

“Ever since junior high, my favorite musical spot has been at the piano with singers, performing songs of Schumann, Sondheim, and everything in between. My years in Boston added composer friends (including a few Grammy winners), who pulled me into the excitement of premiering their new works. I moved to NH in 1983 and right away was so lucky to meet Bill Fletcher. Since then, I’ve always thought that in a perfect world, it would be Bill on TV accepting one of those shiny awards.

Bill and I had tons of fun 40 years ago listening to and exclaiming over Fauré songs and John Adams operas. Soon afterward, I had the honor of premiering some of his songs. They are top of the list favorites of mine, excelling in the most important ways: he finds remarkable texts; sets them in a truly human, vocal line; and brings emotions underlying the words alive, often taking us soaring. I’m beyond grateful to you, Bill, for your gifts of incredible music and loyal friendship. Enjoy the applause!”

–Peggy Senter

Random thoughts in support of tonight’s program (by the composer)

The soul has many motions

I find that much of my instrumental music grows from non-musical sources; a line here, an image there. Written for former CCMS flute teacher Jean Benson, who in discussions before I started, remarked that composers always wrote for the high register of her instrument; she thought its lower range was much more beautiful. (See, Jean, I can listen.) If you’d like to hear the whole set, there is a wonderful recording of all *three lines* by Lisa Hennessy and Karolina Rojahn on Navona Records. (You may have heard a portion of that recording behind donation pleas on Classical NH, WCNH.)

The Young Girl

A return to Theodore Roethke, one of my favorite poets. A misunderstood, awakened being. Decades before anyone would recognize the signs, he spent his last years battling what was thought to be mental illness. This poem was a product of his joyous marriage to Beatrice O’Connell, a much younger woman. I just love the imagery of the awkward poet running, arms flailing, unabashedly down the beach. We should all aspire to that level of unrestrained happiness.

*What can the spirit believe?– It takes in the whole body;/
I on coming to love,/ Make that my study.*

*We are one, and yet we are more,/ I am told by those who know,– /
At times content to be two./ Today I skipped on the shore,/
My eyes neither here nor there,/ My thin arms to and fro,/
A bird my body, My bird-blood ready.*

Daughtersongs

Inspired by being a parent to (eventually) three daughters. *Born Yesterday* spoke to me as a much loved and long awaited son, who learned early on that he was expected to succeed at whatever he aspired toward, and found he very often did. Being so advantaged can be its own curse, compelled to live up to one’s own and others’ expectations. I suspect being “ordinary” is likely a more direct way to satisfaction in life, as long as one can evade the need to compare.

Surrender was the last addition to this set, added at the suggestion of soprano Dawn Upshaw, who admired the sincerity of the set, but thought it lacked a little lightness. I enjoyed an extended dialog with poet William Larsen, who had many insights to share and was *thrilled* that someone wanted to add music to his little tale.

*Tightly-folded bud,/ I have wished you something/ None of the others would:/
Not the usual stuff/ About being beautiful,/*
Or running off a spring/ Of innocence and love –/
They will all wish you that,/ And should it prove possible,/
Well, you're a lucky girl./

But if it shouldn't, then/ May you be ordinary;/
Have, like other women,/ An average of talents:/ Not ugly, not good-looking,/
Nothing uncustomary/ To pull you off your balance/,
That, unworkable itself,/ Stops all the rest from working./
In fact may you be dull–/ If that is what a skilled, vigilant, flexible,/
Unemphasized, enthralled/ Catching of happiness is called.

*at our house there live/ a girl, a dog, and a yardful of newly planted flowers/
The dog came free, the girl is priceless/ and the flowers cost three hundred dollars,/*
*a cozy scene but complicated/ in that/ I love the girl, the girl loves the dog/
and the dog/ loves to dig my flowers/
and I/*

do not love the dog

*creating a dilemma in which I/ who crave/ even the illusion of control/
am stymied between my needs/ for the orderly completion of my desires/
and/ the beam of joyous fire/ in the eyes of the girl,/*
*all of which/ says more about the complexities of love/
than the training of neurotic dogs/
and I've just discovered/ in writing these lines/ that/ the dharma of this dilemma/
has less to do with my training the dog/ not to dig the flowers/
than the dog training me/ to love/ the girl*

brave, bright cry

Three settings of e.e. cummings poetry are among the earliest pieces I've written. Beth Armstrong requested them to enhance a service by Richard Lederer for the Concord Unitarian Universalist Church. Many years later, Peggo asked if I might expand this set, giving me the opportunity to add a flute and clarinet as I had always intended. cummings is perhaps the most set poet in the english language, not without reason; the poems are so direct, the songs almost write themselves. Here also: the first of much future bird imagery shows up.

*until and i heard/ a certain a bird/ i dreamed i could sing/ but like nothing/
are the joys of his voice/*

*until and who came/ with a song like a dream/ of a bird with a song/ like not anything/
under skies/ over grass/*

until and until/ into flame i can feel/ how the earth must fly/ if truth is a cry/

of a whole/ of a soul

*un-til i awoke/ for the beautiful sake/ of a grave gay brave/ bright cry of alive/
with a trill like until*

*since feeling is first/ who pays any attention/ to the syntax of things/
will never wholly kiss you;*

*wholly to be a fool/ while Spring is in the world/
my blood approves,/ and kisses are a better fate/ than wisdom/ lady i swear by all flowers. Don't
cry/ -the best gesture of my brain is less than/ your eyelids' flutter which says/ we are for each
other: then/ laugh, leaning back in my arms/
for life's not a paragraph*

And death i think is no parenthesis.

*in the rain-/ darkness, the sunset/ being sheathed i sit and/ think of you
the holy/ city which is your face/ your little cheeks the streets/ of smile
your eyes half-thrush/ half-angel and your drowsy/ lips where float flowers of kiss/
and/ there is the sweet shy pirouette/ your hair/ and then/ your dancesong soul.
rarely beloved/ a single star is/ uttered, and i/ think/ of you*

*may my heart always be open to little/ birds who are the secrets of living/
whatever they sing is better than to know/ and if men should not hear them men are old/*

*may my mind stroll about hungry/ and fearless and thirsty and supple/
and even if it's sunday may i be wrong/ for whenever men are right they are not young/*

*and may myself do nothing usefully/ and love yourself so more than truly/
there's never been quite such a fool who could fail/ pulling all the sky over him with one smile*

Five Blackbirds - reflections on Wallace Stevens

Probably the most visually oriented piece I've written. My self-inflicted challenge was to present Stevens' lines as directly as possible: picture birds flying above the flowing river or wind whipping leaves. For the less visually oriented portions, I relied on musical puns: melodies derived from the circle of fifths; constantly shifting major to minor "inflections"; "noble accents" and "inescapable rhythms." Written for Stephanie, she and Liz performed "Blackbirds" last week at the National Association of College Wind and Percussion Conference at the University of Miami. (...along with Michael Annicchiarico's "Duo" - a good day for Concord composers in Florida!)

Mindful

Just a little song that may become part of a larger set of mindful songs. This is its premiere!

*Everyday/ I see or hear/ something/that more or less/ kills me/ with delight,/
that leaves me/ like a needle/ in the haystack/ of light.*

*It was what I was born for —/ to look, to listen,/ to lose myself/ inside this soft world —/
to instruct myself/ over and over/ in joy,/ and acclamation.
Nor am I talking/ about the exceptional,/ the fearful, the dreadful,/
the very extravagant —/ but of the ordinary,/ the common, the very drab,/*
the daily presentations.

*Oh, good scholar,/ I say to myself,/ how can you help/ but grow wise/
with such teachings/ as these —/the untrimmable light/ of the world,
the ocean's shine,/ the prayers that are made/ out of grass?*

Three Little Buddha Songs

These songs were written as a thank you to my friend (and *Northern Light-er*) Jeanne Ann Whittington, for all the accupunctural support she kindly and generously provided me during a particularly low state of health.

Staying gently chides the Buddha (here referred to by his family name, Shakyamuni) for not realizing enlightenment doesn't require being anywhere special, doing anything extraordinary. *Knowing* is a Buddhist-customary reflection on mortality, focused on thoughts arriving in one's final moments, set to a gentle waltz because, well, I'd hope to go out mentally *dancing*. *Nothing* is a humorous sendup comparing ambitious meditators to fruit, set in a kinda pop tune groove.

*Shame on you Shakyamuni for setting/ the precedent/ of leaving home.
Did you not think it was there —
 in your wife's lovely face
 or your baby's laughter?
Did you think you had to go elsewhere/ to find it?*

Tsk, tsk

*I am here to show you/ dear sir / that you needn't step/
even one sixteenth of an inch away — stay here — elbows dripping with soapy water
 stay here — spit up all over your chest
 stay here — steam rising in lazy curls from/ cream of wheat
Poor Shakyamuni — sitting under that Bo tree/ miles away from home/*

Venus shown all the while

*Born into a World Knowing/ This will happen
Oh god we say just give/ me a few more/ breaths/and don't let it be/ terrible
let it be soft/ perhaps in someone's/ arms, perhaps tasting/ chocolate
perhaps/ laughing or asking/ Is it over already?*

*or saying not yet. Not/ yet the sky/ has at this moment turned/ another shade of blue,
and see there a child/ still plays/ in the fresh snow.*

*Watermelons and Zen students/ grow pretty much the same way.
Long periods of sitting/ till they ripen and grow/ all juicy inside,/*
*but/ when you knock them on the head/ to see if they're ready —/
sounds like nothing's going on.*

New Old American Songs

Written (while in a Copland thrall) for Peggo, Calvin and Jen, (collectively known as The Larksong Trio) these arrangements unabashedly owe their inspiration to his two volumes of *Old American Songs*. Like him, I have set melodies that are examples of traditional styles (in the case of tonight's selections, a composed folk song, a shaker hymn and a spiritual) with modern accompaniments. You can hear The Larksong Trio perform the whole set on their "Homeward Bound" recording on Big Round Records.

Lao Tsu dances on the breeze above

The impetus for this string quartet was a lesson with a composition student at St. Paul's School. In an effort to try and wean him from his determined chordal orientation when writing, I jotted down a quick pentatonic (the five note scale wherein all notes go harmoniously with all the other notes), contrapuntal (melodically rather than chordally conceived) improvisation. After he left, I looked at what I had done, thought it was pretty fun and interesting, and set about expanding it. I think of the style as sort of classical fiddle music, and while it did not remain not exclusively pentatonic, it is still a contrapuntal workout. (Lao Tsu is famously the author of the Tao Te Ching.)

Suite Vernaculaire

Another Stephanie-inspired piece. It began as just playful experimentation, combining aspects of pop music, such as form or harmonic progression, with "classical" language and conventions. The more I wrote, the more fun I had.

A Ride Home is a trope based on a song by one of my favorite groups, The Staves. It gains its title from a line in the song "Best Friend" and expands on two of its motives. Its form is a variation on common pop song formulae: verse-verse-chorus, verse-verse-chorus, slow outro.

Für Eliz is dedicated to a well-loved friend from my college days: Liz Thompson. She was bright and funny and sweet. She met an unexpected and sad end before our senior year. The piece is elegiac, yes, and deceptively simple. But there are also nods to her lively spirit and I could not let the piece end on a sad note. Re: the technical aspect, I purposely limited myself to three voices in the piano, the clarinet being the fourth.

Astor asks Darius to Dance: That would be Astor Piazzolla, known and revered for his tangos (a composer basing music on his popular culture!) and Darius Milhaud, (also a composer who was not afraid of incorporating popular elements in his music) who was fond of writing in two keys simultaneously. It is a conversation between the two and follows a definite narrative wherein each character is identified by their compositional proclivities. (A clue to his response in the final off-kilter waltz, which combines their themes.)

Triste is a ballad-like piece which grew from the idea that I could base an accompaniment almost exclusively on harmony, without relying on any rhythmic devices for drive; sort of the antithesis of rock 'n' roll. The melody mostly avoids the notes in the harmony that accompanies it. It's an attempt to write a long-lined melody, inspired by Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet* or the second movement of Ravel's *G major Piano Concerto*.

Saturday Mornings owes its being to some conventions of cartoon music, specifically drawing inspiration from Danny Elfman, with a language influenced by Bernstein. Its harmonic and structural underpinnings lie in blues and jazz. I challenged myself to make it swing without actually utilizing swing rhythm. It was also a chance to experiment with limited harmonic and melodic resources, to see if I could keep it concise, yet also interesting. The piece is based exclusively on the manipulation of just two contrasting ideas.

I have a curious relationship to performing music: as primarily a conductor and composer, I tend not to make any noise, and instead faithfully rely on others to manifest my intentions. My sincere and heartfelt thanks to all of tonight's performers for their lavish attention in bringing this music to life, and to you for listening.