

Composer Garth Baxter and the Woman's Voice: *An Act of Compassion*

By Hollis Thoms

"Women never get this kind of voice and platform, especially in opera. Our stories are always told through the male lens. This opera, A Pregnant Pause, actually lets us have a voice."

—Annie Gill, soprano

Composer Garth Baxter (1946–) has a gift of being able, through the female voices he presents in his vocal songs and the female characters in his operas, to represent the female perspective and point of view. He is able to capture how they think about things and view themselves, and how they honestly express their inmost feelings and desires. He has written many songs based on the poetry of women, including Willa Cather, Susan Laura Lugo, Nuala O'Connor, Linda Pastan, and Sara Teasdale.

Librettist Lisa Van Allen wrote the libretto for his full-length opera, *Lily*, which is based on Edith Wharton's novel, *The House of Mirth*; and Alize Rozsnyai wrote the libretto for his one-act opera, *A Pregnant Pause*. Both operas premiered at the Carrol County Arts Center in Westminster, Maryland: *Lily* in a video production on November 14, 2022, and *A Pregnant Pause* in a live performance on April 12, 2024. I was able to attend both premieres. *Lily* is a "masterpiece" in the tradition of the grand operas of Puccini and Verdi, centering on the challenges faced by an independent woman in a male-dominated society. *A Pregnant Pause* is a brief but poignant work that portrays a woman's decision-making process as she faces the possibility of her pregnancy.

"Garth Baxter has a genuine gift for lyricism, especially when it comes to writing for the voice," writes composer Judith Adashi. Musicologist William Lee Ellis comments "when I listen to the music of Garth Baxter, I am struck by the beautiful, rhapsodic writing. He has perfected the art of blending words with music." Baxter states on his website (garthbaxter.org) that he is an unapologetic "modern traditionalist composer" and has a style that "combines the traditions of form and clear melodic writing with the use of

contemporary approaches to harmonies and other elements." His music is melodic, lyrical, approachable, nostalgic, somewhat melancholy, passionate, and romantic.

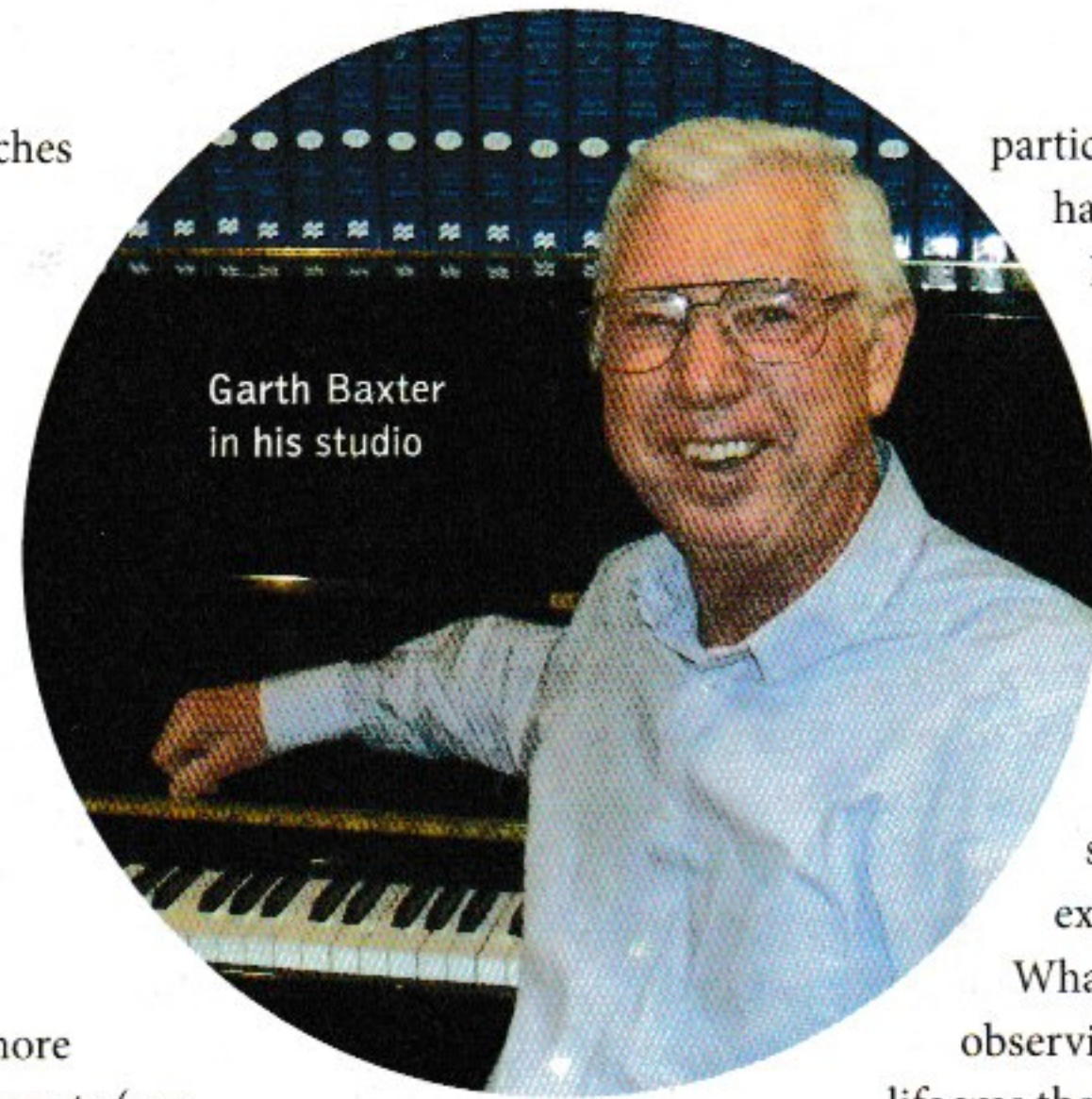
I have been friends with Baxter for over ten years. We have worked together to present our music on a number of Baltimore Composer Forum Concerts (see *PAN PIPES*, Winter 2018); our vocal and piano music on a Music, Gettysburg! concert; and concerts of our string quartet and woodwind quintet music, both at St. John's Episcopal Church Concert, Hagerstown, Maryland.

QUESTIONNAIRE

I wanted to explore Baxter's unique gift at expressing a woman's voice in more depth, which we discussed over the course of a number of email and personal conversations.

A number of women personally impacted Baxter's life: his mother, Miriam; his wife, Katherine; and his daughter-in-law, Tina. His mother was a traditional mother, taking care of Garth and his brother. She enjoyed music and reading and shared a love for the arts. Katherine, his life partner for fifty-five years, remains his closest friend and they have shared everything. She has met the challenges of life with strength of character, kindness, and love. Tina, his daughter-in-law, through her quiet strength, has been an amazing mother, spouse, and daughter. Faced with challenging health struggles, she has shown ability to endure uncertainty and face overwhelming physical and emotional challenges with optimism and confidence.

In looking back at his development as a boy and then a young man, Baxter doesn't know if he falls into the traditional male stereotype. He doesn't fish, hunt, or build things. He has, though,



Garth Baxter
in his studio

participated in sports and has always been athletic.

He questioned from the very beginning why boys were expected to be tough and have no real emotional responses to very real feelings, and girls were able to show tenderness and express love naturally.

What he learned by observing the women in his life was they are more open with their emotions. He was able to make

compassion part of his male psyche. He feels he is able to express a woman's point of view—or, a human point of view—because he "feels the emotion [himself]."

A PREGNANT PAUSE

In his most recent opera, *A Pregnant Pause*, Baxter probes the many thoughts of a woman who is waiting to find out if she is pregnant. She has conflicting thoughts about what to do if she is, and worries how a pregnancy might change her life. Baxter reveals that he and his wife were not able to have children, but they did go through the testing and the trials and the decision to adopt together. Some of these steps involved similar incredibly complicated, life-changing decisions made in an unplanned pregnancy. Having a child, said Baxter, is a life-long commitment, and being a parent is a tremendous obligation. Through that compassion, he was able to imagine what Serena, the main character, went through in her deliberations, even though the physical aspect of pregnancy and birth are unique to women. Baxter and librettist Alize Rozsnyai wished to present the questioning and ambiguity around a possible pregnancy without judgement or tapping into current political controversies. The topic was treated with utmost respect.

Katherine Merryman, who was at the opera's premiere, commented that she found