

THE RENAISSANCE STUDIES PROGRAM PRESENTS



The Songscales of Early Modern Women

A Lecture by Katherine R. Larson

The lecture will be followed by a roundtable featuring **PENELOPE ANDERSON** (English), **MARY HELEN TRUGLIA** (English), and **SARAH VAN DER LAAN** (Comparative Literature), a Q&A, and a reception.

ABSTRACT: This paper considers how the wide-ranging evidence for women's song performance in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England opens up new ways of thinking about women's textual production. My approach to women's song performance is grounded in two premises: first, that song demands to be read in performance-based terms; and second, that singing constitutes an interpretive and creative practice that was integral to early modern women's cultural agency. Surviving cultural and literary documents provide vivid insight into the breadth of women's singing practices and underscore the complex networks of artistic transmission to which women contributed. These processes destabilise any singular claim to musical authorship even as they radically expand the notion of what constitutes a "text." In opening up a performance-based methodology for song, the paper also draws on the *Early Modern Songscales* platform (songscales.org). The examples of song performance included on the beta version of the site, from Henry Lawes's *Ayres and Dialogues* (1653), further illustrate song's tendency to confound generic, architectural, physiological, and sociocultural boundaries and demonstrate the creative role of the performer in mediating a song's rhetorical impact on auditors.

KATHERINE R. LARSON is Professor of English at the University of Toronto and Vice-Dean of Teaching, Learning, and Undergraduate Programs at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Her research and teaching centre on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature and culture, with particular interests in early modern women's writing, gender and language, rhetoric and embodiment, and music (especially opera and song). Her most recent book, *The Matter of Song in Early Modern England: Texts in and of the Air* (Oxford, 2019; pbk 2022), integrates her training as a singer through an online companion recording. She is also the author of *Early Modern Women in Conversation* (Palgrave, 2011; pbk 2015) and the co-editor of *Gender and Song in Early Modern England* (Ashgate, 2014; rpt. Routledge, 2016) and *Re-Reading Mary Wroth* (Palgrave, 2015). Her current research centres on the development of the collaborative intermedia project *Early Modern Songscales*. Professor Larson is a member of the Royal Society of Canada's College of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists.

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