

ARK RESOUNDING: COMPOSERS' NOTES, TEXTS, TRANSLATIONS

Prairie Diary

“A Prairie Diary” came about after playwright Darrah Cloud and I wrote a music-theater adaptation of Willa Cather’s first novel, “O Pioneers!” Our collaboration spanned over a three-year period of experimenting with putting the novel into theatrical form. One of the most challenging aspects of the project was how to use vocal music in the context of the stage production. The songs became part of a “Prairie Greek Chorus” which appears throughout the play. Many songs were tried and then rejected from the final version. It is those “rejected” songs that became the inspiration for this song cycle, although two of the songs (“Transformation Song” and “I Call Your Name”) are still used in the theatrical production. Settings of three poems by Willa Cather complete the cycle.

The material in the text evokes images and feelings of my own roots in the Midwest. I wanted to give a voice to the vastness, the sky and the land, and to give a sound to the feeling of belonging to the dream of this country. And always, these words from “O Pioneers!” rang through my thoughts as I wrote the music:

“For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.”

A Prairie Diary was originally written for piano, clarinet and baritone voice. I then transposed the cycle for Allison Charney, who has sung the piano and clarinet version many times, including on a 1998 recording with Ben Loeb for the DSC label. In 2016-2017, I removed the clarinet part and created a new part for cello and restructured the order of the movements for the ARK Trio. - KDS

PRAIRIE DAWN (text: Willa Cather)

A crimson fire that vanquishes the stars;
a pungent odor from the dusty sage;
a sudden stirring of the huddled herds;
a breaking of the distant table-lands
through purple mists ascending and the flare of water ditches silver in the light;
a swift, bright lance hurled low across the world.
A sudden sickness for the hills of home.

RECIPE (text: Darrah Cloud)

Missus Coney's rum plum pudding:
to one pound flour add day old bread,
a pound of raisins, suet and red wine,
brandy and rum,
six eggs, citron,
sugar and cloves,
allspice and nutmeg to taste.
Mister Zubbakovsky from over Polish town adds a little ground ginger.

NO RAIN (Text: Darrah Cloud)

August one: no rain.
August two: no rain again.
August three: still no rain.
There is nothing you can do about it; there is nothing you can do.
There is nothing you can do.

STILL ALIVE (Text: Darrah Cloud)

September three: a miracle we're still alive.
And yet I find that more and more
I ask myself: what for?
A dream in my waking hours?
A promise in the land?
I wish that I could see and hold those things.

But given the choice again there'd be no choice at all.
Things will get better, maybe.
We'll find a way...

TRANSFORMATION SONG (Text: Darrah Cloud)

The years pass by, more people come,
wheat and corn make a checker board of the land that roads ride over.

The years pass by, the windmills spin
from one week's end to another, and the brown earth surrenders to plowing.

Please God, don't make us be poor again.
We promise to live as humble as you.
Please God, don't make us be poor again.

My voice carries a hundred miles
over wires strung from tree trunks. I can call my aunt in Lincoln.

I want to buy a gramophone.
It will make me feel less alone when the telephones go down in winter.

Thank God nothing will stop us now.
We can withstand whatever befalls.
Thank God nothing will stop us now.

BOBBY SHAFTO (Text: Willa Cather)

Bobby Shafto fat and fair would not comb her yellow hair;
Every morning just at eight, she bewailed her bitter fate.
Then the combs and brush would fly!
All the children going by stopped to listen to her cry.
Pretty Bobby Shafto!

Bobby Shafto fat and fair scorned to comb her yellow hair
But just before she went to school, she had to sit upon a stool
With her mama close beside, while those hateful ringlets dried.
Poor Shafto sobbed and cried!
Pretty Bobby Shafto!

Bobby Shafto fat and fair said she'd cut her yellow hair.
But one morning while she cried, mama found a mouse inside.
Found a mousie pink and bare, who had crept for warmth in there,
Right in Bobby Shafto's hair!
Pretty Bobby Shafto!

I CALL YOUR NAME (Text: Darrah Cloud)

I call your name
and the lark answers back
and the wheat sighs a slow sad sigh and dies.

I call your name
and the clouds utter rain
and the wind takes my sound away and stays.

But still you come to me
we cross the sea of wild prairie
in the little boats of our souls...

I call your name
and the sound hits the ground
and the wind picks it up and sends it flying high.

I call your name
and my voice comes back alone
my voice comes back alone, but changed.
...but changed.

And then you come to me
we cross the sea of wild prairie
in the dark boats of our souls.

EVENING SONG (Text: Willa Cather)

Dear love, what thing of all the things that be
is ever worth one thought from you or me?
Save only love?

Save only love?

The days so short, the nights so quick to flee,
the world so wide, so deep and dark the sea,
so dark the sea.

So far the suns and ev'ry listless star,
beyond their light.. Ah! Dear who knows how far?
Who knows how far?
One thing of all dim things I know is true,
the heart within me knows and tells it you,
and tells it you:

So blind is life, so long at last is sleep.
And none but love to bid us laugh or weep,
—and none but love, and none but love.

Simplicity

My first encounter with Emerson and Thoreau was during an undergraduate American Literature class. Both writers made an unforgettable impression on me, and their writings became permanent sources of inspiration, both for daily living and for artistic work. To say that I have read and re-read their works during different phases of my life is an understatement.

I composed “Simplicity” for the ARK trio. It is written in the form of a mini-Cantata, and the cello part functions as a Basso Continuo, the standard accompaniment technique during the Baroque period. The many references to J.S. Bach are, to me, a musical equivalent of Thoreau’s “Back to Nature” ideology. This is meant in the sense of trying to recapture some the innocence of music before Romanticism and Modernism. The realization that we cannot go back in time adds poignancy to this music. This realization also justifies the use of current post-Modernistic idioms, side by side with the tonal gestures of Bach. When different styles coexist within the same work, there is a suggestion of a state of being, which is beyond the accidents of time and space: a Platonic world of archetypes, a singularity that pre-exists the laws of physics as we know them.

The appeal to this sense of timelessness reflects the great attraction that Thoreau and his Transcendentalist colleagues felt towards the mystical philosophies and the meditation techniques of the Orient. Nevertheless, we do acknowledge the fact that all musical languages are the result of an evolution, which took place in linear historical time. To paraphrase Wordsworth, we are bound by space and time, yet we still have intimations of immortality. - MSK

Text excerpted from “Walden” by Henry David Thoreau

Simplicity. Simplify. Simplicity.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.
And not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Simplify. Simplicity.

Shams and illusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous.
If we would steadily observe realities only, life would be like a fairytale. Simplicity.

If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be,
Music and poetry would resound along the streets.
When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worldly things
Have any permanent and absolute existence.
That petty things and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality.
This is always exhilarating and sublime.

Time is but the stream I go a-fishin' in.
I drink at it, but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is.
Its thin current slides away but eternity remains.
If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be,
Music and poetry would resound along the streets. Simplicity. Simplify. Simplicity.

Wedding Song

The Wedding Song is the sixth movement of my song cycle Song of Songs. Adapted from The Song of Solomon with libretto by Erik Ehn, this work premiered in 2001 by the San José Chamber Orchestra, and was scored for Soprano, String Orchestra and Harp. But before the premiere, Allison Charney wanted a song for her brother's wedding. We quickly devised The Wedding Song, using text in Hebrew and English, adapted by Jordan Charney, and scored for Soprano and String Quartet. This is the premiere performance of a new arrangement for the ARK trio. Song of Songs is dedicated to Daniel and Lisa Charney. - KDS

Hebrew excerpted from "Song of Songs" English Translation by Jordan Charney

Ani l'dodi v'dodi li
Ha'roeh ba'shoshanim
Matzati et she'ahavah nafshi
Achaztiv v'lo arpenu
Libavtini b'echad may'aynayich
Mah tovu dodayich mi'yayin
Ani l'dodi v'dodi li

My beloved is for me and I am for my beloved
Who nurtures the flowers
I found my soul's love

And my love will hold eternally
You have captured my heart
With one glance of your eyes
How much more delightful your love than wine
My beloved is for me and I am for beloved

Arrangements and Derangements: Interpretations of Schubert

Franz Schubert's songs are so perfect that they are hard to adapt without feeling like you might be defacing them. So there are two impulses at work: 1) a very careful, respectful, almost reverential arrangement and 2) an aggressive reinterpretation or commentary which I've called "derangement" which is a jumble of de-arrange, deranged, and French *déranger* (disrupt, disturb).

The arrangements of three of the songs are clear. Create a cello line that meshes with the intent of the song and enhances it. Create a cello line that is fun to play and has melodic integrity.

The derangement of "Sei mir gegrüsst" reflects a 21st century view of the text. What may have seemed Romantic in Schubert's time, seems to me obsessive and even deluded. The cello plays Schubert's melody and the voice reinterprets Rückert's text. It is almost as if the singer is conjuring the words from hearing the song played by the cello.

As for "Die Forelle," even Schubert in his own Trout Quintet, sticks to the jolly trout swimming in the brook. The English speaking audience glosses over the information that the trout is caught and dies. The structure of the original song reinforces that--it goes back to the swimmy, brooky music at the end. In this derangement, I've loosely translated the text and forced us to deal with the fish's demise. Like it or not, humankind can admire a creature's beauty and then turn around and catch it, shoot it, kill it, photograph it, and now post it on social media.

Allison Charney had patiently waited for me to do something with Schubert's songs for the ARK Trio (voice, cello, and piano). Finally, she did the best thing, scheduled a concert which imposed a deadline. I'm grateful to her for waiting me out and grateful for the opportunity to interact with these great songs. The delay was only because I wanted to have my arrangement-cake and then eat it too--derangement!

Hopefully Schubert is laughing, nodding, or humming along. And even if he's not, why should the regietheater directors have all the fun? - MC

Die Männer sind méchant

Johann Gabriel Seidl

(translation: Allison Charney)

Du sagtest mir es, Mutter:
Er ist ein Springinsfeld!
Ich würd' es dir nicht glauben,
Bis ich mich krank gequält!
Ja, ja, nun ist er's wirklich;
Ich hatt' ihn nur verkannt!
Du sagtest mir's, o Mutter:
"Die Männer sind méchant!"

Vor'm Dorf im Busch, als gestern
Die stille Dämm'ung sank,
Da rauscht' es: "Guten Abend!"
Da rauscht' es: "Schönen Dank!"
Ich schlich hinzu, ich horchte;
Ich stand wie festgebannt:
Er war's mit einer Andern –
"Die Männer sind méchant!"

O Mutter, welche Qualen!
Es muss heraus, es muss! –
Es blieb nicht bloss bei'm Rauschen,
Es blieb nicht bloss bei'm Gruss!
Vom Grusse kam's zum Kusse,
Vom Kuss zum Druck der Hand,
Vom Druck, ach liebe Mutter! –
"Die Männer sind méchant!"

Sei mir gegrüsst

Friedrich Rückert

(translation: Allison Charney)

O du Entriss'ne mir und meinem Kusse!
Sei mir gegrüsst!
Sei mir geküsst!
Erreichbar nur meinem Sehnsuchtsgrusse!
Sei mir gegrüsst!
Sei mir geküsst!
Du von der Hand der Liebe
diesem Herzen Gegeb'ne!
Du von dieser Brust Genomm'ne mir
mit diesem Tränengusse
Sei mir gegrüsst!
Sei mir geküsst!

You told me, Mother:
He is a cad!
I would not believe you
Until I had made myself sick!
Yes, yes, now I know he really is;
I had misjudged him
You told me, O Mother:
Men are wicked!

Just outside the village in the bushes
Dusk descended quietly
There was a murmur, "Good Evening!"
Then a murmur, "Many thanks!"
I snuck closer to listen
I stood frozen
It was he with another
Men are wicked!

O Mother, what torment!
It must come out, it must!
It didn't just stop with a rustling
It didn' just stop with a greetiing
It went from a greeting to a kiss
From a kiss to a squeeze of the hand
From the squeeze, ah dear mother
Men are wicked!

Oh you who were torn from me and my kisses
Greetings!
Kiss me!
Only my yearning can reach you.
Greetings!
Kiss me!
You who by the hand of love
To this heart was given
You who from this breast was snatched
With this flood of tears
Greetings!
Kiss me!

Zum Trotz der Ferne, die sich, feindlich trennend,
Hat zwischen mich Und dich gestellt
Dem Neid der Schicksalsmächte zum Verdrusse
Sei mir gegrüsst!
Sei mir geküsst!

Defying the distance – hostile and divisive -
That has come between us
Frustrating envious fate
Greetings!
Kiss me!

Wie du mir je im schönsten Lenz der Liebe
Mit Gruss und Kuss
Entgegen kamst,
Mit meiner Seele glühendstem Ergüsse,
Sei mir gegrüsst!
Sei mir geküsst!

As you once in the beautiful spring of love
With greetings and kisses
You came to me
So with all the passion of my soul
Greetings!
Kiss me!

Ein Hauch der Liebe tilget Räum' und Zeiten,
Ich bin bei dir,
Du bist bei mir,
Ich halte dich in dieses Arms Umschlusse,
Sei mir gegrüsst!
Sei mir geküsst!

One breath of love erases space and time
I am yours
You are mine
I hold you closely in my embrace
Greetings!
Kiss me!

DIE Forelle!

Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart,
With English text by Michael Ching

In einem Bächlein helle, da schoß in froher Eil
Die launische Forelle vorüber wie ein Pfeil.
Ich stand an dem Gestade und sah in süßer Ruh
Des muntern Fischleins Bade im klaren Bächlein zu.

La la la la la la

It's a song about a trout

La la. La la la la la

A song about a trout.

The music is so bubbly

Like water in a brook.

It takes a nasty turn when you have a second look

The story turns quite dark when you understand the words.

Sorry to wreck it for you, but here's the truth of it.

A fisherman is watching, from by the shore,

He baits his fly, he swirls his rod, casts the line and then the trout

Is hooked, it struggles bravely, but soon it is caught and reeled in.

This ending's not so happy especially for the trout.

This ending's no so jolly especially for the trout.

The narrator's rooting for the fish.

But it dies in the end.

Rastlose Liebe

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

(translation: Allison Charney)

Dem Schnee, dem Regen,
Dem Wind entgegen,
Im Dampf der Klüfte,
Durch Nebeldüfte,
Immer zu! Immer zu!
Ohne Rast und Ruh!

Lieber durch Leiden
Wollt' ich mich schlagen,
Als so viel Freuden
Des Lebens ertragen.
Alle das Neigen
Von Herzen zu Herzen,
Ach, wie so eigen
Schaffet es Schmerzen!

Wie soll ich flieh'n?
Wälderwärts zieh'n?
Alles vergebens!
Krone des Lebens,
Glück ohne Ruh,
Liebe, bist du!

Into the snow, the rain
And the wind
Through steaming chasms
and scented mists
Ever onward! Ever onward!
Without rest

I would prefer to suffer
By tormenting myself
Than through such joy
Endure life
This affection
Of one heart for another
Ah, how peculiarly
It creates torment and pain!

How shall I flee?
Escape towards the wilderness?
All is lost!
Crown of life
Happiness without rest
Love, is you!