

All in the Sound

New Vocal Music by **Peter Dayton**

All in the Sound (2017), for Soprano and Piano

Texts by William Carlos Williams

This song set was commissioned by soprano Katie Procell for a concert of American songs. Selected by Procell, these two concise poems sum up the nature of Williams's poetry: empathic, mystical descriptions of nature, a concern for the form and substance of poetry, an elevation of everyday objects, and a celebration of human sexuality. All of those aspects are present in these two small poems, a tiny window into Williams's vast world. This work is dedicated with gratitude to Katie.

Just A Leaf: Three Natural Songs (2019), for Tenor and Piano

Texts by Paul Blackburn and William Bronk

This set of songs explore contrasting moods and emotions, using the imagery of leaves, trees, and branches as its conduit. In each of the songs, the natural vegetation is treated both literally and symbolically, reflecting and amplifying the emotions that the tone of each poem establishes. In the breathless excitement of *Invitation Standing*, the leaf becomes a kind of passkey, a necessary token of vitality and the entrance of spring (“an April leaf”) – to whom the invitation is addressed is ambiguous, possibly the reader, possibly the season of Spring itself, in either case the leaf is a symbol of joyous growth, no matter the conditions. *Winter Vocative* presents a perverse opposite, wishing for an elongation of the leafless trees reflected in the broken mirror of winter, until we ache to know what growth and life look like again (contextualizing the first movement’s eagerness in retrospect). The final movement, at the end of the winter, examines the trees through the lens of wonder. Hesitating, doubling back, struggling to clarify a mystical, ineffable idea of the beauty of nature itself being an act of praise, the poetry becomes a kind of fractal of gratitude, praise of praise, ending the piece with a different kind of breathlessness, that of ecstasy.

Botticellian Trees (2015), for Soprano and Violin

Texts by William Carlos Williams

After a period of struggling to set poetry by William Carlos Williams, these pastoral poems gave me an opening into Williams’s world. Not technically a four seasons piece, the text’s (and music’s) transformation between the first and last movements gives the group of songs both a cyclic sense, and a forward progression. The piece was composed in the spring of 2015 at the request of Ledah Finck and Natanya Washer.

All in the Sound

New Vocal Music by **Peter Dayton**

If They Delight (2015/2017), for Soprano and Piano

Text by Gertrude Stein (Stanza XV from “Stanzas in Meditation”)

The *Stanzas in Meditation*, a long multi-part poem, contains some of Stein’s clearest and most beautiful combinations of words in her hermetic style. This musical work sets Stanza XV from Part 2 of the *Stanzas in Meditation*, a text that dwells on “they,” on others, their delight, their contemplation, the way that they look and speak. The text is lovingly observational, and, like music, gestures at emotion through sound, symbol, and color, leaving the exact meaning to the listener alone. This piece was begun in advance of composing my opera on Gertrude Stein’s first love affair, *MAY SHE | SHE MAY*, musical moments of which appear in the opera

Beyond Dimension (2018), for Soprano and Harp

Text (untitled, unpublished) by Vicki Hearne*

This short song is a tribute to two women, each of whose beautiful creativity has been an important impact on my compositional life: the celestial poetry of Vicki Hearne and the collaborative energies and vocal prowess of Katie Procell. This tiny work came about thanks to a personal correspondence with Robert Tragesser, the husband of the late poet Vicki Hearne. I created a setting of her mystical poem "The Tree That Plucks Fruit" for chorus, and in the course of acquiring permission to set that text from the estate of Vicki Hearne, Tragesser shared with me an unpublished, handwritten fragment by Hearne, which describes a room at night, and the wonder of looking at the stars. It was composed for Katie Procell in gratitude for her otherworldly musical ability.

Hidden Texts: 2 Songs (2017), for Tenor and Guitar

Texts by John Hollander & Wendell Berry

The two settings that comprise this song set were independently composed for the same instrumentation, and then grouped together at an ad hoc premiere (arranged for piano and sung by me in a last-minute program replacement) that took place in 2018 at a concert in Baltimore, MD. I came to appreciate this pairing, however, as both texts deal with atmospheres of conspiracy, espionage, and the struggle to express vulnerability in a world of implicit threats. I think of the pair of works as a character study of a weary secret agent, tired of the game, and ready to shake free from the shackles of deception necessary when the most valuable currency is knowledge. The first movement is a transmission, an excerpt from John Hollander’s spy-themed verse novel *Reflections on Espionage*. Chronicling the reflections and activities of a Cold-War-era agent, alias “Cupcake,” the book unfolds in the format of secret dispatches sent out from Cupcake to his handler “Lyrebird” or a fellow agent and confidante, “Image.” Using cryptography as an analogue for writing and the creative process, *Reflections* is simultaneously an encoded journal of Hollander’s own life, experiences, and friends, as well as a meditation upon writing. The selected text centers around a feeling of regret and imminent loss. Cupcake fears that the cipher to which he has grown accustomed will be changed soon, something fraught with more emotion than it should be for an agent. Against this sense of loss, Cupcake reflects upon beauty in the world, all of it containing encoded messages. He resolves cherishing this method of communication while it yet lasts. In the verse novel’s narrative, this over-investment and emotion is Cupcake’s undoing. In setting this text

All in the Sound

New Vocal Music by **Peter Dayton**

I hope to create a performative portrait of this individual, struggling in a world where the self-suppression is necessary for survival. Wendell Berry's poem "Do Not Be Ashamed" is both illustrative and a didactic. It externalizes the psychological world, painting a nocturnal picture of the addressee's privacy being intruded on by a hostile, vaguely panopticon-like outside force. It speaks to the experience of the socially rejected and disenfranchised, individuals whose lack of conformity, whose very identity is questioned. Against this bleak procrustean scenario, Berry offers that belief in oneself, truth, radical honesty, and determination overcome the malicious forces that seek to destroy us as unique individuals, ending the poem with a calmly breaking day.

A Red, Red Rose (2020), for High Voice and Harp

Text by **Robert Burns**

This short song is dedicated to my friends Jeffrey and Jane – Jeffrey, being one of my oldest friends and dating Jane, who has hosted an annual *Burns Nicht* for years. I was able to attend some of the Baltimore *Burns Nichts* and had the pleasure of reciting this poem. On the occasion of Jane moving away from Baltimore amid the COVID-19 crisis, I composed this as a small gift and a hope that these two remarkable people can be reunited in a better future.

Wilde Colours (2020), for Soprano and Celesta

Texts by **Oscar Wilde**

After working with her on multiple projects, I was honored when soprano Arianna Arnold reached out to me about creating some new text settings for her to sing. Inclined towards Gothic poetry, she suggested several options of poems by Edgar Allan Poe. I began setting Poe's *The Valley of Unrest*, but lost control of the piece and ended up composing a work for mixed chorus! While that work is also, rightfully dedicated to Arianna, I still had the mission of completing a solo text setting she could sing in front of me. Staying in a similar dramatic register, I decided on three Gothic, sensual, atmospheric poems by Oscar Wilde, that seemed to capture a similar ethos to Poe's poems. Unlike in *The Valley of Unrest*, humans are present in these panoramas, but we only glimpse them and speculate on their stories. In an analogy to James Whistler's tonalist paintings, these texts are about evocation, not argument. Each poem explores a different vista: a pastoral, coastal, and urban landscape respectively, with the piece progressing from morning to evening back around to morning again. I hope that these contrasts bring a sense of forward movement to this song set of suspended moments. While the texts are compact, they are luxuriations in the hues of Wilde's pen. They are dedicated to Arianna with gratitude and apology.

All in the Sound

New Vocal Music by **Peter Dayton**

The Second Coming (2018), for Tenor, Tenor, Baritone, Bass and Horn

Text by W.B. Yeats

Nearly a century after *The Second Coming* was written, it seems as relevant as ever. Written in the context of the aftermath of the First World War and beginning of the Irish War of Independence, Yeats depicts a world in chaos, out of balance, where “things fall apart; the center cannot hold,” and where indifference overtakes the good and the evil among us are “filled with passionate intensity.” His apocalyptic vision, (“a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*”) draws on his lifelong relationship to mysticism, astrology, and the occult, to create a hybrid Sphinx and whore of Babylon creature, a symbol of the end-times Yeats seems to be preparing himself to witness. Yeats was a deeply political poet, invested in the future of his country, struggling for independence; it seemed appropriate therefore to interpolate quotations of my own national anthem into this modern setting. As America grapples with a President more concerned about his TV ratings than the safety of our elections or the plight of Puerto Rico, and with a congress that rushes through legislation to line the pockets of the rich, while dithering on any move to protect citizens from the epidemics of opioids or gun-slaughter that plagues our country alone among those of the developed world, we are testing the truth of Yeats’s condemnation that “The best lack all conviction,” and can only hope that, through the voices of the American people, we can prove him, and our corrupt body politic wrong. This setting is dedicated to Peter Campbell, a friend who requested the work – a challenge to set such a well-known poem that has been set so many times before. Additional thanks go to Justin Stanley, who advised me on the horn part.

All in the Sound

New Vocal Music by **Peter Dayton**

Fresh in the Triumph (2018), for Tenor and Piano

Text by Peter Dayton, after Virginia Woolf

This song was a labor of love – commissioned by the husband of a dear friend of mine for that friend’s birthday, *Fresh In The Triumph* is a song inspired by Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, my friend Yancey’s favorite book. A refrain throughout the book is a section from a song in Shakespeare’s *Cymbelline*:

*Fear no more the heat o’the sun,
Nor the furious winter’s rages;
Thou they worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.*

It is a funeral song that suggests that the dead fear nothing, that death is a release from care, toil, and fear. Against that fatalistic notion (and more appropriately celebratory for a birthday), *Fresh In The Triumph* emphasizes the transcendent quality that our passing moments take on and how we survive in those instants forever. A book whose varied strains and ruminations on existence, memory, and time culminate in a party, the song takes elements of the characters and reflections of Clarissa Dalloway and Peter Walsh and combines them into a new celebration of those themes in a style inspired by the folk-rock musical theatre style of Jason Robert Brown. The piece was premiere at a surprise birthday party in North Carolina in April 2018.