

The Persistence of Song (2006)

Song cycle in 5 movements

Baritone w/ violin and piano

Duration: 21'30"

Premiere: Daniel Neer, baritone, The Orfeo Duo; St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Manhattanville), NYC, 10/22/06

I wrote this song cycle for the piano- and violin-playing sibling team of Ishmael and Vita Wallace who make up The Orfeo Duo. For several years now they have curated the What a Neighborhood! Festival in the areas of Manhattanville and Morningside Heights, just north of Manhattan Island's Upper West Side. One of the primary goals of the festival is to integrate the larger community into the world of classical music, both in listening and creating. In this spirit Ishmael and Vita asked me to write a song cycle for the festival focusing on poets from the area, and thus the 4 poets I set, Muriel Rukeyser, Thomas Merton, Howard Moss, and Bonnie Phelps, all at some time either lived or taught in the neighborhood.

The following is from notes I prepared to introduce the work at its premiere:

I titled this cycle after the middle movement, *The Persistence of Song*, because that poem provided the inspiration and the concept for the cycle as a whole. Firstly, if you look at the poem, it's in the form of a palindrome, meaning it reads the same (roughly) forwards and backwards. I've incorporated this form, or its more general shape of an arch, into many musical details of the song: the violin imitates the vocal melody backwards; the accompaniment's chord progression is turned on its head after the pivot—the first chord becomes the last, etc.

But I also decided to apply the song's arch shape to the cycle as a whole, so that the texts are structured as A-B-C-B-A, with this song functioning as C. But also the content of the central song inspired my selection of the other texts. I was struck by the poem's mingling of the mythical and the commonplace, how it travels, in a sense, to everywhere and everytime, all tied together by the thread of melody. Also the perspective is that of a focused observing eye, objective, allowing all to be absorbed without judgment, and I think it results in a kind of quiet transcendence. I wanted this movement to contrast with the outer movements. So I looked for texts first of all with a more subjective tone. Secondly, if the central text is in a sense in every place, I wanted the other texts to convey a strongly singular sense of place. So mvts. 1 & 5, or A, are in the countryside, 2 & 4, or B, in the city. Notice also the texts travel roughly over the course of a 24-hour day, beginning at night and ending early evening.

One thing that is not cyclical is the spiritual journey that occurs. We travel a very classic route from darkness to light in the piece, A to E, not A back to A. There is a transformative quality to the central text. Once we observe impartially and with clarity, we are able to fully experience the beauty of the world, and the whole direction of the cycle has to change with that.

It's ultimately about acceptance. The fourth song shows a man utterly at peace with his surroundings, despite the weather. But also note in the first song, which is, despite its title, really an "adult" nightmare, in the intro before any text is sung, the instruments trace the accompaniment progression from the central movement. It's perhaps just a small hint that the following existential angst is all part of who we are too.

For the last song we come back again to the image of the child from that first song, but it's no longer the child of fear but the children of joy, in their unmediated experience of their natural surroundings. To the jaded, or "deserted" hearing of adults, this is enough to evoke a sense of the ecstatic. To tie things further to the central movement, the last text ends with the experience of singing. From the opening line in the first song, "It is all much worse than I dreamed," we end with the simple and sublime singing of a single bird. The cycle is really a journey through loneliness, pain, observation, acceptance, and ultimately a kind of transcendent joy.

I. CHILD IN THE GREAT WOOD

It is all much worse than I dreamed
The trees are all here,
Trunk, limb, and leaf,
Nothing beyond belief
In danger's atmosphere
And the underbrush is cursed.
But the animals,
Some are as I have dreamed,
Appear and do their worst
Until more animals
With recognizable faces
Arrive and take their places
And do their worst.

It is all a little like dreaming,
But this forest is silent,
This acts out anxiety
In a midnight stillness.
My blood that sparkles in me
Cannot endure this voiceless
Forest, this is not sleep
Not peace but a lack of words.
And the mechanical birds
Wing, claw, and sharpened eye.
I cannot see their sky.

Even this war is not unlike the dream,
But in the dream-war there were armies,
Armies and armor and death's etiquette,
Here there are no troops and no protection,
Only this wrestling of the heart
And a demon-song that goes
For sensual friction
Is largely fiction
And partly fact
And so is tact
And so is love,
And so is love.

The thin leaves chatter. There is a sound at last
Begun at last by the demon-song.
Behind the wildest trees I see the men together
Confessing their lives and the women together.
But really I cannot hear the words. I cannot hear the song.
This may still be my dream
But the night seems very long.
-- *Muriel Rukeyser*

II. AUBADE—THE CITY

Now that the clouds have come like cattle
To the cold waters of the city's river,
All the windows turn their scandalized expression
Toward the tide's tin dazzle,

And question, with their weak-eyed stare,
The riotous sun.

From several places at a time
Cries of defiance,
As delicate as frost, as sharp as glass,
Rise from the porcelain buildings
And break in the blue sky.

Then, falling swiftly from the air,
The fragments of this fragile indignation
Ring on the echoing streets
No louder than a shower of pins.

But suddenly the bridges' choring cables
Jangle gently in the wind
And play like quiet piano-strings.

All down the faces of the buildings
Windows begin to close
Like figures in a long division.

Those whose eyes all night have simulated sleep,
Suddenly stare, from where they lie, like wolves,
Tied in the tangle of the bedding,

And listen for the waking blood
To flood the apprehensive silence of their flesh.
They fear the heart now lies quenched may
 quicken,
And start to romp against the rib,
Soft and insistent as a secret bell.

They also fear the light will grow
Into the windows of their hiding places, like a tree
Of tropical flowers
And put them, one by one, to flight.

Then life will have to begin.
Pieces of paper, lying in the streets,
Will start up, in the twisting wind,
And fly like idiot birds before the faces of the crowds.
And in the roaring buildings
Elevator doors will have begun
To clash like sabres.

-- *Thomas Merton*

III. THE PERSISTENCE OF SONG

Although it is not yet evening,
The secretaries have changed their frocks
As if it were time for dancing,
And locked up in the scholars' books
There is a kind of rejoicing,
There is a kind of singing
That even the dark stone canyon makes
As though all fountains were going
At once, and the color flowed from bricks
In one wild, lit upsurging.

What is the weather doing?
And who arrived on a scallop shell
With the smell of the sea this morning?
--Creating a small upheaval
High above the scaffolding
By saying, "All will be well.
There is a kind of rejoicing."

Is there a kind of rejoicing
In saying, "All will be well"?
High above the scaffolding,
Creating a small upheaval,
The smell of the sea this morning
Arrived on a scallop shell.
What was the weather doing?

In one wild, lit upsurging?
At once, the color flowed from bricks
As though all fountains were going,
And even the dark stone canyon makes
Here a kind of singing,
And there a kind of rejoicing,
And locked up in the scholars' books
There is a time for dancing
When the secretaries have changed their frocks,
And though it is not yet evening,

There is the persistence of song.
-- *Howard Moss*

IV. TRIBUTE TO THE YOUNG MAN WITHOUT HIS UMBRELLA

So well groomed in his
Bright white shirt
Jeans pressed to perfection
His blackened boots
 Cowboyed
 Soft-shined and silver-tipped
Blond hair brushed—smoothed
His youthful face serious
Yet—so serene as he
Moved without a wrinkle
Between God's tears
Exhibiting none of our
Usual urban annoyance
Over his forgotten umbrella.
-- *Bonnie Phelps*

V. EVENING

Now, in the middle of the limpid evening,
The moon speaks clearly to the hill.
The wheatfields make their simple music,
Praise the quiet sky.

And down the road, the way the stars come home,
The cries of children
Play on the empty air, a mile of more,
And fall on our deserted hearing,
Clear as water.

They say the sky is made of glass,
They say the smiling moon's a bride.
They say they love the orchards and apple trees,
The trees, their innocent sisters, dressed in blossoms,
Still wearing, in the blurring dusk,
White dresses from that morning's first communion.

And, where blue heaven's fading fire last shines
They name the new come planets
With words that flower
On little voices, light as stems of lilies.

And, where blue heaven's fading fire last shines
Reflected in the poplar's ripple,
One little, wakeful bird
Sings like a shower.
-- *Thomas Merton*