets. The oboe (bar 64) continues unfolding octatonic patterns established by the flute (bars 64-72), and assumes the role of the bird floating in circular motions above the island. In contrast to the oboe and flute's fast moving notes of bars 67-71, the island can be represented by the remaining lower instruments which sustain long note values moving in descending fifths (67-70) and reinforce the melodic line. (Example 14)

Example 14  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 67-72

The oboe is joined by the flute a minor third higher in bar 70 in the same rhythmic and intervallic motion ending on a D $\sharp$  in bar 72. The oboe is silent for the next four full bars as the clarinet and flute (M6 above the clarinet) continue this pattern through bar 74. This concludes the dense octatonic melodic patterns. It is the first time another instrumental line has risen above the oboe.

The energy line is upward throughout the entire B section (bars 62-74). This upward line moves by step in longer note values in the bassoon and horn and concludes the B section in bar 74. (Example 15)

Example 15

*Island Prelude*, mm. 73-74

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The score covers measures 73 and 74. Measure 73 is marked with a tempo of ca. 44. The Flute and Clarinet parts feature a complex rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes with triplets and quintuplets, marked *mp sub.*. The Oboe part is mostly silent in measure 73. In measure 74, the Flute and Clarinet continue with similar patterns, while the Oboe plays a melodic line marked *pp dolce sostenuto*. The Horn and Bassoon parts provide harmonic support, with the Bassoon marked *fmf* and the Horn marked *f* and *pp*.

A transition section begins in bar 74 with chromatic rather than octatonic motion prevailing. This is an unstable section (74-89). Tower uses dissonant harmonic sonorities (beginning on beat 3 of 78-83) to create tonal instability. By measure 79 a strong sense of pulse is established in all other voices against which the lone oboe voices undulates (2 against 3). From this point the note patterns move slowly both in the melody and accompaniment with frequent grace notes (77-82). (Example 16)

Example 16  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 77-83

The musical score for Example 16 shows measures 77-83. It features five woodwind parts: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The music is in 3/4 time. Dynamic markings include *ppp*, *pp*, *mp*, *ppsub.*, and *cresc. poco a poco*. There are also trill markings in the Oboe part.

The economical use of pitches in close proximity between the melody and ensemble creates tension and upward energy line motion (74-89). In bars 83-87 the frequent melodic use of the tritone creates instability. (Example 17)

Example 17  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 83-90

The musical score for Example 17 shows measures 83-90. It continues with the same woodwind quintet. Dynamic markings include *mf*, *f*, *cresc.*, and *cresc. poco a poco*. There are also trill markings in the Oboe part.

The final surge of energy before the next section (87-89) contains syncopation and a lack of consistent pulse. This final surge is rhythmically complex and creates extreme intensity carrying the listener to the C-section, which begins in bar 90. Other factors contributing to the upward energy of the final surge before the C-section include:

1. high tessitura of the clarinet
2. an ascending octatonic 3 scale occurring in the bassoon (bars 87-90)
3. an increase in melodic density and
4. ascending figures in the flute and horn.

The three part C-section begins in bar 90 as the culmination of the final surge with every instrument except the bassoon (E $\flat$  of octatonic 2 and 3) sounding a D $\sharp$  (also the undulating note of the oboe). This choice of notes and its position at the beginning of a new section could be viewed as an overlapping of sections. The E $\flat$  is an important note from the A section (climactic note) while the D $\sharp$  is important to the B section (unison bar 72, emphasized in 80-87).

This new section is divided into three parts. The oboe carries the first part of the section melodically (90-108), and makes generous use of trills. Trills by nature create intense energy and motion forward; thus that is the nature of this part. The melody is octatonic oriented; however, the use of the whole tone scale also occurs (96,98,100-101), although, less frequently. (Example 18)

Example 18

*Island Prelude*, mm. 96, 98

The musical score for Example 18 consists of five staves: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 96 and 97. In measure 96, the Oboe plays a melodic line with trills and triplets, marked *ff*. The Clarinet has a trill marked *tr* and a dynamic marking *mf*. The other instruments are silent. The second system covers measures 98 and 99. In measure 98, the Oboe continues its melodic line with trills and triplets. The Bassoon plays a low note marked *f*. The other instruments remain silent.

Example 18 (continued)  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 100-101

The accompaniment parts are less integral to the melody in this section, but create tension through the use of punctuation with the major second interval (bars 97,99,101).

(Example 19)

Example 19  
*Island Prelude*, mm. 97, 99, and 101

This interval can be understood as both octatonic and/or a whole tone derivate.

As this oboe dominated section (90-108, first part of C-section) comes to an end, the clarinet joins the oboe melody in bar 105. Here the oboe and clarinet are in unison

octaves, which change to a m10th interval in bar 106. The oboe ends its reign on a high C $\sharp$  (108), and is then silent for the next twenty bars. (Example 20)

Example 20

*Island Prelude*, mm. 105-108

The musical score for Example 20 shows five staves: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The music is in 3/4 time and features several key elements:
 

- Oboe (Ob.):** Starts in measure 105 with a trill, followed by a dense sixteenth-note passage. It ends in measure 108 with a high C $\sharp$  note.
- Flute (Fl.):** Remains silent until measure 106, then plays a melodic line with a dynamic marking of *mf cresc.* leading to *ff*.
- Clarinet (Cl.):** Plays a trill in measure 105, followed by a dense sixteenth-note passage. It ends in measure 108 with a melodic phrase.
- Horn (Hn.):** Plays a sustained note in measure 105, followed by a melodic phrase in measure 108.
- Bassoon (Bn.):** Remains silent until measure 106, then plays a melodic line with a dynamic marking of *f* leading to *ff*.

The remaining instruments become the focus of the second part of the C-section (109-118). It is based on similar motives of its first part (trills, octatonic scale, dense note groups, obscured pulse). Beginning in bar 114 the bassoon and horn (115) begin a pedal trill on D $\flat$  that lasts for five bars through bar 118. This trill, the absence of the oboe, the jumping of *tessitura* in the flute (114- 118), the lack of rhythmic pulse in the clarinet and flute, and the *forte* dynamic level creates an increasing surge of tension. (Example 21)



Example 21

*Island Prelude*, mm. 114-118

Suddenly in bar 118 the energy line wanes briefly, but immediately resumes in bar 122 even more vigorously due to: (Example 22)

1. a faster tempo
2. a gradual build up of dynamic from subito piano in bar 119
3. the gradual incorporation of distinct rhythmic pulse in all parts.

## Example 22

*Island Prelude*, mm. 122-129

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The score is for measures 122 through 129. The Oboe part begins at measure 122 with a rest, marked '122' and 'accel. poco a poco'. It enters at measure 129 with a held high E<sub>b</sub> note, marked 'mp' and 'ca. 100'. The Flute, Clarinet, Horn, and Bassoon parts all begin at measure 122 with a triplet figure, marked 'cresc. poco a poco'. The Flute, Clarinet, and Horn parts reach a fortissimo (ff) dynamic by measure 129. The Bassoon part also reaches ff by measure 129. The score is written in 3/4 time and features various key signatures and time signature changes.

Notably, Tower uses this unique third part of the C-section (118-128) to increase tension before the oboe cadenza. The cadenza is a tradition used in the classical concerto, and in this instance gives an opportunity to support the extra musical imagery of a bird soaring freely. Once again, these two sections (C section and oboe cadenza) transition seamlessly with the oboe dramatically joining the ensemble on a held high E<sub>b</sub> five bars before the ensemble cuts out in bar 135. Both the second and third parts of the C-section (109-128) are entirely based on octatonic 3.

The oboe cadenza is in two parts, separated by one interruptive, punctual bar of accompaniment (136). The first half of the cadenza is in octatonic 3 with a recurring B<sub>b</sub>, which creates a high-sustained energy. The second half (137) begins in octatonic 3, but moves to octatonic 2 on the triplet figure preceding the ritard. (Example 23)

Example 23

*Island Prelude*, mm. 137-139

The image displays two musical staves. The top staff is an oboe cadenza, labeled "(oboe cadenza)" and "rit.", featuring a melodic line with triplets and a final trill marked *ff*. The bottom staff is a woodwind ensemble section starting at measure 138, marked "ca. 52" and "a tempo". It includes parts for Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn (Hn.), and Bassoon (Bn.), with various dynamics such as *ff*, *mf*, and *f*, and trills.

The melodic motion and energy is focused upward in the second half of the cadenza as the piece moves into the final section.

The coda begins in bar 138 with a drop in tessitura for the oboe. As the other instruments re-enter trills in both the oboe and clarinet obscure an implied  $C\sharp_4$  major chord. The half note  $G\sharp_4$  in the oboe (bar 139) completes the implication. Tower uses this traditional connotation of repose to signal the closing of the cadenza, to overlap sections (cadenza and coda) and to release the building of tension throughout the piece. The piece continues in the octatonic 3 (used in 119-134) until one by one each instrument moves

out of octatonic 3 (oboe beat 2, bar 143; flute beat 1, bar 144; clarinet 2<sup>nd</sup> sixteenth of beat 1, bar 142; and bassoon beat 4, bar 142). The exception is the horn, which remains in octatonic 3 throughout the end of the piece. (Example 24)

Example 24

*Island Prelude, mm. 142-145*

The oboe unwinds (140) into a section that has a gelling similar to the opening of the piece (mellow), yet this time ending in a high tessitura (A9 inverted major chord). The piece ends with a dramatic unstable feeling (non-octatonic notes, no strong sense of pulse, soft dynamic).<sup>88</sup>

<sup>88</sup> The individual instrumental wind parts contain the following errors: oboe part- bar 90, beat 2 C<sub>4</sub> should be an A<sub>4</sub>; slur marking missing from last septuplet figure of oboe cadenza: immediately following mismarked slur septuplet in cadenza, the marked D<sub>4</sub> to C<sub>4</sub> trill should be a high D<sub>4</sub> to E<sub>4</sub> trill; flute part- bar 138, beat 4 E<sub>4</sub> should be an E<sub>5</sub>; clarinet- bar 14, beat 2 written D# should be a written C#; bar 141 written F# to G<sub>4</sub> trill should be a F# to G# trill; horn – bar 143, missing “+” on upbeat of beat 3.

**FORM AND ENERGY LINE CHART OF *ISLAND PRELUDE***

**SECTION A  
(bars 1-61)  
arhythmic**

<p>bars 1-21 <u>static energy</u> •ensemble members enter separately •long held notes (Messiaen influence) •1-14 strictly octatonic 1 •15- 62 harbingers of octatonic 2 introduced</p>	<p>bars 22-26 <u>upward motion</u> •change to upper tessitura for oboe,clarinet, flute, and bassoon</p>	<p>bars 27-30 <u>high energy plateau</u> •highest tessitura for oboe •homorhythm •forte dynamic</p>	<p>bars 31-35 <u>subito drop in energy</u> piece fades to silence in bar 35</p>	<p>bar 35-52 <u>static energy followed by slight increase of energy (43-52)</u> •reflects opening of piece melodically and energetically</p>	<p>bars 53-61 <u>surge of energy</u> •leads into B section •alternating, rising tritones and P4ths (Schoenberg influence) •all ensemble voices (ww 4tet) in bar 59 begin octatonic 2 ascending scale leading into section B (bar 62)</p>
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**SECTION B (bars 62-74)**  
**TRANSITION (bars 74- 89)**

<p>section B bars 62-74  octatonic (motivic element influenced by Beethoven)  <u>energetic upward motion</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•all three forms of octatonic scale present</li> <li>•small rhythmic scalar groups of octatonic notes (tropical bird)</li> <li>•longer note values in clarinet, horn, bassoon reinforcing melodic line (island)</li> </ul>	<p>transiiton bars 74-89  chromatic  <u>tension and upward motion</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•74-79 chromatic melody (non- octatonic) creates relaxed energy motion forward</li> <li>•74-82 strong sense of pulse in ensemble against which oboe undulates; frequent grace notes in slow moving note patterns; economical use of pitches</li> <li>•78-83 tonally unstable section due to dissonant harmonic sonorities</li> <li>•83-87 frequent use of tritone in melody</li> </ul> <p><u>high energy surge into section C</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•87-89 rhythmically complex; rising, scalar, octatonic 3 passage in bassoon; high tessitura in clarinet; increase in melodic density; ascending figures in flute and horn</li> </ul>
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## SECTION C

3 parts:

1. (bars 90-108)
2. (bars 109- 118)
3. bars (118- 128)

<p><b>part 1</b> bars 90-108 <u>forward energy motion</u> •oboe dominated melody •trills •octatonic oriented with brief whole tone interludes •staccato response in accompaniment</p>	<p><b>part 2</b> bars 109-118 <u>increasing surge of tension</u> •similar motives of 1<sup>st</sup> part of C -trills -octatonic scale -dense note patterns -obscured pulse •5 bar pedal trill in horn and bassoon •forte dynamic •octatonic 3 based</p>	<p><b>part 3</b> bars 118-128 <u>brief energy wane before unique surge for extreme tension before oboe cadenza</u> •faster tempo •gradual dynamic build from subito piano •gradual incorporation of rhythmic pulse in all parts •octatonic 3 based</p>
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## OBOE CADENZA bars 134- 138

<p><b>part 1</b> bars 134-136 <u>high sustained energy</u> •octatonic 3 •recurring B<sub>♭</sub></p>	<p><b>part 2</b> bars 137- 138 <u>melodic motion and energy focused upward</u> •begins in octatonic 3 moves to octatonic 2</p>
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**CODA**  
**bars 138- 145**

<p>bar138- 139 <u>trills sustain energy motion,</u> <u>although less tension present</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•drop in tessitura for oboe</li><li>•implied C major chord (138)</li><li>• half note G in 139 completes chord and releases the tension of the piece</li></ul>	<p>bars 140- 145 <u>continued unwinding of piece</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•all except horn move out of octatonic 3</li><li>•mellow quality of opening returns, but in high tessitura</li><li>•piece ends with a dramatic, unstable feeling</li><li>-non octatonic notes</li><li>-no strong sense of pulse</li><li>-soft dynamic</li></ul>
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## CONCLUSIONS

Joan Tower's emphasizes the importance of analysis when she states: "...any way you get behind the notes helps. Any way... I think there's a lot that can contribute to an understanding of a piece."<sup>89</sup>

The performer (and the analysis done as preparation for the performance of a work) is viewed to be as important to the presentation of the piece as the composer. Edward Cone states, "Every valid interpretation thus represents, not an approximation of some ideal, but a choice: which of the relationships implicit in this piece are to be emphasized, to be made explicit?"<sup>90</sup> He continues, "Fortunately such choices need not be permanent. They ought not to be. Even the performance that seems a revelation may become boring through repetition. ...Besides, as time passes we look at compositions in new ways. What is now obvious may be forgotten and need to be pointed out again; what is now unclear may become tomorrow's cliché. Interpretation must take such changes into account and change with them."<sup>91</sup> Leonard Meyer states: "whenever stimuli are grouped, ordered, and related into coherent patterns and processes, analysis has taken place. The performance of a piece of music is, therefore, the actualization of an analytic act-- even though such analysis may have been intuitive and unsystematic."<sup>92</sup> The amount of freedom may vary in a performer's creative realization of a score, yet she/he is

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<sup>89</sup> Schloss, 175-177.

<sup>90</sup> Edward T. Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968): 34.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>92</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Experiencing Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 29.

ever shaping and molding the abstract scheme furnished by the composer.<sup>93</sup> The composer's intentions are portrayed according to the performer's convictions and capabilities.<sup>94</sup> An understanding of a piece yields to a convincing performance of a work, this is achieved through analysis.<sup>95</sup>

Fortunately, there can be no such thing as an ideal interpretation. Only one correct interpretation would have long ago created a stale ear for Mozart and Beethoven.<sup>96</sup> New thoughts and viewpoints renew and sustain the vitality of these classics.<sup>97</sup>

The energy line analysis completed in this paper provides an understanding of Joan Tower's writing style. *Island Prelude* bears her musical vocabulary and the stamps of her compositions discussed in the previous chapters.

The title, *Island Prelude*, is typical of Tower's post-1974 compositional style. It sparks an image without painting a complete picture. Long note gestures in the opening of the piece reflect an influence of Messian; and this minimal action at the beginning of the composition is characteristic of her musical language. This provides fuel for the form of the piece. The form of *Island Prelude* contains distinct sections that overlap in transition from one to the other, creating fluidity in her organic style of writing (the music evolves from itself). *Island Prelude*'s through-composed form is unique yet still contains many traditional elements of composers such as Beethoven: motivic elements (octatonic

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<sup>93</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 200.

<sup>94</sup> Roger Sessions, *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950), 82.

<sup>95</sup> Schloss, 178.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

scales), distinct sections, transitions, the use of tonal stability and instability to aid in the unfolding of the form, and a cadenza followed by a coda.

Bonds describes Tower's use of color in her works as impressionistic.

Compositional techniques used to create these coloristic effects in *Island Prelude* include tempo, texture, dynamic and timbre. For example, the opening segment makes use of slow movement, arhythm, and warm sonorities. This solid mass of sound creates a color, representing the island and allowing the tropical bird (oboe) to float calmly above. The high-energy plateau and surges in the piece display more intense colors represented by high tessitura, dense textures, rising figures, rhythmic gestures, and forte dynamic levels.

High energy moves the action of the piece, line, form and imagery. All energy throughout the work continuously moves forward at different rates until the coda, from which the piece unwinds to the end. Contrasts of texture, timbre and energy lines, Tower admits, stem from Stravinsky. Rhythmic gestures coupled with rapid meter changes and ties lead to an inconsistent sense of pulse throughout her work and specifically, *Island Prelude*. This quality overlaps both Tower's stylistic periods and contributes to creating a deeply expressive quality to her music. She states, "it is the composer's task to discover the identities and feelings of things and to give them musical shape and form."<sup>98</sup>

Only if each player knows the total score and, therefore, is able to "hear the piece" can a meaningful representation of the composers intent be achieved in performance.<sup>99</sup> A main performance consideration in this work (chamber ensembles)

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Schloss, 185.

<sup>99</sup> Charles Wuorinen, "Notes on the Performance of Contemporary Music," *Perspectives of New Music*(Fall 1964), 15.

resides in the lack of consistent pulse throughout the piece creating a necessity for each instrumentalist to study and play from the score. The individual instrumental parts lack sufficient cues to enable the ensemble to perform accurately.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries women composers are actively continuing to write major works for the oboe: Claude Arrieu (Anne Marie Simon 1903-1990), *Impromptu* (oboe and piano); Elizabeth Coolidge (1864-1953), *Sonata* (oboe and piano); Ruth Crawford-Seeger (1901-1953), *Diaphonic Suite No.1* (unaccompanied oboe); *Diaphonic Suite No.4* (oboe, cello, continuo); *In Memorium* (oboe, trumpet and strings); Madeleine Dring (1923- 1977), *Italian Dance* (oboe and piano); *Polka* (oboe and piano); *Three Piece Suite* (oboe and piano); *Trio* (oboe, bassoon, pianoforte or harpsichord); *Trio* (oboe, flute, pianoforte); Katherine Hoover (b. 1937), *Sonata* (oboe and piano); Libbey Larsen (b.1950), *Kathleen, As She Was* (oboe and harpsichord); Thea Musgrave (b.1928), *Impromptu* (oboe, flute); *Impromptu No. 2* (oboe, flute, clarinet); *Trio* (oboe, flute, pianoforte); Judith Lang Zaimont (b.1945), *Doubles* (oboe and piano); “...3:4,5...” (oboe, clarinet, violin, viola, bass); Ellen Taaffe Zwillich (b.1939), *Concerto for Oboe* (oboe and orchestra).

Tower uses the oboe in a singing, soaring and energetic way. The oboe part contains virtuosic depth and demands a great deal rhythmically from the chamber ensemble.

The purpose of this paper is to bring awareness to the fact that analysis does enhance a performance of a work, and Joan Tower has written lovely music for the oboe available in a variety of ensemble settings. Secondly, it highlights the work of a

successful women composer, and should encourage more performances of women's compositions in general.

## APPENDIX

### Transcript of Frances Harmeyer Interview with Joan Tower January 9, 1976

That's a question that I always find hard because I've been involved with so many composers on one level or another that it's very hard to pinpoint exactly where the main trends are although I would say Charles Wuorinen had a great deal of influence on me, because when I came to New York I met him and we started – I started playing on his series; he had a series going, too, at Columbia. And he was a pianist-composer, which made him similar to me in some respect. Also I was interested very much in the kinds of pieces he was promoting. So I would say that he is definitely one of my influences, both as a kind of a style of life he has put forward as being kind of an all around composer. In other words he's a guy who performs, and composes, he teaches, he's involved with the committee side of contemporary music, which, I think, is an important part of a composer's career – to be involved in an organizational sense with other composers. And I think I, in a way, I imitated a lot of that kind of style of his. Musically he's also had an effect on me, although that's a little harder to determine. Some people have said that my music sounds a little bit like his. I'm not so sure how much that is true. Varese was another big influence on me. I liked the power in his music, the dramatic scope of his music. In fact, one of the reasons I got so involved with contemporary music was hearing his music. It made a tremendous impact on me...

... I studied with a lot of people, but I would say that composition is a very hard thing to teach. And I would say that what I learned from them was bits and pieces of little things here and there. Like some of them were very good at instrumentation, or ideas about style. But I would say that I have been very much of a learner of my own. I have not... I tried... well, this is really an issue, which is particular to me, not to everybody, but I find that what I have learned from composition has been from composing more than anything else. I have learned – I have not learned from all the teachers that I studied with except little bits of information—superficial kinds of information. I think that's partly because it's a very hard thing to teach. Music is a very hard thing to talk about. Very hard. I would say, one of the people who is probably the best at that, Ben Boretz, who is the editor of "Perspectives in New Music," who came to Columbia my last year—he had a very big effect on me as a teacher. In fact, I would say that out of all the teachers that I studied with he had the most effect....

So, I would say that on the whole I learned more from him as a teacher than from all the other people I studied with.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Joan Tower, interview by Frances Harmeyer, 9 January 1976, transcript, *Oral History, American Music at Yale University School of Music*, New Haven, CT, 4-6.

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