

Stories Out of Cherry Stems

Katie Procell sings works by Peter Dayton

Composer's Original Program Notes

Tracks 1-5: *Entwine Our Tongues, Sapphic Fragments (2018)*

For Soprano, Oboes, and Clarinets

Texts by Jordi Alonso, after Sappho

Translation can be a tricky matter. The challenge is compounded by orders of magnitude when the sum total material one has to translate is a single word or phrase. Yet this is the state in which most of Sappho's poetry exists. The vast majority of translations of Sappho's words, then, are executed by a mixture of scholarly inference and poetic license, tentatively guessing at intentions. I imagine that tentative feeling is similar to the nervous energy of attraction, of trying to sense mutual chemistry, the age-old binary question. Alonso's translations (from Greek and transubstantiations from single words and fragments to stanzas) are clean, concise, and unadorned. In plain, unaffected language they convey the feelings of the speaker, the images, the scene. Who is the speaker? Possibly Sappho, though in Fragment 32, she almost completely renounces her own agency as a singer, instead serving as a conduit for and at the pleasure of the inspiring gods and muses. This was a common ancient conception of artistry and inspiration and, I think, a good way to conceive of the singer in this song cycle. Who are the I's of the songs? I think of each one as an emotional state or attitude, inspired and enacted by desire: pride, modesty (possibly false), selfish possessiveness, flirtatiousness, rumination, tenderness. The singer is the conduit for the states illustrated in the texts, providing one further translation in this series, of text into song, bringing these poems closer to the original Sapphic fragments by their delivery, if not their language.

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Tracks 6-8: Si Solamente (2017)

For Soprano and Violoncello

Texts by Pablo Neruda

These settings of Pablo Neruda's poetry represent my first foray into non-English text setting in nearly a decade. Now, however, with these settings commissioned by Lauren Van Den Broek and Robert Kaufman, I have finally ventured into the rich poetry of South America. Neruda's poetry ranges from the pastoral to the romantic and evocative, encompassing worlds in his apostrophes and images. The first poem, from Neruda's "Canto General," serves as a fitting opening to the song cycle. Address everyone "a todos, a vosotros," earthly beings and spirits of the night, Neruda describes a universe of addressees for his songs, natural and human. The barcarolle, from "Residencia en la Tierra," is a melancholy sea-scape of deeply romantic tone, mixing the desire of an unknown speaker who seems herself a sea-spirit, personifying loneliness and isolation in the setting of a desolate shore. The final poem, "Me gustas cuando callas," is written in a rhyming, strophic manner that suggests, if not outright demands, a ballad-like setting. Starting with the unexpected premise that the poet likes it best when his beloved is quiet because they then seem absent, the ballad expands on the idea of desire and longing being predicated on distance, that the quietude of the lover fills the poet with the gratitude of being in love.

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Tracks 9-13: Lost Daughter, Songs on the Myth of Persephone (2020/2021)

For Soprano, Viola, Flute, and Harp

Texts by Oscar Wilde, Rita Dove, Edna St. Vincent-Millay, Alfred Lord Tennyson

(arranged by Peter Dayton), and Louise Glück

This song cycle was composed at the request of the marvelous Hong Kong-based soprano Jessica Ng, whom I met in 2019. We considered multiple ideas for a collaboration based upon themes of family dynamics for more than a year before decision emerged to create songs based upon Persephone myth as a meditation on grief and maternal love. The first four movements of the work explore different aspects of Demeter's experience of loss with the final movement using Louise Glück's more forensic, analytical approach to the myth as a kind of coda. Oscar Wilde's *Requiescat*, composed to mourn the death of his sister when she was still a child, illustrates a wintry visit to a gravesite, reminiscing on a loved one lost. Rita Dove's *Persephone, Falling* relives the tragedy of Persephone's abduction as a cautionary tale, creating meaning out of the senselessness of loss. Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Prayer to Persephone* is a kind of bargaining scene, in which Demeter projects her own lost motherhood onto Persephone and the child she will have with Hades. *Demeter &* (a text which I created by deleting words from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *Demeter and Persephone* to create a new poem) gives voice to Demeter's rage in her loss and the externalization of her own world crumbling around Persephone's absence. Louise Glück's *Persephone the Wanderer* telescopes back out from the first-person presentation of these poems through Demeter's voice and addresses the myth of Persephone as a text, as a myth, as an examination of tragedy from outside the lens of those it directly touches. In addition to this work's dedication to Jessica Ng, I owe my deepest gratitude to Amy Nam and to Garrett Groesbeck for their consultation on harp idioms in the composition of this piece. I hope that, in a time of catastrophic loss, this work can serve a purpose in processing our individual and collective experience.

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Tracks 14-22: *Desiderata, Ten Pieces of Wisdom (2020)*

For Soprano and Alto Saxophone

Text by Max Ehrmann

The text of this work was requested by Katie Procell as a possible poem that I could set for her and saxophonist Kyle Blake Jones. The simple, plainspoken text of the poem sets forth author Max Ehrmann's precepts of a happy life. *Desiderata's* gentle simplicity and epigrammatic form made for a surprising challenge in my text-setting process. Though Katie and Kyle approached me about the work in 2019, it was not until March of 2020 that I began to compose the piece; splitting the text up into a series of miniatures, I attempted to compose one miniature per day as a way to maintain my creative practice during the COVID-19 period of social-distancing. The simple statements have served as important reminders in a time when so much has been disrupted and seem to have a kind of timeless applicability (with the exception of IV, whose final clause must have rung hollow even shortly after its composition, with the Great Depression only two years away. For this reason, that musical passage can be hummed instead of sung). While not explicitly about it, the creation of this work is inextricably bound up with the global pandemic. I hope that the quiet tone of the text brings some comfort and reflection to audiences, during our current time and beyond.