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Mr Barbecue by Elena Kats-Chernin

The Raw and the Cooked

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Introduction

In this critique of the music theatre work, *Mr Barbecue* (2002) by Elena Kats-Chernin¹, I maintain that the work's subject matter is based in masculinist thinking².

I argue that this is a departure from her earlier music theatre works, which, as I have articulated in my previous research on Elena Kats-Chernin ([Rusak 1999](#), [2000](#), [2001](#), [2004](#), [2005](#), [2009](#)) that express a feminine aesthetic in subject matter and musical setting. I have engaged in some of the musicological discourses on gender and refer to these, where relevant, in the following. With the commissioning of *Mr Barbecue*, Kats-Chernin was faced with a project that would turn her attention to masculinist thinking which emerged in the 1980s as a response to feminism and the discourse on gender studies. This paper briefly discusses the composer's earlier work within the feminist musicological framework. It examines the position of the composer herself as a woman and her position on feminism. This is followed by a descriptive musical analysis of the song cycle, looking at the relationship of text to music and how it succeeds as an amusing performance of Australian masculinity. It concludes with the assessment of *Mr Barbecue* and the composer Elena Kats-Chernin within the context of gender discourse.

The Feminist Framework

My early approaches to the work of Elena Kats-Chernin were an attempt to position her within the context of feminist approaches to musicology. In the 1990s feminist musicology moved from seeking equality and representation of women composers on the concert platform and in the literature ([Drinker \[1948\] 1977](#); [Wood 1980](#), [1995](#); [Neuls-Bates 1982](#); [Bowers and Tick 1986](#); [Koskoff 1987](#); [Jezic 1988](#); [Herndon and Zeigler 1991](#); [Pendle \[1991\] 2001](#); [Bowers and Bareis 1991](#); [Citron 1993](#); [Macarthur 1997](#), [2002](#); [Halstead 1997](#), to name a few) to thinking about difference and the idea that women express a feminist aesthetic drawing upon the French feminist theories on *l'écriture féminine*. French feminist thought was founded on the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Lacan from which emerged theories of difference and the concept of the woman as 'other'. This translated from the postmodernist writings of Derrida ([\[1967\] 1978](#)) to formulate an approach to the discussion of women's literature.



Musicology in the late 1980s and 1990s, found in the writings of Rieger (1985, 1998), McClary (1988, 1991, 1993, 1999, 2000), Cox (1991), Cook and Tsou (1994), Solie (1992, 1993), Macarthur (1997, 2002, 2010) and Cusick (1999), incorporated some of this thinking alongside the Western interpreters of these theories such as Grosz (1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1994) and Butler (1989, 1990).

I claimed, within this context, that Elena Kats-Chernin's early music theatre commissions demonstrated a particularly feminist aesthetic, despite her stated intentions. Kats-Chernin maintained that, in the past, feminism never really concerned her since she had experienced enormous compositional opportunities, as well as the advantages she felt of her experience as a woman and a mother. However, subsequent personal developments have made her seriously consider the disadvantages of being a woman in her profession³. I considered that her operas, *Iphis* (1997) and *Matricide: The Musical* (1998), might be regarded as reflecting her latent feminist concerns.

Iphis was Kats-Chernin's first major music theatre commission resulting in a chamber opera based upon Ovid's original story of *Iphis and Ianthe* from the final section of Book IX of *Metamorphosis*. When asked by fellow composer, Sarah de Jong, why her first major commission upon her return to Australia would be opera, Kats-Chernin stated (de Jong 1994: 29) 'I suppose it's the idea of becoming the 100% composer, of making a big stage work – and I'm back in the theatre!'

Kats-Chernin believed that opera composition brings with it access to both sizeable musical resources and greater public recognition. The idea of composing a large-scale work is associated with having considerable power and influence, and many of the institutions which are involved in the performance of large-scale works have privileged hierarchical power structures which are difficult for any composer to penetrate⁴. Halstead argues that compositional genre can be a powerful indicator of the place of a composer in musical life, as is their access to institutions that can bring their music to public attention. She states:

The dimensions of a musical composition; its complexity and form; the forces needed to reproduce it; its performance sphere and the level of dissemination are all important factors in the potential 'value' which can be ascribed to the work, regardless of its actual content (Halstead 1997: 173).

Thus, a composer relies upon institutions for the production of their works, particularly those on a larger scale, and, for that to occur, the composer must come from a position of authority and respect. Halstead further argues that women are particularly disadvantaged in this regard because of their historical social position and restricted access to power⁵.

Paradoxically, the resources provided for *Iphis* were nowhere near on a grand scale⁶ and, to date, Kats-Chernin's music theatre commissions have been small scale in terms of musical resources and low-budget infrastructure of the presenting organisations⁷.

Iphis is the story of a girl born to a man who hopes for a boy and who threatens to kill the child if it is girl. A girl is born and the mother disguises her gender. The child is raised and educated in accordance with traditional masculine academic pursuits. This causes Iphis considerable grief and confusion and all goes comically awry on her wedding day. The Iphis story has contemporary relevance on a number of levels, not least with regard to infanticide of female babies in some more traditional societies. On another level, the narrative has contemporary relevance in the sex and gender issues raised. In translating the work for modern audiences, the librettist, Richard Toop, says:

The attraction of the story lies in the sexual/gender ambiguities and antagonisms. In general, the libretto will follow Ovid's story, modifying it only to increase these ambiguities and give them a more contemporary aspect (Toop 1995).

I argue in my earlier study of *Iphis* (Rusak 2005) that the area of feminine interest for Kats-Chernin is the role of the mother, which the librettist, Richard Toop, found developed musically beyond his original intentions. I framed this study within the theoretical context of Eva Rieger's 'restricted aesthetics' which she argues applies to many compositions by women.



Many women have a special ability to create a maximum amount out of a minimum of material, a sort of 'restricted aesthetics'.

Although women have composed in all forms and genres, ranging from small piano pieces to the mass and symphony, they were, in the nineteenth century confined mainly to parlour music on account of their social status (this of course led to the well-known prejudice that women were unable to compose large forms). They are skilled in writing music which can be performed easily and are less experienced in writing music for its own sake. This tradition prevails: songs, piano and chamber music predominate in music written by women. It is difficult to judge whether women are struggling with a negative burden or whether their ability to make the most out of limited circumstances can also be a specific talent which is linked to their social character ([Rieger 1998: 147](#)).

While this appears to be a generalisation, it must be considered within the context of the article where Rieger provides support for these findings in a number of examples demonstrating how this restriction is manifest in music by women. *Iphis* might be considered an expression of restricted aesthetics because, even though Kats-Chernin has been given the opportunity to write opera, it is a small chamber ensemble piece with limited instrumental and vocal resources. The opera is short and the overture is restricted to the barest minimum played by a very small instrumental ensemble. The overture to *Iphis* is a mere 33 bars. Some of the restriction regarding the overture can be accounted for by the one-minute brief, as there was no curtain available for the first production. Within this time frame, the essential themes of the opera are presented along the lines of traditional overture principles. Whilst the opera becomes a richly themed piece, the dramatic crux lies in three descending chords for the father's statement, 'I am the father, I am authority', which can be found in the initial sketches for the opera. These are also the three chords which open the overture.

When venturing further into Kats-Chernin's works, I discovered that the restricted aesthetic has always been present. This is not in the minimalist sense, where a single musical idea is repeated with subtle changes, but in the sense of beginning with a single musical unit as a foundation for the piece: *Reductions* (1983) represents her 'interest in reducing musical means to a bare minimum' ([Kats-Chernin 1996](#)); *Tast-en* (1991) for solo piano is based around a single pitch; *Coco's Last Collection* (1994) is based on three notes, while *Rhetonica* (1993) for chamber ensemble uses a single chord and *Clocks* (1993) for 20 musicians and tape is based upon a single metronomic pulse. The musical unit could also be a chord progression, which is the basis for the construction of *Chamber of Horrors* (1995) for harp, or *Variations on a Serious Black Dress* (1995) for piano or the *Schubert Blues* (1996)³ for piano. The d minor scale is the single idea used in *Transfer* (1990) for orchestra, while her earliest orchestral work, *Stairs* (1984), derives from a whole-tone scale and chromatic scales. Intervals also have been used as the main structural cell: for example, *ProMotion* (1995), written for the ensemble, Bang on a Can Allstars, is based upon the interval of a fifth, and both *Concertino* (1994) for violin and eleven instruments and *Charleston Noir* (1996) for double bass quartet are based on a major seventh. Kats-Chernin states, with reference to this technique:

My general interest, which has been with me since I started hasn't changed, is in minimising the material, reducing it to the bare bones, and then putting a bit of flesh on it later on. That's why when you look closely, sometimes the main material exists only as three notes, or three chords, or one note, or one rhythm, something very tiny ([Shaw 1997: 32](#)).

Examples of this kind of cellular approach can be found in the work of many great composers. Nonetheless, Kats-Chernin's approach to composition might be considered particularly economical. This could be purely an aesthetic decision or, it could be viewed within the context of Rieger's restricted aesthetics.

The issue that becomes very evident in this approach, based on the idea of feminist aesthetics, is the problem of essentialism. Firstly, the notion of women as 'other' has been criticised as placing women in a secondary and inferior position which does nothing to elevate women's compositional efforts and talents. Secondly, to say that all women's music therefore is characterised by a restricted aesthetic is not only putting women's music in the musical ghetto, but also not providing an opportunity to view composition by women as having the right to a voice within the wider compositional sphere. Not to mention that a restricted aesthetic, such as the use of minimal melodic material and small musical cells, might be the basis of music written by men. This is where the conundrums of feminist aesthetics in



musical composition become impossible to unravel. To construct a boundary between masculine and feminine creates a polarity that contravenes the deconstructionist thinking of feminist aesthetics. Conversely, it also ignores the place in between feminine and masculine which has been explored in the recent literature on the topic ([Macarthur 2002](#), [2010](#); [Grosz 1994](#)). Macarthur ([2010: 61](#)) provides a Deluzian⁹ solution to the problem based on the idea of 'positive difference'.

In turning to Elena Kats-Chernin's second music theatre piece, *Matricide: The Musical* (1998), a feminist agenda can be more clearly articulated largely due to the strong feminist and social activist agenda of the librettist, Kathleen Mary Fallon¹⁰. *Matricide: The Musical* features mother as the victim with brutal consequences. It is based upon the gruesome and true story of the bludgeoning murder of a woman by her own daughter and her daughter's girlfriend that took place in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1954¹¹. Alongside her development of the libretto, Fallon drafted theoretical ideas outlining her aesthetic intentions for this work¹². These appeared in the form of essays accompanying the libretto drafts. Most of the essays' ideas are based in academic feminism. It is clear from the theoretical essays that Fallon was keen to induct Kats-Chernin into feminist ideology.

Although Kats-Chernin's success as a woman composer has resulted in her name appearing in this context, she never became directly involved in feminist propaganda. Her works have been performed in concerts embracing the cause of propagating women's music. The National Festival of Women's Music, 29 August – 2 September, 2001, used her photographic image on all of the promotional and program material. Apart from having a number of premieres and performances of her works at that festival, Kats-Chernin was also profiled in an interview at the main forum of the festival. In that interview, she discussed her embarrassment at being profiled in this way above all the other talented women composers in Australia, particularly by being the program cover girl. However, when asked to provide a photographic image, she agreed to provide the one that she considered the most appropriate representation of her working life ([Kats-Chernin 2001](#)). It shows her carrying a large bag that she explained was used to transport loaves of bread, milk, other grocery shopping, scores, pens and the tools of her compositional trade¹³. Kats-Chernin's status as a single mother with three sons has contributed to domestic concerns being a major priority in her life. The symbolic implications of this choice of image to represent her indicate the extent of the intrusion of her domestic responsibilities on her professional life.

While Kats-Chernin's engagement with the values associated with feminism cannot be overlooked, her stated aesthetic and personal concerns have never resided in feminist thinking. Her choice of subject for her first music theatre work, *Iphis*, which she had clearly been thinking about for some time, and her subsequent collaboration with well-established feminist thinker and author, Kathleen Mary Fallon, as well as her personal experience as a single mother carving out a career as a professional composer, have contributed to her positioning within the feminist context.

The Masculinist Challenge

For her next musical theatre work, Kats-Chernin was presented with a subject which was a complete departure from her earlier works in the genre. In 2000, Kats-Chernin was commissioned by Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA) in regional New South Wales to write the music for the work titled *Mr Barbecue*. It was premiered at the Lismore Town Hall, Lismore, on 10 April 2002 by baritone, Lyndon Terracini, and the Chamber Ensemble of the Queensland Orchestra featuring Elena Kats-Chernin on piano. The work was commissioned by Australian baritone, Lyndon Terracini, who has built an international reputation in contemporary opera and music Theatre and who has a firm commitment to performing new Australian works¹⁴. The libretto was written by Janis Balodis, another Australian who also has a high profile as a writer, actor and theatre director for stage and screen¹⁵. Paradoxically, all of these collaborators come from migrant backgrounds: the librettist Balodis is a first-generation Latvian; Kats-Chernin migrated from Russia with a Jewish heritage; and the main performer, Terracini, is an opera baritone of Italian heritage. Thus, the multicultural influences are manifest for this depiction of Australian suburban larrikinism.

Mr Barbecue is based upon the reclamation of masculine territory emerging from Western males' redefinition of their role in modern society¹⁶. It is questionable whether Kats-Chernin had a great deal of sympathy for the middle-class Australian male's ennui at his backyard barbecue, but this adds to the satire of the musical setting.



The tradition of the Australian barbecue and the folklore associated with the Australian male taking over the role of cooking, but only meat and only outdoors, has become the topic for theorising on masculinity. By tracing the contemporary male urge to cook meat at the barbecue back to the masculine tribal rite of hunting, searing and distributing game, the reclamation of masculine purpose in suburban peacetime is legitimised. The barbecue becomes a site for the expression of masculine difference and for the segregation of the sexes. It also provides space for conversation in the company of men. A favourite on the 1999 Australian Christmas bestseller list was a book devoted to the Australian barbecue entitled *Meat, Metal and Fire* (Thompson 1999). It included text and photographs featuring a range of barbecue styles found during the author's travels around Australia¹⁷. It is the third in Mark Thomson's series of books from the Institute of Backyard Studies, which he established with the aim of researching and celebrating traditional men's business. His other titles are *Blokes and Sheds* (1998), *Stories from the Shed* (1997) and *Rare Trades* (2001). In theorising the ritual of the barbecue, he writes:

Food is not the reason why we barbecue. It's the excuse to go through the ritual of lighting a fire and searing flesh. Just to create the distant stirrings of an ancient memory is an elemental source of satisfaction. The Australian barbecue is a universal one-size-fits-all celebration that is religious worship, tribal bonding and ritual ceremony all rolled into one. It's the place where big lies and truths are converted into myth and legend. That's the secret of a good barbecue (Thompson 1999: x).

With more than a hint of irony, Thomson elevates the status of the barbecue to spiritual ritual and, according to his photographs and commentary, it is predominantly practised by men. This proselytising on the ceremonial significance of the barbecue provides an alternative social political significance to the otherwise humble act of cooking meat¹⁸.

The choice of Kats-Chernin for this collaboration on the machismo site could be considered rather perplexing. On the other hand, she might be considered the obvious choice not only because of her successful commissioning track record and international musical profile but also for her ability to write both substantial and light-hearted music.

The comic twist is something close to Kats-Chernin's personal experience, for there has been a great divide in her life between the serious and the fun. In an interview for ABC magazine (Schinberg 1997: 29), she spoke of her days as a conservatorium student when, after hours, she was involved with the Darlinghurst underground theatre scene and the Cabaret Conspiracy. The latter was a loose assembly of artists, featuring Fifi Lamour, Michael Matou, Boom Boom la Burn, and other prominent figures in Sydney nightclubs of the period. Kats-Chernin also practised comedy during her time as a student in Germany. At a time when she and her flatmates could not afford to pay the electricity bill, they devised the *Red Hot and Blue* cabaret, which became a hit in cafés and performance spaces around Germany. Kats-Chernin expressed her concern about the impression this work had on her profile as a serious composer and said:

You know sometimes I think I almost have a split personality. I use my normal name for the 'serious' stuff, but was just 'Chernin' for the theatre, you know, when they put your name up. I can remember feeling really guilty thinking, I hope Lachenmann [her teacher] never finds out!' (Schinberg 1997:30)

A look at Kats-Chernin's compositional chronology indicates that she became more productive in the years following 1995, which coincides with her return to Australia and single motherhood. Kats-Chernin claims that part of her diminishing productivity in the area of serious music in the ten years prior was the result of a crisis of confidence brought on by Helmut Lachenmann.

He was a very hard critic and I always had the feeling I was not good enough for him – and I could not shake off this incredible over-respect for the teacher, which is a very Russian thing (Nicklin 1997: 23).

Thus, she confined herself to writing for the theatre and film. Keeping her hand in this way enabled her at least to continue composing, if not to pursue her career in her preferred professional field of serious composition.

These experiences of cabaret still pervade Kats-Chernin's scores. Her music is also characterised by drawing on a wide range of traditions and styles, evocative on the one hand of the Berlin Cabaret in the tradition of Kurt Weill with the influence of klezmer music, or of the cabaret styles of *Les Six*. Her music is sometimes referred to as 'pastiche' (Slavin 1999: 30), which is generally considered a



derogatory term, with its references to Wagner, Stravinsky, Mozart, Chopin and a eclectic array of both popular and classical musical styles. The reworking of old into new is testimony to Kats-Chernin's rich knowledge of musical treasures and her facility in weaving the old with the new into a highly original musical tapestry. She found it justifiable, at the close of the twentieth century, to use whatever style that was available and said:

In my music there are all the styles from the beginning of the century to today; all those references and quotations and hints, but not just one style. You can't anymore ([Murdoch 1997: C5](#)).

In describing her blending of the various musical styles, she enjoys using the culinary analogy. She says, 'You mix the ingredients to get the right sound' ([de Jong 1994: 29](#)) and later:

Basically it's like cooking – you put all the Russian composers into one pot and they're all there in my music somewhere ([Davidson 1997–8: 16](#)).

Kats-Chernin also speaks in terms of scales and chords. Although she was tutored within the musical framework of modernism, during her Soviet education the composers of the Second Viennese School and their followers were bypassed, as they represented the decadence of modernist composition. For her postgraduate studies, she chose Helmut Lachenmann as a teacher in order to engage in the extremes of modernism that she had been exposed to in her training in Australia under Richard Toop and that she had been denied in her earlier training ([Davidson 1997: 16](#)).

Mr Barbecue the Music

From Kats-Chernin's point of view, the opportunity to collaborate with Terracini was one of the driving factors in agreeing to the *Mr Barbecue* commission.

He makes you enthusiastic because he has so much energy. You want to do great things, you want him to like what you are doing ([Albert 2003: 20](#)).

Thus, the appeal for Kats-Chernin was the opportunity to work with an artist who inspired her and whom she obviously respected. It was also an opportunity to collaborate with an influential figure in Australian musical life¹⁹. Presented with a topic which explores the domain of the Aussie male in his suburban backyard²⁰, Kats-Chernin set about writing a series of cabaret songs.

Mr Barbecue is subtitled 'A music theatre work for voice with ensemble'. It is a set of thirteen distinct songs for baritone, bass clarinet, violin, piano, bassoon, double bass and percussion. The composer herself has played the piano for all performances to date.

The songs appear in the following order:

1. Meat Metal Fire
2. Alphabet Cuisine
3. Vegetarian Lover
4. Men Are Like Cars
5. Tofu Song
6. Waiting for Wood
7. Sausage Song
8. Barbecue Rag (Siegfried in his backyard Rag)



9. Dogs Know How to Live
10. Impossible Men
11. My Father's Eyes
12. Barbecue Zen
13. Wrecked Eggs

[Moving Images 1](#) and [2](#) show Lyndon Terracini singing 'Meat Metal Fire' at NORPA in 2002 (see Moving Image Credits for details).

The song cycle tracks Mr Barbecue's disposition as he carries out his personal psychodrama at his backyard barbecue. The barbecue is the site where he commands his domain, asserts his supremacy, conquers the element of fire, forges the metal and sears the flesh. He commences in high spirits, championing his masculine supremacy, boasting of his vigour and sexual prowess. He then passes through a ruminative stage, reflecting upon his failures and expressing frustration at his emotional weaknesses. He becomes increasingly boorish as he indulges in the barbecue's liquid offerings. The alcoholic fuel for his potency becomes his nemesis and he eventually falls down comatose. Returning from delirium tremors, Mr. Barbecue wakes in a melancholic state and his meditations conclude with mystical revelations, ultimately seeking comfort in spirituality.

The range of Mr Barbecue's emotions is underscored by a vast array of musical devices. Kats-Chernin marshals a wide variety of musical idioms with her characteristic postmodern musical eclecticism. Cabaret is the source for much of the musical style, but references to the master composers and popular music abound. For example, to illustrate Mr Barbecue's bravery as he conquers his barbecue in the first song, 'Meat, Metal Fire', Kats-Chernin makes a direct reference to Wagner. The opening verse of the song introduces his barbecue philosophy:

Fire is a man's toy
He's a moth drawn to the flame
Fire's allure is mystical
And when it burns he blames the smoke
He couldn't see
Elemental fire burns
Elemental Earth turns into essential metal
Tongs and Weber's Kettle
Fire is man made use a knife to kill the beast
Metal's bite is practical
Weber's Kettle keeps the feast safe out of the fire
Elemental fire burns essential metal heats searing raw flesh magically into meat.

The verse is interrupted at Section H (bar 47) by a musical interlude marked 'Heroically!' In brackets at bar 47, the word 'Siegfried' appears above the violin part where the instrumental section plays out a modified version of Wagner's *Walkürenritt* leitmotif, as can be seen in [Example 1](#).

This reference to Siegfried becomes significant later in the piece. Here it appears as allusion to the heroics of this particular character from Wagner's Ring, but it also a references a leitmotiv that has become a modern day musical cliché for the heroic. Meat, metal and fire are the earthly elements that connect Mr Barbecue with his primeval purpose. Through his masculine alchemy they are transformed at the barbecue and he finds self-actualisation by conjuring these elements and exercising magical mystical powers of transformation of flesh into food.

In performance, the quintessential machismo baritone, Terracini, wears a Viking's horned helmet in direct contrast to his casual shorts and singlet with waist chord carelessly dangling down his inner thigh. The juxtaposition of the heroic Viking and the casual bloke in his suburban backyard adds to the humour of the performance.

Example 1 & Sound Sample 1: No. 1, bars 47–50, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 



47 **H** (Heroically!)

Bass Cl. *ff*

Vln. *ff* ("Siegfried")

V.

Pno. *loco*

Bsn.

D.B.

Perc. **Timpani**

The verse of this song resumes at bar 51, concluding that, through the ritual of cooking, the meat man transcends his animal state and becomes human. Apart from the 'Siegfried' interlude, the music is based on an aggressive and lively ostinato complete with corrugated iron scraped with metal bar. The ostinato, based upon a syncopated rhythmic cell featuring two quavers followed by a crotchet, is performed by bass clarinet, violin, voice, piano, bassoon, double bass, percussion and metal bar. The driving rhythm is suggestive of the virility of the man at his barbecue and is reinforced by his broad declamatory tessitura. This is interspersed with improvisations by the singer marked 'Lyndon's impro with metal utensils' into the written score.

By invoking Wagner, Kats-Chernin has, in the first song, launched the listener into familiar musical terrain and in a brief referential moment conveyed the essence of Mr Barbecue's self-delusions. In his own backyard, he sees himself as a hero battling the elements and nature's forces. The humour in the reference is how far removed Mr Barbecue is from the heroic Siegfried in his gauche attire, secure and safe in his picket-fenced plot.

Drawing upon popular song styles is also a feature of the *Mr Barbecue* cycle. For example, 'Vegetarian Lover' is set as a lyrical love song based on the bossa nova. This musical style, invented along the beaches of Rio de Janeiro in the late 1950s, often spoke of love, the beach, and beautiful women, usually in insipid platitudes. The choice of this musical style to represent the serenade to Mr Barbecue's vegetarian lover is highly appropriate to its scope.

The violin's sentimental rising melody, marked '*molto vibrato, espressivo*' and, in brackets, 'soloistically', is echoed in the piano accompaniment, setting the tone for this torch-song romantic serenade to the vegetarian lover. The singer's entry is based on the same melodic material introduced by the violin. The 'bossa, feel subtle', marked in the score at bar 7, provides the indication for the mood



Example 2 & Sound Sample 2: No.3, bars 1–9, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 



1 $\text{♩} = 108$

Clarinet in B \flat

Violin *molto vibrato, espressivo*
f ("solistically")

Voice

Piano *mf*

Bassoon *p* *mf*

Double Bass *arco* *mf*

Percussion

6 **A** *rit.* *a tempo*

B \flat Cl.

Vln. *molto vib.*

Vce.

Vc - ge - ta - rian lo - ver does - n't eat meat, Neat and pe - tite — she smells so sweet.
Vc - ge - ta - rian lo - ver hot as cay - enne, Out on the prowl has a yen for men.

Pno. *C7* *Fm* *B \flat m* *Fm*

Bsn.

D.B.

Perc. "Bossa" feel, subtle

of the song. As mentioned previously, the harmonic scheme is based on triadic harmonic descent through the cycle of fifths with the some elusive colourings on the 6th and 7th, commencing on g minor and ending on G major 7. For the contrasting B section in the binary form setting, the tempo increases for the vocal crooning on the words 'vegetarian lover' (see [Example 2](#)).

The song closes with the classic bossa nova cadence, with the harmonic shift V7–I–II–I. The score provides the performer with two options for the ending, the second being slightly more elaborate. The first is a simple perfect cadence on E. The second extends the cadence re-routing it via a II chord, which is typical of mid-twentieth-century popular dance and song (see [Example 3](#)).



Example 3 & Sound Sample 3: No. 3, bars 37–39 and 40–44 of alternative endings, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 

Version 1 ending *rit.*

37

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vce.

falsetto

Ve - ge - ta - rian lo - ver

Pno.

B7 E

Bsn.

D.B.

pizz

p

Perc.

p

Version 2 ending

40

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vce.

Ve - c - e - ge - ta - rian lo - ver

Pno.

B7 E F E

Bsn.

D.B.

Perc.



Kats-Chernin also introduces a simulation of raunchy music generally associated with striptease for the setting, 'Men Are Like Cars'. The introduction to this song features a klezmer-style clarinet tune accompanied by piano, denoted by a dotted melodic rhythm accompanied by syncopated triplet percussion shuffle, as illustrated in [Example 4](#).

The text of this song is set to a 4/4 boogie beat, 12-bar blues harmony with percussive harmonic shifts down the semitone. The declamatory vocal line is given a very Australian colloquial accent in the performance interpretation by Terracini. The F section is sung falsetto to represent the female voice. In performance, the female is depicted by the performer wearing an apron with fake female breasts (see [Moving Image 3](#)). An instrumental interlude occurs at the E section, featuring arpeggiated improvisations on the boogie beat.

A contrast in mood to the spirited depiction of men and their cars is the meditative 'Tofu Song', which incorporates stylistic references to Eastern music and features a Chinese-style melody based upon the pentatonic scale that is accompanied in fifths by the piano and in unison by the marimba. Both the parallelism of the harmonic texture and the use of the marimba in the instrumentation add to the overall exoticism of the music. This is further enhanced by the rhythmic shifts between 7/8–5/8–3/8–5/8–6/8 etc. (see [Example 5](#) and [Moving Image 4](#)).

The contrasting, more upbeat, B section (commencing bar 77) departs from the Asian stylistic character to become a simple half-spoken vocal line accompanied by a four-bar ostinato F#–D–E–C#. The A section returns to complete the ternary setting of 'Tofu Song'.

The blues underlie the more raunchy setting of the next song, 'Waiting for Wood' (marked 'slow blues') with the baritone commencing more slowly singing the blues at the bottom of his vocal range as Mr Barbecue commences lighting his fire. His level of excitement increases in anticipation of the fire rising higher and higher. His rising pyromaniacal excitement is rhetorically represented by the melodic rise in pitch and accelerated tempo. As his excitement increases, the slow blues turns to fast jazz swing with a racier underscoring of his rising passion. A musical climax is reached at the setting of the words, '[wings of desire](#)', as the baritone sings d accompanied by a clarinet trill on b flat. The sexual innuendo of the song is the play upon the word, 'wood', colloquially also referring to a man's erection. As the wood burning in the barbecue fuels the fire and it grows higher and higher, the music becomes more raunchy, echoing the style of the fourth song ('Men Are Like Cars') to represent Mr Barbecue's rising excitement. In performance, a garden hose is the prop used to illustrate Mr Barbecue's rising sexual excitement and the pun on the word, 'wood', is emphasised (see [Moving Image 5](#)). The climax is reached in the penultimate bar where the baritone sings f with fermata and falling back to c for his last gasp before a fire alarm is set off (see [Example 6](#)).

The blues, the style with traditional African-American cultural roots that McClary asserts '[has most shaped our era](#)' ([McClary 2000: 34](#)), is the basis for Mr Barbecue's expression of both his sexual and pyromaniacal desire in 'Waiting for Wood'.

A brief echo of Liszt is heard in the opening of 'Sausage Song', which starts out as a lively dance. It takes up a musical idea reminiscent of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*, as illustrated in [Example 7](#).

The idea here is that it is a quick, lively interlude that promises not to take long, the stereotyped Australian male's sexual performance being conflated with the cooking of a sausage. At the second system in the score, the music becomes more mellifluous featuring arpeggiation on C in the violin and bass clarinet as the singer's melody broadens in a tango rhythm.

At bar 17, the mood changes for another bossa nova section. The rhythm of the bossa nova, already heard in 'Vegetarian Lover', returns for Mr Barbecue's rhapsodising on methods of cooking sausages. At bar 49, the tango returns as his passion for the sausage is expressed with Argentinean flare.

One of Kats-Chernin's favourite forms,²¹ the ragtime, features in the ensuing instrumental interlude, 'Barbecue Rag (Siegfried in his backyard Rag)'. This is the first time that Mr Barbecue is named as such and ties in with the earlier reference to Wagner in the first song of the cycle. The 'Barbecue Rag' is a purely instrumental piece to accompany Mr Barbecue's mimed performance in his backyard



Example 4 & Sound Sample 4: No. 4, bars 1–4, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 152$
 Clarinet in B \flat
 Violin
 Vocal
 Piano
 Bassoon
 Double Bass
 Percussion

as he mows the lawn, tidies the barbecue area, has a few more drinks and generally ends up making a mess of the whole thing. It is also an opportunity for Kats-Chernin to express her compositional flair and virtuosity, and, in 2002, it was issued as a stand-alone piece. Composing rags is one of Kats-Chernin's favourite musical pastimes and she has composed several books of rags. This style also makes its appearance in her earlier music theatre works. The 'blue' note, with its characteristic semitone shifting, features in Kats-Chernin's rags. In the 'Barbecue Rag', this treatment is introduced in the opening two bars with a shift in the melody from A# to A natural. The bass line commences with the chromatic descent from B.

The 1950s blues ballad is the basis for the next song, 'Dogs Know How to Live', which opens with pulsating chords in compound time shifts. This stylistic idea is maintained for the first section of the song, revolving around an A flat tonality, as illustrated in [Example 8](#).

The B section of the song is a contrasting waltz on the compound metre at bar 22 for 'a dog's gotta do what a dog's gotta do'. The composer places the note, 'woof woof', on the two weak beats of the waltz representing the dog's bark. The waltz style is indicated as a tempo marking at B by the composer to avoid any confusion with the 12/8 of the preceding A section (see [Example 9](#)).

The A section returns with the 1950s ballad style based upon the earlier material at bar 31 to close the song with a rubato underscoring of Mr Barbecue's drunken slur and abuse of the neighbours represented by the musicians on the other side of the picket fence (see [Moving Image 6](#)).

The next song in the cycle, 'Impossible Men' opens with a theme marked 'Mantra'. The mantra is another reference to Oriental spiritual wisdom, a subject that weaves itself throughout the song cycle, appearing in the first instance in the 'Tofu Song' and concluding at the last song, 'Barbecue Zen'. A mantra is a musical chant that in Hindu and Buddhist worship acts as the basis for meditation. It is generally



Example 5 & Sound Sample 5: No. 5, bars 1–7, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 92$

1

Clarinet in B \flat

Violin

Voice

(sing on repeat)

1.) To - fu ah to - fu What can't you do with to - fu? Sculpt a side of non - lamb

Piano

Bassoon

Double Bass

Percussion

Marimba

4

B \flat Cl.

Vln.

Vce.

or a roa - sting non - chook From a block of rock - hard —

Pno.

Bsn.

D.B.

Perc.

Example 6 & Sound Sample 6: No. 6, bars 59–66, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 



The musical score for Example 6, bars 59–66 of *Mr Barbecue* by Elena Kats-Chernin, is presented for a full orchestra and voice. The score includes staves for B♭ Clarinet, Violin, Voice, Piano, Bassoon, Double Bass, and Percussion. The vocal line features the lyrics: "hi - gher and hi - gher I'm on fi - re I'm on fi - re I am on fi - re". The piano part includes chords C and E7. The percussion part has a repeating triplet pattern. The score ends with a "Alarm" marking.

a short melody with limited pitch range. The chant marked as mantra melody in the *Mr Barbecue* song cycle is, however, anything but meditative. Certainly Mr Barbecue is going through some kind of meditation on the idea that men are impossible. However, his meditation is tinged with aggression and the shape of the mantra melody mirrors this. The 'Mantra' marked in the opening bar, with the melodic pattern augmented 6th–minor 2nd–augmented 7th – major 7th, creates a menacing dissonance (see [Example 10](#)).

The repetitions of the mantra are interspersed with a percussion motive that clatters in the instrumental section and on stage, as the impossible man 'bangs his drums' in the form of tin cans. Mr Barbecue refers to the 'age of uncertainty' for men and opines that, underneath every 'tree-hugger' and 'jerk in a suit', there is an impossible man. The impossibility of men, which is really more a reference to the mantra of female complaint, is an expression of Mr Barbecue's frustration with his masculine role. Confused by a role that has



Example 7 & Sound Sample 7: Sausage Song No 7, bars 1–10, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 

Leggiero ♩ = 144-152

1

Clarinet in B \flat

Violin

Vocal

The sau - sage song need not take long - er than a

Piano

Bassoon

Double Bass

Percussion

Cowbells

6

A

B \flat Cl.

Vln.

Vce.

mi - nute 'Cos there's no meat in it. Left o - ver pink stuff in a bag

Pno.

Bsn.

D.B.

Perc.

pizz
mf

Example 8 & Sound Sample 8: No. 9, bars 10–15, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 

The musical score for Example 8 & Sound Sample 8, showing bars 10–15 of 'Mr Barbecue' by Elena Kats-Chernin. The score is written for a full ensemble including B♭ Clarinet, Violin, Voice, Piano, Bassoon, Double Bass, and Percussion. The music is in 12/8 time and features a complex, repetitive motif. The lyrics are: 'Dogs know how to live. Dogs on - ly think a - bout be - ing a dog lea - ding a life of a sen - si - ble lei - sure'.

lost traditional definition, Mr Barbecue complains that, whatever he does, he can't get it right. The rigidity of the motif, with its obtuse intervals stubbornly refusing to alter upon each repetition, is a direct allusion to the doggedness of the impossible man.

Sections of half-spoken verse are interspersed between repetitions of the mantra accompanied by rhythmic swing beat instrumental improvisations. These sections of verse articulate the acts of impossible men, acts that Mr. Barbecue applauds as true expressions of masculinity, but are on the whole socially unacceptable, such as, 'hack meat with an axe', 'pour beer over their heads', 'talk in grunts', 'scratch their runts', 'ignore their wives' and 'tell impossible lies about their sex lives'.

Example 9 & Sound Sample 9: No. 9, bars 22–24, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 



B ("Waltz")

22

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vce.

Pno.

Bsn.

D.B.

Perc.

("scoof swoof")

The song is an expression of Mr Barbecue's anger and frustration at his need to suppress his true masculine urge to behave boisterously and selfishly in everyday life. The barbecue site provides him with permission to express his larrikin²² urges and he concludes by proposing a toast to impossible men. Thus, the mantra has provided the vehicle for Mr Barbecue to gain clarity of thought and enlightenment regarding his true purpose. Paradoxically, his kind of enlightenment is almost in direct opposition to the nirvana that Buddhists and Hindus seek through their meditations, just as the theme of his mantra is in complete contrast to the simple mantras that generally accompany meditation.

As a direct and dramatic contrast to the aggression of 'Impossible Men', the ensuing 'My Father's Eyes' is an introspective soulful ballad. Mr Barbecue reflects on his resemblance to his own father as he grows older, and on the broader philosophical implications of his genetic inheritance. The ballad is accompanied by piano in the style of popular ballad or song; a plaintive violin joins for final repetition of the verse. The thematic gesture in the music is broad and lyrical (see [Example 11](#)).

'Barbecue Zen' is also based upon popular ballad style. It commences with Mr. Barbecue in a state of despondency and hopelessness to then advocating the virtues of barbecue Zen. The song opens with a poignant alto saxophone solo that turns to a swing as he becomes more eloquent. Mr Barbecue's revelation that the barbecue is the solution to his disillusionment with life and his reference to Eastern religious dogma, echo the well-trodden philosophical path for middle-class Western lapsed Christians in their quest for spiritual fulfilment. The application of his philosophical rebirth in the barbecue returns to the original notion of the barbecue as a site for masculine rebirth. Eastern musical references, as employed in the 'Tofu Song', reappear. The song livens to a 4/4 swing beat which dwindles to a quite limp, largely improvised swing, with which Mr Barbecue concludes his backyard adventures and leaves the stage. It is an uncertain conclusion to the set of songs and leaves the audience in doubt as to how to act. Has Mr Barbecue left the stage for good and are the audience free to applaud? The ending has been so downbeat and unlike a traditional ending that it seems to indicate there is more. Mr Barbecue does return for the real ending which is in this case the encore piece, 'Wrecked Eggs', a piece which is not scored and, in performance, is a short improvised encore to Siegfried's backyard adventures.

Example 10 & Sound Sample 10: No 10, bars 1–4, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 



The musical score for Example 10, bars 1–4 of *Mr Barbecue*, features the following instruments and parts:

- Clarinet in B \flat** : Melodic line starting with a forte dynamic.
- Violin**: Rests in the first two bars, then enters in the third bar.
- Voice**: Sings the lyrics "Im - pos - si - ble men im - pos - si - ble men Im -". There are markings for "Mantra" and "(Voice may enter here)".
- Piano**: Accompanying the voice and other instruments.
- Bassoon**: Melodic line.
- Double Bass**: Melodic line.
- Percussion**: Provides a rhythmic accompaniment.

The contrasting moods of *Mr Barbecue* and his backyard delusions are musically underscored with recognisable stylistic references to cabaret, popular 20th-century song and musical, with smatterings of Wagner and Liszt amongst others. Kats-Chernin succeeds in facilitating instant audience recall of moods and characterisations through the crafting of familiar musical styles and a rich store of ideas that have become typical of Kats-Chernin's skills in writing musical cabaret.

For the musical expression of *Mr Barbecue*'s reclamation of the masculine space at his backyard barbecue, Kats-Chernin invokes the Wagnerian hero, Siegfried, with a fleeting reference to the leitmotif, Walkürenritt, possibly the best known musical cliché for the heroic in Western music today because of its wide use in film and television to portray heroic events. The fact that it is not Siegfried's leitmotif in the opera is immaterial, as it is the Walkürenritt which has become the contemporary signifier for the heroic. For the rest of the song cycle, Kats-Chernin uses musical devices to portray the *Mr Barbecue*'s masculine identity crisis with devices such as the stubborn angular melodic and rhythmic mantra of 'Impossible Men', the 1950s raunchy style blues for 'Men Are Like Cars' the irreverent falsetto mimicry of women's voice in the second section of the song where *Mr Barbecue* wears the apron with false breasts. The complete larrikinism of *Mr Barbecue*'s behaviour is underscored by musical references ranging from Liszt to bossa nova with the occasional Eastern pentatonic colouring for the 'Tofu Song'.

Conclusion

At the turn of the 20th century, Kats-Chernin found herself working under a certain amount of restriction given the limited instrumental and vocal resources available for her opera commissions, which might be argued as being consistent with Eve Rieger's paradigm of the women composers' restricted aesthetic and Halstead's discussion of women's limited access to power and resources. For *Mr Barbecue*, Kats-Chernin finds herself returning to the cabaret of her student days to the point where she is also performing on stage. She had expressed her interest early in her career to pursue opera so that she would be recognised as a serious composer, but, at this point in her career, this has hardly occurred. The restriction of the commission to one singer results in a very lonely barbecue indeed.

Example 11 & Sound Sample 11: No. 11, bars 1–9, *Mr Barbecue*, Elena Kats-Chernin. 



♩ = ca. 84

Voice

1.) Tur-ning thi - rty (the) mor - ning
2.) mor - ning while I'm

Piano

Vce.

af - ter I - ma - gine my sur - prise there in the mir - ror see my
sha - ving See-ing through my dis - guise loo - king back at me I are my

Pno.

8

1. fa - ther's eyes
fa - ther's eyes

2. Eve - ry eyes

Mr Barbecue's only human interaction is with the musicians, who are situated on stage behind a picket fence, and such interaction is mostly only to hurl abuse and empty drink cans. As a performer, Terracini succeeds in a convincing and engaging interpretation of the songs. However, given that the barbecue is generally a social occasion, this dimension is missing from the work. That being said, Mr Barbecue does succeed in capturing the idea of the Aussie male in his home as castle, living behind the picket fence expressing all of the bravura and frustration of his suburban crisis. It delves into the confusion of masculine identity at the end of the 20th century in Australian suburban peacetime.

Kats-Chernin's restriction to this point in her career resides primarily in her access to large-scale resources and the opportunity to write a full-scale opera. While I have argued that her aesthetic approach has always been based upon minimal musical ideas, the artful development of these into a rich array of musical themes in all three early music theatre works overrides the limitations of each of the commissions. She is, in this respect, representative of Rieger's notion of restricted aesthetic in creating a maximum amount out of a minimum of material.

Some would argue that Elena Kats-Chernin's success demonstrates that there are no obstacles to women composers in Australia because of limited access to high profile musical commissions. Her subsequent commissions redress the imbalance of her access to large-scale forms and she has since received commissions from orchestras, the national ballet company, leading national and international musical ensembles and for numerous films. In some ways, she has single-handedly shifted the statistical weight of commissions in Australia towards women composers at the outset of the 21st century.

A decorative header featuring musical notation on staves with various notes, rests, and symbols, set against a light green background.

ENDNOTES

1. Elena Kats-Chernin is a Russian born émigré who lives in Australia. She rose to international fame when her work 'Eliza's Aria' from the ballet *Wild Swans* (2002) was used for a Lloyds Bank advertisement in the UK and went viral on the internet with numerous remixes on YouTube. It was professionally remixed by UK DJ Mark Brown and St. Etienne and reached No. 1 on the UK dance charts and went to the top of the UK pop charts ([Rusak 2010a](#)). More information on the composer can be found at the Australian Music Centre.
2. This paper is based upon my Ph.D. research and the papers 'Having an Identity Crisis: *Mr. Barbecue* by Elena Kats-Chernin' ([Rusak 2006](#)) and '*Mr Barbecue: The Raw and the Cooked*' ([Rusak 2009](#)).
3. This followed a particularly disturbing series of events involving her adolescent sons for whom for she had full parental responsibility. ([Kats-Chernin 2003](#))
4. Studies and statistics to date indicate that women have been historically marginalised in their access to large-scale composition. See Rusak ([2010b](#))
5. It might be argued that Australian men composers also have limited access to opera compositions, but by 2005 only one of twelve operas commissioned and presented by the national company, Australian Opera, since its establishment in 1970 was by a woman and of the 21 commissions for Australian composers of the major state companies, two have been for women. Elizabeth Wood, in her doctoral dissertation, *Australian Opera, 1842—1970: A History of Opera with Descriptive Catalogues* ([Wood 1979](#)), lists 99 operas of which 15 are by women. Of these, six are by Florence Ewart and four are by Peggy Glanville-Hicks, both of whom should be considered within the expatriate context as most of these operas were commissioned offshore. The rest are one-off opera commissions by the remaining five women composers represented in the catalogue. In turning to the later part of the 20th century, the comprehensive survey of opera and music theatre by Jenkins and Lenz, *Arias: Recent Australian Music Theatre* ([Jenkins and Lenz 1997](#)), mentions 104 opera and music theatre works, of which 11 are by women. This brings women's representation in recent years down to 11%.
6. The instrumental resources for the work are small orchestra: piccolo, bass clarinet, violin, viola, cello, double bass, piano (= keyboard), percussion and the vocal resources are two sopranos, mezzo soprano, two tenors and baritone .
7. Kats-Chernin has, however, received a number larger-scale commissions for full orchestra: *Stairs* (1985), *Transfer* (1991), *Retonica* (1993), *Lamento the gestures* (1995), *Heaven is Closed* (2000), *Rockhampton Garden Symphonies* (2001 and 2003), *Wild Swans* ballet score (2003), *Lotus/Water* (2003) and so has, in fact, demonstrated some success in this area.
8. In this case as a quotation from Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*.
9. Macarthur draws upon the writings of Deleuze and Guattari ([1987](#)) to open up a new way of thinking of the author text relationship and the 'molar lines in the neo-romantic model of authorship' ([Macarthur 2010: 60](#))
10. Kathleen Mary Fallon won the Victorian Premier's prize for her novel *Working Hot* (1989), which explores the dynamics of the lesbian relationship in a patriarchal society, as she interrogates social norms like marriage and education. Her feminist perspective manifests itself ironically in the novel. Kathleen Mary Fallon worked as a nurse/carer in an institution for children with disabilities, where she fostered a young Torres Strait Islander boy. She has written for theatre, radio and television and her film script, *Call Me Mum*, became the basis for her novel *Paydirt* (2007). In 2006 she directed her play, *Buyback*, at the Carlton Courthouse. Fallon currently lectures in the creative writing program at the University of Melbourne.
11. A full discussion can be found in my article 'Matricide and the Female Divine' ([Rusak 2004](#)).
12. It should be noted that the librettist sought out Kats-Chernin for the commission, following some unsuccessful earlier collaborations on the work with other women composers who had clearly defined feminist agendas.
13. Composer Miriam Hyde reports of a similar association with her shopping bag when she turned up at the ABC for a run through of her orchestral *Theme and Variations*:

I somehow felt very conscious of the fact that I was a domesticated creature, trying to survive in the realm of creative music. I went there after some shopping, and I remember to this day, I had a big sort of shopping carrier bag, with a large bunch of celery sticking out of it and they must have thought, 'Oh, this looks awfully unprofessional' ([Crews 1987:223](#)).



14. Terracini has performed many of the great baritone roles from the traditional and contemporary repertoire. In 1999, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Music Theatre by Central Queensland University. The following year, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Southern Cross University. He was also appointed Artistic Director and CEO of the Queensland Biennial Festival of Music. He is currently Artistic Director of Opera Australia.
15. Since returning to Australia in 1979 after teaching at E15 Acting School, Balodis has worked as a freelance writer, director and dramaturge for stage and screen. He was Associate Director and Literary Manager for Melbourne Theatre Company from 1987–1993 and, in the following year, was appointed dramaturge of Queensland Theatre Company. He became Artistic Associate in 1996. He was also a Member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council between 1989 and 1992 and, more recently, a member of the Theatre Fund of the Australia Council. He was chair of the Australian National Playwright's Centre between 1989 and 1991.
16. A whole body of work has emerged in this area of gender studies since the late 1980s with good examples such as *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions* (Gardiner 2002) and *Masculine Domination* by the influential cultural theorist and anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu, translated by Richard Nice (Bourdieu 2001).
17. The author presented a copy of Thompson's book to the composer at the time of the commission.
18. The anthropological significance of fire and the cooking of meat is central to the study by Claude Lévi-Strauss of the Bororo myths in *The Raw and the Cooked* (Lévi-Strauss 1969). Incidentally, he uses a musical analogy as a framework for his chapters.
19. Terracini and Kats-Chernin continued to collaborate after *Mr Barbecue*. Under Terracini's artistic direction of the 2001 Brisbane Biennial Festival, Kats-Chernin was commissioned to write her two *Rockhampton Gardens Symphonies*. Later, she also collaborated with him in writing the score for the operatic film, *The Widower* (2004), for which Terracini performed the vocal part.
20. Early in the composition process there was some concern on the composer's part about the lewdness of the language in the original libretto (Kats-Chernin, pers. com. 2002). I understand that this libretto still exists for a possible future setting.
21. Refkin (2008) quotes Kats-Chernin as saying,

I should go back to the very first rag I wrote. I was asked by an Australian radio program producer to write a piece for a CD full of rags. It was called 'Rags to Riches' and played by Donna Coleman. I struggled for a while, because at that point I was writing a lot of new music. Writing a rag was a big departure from my usual compositional technique. I first tried to write a sort of modernistic rag, and that didn't work. It wasn't what really was needed. I thought, 'Why not, I'll just write a real melodic ragtime piece.' I listened to a few of them, from William Bolcom and William Albright, and I must say I was very influenced by that style. It was slightly nostalgic, a little bit wistful, with beautiful harmonies and modulations. Somehow that interested me more than some kind of jaunty, fast, highly syncopated rag. I went for a slightly more melancholic type.

I wrote ten rags for this producer to choose from – just motifs, and he chose the one that's become 'Russian Rag,' the very first one that I've written. Writing that one started a flood of rags. I think that was the beginning of the incredible inspiration to continue this trend in my writing. I couldn't stop, as I had all those other nine rag ideas that I really needed to finish. 'Russian Rag' became very popular, I must add. I thought, well, I'd like to continue this and it just happened on the spur of the moment. On some days, if I had nothing else to write, I thought I would just write another rag. It is also a great way to use a title. Any word fits before rag – the 'Door Rag', 'Mushroom Rag', anything.

22. Rickard addresses the affectionate place that larrikinism has held in Australian culture and its importance in shaping Australian masculine identity (Rickard 1998)

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Moving image: *Mr Barbecue* by Elena Kats-Chernin, libretto by Janis Balodis, performed by Lyndon Terracini with Elena Kats-Chernin at the piano, recorded at NORPA in 2002. Reproduced with the permission of the composer, performer and NORPA.

CD: *Mr Barbecue*, non-commercial recording, Australian Music Centre.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the music theatre work, *Mr Barbecue* (2002), composed by Elena Kats-Chernin with a libretto by Janis Balodis. It looks at the work within the context of her two previous music theatre works *Iphis* (1997) and *Matricide: The Musical* (1998), which I argue express a feminine aesthetic. I refer particularly to Eva Rieger's theories of the 'restricted aesthetic'. With the commissioning of *Mr. Barbecue*, Kats-Chernin was required to set a libretto which expressed the new wave of masculinist thinking that emerged in the 1990s as a backlash against feminism. I hypothesise that Kats-Chernin engaged in this commission for the career opportunities it provided rather than for her interest in the subject matter. The resulting work demonstrates superior compositional expertise, but to a lesser extent, an aesthetic engagement by the composer.

I examine her background and training as a composer and how Kats-Chernin is particularly suited to the writing of music with comic twist. I also argue that in setting the songs she resorts to a mode of expression very familiar to her, i.e. cabaret. I also examine the musical setting of the text and her particularly post-modern approach of incorporating an eclectic array of ideas drawn from a wide variety of musical sources.

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