

# Genre, Gender, and Convention Revisited: k. d. lang's Cover of Cole Porter's "So in Love"<sup>1</sup>

*Lori Burns*

I began this project wishing to explore my initial response to k. d. lang's video cover (1991) of Cole Porter's song, "So in Love" (1948).<sup>2</sup> Through the unusual video images, lang seemed to be appropriating and recontextualizing the genre of the "torch song," while at the same time, through her sensitive musical performance, she was offering a great tribute to the original song and its composer. For me, lang's dual role as critical social commentator and sensitive, talented musician inspired a similarly complex theoretical stance. This initial response has enormous potential for theoretical development. What social and musical constructs does lang engage through her performance? What traditions is she examining, criticizing, and ultimately attempting to challenge, revise, or subvert? And in what specific domains—visual, textual, musical—does she enact this critical commentary? These are questions for which there are many possible re-

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper, titled "So in Love with Cole Porter and k. d. lang," was presented at the conferences "Border Crossings: Future Directions in the Study of Music," Ottawa, March 1995, and "Feminist Theory and Music III," Riverside, June 1995.

<sup>2</sup> "So in Love" (words and music by Cole Porter) was published by Chappell and Co., Inc. in 1948. lang's cover of "So in Love" was released on her *Harvest of Seven Years* (Warner Reprise Video, 1991), directed by Percy Adlon, and on the 1990 album of Cole Porter cover songs, *Red Hot + Blue* (Chrysalis F2 21799), produced by John Carlin and Leigh Blake to raise money for AIDS research.

sponses, springing from consideration of the social and musical contexts of both the original song and lang's cover. I will attempt to do justice to these questions, but my own response will obviously be delimited by my position as a music theorist who possesses a strong feminist sensibility. My ultimate goal in this study is to illustrate how these two stances—that of the music theorist and the feminist—contribute to my reception and interpretation of the song and lang's cover.

k. d. lang has made a career out of deliberately expanding what is considered acceptable within musical genres. She seems to defy categorization by merging musical styles, and at times confusing her adoring heterosexual audience while communicating clearly with her lesbian fans. Her song revisions, or cover songs,<sup>3</sup> are a kind of time travel, since she expresses new meanings while singing old songs, creating these new meanings through social commentary that reflects contemporary issues. In her video production of the cover, she provides not only a musical revision of this popular song, but also a visual commentary that subverts the traditions associated with the original. In this paper, I will discuss these traditions and lang's revision by examining the musical, textual, and visual codes that we witness, and by demonstrating how these parameters contribute to lang's dynamic interpretation. In order to appreciate lang's manipulation of the traditions associated with "So in Love," I would like to do a bit of time travel myself, and examine a version of the song that captures on film the mainstream social and gender values of the early postwar pe-

---

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of another cover song by lang, see my paper "Joanie' Get Angry: k. d. lang's Feminist Revision," in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, ed. John Covach and Graeme Boone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

riod. I will begin, therefore, with a discussion of the song as it appears in the film musical *Kiss Me, Kate*, focusing in particular on issues of gender representation. I will then analyze the music, with the aim of illustrating how the cultural perspective revealed in the film can affect the musical interpretation. With these contexts in mind, I will study lang's manipulation of gender, genre, and music in her video.

### *Patriarchal Narratives: A Hollywood Version of "So in Love"*

Cole Porter wrote "So in Love" for *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), a musical based on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.<sup>4</sup> A Hollywood film version of the musical was released in 1953. I will not explore the differences between the stage musical and the film version, or the performance conventions of the stage musical; my comments will be based on the Hollywood film, a representation of how the musical

---

<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* was adapted into a libretto for the musical comedy *Kiss Me, Kate* by Bella and Sam Spewack. The musical was produced by Saint Subber and Lemuel Ayers and directed by John C. Wilson. It was premiered on Broadway on 30 December 1948 and ran for 1,077 performances. The lead characters were played by Patricia Morison and Alfred Drake. The film version was released in 1953 by MGM, directed by Sidney George and featuring Kathryn Grayson and Howard Keel. Cole Porter's songs for *Kiss Me, Kate* include: "Another Op'nin', Another Show," "Why Can't You Behave?," "Wunderbar," "So in Love," "We Open in Venice," "Tom, Dick or Harry," "I've Come to Wive It Wealthily in Padua," "I Hate Men," "Were Thine That Special Face," "Too Darn Hot," "Where is the Life that Late I Led?," "Always True to You in My Fashion," "Bianca," "Brush Up Your Shakespeare." For more information about the musical, see Stanley Green, *Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1976), and David Ewen, *The Cole Porter Story* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 123-35.

and the song can be used within the confines and traditions of that genre. Shakespeare's play provides the perfect material for a 1950s adaptation of the "boy conquers girl" plot. The story follows a "play within a play" structure, in which a divorced husband and wife (Fred and Lilli) are performing the roles of Petruchio and Katherine in a musical adaptation of the Shakespeare play. In the plot lines of both the musical comedy and the play within it, the woman is tamed or seduced by the man, with the "real-life" events mirroring those of the play. In both plot lines, the woman is subjected to verbal and physical cruelty and the husband is notorious for his affairs with other women. The boundaries between "real life" and the play are blurred; when Petruchio and Katherine fight on stage, it is a real battle between Fred and Lilli, with painful consequences for Lilli.<sup>5</sup> The song "So in Love" signifies Fred's gradual seduction of Lilli, and it is used at strategic moments to symbolize and also to achieve her submission.

The opening scene of the film features "Fred" and "Cole Porter" (an actor playing the role) having a conversation about casting for the upcoming production of Porter's new musical *Kiss Me, Kate*.<sup>6</sup> They are in Fred's apartment, awaiting the arrival of "Lilli" (Fred's ex-wife), who has been offered the role of Katherine but has not yet agreed to take the part. Their conversation establishes Fred's strategy to manipulate Lilli into accepting the role.

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, in one scene Fred puts her over his knee and strikes her very hard; in another scene she is held at gunpoint as part of a subsidiary plot line that involves gangsters.

<sup>6</sup> This opening scene in Fred's apartment is an addition to the original musical; the original musical does not have the song "So in Love" as its opening musical number. The addition of this scene places structural emphasis on the song, since it opens and closes the film.

Fred tells Cole that the apartment where they once lived as husband and wife is “psychologically” the best place for their meeting. As in the original Shakespeare, the woman is brought into a domestic household where the man can assert his power over her. Fred’s strategy (significant for my purposes here) also includes his choice of music for Lilli to sing. Before she arrives, Fred instructs Cole to begin with a love song, since “she is a pushover for a sentimental lyric.” Lilli arrives at Fred’s apartment and, after some verbal sparring, is persuaded to join Fred in singing “So in Love.”

Example 1 reproduces the text of the song. The song is written in 32-bar song form, with three statements of a chorus, interrupted by a bridge before the third statement (chorus 1–chorus 2–bridge–chorus 3). Each chorus concludes with the same final refrain: the title line of the song, “So in love with you am I.” The song text is written from the perspective of a subject (“I”), who loves an Other (“you”). In each chorus, we learn something about their love relationship, and gradually it is revealed that it is ultimately devastating—the final chorus begins with the lines “So taunt me and hurt me/Deceive me, desert me.” No matter how the relationship is described in the first few lines of the chorus, each chorus offers the direct declaration of love in its fourth line. The bridge represents a kind of flashback to their first meeting, presumably the moment when the relationship existed in an innocent and potentially positive state. The choruses operate in the present tense, but they invoke both the existence of the painful past (“Deceive me, desert me”), and the ongoing nature of the singer’s unconditional love (“I’m yours ‘til I die”).

The song text belongs to the genre of the “torch” song, a genre in which a singer declares everlasting love for an Other, despite the Other’s cruelty or

Chorus 1 Strange, dear, but true, dear,  
 When I'm close to you, dear,  
 The stars fill the sky,  
 So in love with you am I,

Chorus 2 **Even without you,**  
**My arms** *fold about you,*  
*You know, darling, why,*  
*So in love with you am I,*

Bridge In love with the night mysterious  
 The night when you first were there,  
*In love with my joy delirious*  
*The thought that you might care,*

Chorus 3 So taunt me and hurt me,  
*Deceive me, Desert me,*  
**I'm yours 'til I die,**  
*So in love [so in love], so in love, [so in love],*  
*so in love with you, my love [so in love] am I.*

(Text distribution: Fred, *Lilli*, **Fred and Lilli**)

### Example 1

indifference.<sup>7</sup> The general theme of the torch song is submission, but there is also an underlying implication of masochism. The *performance* of such a song (traditionally by a beautiful and seductive woman) provides additional layers of meaning that signify the singer's vulnerability. For the patriarchal observer (we shall discuss the feminist observer later), the torch song confirms conventional societal gender roles—the woman is subordinate to the man, who is in control of the love relationship; she wants to be joined with her man, no matter what the cost.

In addition to invoking the torch song genre, "So in Love" also engages the musical genre of tango, through its duple meter, syncopated melodic rhythms, and accompanimental style.<sup>8</sup> In the film version of the song, the tango elements are not strongly emphasized; the tango presence is subtle, yet sufficient to convey some of its conventional associations: an intense romantic sensibility, drama, and a sense of pessimism or fatality. Perhaps even more than the dramatic context, the association of the dance relationship of tango is an important signifier, especially of gender roles:

The major theme of the tango as a dance for embracing couples is the obvious domination of the male over the female, in a series of

---

<sup>7</sup> The torch song tradition is discussed by John Moore in "The hieroglyphics of love: The Torch Singers and Interpretation," *Popular Music* 8, no. 1 (1989): 31-58. Moore identifies "My Man" as the original torch song in America, citing the success of Fanny Brice's performance at the 1921 Ziegfeld Follies.

<sup>8</sup> I could investigate the treatment of tango quite extensively here, to consider the ways in which a white American composer (in the middle of the twentieth century and for the middle-class audience targeted by the Hollywood film genre) appropriates a Latin American urban dance developed in the nineteenth century. Two useful studies of tango are: Simon Collier, Artemis Cooper, Maria Susana Azzi, and Richard Martin, *Tango: The Dance, the Song, the Story* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), and Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

steps and a very close embrace highly suggestive of the sexual act. Characteristic of the dance is the contrast between the very active male and the apparently passive female.<sup>9</sup>

Although I cannot take the time here to investigate tango as thoroughly as it deserves, the reader should bear these associative meanings in mind as I discuss the staging of the opening scene in *Kiss Me, Kate*.

The film *Kiss Me, Kate* and its theatrical foundation, Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, share a plot structure that feminist critics such as Teresa de Lauretis and Laura Mulvey have identified as a patriarchal narrative. Theater critic Sue-Ellen Case summarizes such narratives as follows:

the male is the one who makes something happen..., who forces a change in another through a battle of wills. He is given the role of sadist. In love stories, the defeated one is typically the female. Within the narrative structure, the female plays the masochist to the male sadist.<sup>10</sup>

From the opening scene of the film, we understand that the larger plot will be Fred's seduction and "taming" of Lilli, despite her fear of that outcome and her efforts to fight it. As in all musicals, the music itself is an important vehicle in the advancement of the plot, as well as an important representation and expression of the characters' feelings, motivations, and desires.

The song "So in Love" is used in three pivotal scenes of the film to signify Lilli's submission to Fred in

---

<sup>9</sup> Gerard Béhague, "Tango," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 18: 563, 564.

<sup>10</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 124. In this excerpt, Case is summarizing discussions of patriarchal narrative in Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), and Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

spite of his continuing cruelty and infidelity. Initially, in the scene described above, the song establishes Fred's intentions and Lilli's discomfort. In a later scene, Lilli receives some flowers from Fred, which she assumes to be an affirmation of love. We know that they were meant for another woman, but Lilli holds them as if they were a wedding bouquet and sings the final verse of "So in Love." It is significant that she sings this particular verse since, as my musical analysis will show, it is the moment in the song where textual and musical conflicts are resolved and the ultimate submission occurs. The song is heard once more in the film's final scene, which is meant to resolve both the real and Shakespearean plot lines. Lilli, who had attempted to leave the show because of the abusive treatment she received,<sup>11</sup> returns to the stage as Katherine, surprising Fred, who had assumed that an understudy would take over the role. Lilli's return is in itself a declaration of submission, but it is dramatically underlined by the scene that she arrives to act—the famous speech during which Katherine takes Petruchio's foot in her hand. As a musical backdrop to this speech, the orchestra plays "So in Love," symbolizing Lilli's submission to Fred as Kate gives herself to Petruchio.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> When Lilli discovers that the flowers were meant for another woman, she lets her real anger carry her through an argumentative scene with Petruchio on stage. The angrier Lilli/Kate becomes, the more powerful the blows she receives from Fred/Petruchio; when the curtain falls at the end of the act, Fred is literally beating Lilli on stage. This is the final straw for Lilli, and she threatens to leave the theater.

<sup>12</sup> In the musical, "So in Love" is sung twice, first by Lilli when she receives the flowers in her dressing room, and later by Fred as Lilli leaves the theater in anger. It is interesting that it is treated as a solo in both of the scenes. In the film version, it is first staged as a duet, with the division of the melodic lines deliberately crafted to develop the tension between Lilli and Fred.

With the context of the song's genre, the film's plot, and the strategic use of the song within the plot now in place, I would like to consider the staging, text, and music of the opening scene in greater detail. First, let us return to the text of example 1, which indicates the text distribution between Lilli and Fred. To initiate the performance, Fred sings the first chorus. As we look at the screen, he is to the right of Cole, who is seated at the piano. Lilli is to the left of Cole and has not yet been drawn in to the musical performance. As Fred begins to sing, Lilli looks tentatively around the room, clearly remembering their life together. She uses the music as a means of distracting herself from such thoughts, and joins in at the start of the second chorus. They sing together momentarily while Fred moves toward Lilli and puts his arm around her; she rejects his affection, however, and moves toward the curved part of the grand piano. Fred strategically stops singing, having accomplished his goal of capturing her musical attention. Thus centered within the piano's frame (the "singer's position"), Lilli carries the chorus to its conclusion, while Fred and Cole (together now, stage left) share a bemused and conspiratorial nod. Although he is pleased that Lilli has taken up the song, Fred is not content to let her complete the performance alone. He takes the first two lines of the bridge section, moving toward Lilli as he sings. During this passage, Lilli discovers that her new position has placed her squarely in the midst of her past—she is surrounded by old pictures of their married life, and she looks at them reluctantly and painfully. Once again, as if to distract herself from her own memories, she clutches the sheet music and resumes her singer's role by taking the last two lines of the bridge. The men nod once more, pleased with her performance. For the final chorus, Fred moves far stage right to look

out the window; he sings "So taunt me and hurt me" with his back to Lilli. She retorts with "Deceive me, desert me." Fred then returns to Lilli, and as they both sing the climactic statement, "I'm yours 'til I die," he assumes a position very close to her, looking down on her. In this position, his height becomes noticeable as an attribute of power. Lilli carries the melodic expansion of the final love declaration, "So in love with you am I," while Fred interjects in an imitative and secondary role on the phrase "so in love." This final expanded version of the title line of the song is enormously important to my interpretation of the song's gender relations, and its power distribution along gendered lines. This division of textual work means that it is the woman who makes the declaration of love, despite the cruelty that has been mentioned in the song, despite the tension that has been established in the scene, and also despite—but perhaps even more *because of*—the obvious physical relationships conveyed by the staging of the performance. The woman's declaration has been manipulated by the man, thus we are led to perceive her as weak or submissive, and him as strong and in control.

With this conclusion of the duet, Fred achieves his goal: Lilli has fallen for the sentimental lyric. She has been deceived once again into admitting to Fred that she still carries a torch for him and that he still has power over her. The scene demonstrates that this power is not only emotional but also physical. The distribution of strength and weakness according to gender is also essential to the Shakespearean plot that is the foundation of the film's story. Kate must gradually be tamed: her outbursts of aggression must ultimately be replaced by gentle and passive "femininity." Fittingly, the opening scene of the musical establishes the focal male/female relationship and defines those gendered roles in terms of emo-

tional and physical dominance and submission. That all of this is enacted through a musical performance provides a fascinating subject for a music-theoretical investigation. In the following discussion, I shall illustrate how the gender politics so apparent in the text and staging of this scene can also be described in music-theoretical terms. In order to do so, I shall conduct an analysis of the music with my interpretation of text and staging in mind.

Consider the form and structure of the melody of "So in Love," given in example 2.<sup>13</sup> Each chorus begins with a similar sequential melodic pattern, but follows with a different continuation and cadence. Each chorus concludes with the line "So in love with you am I," but this shared text is set differently each time: in chorus 1, the final melodic movement creates a half cadence (HC) in F minor; in chorus 2, the melody concludes with a perfect cadence (PAC) in A $\flat$  major; the final chorus also ends in A $\flat$  major, but with a much expanded melodic descent into its cadence. Thus we have the repetition of the initial melodic material, but a significant revision of the close for each chorus.

The moment at which the melodic change becomes evident is worth careful consideration. I have marked this moment with an asterisk in each chorus. The first chorus peaks on a D $\flat$ , then steps down toward its cadence in F minor. The second chorus oversteps that point by a whole step, leaping to E $\flat$ , from which it falls

---

<sup>13</sup> The melody in example 2 is based on the score published by Chappell and Co. (1948). The original key signature is four flats (F minor/A $\flat$  major), and this is the key used in the film version. For one scene in the musical, the song is transposed up a semitone (F $\sharp$  minor/A major) when it is sung by Lilli.

The musical score consists of four staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The lyrics are written below the notes, and various performance markings are present throughout.

**Staff C1:** Starts with the name "Fred..." at measure 5. A bracket labeled "sequence" spans measures 5 to 10. Measure 10 has an asterisk (\*). The lyrics "stars fill the sky" are under measures 10-11, and "(so in love)" are under measures 12-13. Measure 13 is marked "HC in f".

**Staff C2:** Starts with "Fred + Lilli ..." at measure 20. Measure 20 has an asterisk (\*). The lyrics "Lilli" are under measure 20, and "(know dar - ling why)" are under measures 21-22. Measure 22 has an asterisk (\*). Measure 29 is marked "PAC in Ab".

**Staff B:** Starts with "Fred..." at measure 35. Measure 35 has an asterisk (\*). The lyrics "Lilli ..." are under measure 35, and "Lilli ..." are under measure 40. Measure 40 is marked "IAC in Ab". Measure 45 has an asterisk (\*). Measure 45 is marked "HC in f".

**Staff C3:** Starts with "Fred..." at measure 50. Measure 50 has an asterisk (\*). The lyrics "Lilli ..." are under measure 50, and "Lilli (Fred) ..." are under measure 55. Measure 55 has an asterisk (\*). The lyrics "(Oh I die)" are under measure 60, and "Lilli (Fred) ..." are under measure 65. Measure 65 is marked "PAC in A>".

Example 2

to a cadence in  $A\flat$ . The final chorus reaches the ultimate apex of the song on F, then continues with a chromatically elaborated descent into the  $A\flat$  cadence. (The bridge also participates in this melodic scheme by articulating  $F\flat$  as its local apex, a mediation between the apex pitches  $E\flat$  and F in choruses 2 and 3.)

The gradual climb toward the climactic F is prepared by the melodic sequence that announces each chorus. In chorus 1, the voice starts on  $C^4$  and moves through a sequential treatment of a motive that rises by fifth then falls by step.<sup>14</sup> The sequential chain is broken so that the line does not continue up to the expected  $F-E\flat$ ; in the third leg of the sequence, the voice skips only a third to  $D\flat$  (rather than rising a fifth), creating the apex for that line. Chorus 2 begins with the same sequence, but now the melody leaps a fourth to  $E\flat$ , creating a new apex for the song. Chorus 3 begins with the rising sequence once more, but this time realizes the sequence's full potential to reach the high  $F-E\flat$ . Thus the final arrival on F is prepared not only by the gradual linear ascent to that pitch over the course of the song ( $D\flat-E\flat-F\flat-F$ ), but also by the actual sequential pattern. The first two choruses might very easily have stated the sequence in full; the avoidance of F in the first and second choruses creates a heightened sense of anticipation for the pitch's ultimate arrival in the final chorus.

Example 3 is a linear tonal analysis of the melody using reductive (Schenkerian) notation. The melody shifts back and forth between a minor key and its relative major (F minor and  $A\flat$  major); my sketch illustrates and

---

<sup>14</sup> The registral designations used here assume middle C on the piano as  $C^4$ , the octave below as  $C^3$ , and the octave above as  $C^5$ , etc.

The musical score consists of three staves of music in F minor. The first staff contains two choruses, C1 and C2. C1 is marked with an asterisk and a scale degree symbol  $\hat{5}$  above the note G, with the text "(=  $\hat{5}$  -  $\hat{2}$  in f)" below. C2 is marked with an asterisk and a scale degree symbol  $\hat{5}$  above the note E $\flat$ , with the text "(=  $\hat{5}$  -  $\hat{2}$  in A $\flat$ )" below. The second staff contains a bridge, B, marked with an asterisk and a scale degree symbol  $\hat{5}$  above the note E $\flat$ , with the text "(=  $\hat{5}$  -  $\hat{2}$  in A $\flat$ )" below. The third staff contains Chorus 3 (C3), marked with an asterisk and a scale degree symbol  $\hat{5}$  above the note G, with the text "(=  $\hat{5}$  -  $\hat{2}$  in f)" below. The lyrics "(fill sky)", "(darling)", and "(til I die)" are placed under the corresponding musical phrases.

### Example 3

interprets this movement. The apex points are once again marked with asterisks. Choruses 1 and 2 form a parallel antecedent/consequent phrase structure in which the open harmonic cadence on the dominant of F minor at the end of the first chorus is answered by the closed harmonic cadence on the tonic of A $\flat$  at the end of the second chorus. In Schenkerian terms, the potential tonic harmony of F minor is eventually subsumed by the tonic of A $\flat$  major. The bridge and final chorus likewise compose a large-scale antecedent/consequent relationship. The bridge concludes with a half cadence in F minor (similar to the one at the end of the first chorus), and the final chorus closes with a perfect cadence in A $\flat$ .

In chorus 1, the primary melodic tone is C $^5$ , which is approached by its upper neighbor D $\flat$ , the local apex of that chorus. From this C, the melodic descent to G is harmonized and thus interpreted as scale degrees  $\hat{5}$  to  $\hat{2}$  in F minor. The second chorus reaches the high E $\flat$  apex, which allows for the modulation to A $\flat$  major. E $\flat$  steps down to the primary tone C, and the melody then

cadences through the motion  $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$  in  $A_b$ . The final chorus ascends to the true apex pitch F, which is articulated as a neighbor to  $E_b$  in the key of  $A_b$  major (i.e. as scale degrees  $\hat{6}$  to  $\hat{5}$ ). The motion  $\hat{6}-\hat{5}$  then initiates the elaborated and expanded descent to  $A_b$  for the final cadence.

The bridge comprises a pair of phrases that are heard as a melodic digression or contrast from the chorus statements. This section contributes in an interesting way to the tonal tension between F and  $A_b$  and thus participates in the linear narrative of the song. In the first phrase of the bridge, the voice rises stepwise from  $A_b$  to  $E_b$ , then settles back on the familiar C. From that C, there is a melodic descent which is shown in two layers of notation in example 3. The upper layer, given in brackets because these pitches are not actually sung, normalizes the linear progression as  $C-B_b-A_b$ . However, the real vocal line continues down to  $E_b$  and then cadences on F, an added sixth over the supporting  $A_b$  tonic chord. The second phrase of the bridge repeats the stepwise climb from  $A_b$ , but this time reaches  $F_b$ , which resolves as a neighbor down to  $E_b$ . As  $E_b$  steps down to the expected C, the harmony shifts back to F minor, with the melodic descent from C down to G suggesting a half cadence in that key.

The musical narrative that unfolds in this song is thus based on a tension between the keys of F minor and  $A_b$  major. The tension between the relative minor and major is felt until the end of the composition, at which point F is ultimately subsumed within the context of  $A_b$ . This is accomplished through the melodic development of the vocal line, as well as its harmonic support. I wish to emphasize the voice's critical role in the tonal narrative—its high F- $E_b$  resolution is the climactic moment in the song, a moment that has been prepared as the desired

goal. The song's melodic/harmonic narrative has been about resolving the tension between the two contrasting keys and this moment is where the resolution takes place. In strict tonal terms, once the F is resolved as a neighbor to E $\flat$ , and once we have that stable E $\flat$  from which to descend, the key of A $\flat$  is tonally secured.

Now I would like to interpret this analytical data in light of the gender relations and the ascription of power that I explored in my analysis of the scene. My discussion of the text and staging led me to the conclusion that Lilli is manipulated into singing the final declaration "So in love with you am I." Her performance of this line—and by "performance" I mean to invoke all aspects of the act, including the distribution of text and melody, the staging, her relationship with the two men in the scene with her, etc.—signifies her submission to Fred and, in turn, his dominance of her, both emotionally and physically. In music-theoretical terms, the melodic goal of the song is the climactic apex on F and its resolution and subsequent cadence; the melody leads to that moment as the defining moment of the musical structure. Significantly, it is Lilli who articulates this climactic gesture: as she sings "'til I die" she resolves the apex F down to E $\flat$ , the pivotal moment in the melodic/harmonic narrative that subsumes F within the overriding harmony of A $\flat$ . Fred also sings the words "'til I die," but he sings them a third lower. As Fred leads Lilli to the dramatic "resolution" of the scene (her submission to him), he also leads her to articulate the tonal "resolution" of the song (the submission of F to A $\flat$ ).

All these details of text, music, staging, play, and film define gender roles and the ascription of power in a very particular way. One of my analytical agendas here is to illustrate how musical language can be used strategically to represent and signify the constructs of gender

and power. However, for the feminist observer it can be disconcerting, and even alienating, to discover such patriarchal systems operating in a piece of compelling music. How, then, the feminist asks, can we hope to redefine such systems in order to promote a feminist agenda? Another of my goals here is to demonstrate how that same musical language can be manipulated to produce a different meaning. Enter k. d. lang and her revision of the Cole Porter song.

### *Feminist Narratives: lang's Revision of "So in Love"*

One way in which feminist film and theater critics have discussed the impact of a patriarchal narrative on an audience is by invoking the concept of the male gaze, which "asserts that representations of women are perceived as they are seen by men."<sup>15</sup> For the female in the audience, the patriarchal narrative and the assumption of the male gaze can have an alienating effect. As I watch Lilli in the scene with Fred and Cole, I am painfully aware of the ways in which she is represented as a vulnerable woman; the staging, the camera's gaze, the plot and character motivations lead me to see Lilli, through the eyes of Fred and Cole, as an object to be desired, coveted, controlled. According to Case, in such a situation "[the female viewer] becomes an Other to herself. Within the patriarchal system of signs, women do not have the cultural mechanisms of meaning to construct themselves as the subject rather than as the object of performance."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the goal of feminist filmmakers is to produce a female subject who functions within a

---

<sup>15</sup> Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

feminine narrative. Thus when I consider lang's remake of "So in Love," I am intrigued by the following questions: How does lang resist the patriarchal narrative, its system of signs and its representation of women as objects of desire? How does she counter the male gaze to avoid alienating her female audience? In what sense does lang assume the role of subject rather than object? In other words, how does lang create a feminine narrative within the torch song, a genre that has traditionally been a vehicle for the patriarchal narrative?

In a published interview, when lang was asked about her appeal to a female audience, she replied as follows:

I'm offering women something that they don't have a lot of: a strong example, something that's geared more to women's feelings... I am a feminist. I don't care if the women I reach are lesbians or not. I don't even care if men come. Music transcends. But women have to realize that we're different, and we have to find some way of making that difference known inside ourselves.<sup>17</sup>

With this quotation in mind, I turn to my discussion of lang's video performance of "So in Love." I will begin with the video images, then turn to the music.

With her appearance and physical demeanor, lang resists the role of the traditional torch singer as an object of desire. Her behavior in front of the camera is unself-conscious and her appearance is not fetishized for sexual objectification. Indeed, she does not seem to be performing for an audience at all, but rather, through the camera's lens, we intrude into her private world, observing her as she goes through the mundane actions of washing clothes. Her physical movements are natural to the task: her head is bent to her work; she avoids eye contact with

---

<sup>17</sup> k. d. lang, "lang: Virgin Territory," interview by Brendan Lemon, *The Advocate* (16 June 1992): 38.

the camera; she does not assume body positions that would indicate that she is performing. A greenish-yellow wash over the film deglamorizes her appearance and the setting. In addition, for most of the song, we do not observe the performative aspect of lang's musical presentation—the singing. Instead, the song is heard as a backdrop to lang's actions. It is only in the final refrain that she begins to sing for the camera.

The setting is more like a private dwelling than a stage. The action takes place in a laundry room, kitchen, and bathroom. In each of these rooms, we see the clutter that lang is attempting to tidy. We can infer from the nature of the mess and by means of some inserted images within the film, that lang is cleaning up after the recent death of a loved one. In the kitchen, for instance, we see dead flowers, a bedpan. The inserted images, which are filmed with a dark green filter, provide sudden images of a blood transfusion bag and other hospital equipment. We can also infer, from the love song in the background, that the person who has died was her lover.

It is during the bridge of the song that we learn the sexual identity of the lover. lang rinses out a woman's nightgown and then hangs it up to dry. At the text, "the thought that you might care," lang leans in to embrace and kiss the nightgown in an intimate gesture. With this action, lang explicitly identifies her deceased lover as a woman. An awareness of the video's production within the popular music industry is also critical to our understanding of lang's social message. lang's revision of this song was commissioned as part of an album of Cole Porter songs released in order to benefit AIDS research. lang's message acknowledges the deadly potential of the disease, its effect on homosexual couples, but more specifically, its effect on this lesbian couple, identifying the disease as a killer—not just of men—but also of women.

With this performance, lang avoids the masochistic aspect of the torch song. It is an expression of love in the spiritual sense; the lover has died, so the singer cannot be viewed as an object who may yet be subordinated to the subject. lang thus liberates herself from the submissive role of the torch singer and creates a performative opportunity for personal expression in which she is the subject.

Once the story has been revealed, the final chorus is filmed differently. lang sits down in the middle of the kitchen, which now becomes a stage. She rids herself of the yellow rubber gloves—a symbol of society's fear of AIDS—that she had donned at the beginning of her work. She begins to sing, and gradually raises her head to look into the camera. The cold yellow gradually changes to warmer red tones. In this final verse lang abandons herself to the sensual art of singing, but only after the message that she is not performing for the male gaze has been clearly sent. She is only willing to expose herself as a performer once she has established her resistance to traditional patriarchal narratives and heterosexual stereotypes.

At this climactic moment of lang's performance, she also resists a traditional musical narrative, and here once again I find meaning in my musical analysis of the original song. At the climax of the song, lang disrupts the tonal structure with a simple but loaded musical gesture, one that is filled with musical as well as extra-musical meaning. Indeed, all of lang's musical changes prepare for and relate to the climactic final line of the song.

Before investigating this further, I would like to mention that lang's version develops more fully the tango features inherent in the original song, mainly through the instrumental accompaniment. In the instrumental introduction we hear the syncopated rhythmic pulse estab-

lished in the bass, and a melodic instrument—the *bandoneón*, a type of accordion that is used by tango players. It is interesting to reflect on lang's use of tango in this performance of the song. The themes of death and loss that are developed in the video images are in keeping with the fatalism of the romantic tango. In this sense, the tango reference seems sincere and poignant. However, there is also an ironic element to lang's tango: in this case, there is no dance. Whereas Fred and Lilli, in their staging of the song, create a kind of "dance" or physical relationship that enacts the spirit of tango (male dominance over female compliance), there can be no physical interaction between lang and her lover. Ultimately, lang rejects the traditional use of tango as a vehicle for enacting opposing gender roles.

Example 4 is a reduction of lang's vocal line, similar to the reduction of the original song in example 3. lang's version of the song for the most part follows Porter's closely, but there are certain notable exceptions. First, and perhaps incidentally, lang transposes the song down a fifth so that the key relations are now B $\flat$  minor and D $\flat$  major (instead of F minor and A $\flat$  major). lang generally sings in a low range, so her choice is probably influenced by the tessitura of her voice. At the same time, however, the transposition creates a very dark and somber mood for the song.

In addition to the key change, lang extends the song by repeating certain material. Example 5 illustrates the formal changes. The original 32-bar song form was chorus 1, chorus 2, bridge, chorus 3. (The pitches in parentheses serve to remind us of the apex structure of the song.) lang maintains the original form through the bridge section, but thereafter alters the pattern. After the bridge, she moves into the expected chorus 3, which

The image shows three staves of musical notation in a key with three flats (F major or D minor). The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, accidentals, and annotations. Boxed labels C1, C2, B, and C3 are placed above the notes. Annotations include "(fill sky)", "(= 5̂ - 2̂ in bb)", "(= 3̂ - 1̂ in Db)", "(altered)", "(1st half instrumental, 2nd half vocal)", and "(til I die)".

Example 4

<b>Porter:</b>	C1 (D $\flat$ )	<b>lang:</b>	C1 (G $\flat$ )
	C2 (E $\flat$ )		C2 (A $\flat$ )
(keys: f/A $\flat$ )	B (F $\flat$ )	(keys: b $\flat$ /D $\flat$ )	B (B $\flat\flat$ )
	C3 (F)		C3 (G $\flat$ )
			B (B $\flat\flat$ )
			C3 (B $\flat$ )

Example 5

should climax with the statement of “til I die” on the ultimate apex gesture, the resolution from scale degree  $\hat{6}$  to  $\hat{5}$ . In the original song, these pitches were F–E $\flat$ , but in this transposition, the pitches would be B $\flat$ –A $\flat$ . lang subverts our expectations for this climax, however, and substitutes the gesture G $\flat$ –F. She then goes on to cadence in D $\flat$ , in keeping with the cadential structure of chorus 3. This statement of chorus 3 is followed by a repetition of the bridge, from which she can take another run at the conclusion of the song. The first half of the bridge is instrumental; the voice enters for the second half, once again taking the phrase with the local apex (in lang’s transposition, B $\flat$  $\flat$ ). The bridge moves into a final statement of chorus 3, a statement that is once again an altered version of the original. This time, lang does ascend to the climactic B $\flat$  but then sustains it through the text “til I die.” In other words, she does not resolve the B $\flat$  to A $\flat$ , but instead sustains B $\flat$ , skips down a third to G $\flat$ , and completes the descent to the tonic D $\flat$ . The B $\flat$  is never resolved and thus is never subsumed; it remains in our ears for the rest of the song. Indeed, this is confirmed by the supporting harmony: the added sixth B $\flat$  is held over into the final D $\flat$  tonic and is never resolved as a neighbor to A $\flat$ .

I am fascinated with this melodic gesture (the sustained B $\flat$ ) because of its use within the larger voice-leading narrative of the song. According to Porter’s original, the apex structure in lang’s transposition should move from G $\flat$  in chorus 1, to A $\flat$  in chorus 2, to the mediating B $\flat$  $\flat$  in the bridge, and then finally to the ultimate B $\flat$  in chorus 3. The stepwise ascent would contribute to the sense of direction in the melody, and to the sense of logical and satisfactory arrival when the B $\flat$ –A $\flat$  resolution of the true apex was followed by its cadential descent in

the major key ( $D\flat$ ). However, lang disrupts this narrative in a number of ways. First, the initial statement of the bridge, with its apex  $B\flat\flat$ , is not followed by the expected version of chorus 3 with its apex  $B\flat$ . Instead the apex of the first chorus 3 brings us back down to  $G\flat$ . Following this “disappointment” we return to the bridge material, with its  $B\flat\flat$  apex (see example 5). The melodic intervals here are not mediated by  $A\flat$ , as they were in the original melodic ascent. That  $A\flat$  is the fifth scale degree in the major key ( $D\flat$ ) which ends the song; it should be a point of stable reference in a piece that appears to be fluctuating between the major and its relative minor ( $D\flat$  major/ $B\flat$  minor). lang thus omits the melodic reference to one of the central pillars of the song’s tonality. To confirm this musical point, she then avoids the  $A\flat$  in the final statement of chorus 3, as she sustains the apex  $B\flat$  instead of resolving it to  $A\flat$ .<sup>18</sup>

The effect of these changes in the apex scheme is startling to the trained musical ear: following Porter’s original, we expect chorus 3 to offer the logical continuation of the opening sequence so that it finally reaches the structural  $B\flat-A\flat$  ( $\hat{6}-\hat{5}$ ) from which the expanded statement of “So in love with you am I” would continue to its conclusive cadence in the major key. Tonally, everything would be in its place; to paraphrase the text, all taunts

---

<sup>18</sup> Another subtle detail of lang’s vocal line foreshadows this final line. At the text “first were there” in the bridge (system 3 of example 4), lang doesn’t sing the original line  $A\flat-B\flat$  at the melodic cadence, but rather sustains  $B\flat$ . At the equivalent moment in example 3, the  $E\flat-I'$  gesture presents  $I'$  as a neighbor to  $E\flat$ . The harmony is  $A\flat$  major, and  $I'$  sounds as an incomplete neighbor, an added sixth in the chord. In lang’s version there is no  $A\flat$ ; therefore  $B\flat$  cannot be perceived as a neighbor tone. She does not change the harmony (it is still  $D\flat$  major) but she does create a subtle emphasis on  $B\flat$  as a note that is outside of the  $D\flat$  tonic triad, and which is not explicable (in Schenkerian terms) merely as a neighbor note.

and hurts, deceptions and desertions would be forgotten in light of the radiant descent from A $\flat$  down to the tonic D $\flat$ . In lang's remake, that annunciatory A $\flat$  seems to have come unhinged, to have been misplaced in a musical development that seems both calculated and defiantly spontaneous.

An "orthodox" Schenkerian would find the unresolved B $\flat$  in the final line of the song troubling and would attempt to resolve it, probably by using an *implied* pitch A $\flat$ . The A $\flat$  is essential to the tonal structure of this song—it is the logical apex of the sequence that has unfolded over the chorus statements, and it resolves the tonal tension between B $\flat$  minor and D $\flat$  major in favor of the latter. It is what makes unequivocal D $\flat$  major closure possible at the end of the song. To substitute an implied A $\flat$  is to gloss over lang's reworking and by association to annul the political import of that reworking. Tonality does not take place in some rarified world above human relations; it is instead a hotly contested social convention. When lang leaves the B $\flat$  unresolved she rebukes convention, creating an emphasis that is reinforced by the video's filmic techniques. This is the moment when lang assumes center stage, adopts the singer's position, and looks into the camera for the first time.

I have already discussed the significance of the melodic resolution within the musical narrative of the original song and its significance for traditional music theory, as well as for the patriarchal plot of *Kiss Me, Kate*. For lang, it is obviously the most poignant moment of the song, as it is associated with powerful visual and musical gestures. She resists the traditional narrative and substitutes her alternative ending, staying outside of the system and avoiding submission. Her musical resistance can be interpreted in a number of ways, but given the context of the video and its overall message, I am com-

pelled to hear the unresolved B $\flat$  as a powerful expression of grief for people suffering from AIDS. Her sustained cry, coupled with the climactic video close-up of her face, project a profound sentiment that transcends the original sentimental lyric and permits lang to create a deeper social statement.

### *Conclusions*

Much more work could be done on the song "So in Love," as well as the stage musical *Kiss Me, Kate*. One could investigate how this material was handled in different recordings and productions by the many artists and theater groups who have chosen to work with it. What I have written here is a case study of two of the song's many versions, in order to explore the different ways in which a particular song can be used to represent gender relations and, concomitantly, societal gender values. These two cases capture my interest not only for the socio-cultural constructs that are explored in their production, but also for the actual musical constructs. For me, the most powerful musical gesture in the production of both versions is the climactic and elaborated statement of the title line in the final statement of the refrain; my ear is truly captivated by that simple, beautiful culmination of motivic melodic design, registral and linear progression, and tonal rhetoric. The staging/filming of each version confirms the power of that essential musical gesture to signify the gender narrative that has been placed at the heart of each artistic production.