

Hopkins Songs (2001/2004/2009)

Song cycle in 5 movements

Soprano w/ piano

Duration: 16'00"

Partial premiere: Amy Bartram, soprano, Catherine Miller, piano, NYC, 5/9/04

Full premiere: Amy Bartram, soprano, Chris Berg, piano, NYC, 3/6/10

My Hopkins song cycle has a fairly long genesis: The first three songs (the current first three, though originally performed in reverse order) were written earlier in the decade, over a period of three years, for the wonderful and unique voice of Amy Bartram. Early in, I believe, 2009 I ran into Amy on the street, and she asked if I'd consider adding a couple more songs to the set for a recital of American art songs she was planning. I found two more Hopkins texts to complement the existing three, and create a true cycle, with a solid conceptual arc.

The Victorian mystic Gerard Manley Hopkins, in addition to being one of poetry's great innovators, was also one of the most significant nature poets of the 19th century. My *Hopkins Songs* can essentially be seen as a nature cycle. Hopkins was also a Jesuit priest. My odd-numbered songs are indeed apotheoses of a natural world in which Christ and the Father are manifest, in the constellations, the flight of a falcon, and the beauty of color, respectively. The darker even-numbered songs are more chiefly concerned with mortality and loss, seen through the falling leaves of autumn or the sacrifice to the ax of a beloved row of aspens. The songs are linked musically by recurring motivic elements in the piano, principally a 5-note ascending figure. With the frequently shifting tonal/modal key centers I've hoped to express some of the ambiguities and rich textures in these strikingly original texts.

I. The Windhover

To Christ our Lord

I caught this morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

II. Spring and Fall

To a young child

MÁRGARÉT, áre you gríeving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Áh! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórrów's spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

III. The Starlight Night

Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!
Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-eyes!
The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!
Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!
Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!
Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize.

Buy then! bid then!—What?—Prayer, patience, alms, vows.
Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!
Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow shallows!
These are indeed the barn; withindoors house
The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

IV. Binsey Poplars

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled;
Of a fresh and following folded rank
Not spared, not one
That dandled a sandalled
Shadow that swam or sank
On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank.
O if we but knew what we do

When we delve or hew—
Hack and rack the growing green!
Since country is so tender
To touch, her being so slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
To mend her we end her,
When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.
Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc unselfe
The sweet especial scene,
Rural scene, a rural scene,
Sweet especial rural scene.

V. Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise Him.

--Gerard Manley Hopkins