

## CASSANDRA'S DREAM SONG: LET'S (NOT) TALK ABOUT GENDER

### Ine Vanoeveren

Brian Ferneyhough (1943), the British composer generally described as the “father of New Complexity,” changed the oeuvre for flute. His first solo piece for the instrument, *Cassandra's Dream Song*, was so advanced that it took up to four years before it was premiered.

Besides the extremely complicated musical notation, the structure of the piece was quite bizarre for the more conventional music scene in the 1970s. The piece consists of two pages, where the lines of page one are alternated with a line of the performer's choice of page two. Therefore, the performer has a strong influence in the structural course of the piece. In his performance notes, Ferneyhough instructs the performer to not determine the order of lines beforehand, but to instantly decide on stage. That should preserve the unique character and free experience of the piece every time it is performed.

### The mythical figure of Cassandra

Cassandra was one of the eighteen daughters of King Priam of Troy and was chosen by the god Apollo to become a seer. If Cassandra would agree to spend the night with him, Apollo would reward her with the gift of fortunetelling. As the moment of passionate lust was approaching, Cassandra had second thoughts and didn't fulfill her part of the deal. Apollo, not used to being treated this way, was beside himself with anger. Unfortunately for him, a gift of the gods could not be made undone. Instead, Apollo cursed Cassandra's gift: she would be able to predict the future, but no one would ever believe her.<sup>1</sup>

### Musical analysis of the piece

Cassandra's Dream Song can be analyzed on three different sub-levels or layers: the microlayer, the macrolayer and the middle ground. The microlayer is defined by the execution and analysis of all the little details and techniques within the score. The macrolayer, or overall structure of the piece, is mostly determined by the structure of the middle ground, which is the organic and logical connection between the lines on both pages (Vanoeveren 2016).

The first (male) performers of the piece, Pierre-Yves Artaud and, later, Harrie Starreveld, interpreted the middle ground based on a mathematical analysis of both pages—the so-called pioneer's version. The feminist equivalent by Dr. Ellen Waterman focuses on the emotional development of Cassandra in order to give structure to the piece (Waterman 1994).

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<sup>1</sup> Homeros. *Illias*. ca. 850 B.C.

Appolodorus. *Bibliotheca*. ca. first or second century A.D.

Hyginus. *Fabulae*. ca. second century A.D.

Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. 458 A.D.

## The pioneer's version



Figure 1: Pioneer's version, page 1

Artaud and Starreveld used the mathematical construction of the first page to determine the fixed order of the second page (Waterman 1994). The amount of sections appearing on page one is structured according to the principle of a palindrome (2-4-5-5-4-2) (Fig. 1). Inspired by this analysis, the pioneers structured the order of the second page according to a similar mathematical approach.

They counted the amount of sections per line and sorted them in increasing order (4-6-8-9-11) (Fig. 2). The constantly diminishing sections, where the performer needs to breathe more often in a more restless way, contribute to the metaphor of Cassandra's hysterical episodes.

For me, this interpretation contains two problematic implications. First, the order of the second page is predetermined and fixed. Second, this interpretation maintains the rather archaic and rudimentary binarity within Western classical music. Page one, the “Apollo voice” or the “male page” is well-balanced, rational, and notated in a very rigid and structured way. Page two, the “Cassandra voice” or the “female page” is rather chaotic, hysterical, and all over the place.

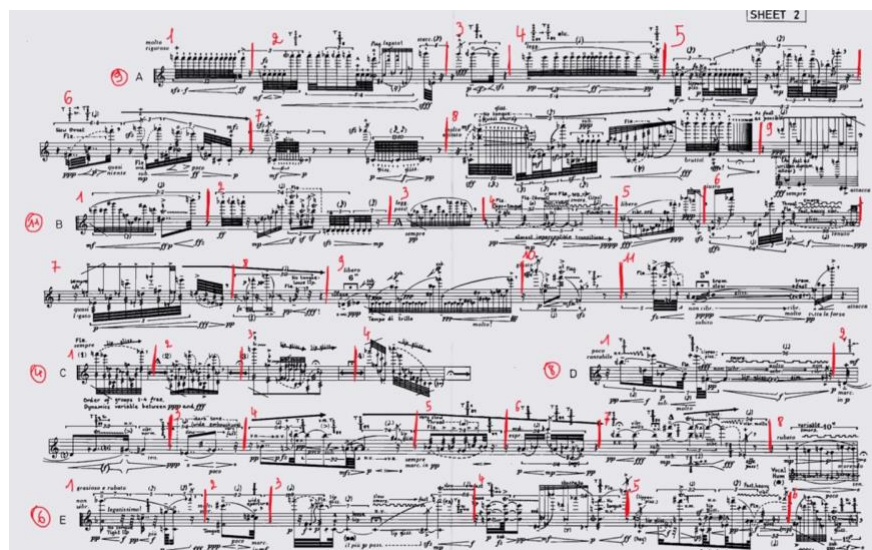


Figure 2: Pioneer's version, page 2

## The feminist version

Waterman decided to research the myth of Cassandra and Apollo more profoundly and turned towards the novel *Kassandra* by the German author Christa Wolf. She tells the myth of Cassandra from the perspective of the female protagonist (Wolf 2009). Waterman uses Wolf's description of Cassandra's emotional evolution as a woman in a patriarchal society as the guideline for her order of the second page (Fig. 3):

- Line A (blind ambition)
- Line E (formation of an individual voice)
- Line C (choice)
- Line B (hysteria)
- Line D (resolution, self-knowledge)

This version also abandons Ferneyhough's instruction to not predetermine the order of the second page. And exactly as the pioneer's version in the 70s and 80s, this interpretation is also soaked in a stereotypical atmosphere.

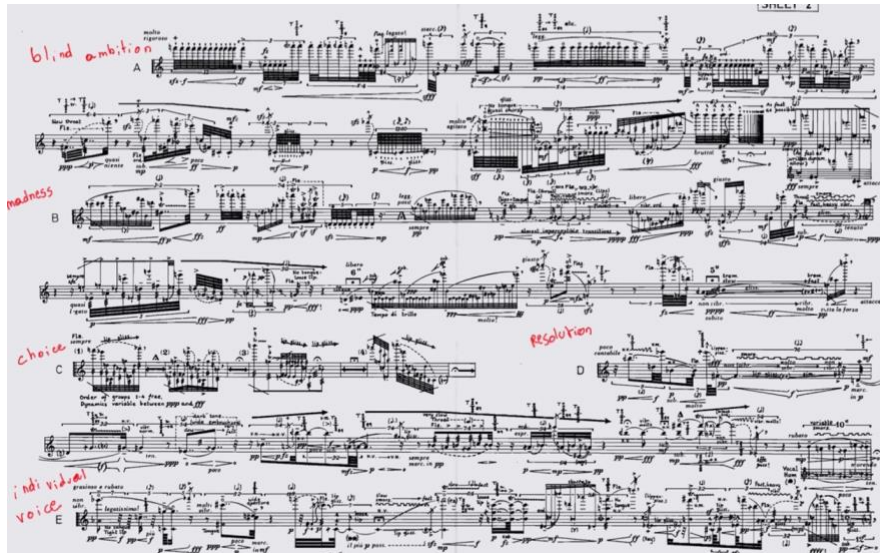


Figure 3: Feminist version, page 2

## Cassandra in the twentieth century

When a composer so explicitly states that the structure and order of the piece cannot be determined beforehand, it has indisputable consequences for the interpretation. Strongly holding on to a gender-related—and thus a predetermined and binary—interpretation destroys every chance for flexibility in the structural course.

That is why I decided to consider the figure of Cassandra as an allegory rather than a gender-determined figure. This led me to a psychological approach. The Cassandra complex is a psychological phenomenon that has been used in specialized literature since 1949, ever since the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard referred to the term as “events that can be known beforehand.”

In 1963, psychologist Melanie Klein explained the Cassandra metaphor by describing people “who suffer from severe physical or psychological pain, seen from a tormenting and personal point of view” (Bolen 2014). When these people try to explain their suffering to people they trust, they are not believed.

In 1988, psychologist Laurie Layton Shapira researched the different possible causes of the Cassandra complex:

1. A dysfunctional relationship of the “victim” with the “Apollo archetype”
2. Emotional or physical suffering

3. Not being believed when one tries to explain the cause of their suffering

Where previous psychologists still researched the Cassandra complex within the well-known stereotyped gender specifications, Jean Shinoda Bolen introduced a non-gender specific explanation of the metaphor around the same time.

Bolen describes the Apollo archetype as someone who is dominant, rational and strictly analytical, regardless of his or her gender. When the Cassandra archetype—usually unsuccessfully—tries to open someone’s eyes, this person often reacts from the emotion of injustice and will therefore be seen as a hysterical person by the other party (Bolen 2014).

### **Embedding in present-day society**

A further derivative of the Cassandra complex is the Cassandra dilemma or the Cassandra metaphor, where the Cassandra figure is used as a conceptual symbol for all those who paint a realistic picture but are not believed.

Climatology is a crucial issue within the subject matter of the Cassandra metaphor. For decades, climatologists have warned us about global warming and the related natural disasters. All these warnings have been ignored by world leaders and governments for as long as they have been expressed. In 1999, climatologist Alan AtKisson described this extreme complexity of the Cassandra dilemma within the problematic field of climate change (AtKisson 2000):

The people who gave the warnings about the bad conditions of our environment and the possible occurring disasters are being blamed that their predictions set the disaster in motion.

This is a world upside down: experts are being held responsible for the disastrous consequences that they warn us about. This happens because the actual consequences are often more severe than originally predicted. The time span between a prediction and the natural disaster is rather large. Large enough for humanity to continue living the way they are used to, without giving up their modern-day comforts. The input (e.g., the energy waste) increases daily; therefore, the expected output (a natural disaster) is also growing exponentially.

### **The conceptual version**

The latter concept is an important factor in my personal, conceptual analysis and interpretation of Cassandra’s Dream Song. The given input will determine the output. The way an event is being communicated (an *action*) and interpreted (a *reaction*), establishes the factual output at that particular moment (*result/chaos*).

I don’t condemn one voice to one specific page, but both “action” (the sound world around “A,” marked in green) and “reaction” (the sound world around “Bb,” marked in purple) are represented on both pages and are constantly in conversation with each other. The way I execute the material on page one will determine the material on page two (Fig. 4). This is the key to complete freedom in the order—and middle ground—of the piece.

Since the input is constantly changing, the output will be continuously influenced by new turns and twists, by evolutions and changes. I truly hope that, in 30 years, I will have a completely new interpretation of the piece because that would only confirm the conceptual definition of the Cassandra dilemma and emphasize the timeless character of Ferneyhough’s composition.

**CASSANDRA'S DREAM SONG** BRIAN FERNEYHOUGH

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Figure 4: Conceptual version, page 1

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