

Winter Birds (2007-2009)

Song cycle in 6 movements

Counter-tenor (or mezzo), clarinet, viola and 2 cellos

Partial premiere (Mvts. 1 & 2): Phillip Cheah, ensemble, NYC, 11/20/07

In Winter Birds, North Carolina author David Brendan Hopes shines an austere, modern light on love and sex, often filtered through the prism of nature, another of the poet's favorite subjects. The scoring, for low strings and clarinet, is understandably dark, though as with the poems not incapable of moments of warmth or even ecstasy. The clarinet's introduction to the work begins with the intervals of a second followed by a fifth, a motif which will reappear in each movement, in different permutations each time. The first movement places a soaring vocal line over unsteady rhythms in the ensemble. The second is an angry blues featuring bends and slides in the clarinet. The third is arguably the chilliest in the cycle, dominated by icy string harmonics. The fourth, scored without strings, is a short bit of comic relief. The mockingbird's "song" is in fact an amalgam of quotations from prominent classical clarinet works, set to words. The clarinet rests in the following movement, where the strings pluck and strum forth a barren landscape. The final movement has yet to be written.

The work will be available following its full premiere.

1

Don't think the stars and moon are all
that set out sailing over Thornden Hill
this last August night.
I have never said what is in my heart.
I have pointed to the birds
and let them have the summarizing words
as their wintry lives are blown apart.
Now listen. That is the compassing call
of a nighthawk filling his belly for the long flight.
He is doing what we all soon will.
He finds his way by voices. They touch
roof and wall. By his cries
he knows how distant and how much.
He fills up heaven till the echo dies.

2

Do you think because you suffered for love
nothing more will be asked of you?
Do you think because your beauty was besieged
an hour, an afternoon, a week or two,
that all the high dead lovers are appeased?
Because your bones ride stark in your cheeks for love
do you think one cord of the net is eased?
I say there are nine hells for every one
you bawled away behind you.
You think you have endured. You have not begun.
If you saw where the road was you went not in love.
If it is gentle, it is through.
Do you suppose that what you gave, and lost, and missed
will keep you from knotting the blankets in your fist?

3

A lover taken in winter is an ice-bound harbor,
a she-wolf, a bolted door.

A lover taken in winter is a lock
and a well-stocked house
and a guarded door.

She will not give. She will not lose.

A lover taken in winter is amaranth.

She is a high wall and a black door.

A lover taken in winter is a ruby, a shelter, a knife,
a golden door.

Love begun in winter is a fox
and a prophet and a blind door.

He closes. He survives.

4

In Baltimore the mockingbirds
told in every language but words
of bird, and air, and bird in air,
and how the flocks go when there's nothing left.

One at my window sang *Wake, awake,*
see the colors that the mornings make
to sharpen the delight of my inveighing black-and-white.
Look quick, while all my magic's left.

Any bird that labors in any tree
you'll hear better boiling out of me.
My mimicry is best. Leave aside the rest
that have only genuineness to recommend
them when all the songs are at an end.
Come out on your heavy feet and drink the melodious deceit.

5

Pure as the note of a bird, sometimes,
the sound of bark scraped on bark,
wood bowing wood.

There are strings in oads, reeds in pines,
percussion in the cedar dark
below the cliffs, where trees that withstood
are struck by trees that were defeated
by winter and relaxing rock.

All work to bring silence from their noise.

Shaft smooths trunk; the brush repeated
planes the gnarl; the wind-blown shock
flattens, dies. Uneasy with their own voice,
the solitary outlast all the rest.

They've seen the weasel led by singing to the nest.

6

There is something rhetorical, of course,
in repenting love for its perversity
after it has been loved out,
after drawing the tingle of tongue and snout
as far as the night will let them go.
I did not know what roads could be

except the one that wound to me;
I did not see how time rolls us about
until all the rose-sweet lovers go
bud to briar and bloom to stump, their course.
It is not yet so late that I'll extol
the suitable over what hurt best,
nor forget how flesh follows soul
sucking the salt sweat from the breast.

-- *David Brendan Hopes*