Recital Papers   School of Music

Summer 8-2022

Love Is Complicated: Examining Songs of Love Lost and Won for Soprano Voice

Margaret Anna Collier
Belmont University, Maggie.collier@pop.Belmont.edu

LOVE IS COMPLICATED:
EXAMINING SONGS OF LOVE LOST AND WON FOR SOPRANO VOICE

By
MARGARET COLLIER

A RECITAL PAPER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music Vocal Performance
in the School of Music
of the College of Music and Performing Arts
Belmont University

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

August 2022

Submitted by Margaret Collier in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Vocal Performance.

Accepted on behalf of the Graduate Faculty of the School of Music by the Mentoring Committee:

___7/6/22_____
Date

Virginia C. Lamothe
_____
Virginia Christy Lamothe, Ph.D.
Major Mentor

Ted D. Wylie, DM
_____
Ted D. Wylie, D.M.
Second Mentor

___6/30/22_____
Date

Jeremy S. Lane, Ph.D.
_____
Jeremy S. Lane, Ph.D.
Ex-Officio Member

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mentors, Dr. Virginia Lamothe and Dr. Ted Wylie, for their constructive and detailed feedback on my writing. Through their efforts and encouragement, I have become a better writer and researcher. They have helped me find a love for reading and writing about all the aspects of music. Thank you both for all the hours you spent reading each chapter. Thank you to Dr. Lamothe for all the hours in your office going over each piece in detail.

I would like to thank Dr. Kristi Whitten for all her support and teachings the past three years at Belmont. With her help, I have grown in my musical understanding, performance abilities, and technique. She has always been there to help me, encourage me, and push me when I needed it. Thank you for always stepping in when I needed you and having my back.

I would like to thank Alessandra Volpi for all the countless hours she spent with me in the practice room and in my lessons, ensuring that I always understood and knew my word-for-word and poetic translations of each song. Alessandra encouraged me to always think about how the piano played into what I was singing, and she has been the best duet partner. Thank you for always finding me when I lost my rhythm.

I would also like to thank my parents, Jim and Kathy Collier, for supporting me during some of the hardest and most edifying three years of my life. I would not be here today without them. Thank you to my family and my friends for all your constant

support, hand holding, and understanding every time I said I had to decline plans because I had to work on this paper. Thank you to all my coworkers for cheering me on as I went to take exams or finish big papers. Thank you to James Draeger for sitting quietly with me and keeping me company as I worked on this and making sure I was fed when I got too focused. How blessed am I to have such a network of love and support?

Contents

Introduction

This vocal recital paper will examine songs about relationships. It will focus on songs that feature various kinds of relationships, from romantic relationships that are either reciprocated or one-sided to the relationship between man and nature. The kinds of relationships featured are complex and require an examination of various other factors for each song to uncover the true nature of the relationship that is sung about. The repertoire represented in this paper was carefully and specifically chosen to represent my technical abilities, strengths, and stamina as the performer. These pieces represent an understanding of repertoire that spans several centuries of Western musical history. The composers I have studied are George Handel (1685-1759), Franz Schubert (1797-1828), Charles Gounod (1818-1893), Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835), Claude Debussy (1862-1918), and Amy Beach (1867-1944). I wrote about each of these pieces in detail, with each focus varying from piece to piece as is dictated by the nature of the groupings.

In chapter one I explore how historical character study helped me create an informed picture of the character, Atalanta, from *Serse* by Handel. I researched the opera and its reception to gain context of what audiences have enjoyed or not enjoyed about the opera and the role of Atalanta. I used historical context as well as context clues from the

opera to form a full character history of Atalanta to successfully perform her in an engaging way.

In chapter two I discuss how Schubert uses his compositional setting to elaborate on the poetic texts that he has chosen to set. He uses the composition to help paint clear pictures of the songs' settings and to elaborate on the emotion in the scene. This is a technique that David Lewin calls a "poem build upon a poem" in his article, "*Auf dem Flusse:* Image and Background in a Schubert Song" (1982, 47). This article plays a key role in establishing the terminology later used to delve into the settings of each song.

In chapter three I return to how historical performance is important to research while preparing an operatic role successfully and is especially important in preparing "Marguerite" from Gounod's *Faust.* Because *Faust* is so popular in the western operatic repertoire, it is important to research performances that have been well-received, in addition to those that have not been received well. This information deepened my understanding of what makes a successful Marguerite while I also put my own personal character study into my performance of Marguerite.

Chapter four focuses on the *bel canto* singing technique. This technique is the foundation for healthy singing and learning these songs helped me to gain a greater understanding and mastery of this technique. These songs also feature compositions that assist in crafting engaging, passionate characters that audiences greatly enjoy.

Chapter five features an exploration of Debussy's "Green" and "Spleen" from *Ariettes oubliées.* It highlights a brief discussion of French art song in the second half of

the nineteenth century and the Symbolist poetic movement. Then the chapter discusses how Debussy uses Symbolism in his compositions to expand and explain the Symbolist poetic text of each song. Discovering the heart of the emotion and meaning of each song requires this understanding of Symbolism for an accurate performance.

Finally, in chapter six, I discuss Amy Beach as a female composer who was able to successfully produce her art while maintaining a respectable reputation in society at her time. As the only female composer featured in my recital, I was able to connect with her compositions on a personal level. I was also able to use my skills as a musician analyze and comprehend her settings.

Chapter 1

***Un cenno leggiadretto* and Historical Character Study**

"Un cenno leggiadretto" is an aria sung by the character Atalanta in Handel's opera *Serse* (1738). In learning the role of Atalanta, I started by doing research on *Serse,* both as an opera and as a character. One of the last operas that Handel composed before focusing on choral works and oratorios was *Serse*. It was first performed in April 1738 and was based on an Italian libretto that had previously been set by Silvio Stampiglia (1664-1725) for an opera of the same name in 1694. Handel took more than just the libretto from this previous opera: he also took many of the characters, plot points, and some of the melodies that composer Giovanni Bononcini (1670-747) wrote in the 1694 iteration of the story, as well as Francesco Cavalli's 1655 opera based on the same story. This was not uncommon for Handel, as he frequently reused or "borrowed" ideas from other composers and even himself from time to time to help him produce his works on schedule (Heller 1949, 242). In researching the role, I referenced various essays and books on the history of the opera *Serse*, Handel's history as an opera composer, and the reception of *Serse* when it first premiered.

The first production failed to capture audiences, and many found it difficult to understand as it incorporated aspects of the new popular Italian genre *opera buffo,* or comic opera, that included more speech-like recitative and featured humorous plots that were unfamiliar to English audiences (Dean 2006, 140). By the time Handel premiered

Serse, the English audience had grown to expect an entirely serious, tragic piece, not one that mixed tragedy with comedy or high- and low-class characters as *opera buffo* typically does. It also featured short, one-part arias instead of the typical *opera seria* long, three-part *da capo*, or "return to the beginning," arias. With the arias being so short, the public was unsure where the recitative ended and the arias began, confusing them regarding where they should place their focus (Dean 2006, 140). Regarded as a flop for almost two hundred years, *Serse* did not return to the stage again until 1924 when there was a resurgence in interest around Handel's lesser-known works. This time, the audience enjoyed the short arias that seamlessly flow from and into the recitative.

Researching the original story of *Serse* revealed which characters were real and recorded in history and which—like Romilda and Atalanta—were made up for dramatic and comedic effect. In realizing that Atalanta was a fictional character, I had to ask the question of "why?" What does Atalanta add to the story as a character, and why is she important to the plot? The answer that I came up with was that she helps to move the plot along by spreading misinformation to cause strife between Romilda and Arsemene. Because this is her main function in the plot, it would be easy to write her off as the main antagonist of the entire opera, but she is never fully seen as the villain of the story. In *Serse,* Atalanta is introduced as the sister of Romilda and daughter of Ariodate, a war hero that has served under King Serse's campaign against the Greeks. Romilda is in love with Serse's half-brother, Arsemene, and Atalanta fancies herself also in love with Arsamene. Serse believes himself to be in love with Romilda, despite his betrothal to Princess Amastre. When Serse discovers that his brother Arsamene is in love with Romilda, Serse exiles Arsamene from Persia in the hopes that the devastated Romilda

will eventually fall in love with him. Atalanta sees Arsamene's exile as her chance to persuade Romilda to marry the King Serse and forget about Arsamene. This leaves Arsamene vulnerable to Atalanta's advances. When she cannot dissuade Romilda from her firm loyalty to Arsamene, Atalanta resorts to trickery and gives either false or purposely misleading letters to Serse, Romilda, and Arsamene. This leads to Serse believing that Romilda is in love with him. Romilda believes that Arsamene has been unfaithful and abandoned her, and in turn Arsamene believes that Romilda has been unfaithful to him. However, all is set right by the end of the opera and Romilda and Arsamene are married before Serse can force Romilda to marry him. When confronted about her crimes, Atalanta claims that she was only trying to help the couple. Romilda does not fully believe her, even though she forgives Atalanta for all her deceit. Atalanta decides to set her sights on a new man after initially being upset by Arsamene's final rejection.

There is much about Atalanta that the audience—and performers—do not know about her. Handel never provided a full character history or very much description of her, other than that she is supposed to be a fun distraction and the character that causes the comical misunderstandings in the opera. She is a great liar and her music is written jovially, as if she does not take much in life seriously. Her main aria, "Un Cenno Leggiadretto (A Pretty Little Gesture)" is composed entirely of jumps and melismatic runs that mimic laughter and joyous squeals. Her introduction aria, "Si, Si, mio ben, si si (Yes, yes, my love, yes, yes)" shows her mocking how serious her sister, Romilda, takes her relationship with Arsemene, while simultaneous wishing that Arsemene loved her the way that he loves Romilda. Her ability to be jovial and silly while hiding her true feelings

is a main character trait that is showcased throughout the opera. She is someone who has deep feelings but tries to avoid them when she can. Seeing Atalanta in this light led to more questions like "What could have made her this way?" Because Handel did not provide any information on this, I had to read between the lines and invent Atalanta's character history.

Because Atalanta's mother is never mentioned in the opera, it was decided that she must have died, possibly when Atalanta and Romilda were quite young, leaving them to be raised by their father who was often gone on military campaigns. This would explain the lack of interaction between Atalanta and her father in the opera, as she may resent him for being gone for much of her childhood. Atalanta's age and birth order were the next things to consider in uncovering who this character is. She is clearly of marriageable age, and she insinuates that she has had many suitors in her life. However, she is not married, signifying that something has gone wrong in each of these courtships. Perhaps it was because she was overshadowed by Romilda? Knowing that Romilda is Atalanta's younger sister and is also considered the great beauty of the family, Atalanta's resentment towards Romilda is understandable. It would also explain why Atalanta would attempt to steal away Arsemene, so that she could be the first to marry. The audience does see her attempt to be a good sister to Romilda at first and be happy for her, even in "Si si, mio ben (Yes, yes, my love)." Atalanta tries to espouse Romilda's good qualities of being unendingly loyal to Arsemene, even if these praises are twinged with jealousy and the audience previously hears in her recitative that she wishes Romilda would be unfaithful so that Arsemene would love her.

Prior to "Un cenno leggiadretto," Serse has exiled his brother Arsemene, so that Arsemene's love, Romilda, will marry Serse. Arsemene leaves, but accuses Romilda of being unfaithful while she claims that she will never be unfaithful to him. Atalanta sees this as an opportunity to create a misunderstanding between Arsemene and Romilda so that she can make Arsemene fall in love with her instead of Romilda. She tries to convince her sister that it would be more prudent for her to marry King Serse and not to worry about Arsemene, as he will find another to love. She suggests that Arsemene may have already fallen in love with another, and Romilda understands her insinuation to mean that Atalanta wants Arsemene for herself. Romilda sings an aria calling her sister out for her vanity and obsession with her looks. Atalanta is unphased by Romilda's criticism and proceeds to sing "Un cenno leggiadretto."

In "Un cenno leggiadretto," Atalanta is both speaking to herself and to the audience. This aria is typically staged with Atalanta by herself on the stage trying on various articles of clothing. It serves as the main piece of music from the opera that provides clues into who Atalanta is at her core. She explicitly states what she thinks is important: getting a man with a coy smile and coquettish demeanor. On a surface level of the lyrics, one can generalize that she is vain and selfish in her desires and only cares about gaining the attention of the opposite sex. It is very important that she find someone to marry her that she can love, even if that means taking Romilda's love. At the same time, she wants to have fun in all things. She does not take herself very seriously, as is evident in the composition of the vocal line, which mimics laughter.

Throughout the aria, the vocal line is made up of mostly eighth- and sixteenth-note phrases with only one measure containing successive quarter-notes. The melody

frequently jumps in third and fifth intervals. Handel also includes some sixteenth-note neighbor groups before Atalanta's fourth and fifth interval jumps down in the vocal line. Her melismatic sections are short compared to other Handel arias, only lasting a maximum of one and a half measures, and are all on the last "a" syllable of the word "innamorar," heightening the sensation that Atalanta is laughing at herself. There is a bit of syncopated rhythm, particularly leading up to the short melismatic phrases, which all contribute to the bouncy, carefree nature that Atalanta is trying to convey. In this aria, she is having fun with herself; as a da capo aria, there are many places to add trills for ornamentation in the reprise of section A, which add to the laughter sensation of the piece. Handel wrote a specific trill to go over a repetition of the word "riso" ("laugh") in the second half of the A section, signifying that he desired for the aria to be an inside joke between Atalanta and the audience.

In staging this aria for Belmont's spring opera production in 2021, this scene was placed in Atalanta and Romilda's shared room, a setting that is frequently done in modern performances of the opera. It was decided that Atalanta would visually demonstrate exactly what she meant when she sang, "e tutti io li so far" ("and I know how to do them all") in regard to ways to catch a man's attention. Having specific actions associated with each section of the aria helped give the aria a path and a story. Because the text, "un cenno leggiadretto, un riso vezzosetto, un moto di pupille può far innamorar" ("A pretty little gesture, a charming little smile, a movement of the eye can make one fall in love") is repeated in variation throughout the aria with piano interludes, without a clear action, the aria can become repetitive and dull.

One could portray Atalanta as a spiteful and conniving character. It is difficult to find many redeeming qualities in her. However, the audience can see that she does care for her sister in various scenes in the opera, such as when she protects her from Serse's wrath. The audience also sees that she cares about what Romilda thinks about her; in her final aria, she is furious and desperate that Romilda and Arsemene have both forsaken her. With both of these events in mind, I believe that Atalanta does care about her sister, but she also believes that she is truly in love with Arsemene and Romilda is an obstacle in Atalanta's way to happiness. Therefore, she does not want Romilda to be hurt—she only wants Romilda to release Arsemene from their relationship. This adds complexity to Atalanta and prevents her from being perceived as a simple, vain character. She is more than her vanity and desire to be loved—Atalanta is a character who I believe feels lonely most of her life and believes the only way to not feel lonely is to be married.

This information is vital in creating a full picture of who Atalanta is. While only one aspect of her character is shown in "Un cenno leggiadretto," there must be an understanding that there is more to this character than a conniving villain intent on stealing the man of her sister. Researching the history of the opera helped give a foundational understanding of Atalanta as a character, and clues to understand her with all the missing information that is needed to fully characterize her. While Handel gave little information on her explicitly, actresses playing Atalanta can craft her character based on the information they can mine in the opera itself, as well as other performances of *Serse*. All of this was taken into consideration, along with a study of the score, to create my performance of Atalanta and make her into a dynamic character.

Chapter 2

Reflection of Man's Relationship to Nature in Music

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) wrote over six hundred Lieder in his short life, with many settings of texts that explore man's relationship with the divine and nature. In each of the chosen pieces for this section of my recital, there is a clear relationship between nature and the text of the poem. In addition, Schubert chooses to illustrate this relationship and deepen it through his musical composition and treatment of the accompanying piano. In each of these pieces, the piano works with the voice to paint a musical picture for the audience. In some Lieder, such as "Nacht und Traüme" (Night and Dreams), "Am see" (By the Lake), and "Im Abendrot" (In Evening), the piano sets the atmosphere and emotional mood of the piece, while in "Im Frühling" (In Springtime) the piano guides the vocal part with the text as it follows the speaker's walk through the familiar terrain of a hillside in spring. This hill is one where the speaker previously enjoyed the spring season in their youth with a love that is now lost to them.

In each of these songs, the voice and piano act as duet partners. The piano is not simply accompanying, as Schubert wrote it to be the interpretation of the text. David Lewin calls this use of the piano part a "poem built upon a poem" in his article, "*Auf dem Flusse:* Image and Background in a Schubert Song" (Lewin 1982, 47). Lewin goes in detail discussing how Schubert's Lieder demonstrate an essential relationship between the music and texts that elevates the music to be regarded as a poem on its own, separated

from the text (Lewin 1982, 49). According to Lewin, "a Schubert song takes a structural premise not only musical syntax, as it was understood at the time, but also the structure of the individual text at hand" (Lewin 1982, 48). He goes on to claim that in each Schubert song, there is more than just the world of the poem; it is like the song is a poem itself based on the poem that it sets to music. To properly capture the essence of these songs, I must understand how the music and the text operate independently and together. To do this, I explored the poetry and its origins, creating my own sense of the scene the speaker is seeing and backstory if need be. Then I examined the piano accompaniment and explore how the vocal melody interacts with the piano. Finally, I examined the music combined with the text to understand the full picture of the Lieder.

"Im Frühling's" walking pace illustrates the speaker's journey as they sit on the hillside they formerly shared with their beloved. The speaker journeys through this blooming area and reminisces about their former lover, with each sight of flowers and trees bringing back the fond memories. The piano, too, follows this stream of consciousness recollection with the speaker. When the speaker is confronted with how everything is the same in nature, while they are separated from their love, the piece turns to minor briefly before returning to the original key as the speaker wishes wistfully that they could go back and sing all summerlong for their beloved as a songbird on the tree.

For "Im Frühling," I focused on having a backstory and a poetic translation of the text in addition to the literal translation. Much of the poetic translation is influenced by the mood of the accompaniment. One example of this influence is found where the music highlights the idea of "change" when it shifts from major to minor in the third stanza, "es wandeln nur sich Will und Wahn" ("Only will and delusion change"). The piano walks

with the speaker as you go through the piece. Learning this song presented various challenges in the learning process. The composition is a varied strophic form, with each verse changing in text and slightly changing in melody and rhythm. This varied strophic form reinforces the passage of time and changing of the season, as well as the changes in the relationship between the singer and the subject of the song. It highlights the loss of a love that was once blooming but is now gone forever. The words of each verse are slightly similar, as they reflect the speaker reminiscing on their youth and returning to a specific time in their youth. The walking pace prevents the singer from being able to hold any tension in the tongue and larynx while requiring a deep connection to the breath support so that the singer can complete each phrase. In performing the piece, it is important to know the end destination of the piece where the text becomes wistful, but the performer must experience each phrase as if the thoughts are occurring to me for the first time. As the piano plays the prelude, the performer must see the hillside the text describes, where "Der Himmel ist so klar/Das Lüftchen spielt im grünen Tal" (The sky is so clear/The breezes play in the green valley").

Similarly, while singing "Nacht und Traüme," it is important to be able to visualize the starry, peaceful night that the piano depicts. Set at a *Langsam,* or slow, pace, "Nacht und Traüme's" accompaniment plays continuous arpeggios, creating a song where "melody and rhythm together trace a line, which, when followed by the listener, affords a sensation of inner release," as described by the great twentieth century German baritone and Lied scholar, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (1977, 219). The melody floats above the piano's arpeggiation, and the singer must make the voice sound as if it is effortlessly flowing and gliding to each note. This is not an easy feat, as Schubert wrote

the vocal line to soar in each phrase before slowly descending back down into the lower head or upper chest voice, depending on the key that the singer has chosen. In order to successfully accomplish this, I visualized my voice coming out and flowing like water, with a consistent and constant circulation of air must be flowing in my body. I visualized breathing in while exhaling, which is a tool to help engage the breath support in the lower back and outer ribs so that I lean on the *appoggio,* or balanced breath. In addition, while the song is marked *piano,* or quiet, for dynamics, I thought about being light instead of being quiet, as trying to sing quietly can add tension from the throat muscles attempting to limit the flow of air to of my voice. Therefore, in this passage I increased my flow of air and leaned further into my *appoggio* so that I am able to sing at a *piano,* or quiet, dynamic for these gentle phrases.

A similar connection to the *appoggio* is important in singing "Am see." Similar to "Im Frühling," "Am see's" phrases are long and connected, with movement similar to that of "Nacht und Traüme." Schubert set the text to a melody that repeatedly dips down into the chest voice before leaping back up to the upper head voice, mimicking how waves dip and then crash up on the shoreline of a lake. Similarly, the piano line is in constant motion, propelling the vocal line forward like the current of the waters. Schubert included moments where the singer stops mimicking the waves and instead breaks into awe of the multitude of the stars each time they say, "ach, Gar fiele" ("Oh, so many"), where the vocal line sustains and repeats each time it is uttered, as the speaker cannot believe the multitude of stars that flame in the sky.

This reverence of nature and state of being awestruck by the beauty of God's creation is echoed in "Im Abendrot." The piano introduction of this Lied features rolling,

grand chords with light, delicate trills mimicking the evening birds in the trees as the sun

begins to set over a field. The voice must shimmer in the vocal line and combine with the

piano to paint the rays of sun that stream through the clouds or trees. The speaker of this

song repeats in various phrases how in awe they are of the level of detail and beauty that

God has put into the smallest of details, such as the "den Staub mit Schimmer" ("the dust

with shimmer") that floats in the room. All of these beautiful details lead the speaker to

ask "Könnt' ich kalgen, könnt' ich zagen? Irre sein an dir und mir?" ("Could I complain,

could I be apprehensive? Could I lose my faith in you and in myself?"), while the vocal

line builds steadily both in dynamic sand pitch during this line of questioning, showing

the speaker's growth towards their next realization: "Nein, ich will im Busen tragen/

Deinen Himmel schon allhier" ("No, I will carry in my heart, your heaven which is here).

The vocal line triumphs with the exclamatory "Deinen Himmel." Dieskau perfectly

encapsulates how the piano and voice work together in this song to bring out and expand

upon the overwhelming emotion that is in the text. He says:

> In some mysterious way, emotions themselves are given shape, while the
> religious spirit underlying the music is that of a child of nature, whose
> gods are the stars, the mountains, the seasons, and the flowers. The feeling
> of enraptured silence in the presence of such natural phenomena as
> expressed here by the gentle signs which accompany the setting of the sun
> dominates Schubert's purely religious song. (Dieskau 1977, 236)

Dieskau not only summarizes how Schubert encapsulates the beauty of nature in

his songs in this passage, but he also likens the idea of celebrating nature's beauty in song

as something so ecstatic that the song itself becomes "religious" or akin to a religious

experience. Schubert's skill in composing music that fully represents moments where one

is experiencing nature in a religious sense is on full display in both this song and many of

his other works.

Understanding how the music interacts with the poetry leads to a greater understanding of the meaning of each of these songs. This understanding helps to create a captivating performance and gives layers to each song for the performer. In understanding and instilling my own personal meaning into each song, I can give an intimate and earnest performance, even when singing them in a large hall. Because these songs were meant to be performed in intimate spaces, it is vital to create this intimate and personal feeling. Understanding these "poems on poems" make these songs dear to me and help for me to perform them in a manner that they can become dear to others.

Chapter 3

***The Jewel Song* and Performing Marguerite**

"The Jewel Song" from *Faust* by Charles Gounod is both the main aria of

Gounod's character, Marguerite, and one of the most showcased arias by great sopranos.

The opera *Faust* is performed every year by at least one opera company. Almost every

lyric soprano has featured the song either in a recital, concert, or by performing the role

of Marguerite. There are many visual and audio recordings of its performance, as well as

written descriptions and reviews of each singer. From the performances Marie

Carvalho—the singer who originated the role—to other singers like Renée Fleming, there

is no shortage on information describing what critics and audiences enjoy about the aria

and the soprano singing it, as well as information about the staging of the opera itself.

Learning this aria provided an opportunity to research many of these performances and

reviews. Through this research I was able to discover which characterizations of

Marguerite I felt were appropriate to include in a performance. I was also able to learn

what audiences appreciate about Marguerite and what has made her story and the opera

Faust so popular in Western opera.

To begin my research of Marguerite as a character, I turned first to Gounod's

source material: Goethe's tragic play of the same name, *Faust.* Goethe's play is based on

the first literary telling of the Faust story, the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* by Johann

Spies in 1587. Goethe also took inspiration what little is known about the real sixteenth-century magician and alchemist Johann Georg Faust and German folktales

Marguerite is introduced by Goethe as Gretchen. Gretchen is a local village girl with whom the main character, Heinrich Faust, is in love with. Faust has bartered a deal with the devil whom Goethe names "Mephistopheles" to get "everything he would want," including the love of beautiful Gretchen. Faust gives her jewels and Mephistopheles convinces Gretchen's neighbor, Marthe, to help Faust seduce Gretchen. After she falls for Faust, naïve Gretchen is manipulated by Faust and Mephistopholes to make a series of bad decisions. The consequences prove to be fatal to those she holds dear. She accidentally kills her mother with a "sleeping potion" Faust gives to her so that they may be alone. Not long after, Gretchen discovers that she is pregnant with his child. Faust abandons her when the child is born, and when her brother, Valentine, returns home and learns of his sister's fate, he challenges Faust to a duel in which Faust kills Valentine with the help of Mephistopholes dark power. Gretchen, driven mad from losing her virtue and all her loved ones, drowns her child and is convicted of murder. She willingly goes to her death as her punishment for going against God, even though Faust and Mephistopheles offer her an escape from her prison. This ultimate sacrifice redeems her in Heaven's eyes and she is forgiven for eternity.

Throughout the plot, Gretchen shows her naiveté by trusting that Faust's love is as permanent and unselfish as hers and that all people have the best intentions at heart. She is the only truly good person in the play, even though she commits horrible crimes. Considered the main victim of the work, Gretchen is not condemned for her actions by

scholars, the audience, or Heaven in the end, because all her actions were motivated by her natural instincts instead of bad intentions.

Gounod followed much of this plot in his opera; however, he did change a few main plot points, beginning with changing Gretchen's name to Marguerite. In the opera, the first glimpse of Marguerite the audience sees is at the end of Act Two for barely a moment. She appears briefly with a group of villagers waltzing and she rejects Faust's offer of a dance. As soon as she appears, she disappears, leaving Faust enchanted by her and wanting her even more. He comes to her garden at the beginning of Act Three to shower her with praise and instructs Méphistophélès to procure her a gift, just as it was in Goethe's play. The gift remains the box of jewels, and he positions it right next to some flowers left for Marguerite by Siébel, Faust's rival, for her affection. Marguerite is mesmerized by the jewels and begins to picture herself draped in them like the daughter of a king ("C'est la fille d'un roi"). This is the famous "Jewel Song."

In both the play and the Gounod's opera, Marguerite is portrayed as an innocent, demure village girl who becomes enraptured and tempted by jewels and the promise of love. In the opera, her music represents much of her innocence. Martin Cooper explains this in his article exploring Gounod and his influence on French music, comparing *Faust's* Marguerite to the characters in some of Gounod's contemporaries' operas. Cooper States that "despite her false flowers and her falser jewels she has a simple heart, and after the heroism and devilry of Meyerbeer and Rossini a simple heart was very engaging," showing that her pure intentions are evident in both her character and music (1940, 54). This is especially true in "The Jewel Song," as Marguerite goes through the chest of treasures laid out for her by Méphistophélès. Each time she dons another piece of

treasure, she is amazed at how unlike herself she appears and states that she cannot recognize herself. Due to her innocence, she assumes that Faust's love is as pure as her own. Again, as in the Goethe play, Marguerite is ultimately abandoned by Faust and starts to lose her mind as she reflects on all the things that she lost due to her actions including the murder of her infant. She is condemned for all of her actions by those around her and those she loves, but she ultimately feels that this is her just punishment as she is truly remorseful for all her actions. This is what ultimately saves her from eternal condemnation and what caused the original audience of the play to feel sympathy for her. It also helps the audience believe in the justification of her redemption at the end of the play. After doing this literary character study of Marguerite, I turned to reviews and depictions of Marguerite and *Faust* as an opera. I wanted to know what was received well about the character and what could cause and audience to reject a soprano as a convincing Marguerite.

The original performance of the opera debuted at the Théâtre Lyrique on March 19, 1859. It contained spoken dialogue and featured the Théâtre's manager's wife, Marie Miolan-Carvalho, as Marguerite (Sternfeld 1992, 1). It very quickly became an international success with the help of heavy promotion from Gounod's publisher, Antoine Choudens. Within four years, the opera had premiered in Vienna, London, Berlin, and New York with audiences absolutely falling in love with the music and story. More than that, audiences loved Marguerite—so much so that when the Dresden Semperoper debuted the work, they billed it as *Margarethe* rather than *Faust*. A review from the original debut from *La Revue des Deux Mondes* by Scudo calls Marguerite "touching," and notes that in Act One, "a small pastoral symphony which announces the arrival of

day, an early morning choir that sings behind the scenes and some orchestral details during Marguerite's vision are the only remarkable things about this first act, which is hardly more than a prologue" (*Revue des Deux Mondes,* April 1, 1859). This is high praise for a character who is seen for the briefest of moments in the first act. Each time the reviewer brings up a scene or song in which Marguerite is involved, they give nothing but praise to Gounod for composing something beautiful and touching for the character. In fact, the reviewer seems so infatuated with the characterization of Marguerite that when she is absent in Act Five during Faust's fantastical adventures with Méphistophélès, they write, "I do not find anything to report in the fifth act except a few passages of the prison duo between Faust and Marguerite" (*Revue des Deux Mondes,* April 1, 1859). The praise of the character in the review was no less than the praise of the soprano, Marie Carvalho, who, according to the review, "revealed comedy qualities in the role of Marguerite" and "made up this fasting character, blonde as wheat, with a mixture of grace, finesse, and qualities that seem to be mutually exclusive" (*Revue des Deux Mondes,* April 1, 1859). Their praise does not extend to Barbot's Faust, whom the reviewer says "does all he can in the person Faust to be forgiven for his bad tenor voice" (*Revue des Deux Mondes,* April 1, 1859). Overall, the review is glowing of Gounod and his partners, Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, as well as Marie Carvalho and the character of Marguerite.

Modern day reviews show that what critics and audiences alike praise in any performance of *Faust* are similar qualities that Carvalho brought to the character. In a review from the Lyric Opera of Chicago's staging in 2018, Lawrence B. Johnson of Classical Voice North America calls Ailyn Pérez's Marguerite "effervescent…Pérez's

singing was agile, bright, and elegantly contoured" (*Classical Voice North America*, March 6, 2018). When Marina Poplavskaya performed Marguerite in the Metropolitan Opera in 2011, Corinna da Fonesca-Wollheim argued that her timbre was too dark and knowing for "such a girlish role," but praises her for throwing "herself into the part wholeheartedly with vocal shadings to match" *(The Classical Review,* November 30, 2011). Previously, Renée Fleming, who also performed the role at the Metropolitan Opera in 1997, was praised for singing the role, "with consistent polished tone, with no forcing (or need for forcing), and with beautiful phrasing. It went along with a subdued and graceful stage manner" (*The New York Times,* March 24, 1997). All these reviews focus on each actresses' portrayal of Marguerite's "Jewel Song," the song where one gets the most of Marguerite's character aside from her assumption to heaven. They all seek for an easy grace for Marguerite and a voice that is believably naïve enough to be tricked into temptation by love. As Fonesca-Wollheim says, the role is supposed to be "girlish," which supports agile, bright voices such as Pérez. It also calls for consistent tone, as many of Marguerite's arias and duets call for her to extend into a soprano's higher *passaggi,* or breaking point between voice registers. If a soprano does not pace herself on the "Jewel Song," she may be exhausted for the rest of the opera. If she does not impress enough on it, she will be a failure as Marguerite.

This leads to a lot of pressure in learning this song, as well as much thought and consideration in where to place it on the recital order. As mentioned before, the aria is very vocally demanding, with quick movement and long phrases as well as many phrases that go into the higher *passaggi*, chest voice, and head voice. The vocal range necessitated by this aria is broad and the voice cannot have any strain or "forcing" in it,

both for the enjoyment of the audience and for the longevity of the singer's voice. In addition, the French language is notoriously difficult for English singers and the proper pronunciation can at times interfere with the *bel canto* technique. French pronunciation in speaking can require the mouth to be in exactly the opposite position than you would like in *bel canto* technique, which focuses on horizontal and forward vowels. For me, French provides its biggest challenge in combatting my tendency to sound either very "Southern" or very Spanish when I speak the language. Neither provides success when performing this aria. However, learning this aria greatly improved my ability to sing in French and my pronunciation after constantly reciting the text with my teacher and accompanist over the course of a year.

For placement in the recital, there was much consideration of what other songs would need to go after the aria was performed, how it falls on the timeline of composition for each of my pieces, the high energy of the piece, and if I would be vocally fatigued after singing it. Because it is such a high energy aria, it was decided that it would be best for it to occur in the middle of the recital at a point where I would be able to walk off stage afterwards and collect myself before finishing out my program. This way I would be able to gather myself, mentally and vocally, before diving into some of the more rhythmically challenging pieces of my recital.

I decided to portray Marguerite in a similar manner as the successful portrayals before me. She would be sweet and innocent, and in utter shock over her discoveries in the jewel case. Because she was raised a simple village maiden that was perfectly content with her life, I do not think that she would have ever thought to envision herself rich and heavily bejeweled, even in a daydream or fantasy as a child. She was happy with her lot

in life. When she finds a jewel case filled with riches that she has never even dreamed about owning addressed to her, I determined she would be in utter shock, especially at seeing the jewels on herself. I resolved that she would gain more confidence in herself as she explores the case and gives herself a moment to indulge in the fantasy. The end section of when the music breaks into a new pattern leading up to the aria's grand finale, I decided would be Marguerite having the absolute time of her life and starting to genuinely see herself as being worthy of these gifts. As I ascend on the final "C'est la fille d'un roi" (like the daughter of a king), I imagined she would be finally coming into her own and becoming overwhelmed with happiness and excitement at the thought of Faust seeing her looking so beautiful, thus prompting the trill and exclamatory leap on "Qu'on salut au passage" (One must bow to her as she passes) at the end of the aria.

Each layer of research previously mentioned was required to fully understand Marguerite as a character and to successfully perform such an important role in the Western Operatic repertoire. I had to research how others have historically performed the role to fully grasp what audiences and critics do and do not enjoy about the role. I was fortunate to learn from others' mistakes in how they portrayed her as a character and not repeat them. I also had to understand the source material for the opera to create my own interpretation of Marguerite so that I was not simply mimicking previously successful sopranos. I needed to put my own personal interpretation of the character into my performance so that Marguerite compelled my audience. While historical performance and source material were the foundation of my performance, I ultimately had to decide who Marguerite was to me and make my own choices for how to perform her with this historical information.

Chapter 4

Bel Canto and Crafting Characters

Bel canto, or "beautiful singing," is an Italian phrase that refers to a vocal style of Italian singing that grew in popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The technique encourages *legato*, or long, vocal lines, agility of the voice, and a deep reliance on the *appoggio*, a breathing technique that requires grounded breaths and steady flow of air for consistent tone and vibrato. Many opera singers, including me, have been taught to use *bel canto* techniques. The techniques lead to a beautiful vocal quality that allows the voice to carry throughout any concert or opera hall without additional amplification, such as microphones, but also keeps the vocal tract from sustaining any injuries that could lead to a shorter singing career. Bel canto can also be used to refer to the era when nineteenth-century Italian composers Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), and Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) flourished in their output of songs and operas. The arias of these composers are written so that I must rely on the *bel canto* basics to successfully perform them successfully without causing any vocal damage. "Per pieta bell'idol mio" (For pity, my beautiful idol), "Me voglio fa' 'na casa" (I want to build a house), and "Stornello" (Folk song) were chosen to help increase my legato lines, vocal agility, and freedom of tone, while presenting an exercise in crafting engaging characters based on the text. As discussed in my previous chapter, Schubert's songs require the piano and voice to paint the full picture of the songs' texts through music. However,

these *bel canto* arias use the piano as an ornamentation for the characters depicted in the vocal line. The accompaniment is helpful in realizing the full picture, but the meat of the characters lies in the study of the melody and the text depicted.

"Per pieta bell'idol mio" by Vincenzo Bellini, one of the most recognizable art songs of the *bel canto* era, demands its performers have a deep understanding of *appoggio* to successfully execute the legato lines written in the melody. In learning this song, I struggled initially to align my vocal tract so that my tongue was not interrupting the steady stream of air required to finish the long phrases. I also struggled to keep my jaw from moving to manipulate the sound I was producing, which altered the vocal tract and caused tension in my neck and vocal cords. I focused on learning the melody on the vowels of the words without adding the consonants until I had the vocal line fully learned. I utilized this tool to help learn exactly how much air I needed to release to successfully navigate the line without running out of air or losing any vibrato on each note. This method of learning the song caused me to mentally memorize the feeling of being connected to the appoggio for a legato line. In repeating the technique in each practice until the line was learned fully, and then again using it once the consonants were added into the practice, creates a muscle memory of what correct connection to the appoggio feels like. Once this feeling becomes the default when singing, it is easier to master the other features of bel canto technique to create a healthy, consistent sound in the voice.

The next technique that I needed to learn was consistent vocal agility that was not being manipulated by the tongue, jaw, or excess tension in the neck. "Stornello" by Giuseppe Verdi capitalizes on this kind of vocal agility in his compositions. The vocal

line features many *staccato*, or short, notes and short runs between notes to showcase the fiery and mocking nature of the character. One of my main struggles learning this song was stopping tension from my throat and tongue as I moved into higher *passagi*, or movement between registers of the voice, points in my voice. The *tessitura*, or main range of notes in which a song is composed, of "Stornello" falls right where I have a *passagi* point from my mixed chest and head register into my head register. Finding the right mixture of these two areas of my voice again required a deep connection to the appoggio learned in "Per pieta." Because the song moves quickly, this registration change must be seamless and quick, requiring the default position of breathing previously discovered in "Per pieta."

"Me voglio fa' 'na casa" by Gaetano Donizetti acts as a final test of knowledge in this technique. It requires the *legato* line from "Per pieta" and the ability to seamlessly move between voice registers while moving the voice quickly like "Stornello." It also forces me to relax my tongue while maintaining it in the proper position while singing the staccato "la la's" at the end of each phrase. Initially while learning "Me voglio," I tended to let my tongue move too much, causing the vowel to modify and the vocal cords to tense, ceasing the consistent tone and air flow. However, once the tongue tension was released, I had more vocal freedom in each of the "la la" sections and the vowel was more appropriately articulated. Once all of these factors of the bel canto technique settled into becoming my default way of singing, I was able to turn to the music and text to discover the appropriate characterization of each song.

The characterization of bel canto songs is vital to a successful performance, as the characters of bel canto are part of what initially caused these songs to be popular at the

time of composition and continues to cause them to be popular amongst audiences today. Composers of the bel canto era understood that audiences enjoyed watching dramatic, complex characters that were funny and tragic. Audiences want to feel both a connection and be entertained by characters in both art songs and operas, and Donizetti, Verdi, and Bellini capitalized on this desire. Their characters were never "one-note" or flat—they always had complex backgrounds, stories, and desires. Verdi is one of the best examples of this. His operas, including *La traviata, Rigoletto, Aida,* and *Otello*, among others, are all continuously performed in opera houses around the world, and they all feature complex characters. His female characters especially shine in this aspect, from Violetta from *La traviata* being both excited and terrified of love to Aida, who is torn between her love of her country and father and her love of Radamès, the Egyptian commander. Verdi, Bellini, and Donizetti let their characters have internal conflict that is explored verbally through their music throughout their operas. This internal conflict and complex emotions continue to captivate audiences today and are found in each composers' art songs as well.

A prime example of this is in "Stornello," where the text depicts a lover scorned. The text reflects the conversation the speaker is having with the lover. The lover says that they do not love the speaker, therefore the speaker no longer is in love with the lover. The speaker uses various metaphors to show how unphased they are by the lover's changed affection, but the punctuation of the melody with staccato notes hints that the speaker angered by the change in attention. The speaker constantly repeats "Son libera di me, padrone è ognuno, Serva di tutti e non servo a nessuno" (I myself am free, everyone is my master, I am servant of all and servant of none), which suggests that the speaker may have sensed the lover's distance and sought out a new lover. Like Atalanta in Handel's

Serse, the speaker is trying to convey that they are not bothered by losing this love and know how to gain another quickly. It is the nineteenth-century equivalent to Ariana Grande's hit song, "Thank u, next."

An equally strong, independent character can be found in "Me voglio fa' 'na casa," in which the speaker is determined to build a house for their love. The speaker wants to build a house surrounded by the sea, built with precious metals and stones so that it shines and reflects the beauty of their beloved. The unbridled joy and excitement Donizetti captures in the composition of the vocal line adds to the characterization. He helps the singer interpret the song by adding variations in each verse as clues. For example, in the second verse, when the speaker discusses making the stairs out of gold and silver ("D'oro e d'argiento li scaline fare"), the line modulates from major to minor, highlighting the wistful dreaminess of the house that the speaker envisions and signaling that they understand it is a fantasy. However, the fantasy sweeps them away again when the "tra la la le la" chorus returns and the speaker continues to envision their love leaning out of the balcony to rival the sun ("Quanno Nannella mia se va facciare/Ognuno dice 'mò sponta lu sole").

Strong, complex, and fun characters are the hallmark of bel canto vocal compositions, but singers must first understand the bel canto technique before they are able to embody the characters they craft. Without an understanding of how to lean on the appoggio; free the jaw, tongue, and neck from tension; and finding the healthy resonance space needed for each of these songs, it would be difficult to perform them successfully. It could also lead to vocal fatigue or wear if the singer does not understand the basic *bel canto* technical requirements. However, once these techniques are learned and

implemented successfully, a world opens up for the singer in which they can create three-dimensional, complex characters that are both a joy to perform and watch. Audiences love seeing the performer engaged in fun characters, and these songs remain popular because they give the audience multi-faceted characters to watch in any performance. The *bel canto* art songs remain so popular today because they combine valuable technical teachings and captivating performance possibilities.

Chapter 5

Debussy and Symbolism

"Green" and "Spleen" from Claude Debussy's *Ariettes oubliées* are two
challenging pieces of French *mélodie,* or form of art song typically from the mid
nineteenth century, that is typically assigned to advanced vocal students. This is due to
their complex texts, dynamic settings, and use of ever-changing and intense emotions. To
learn and perform the songs successfully, I had to first research Debussy as a composer
and discover his artistic affinity with other artists of the Symbolist movement. Learning
more about Debussy's understanding of Symbolist poetry was vital for interpreting why
he chose these poems and his settings of their texts. With this information, I was able to
delve into the emotions and scenes he depicted in his compositions of "Green" and
"Spleen."

French song composed in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early
twentieth century grew away from the simple melodic genre of the "romance" and
settings of arias from French operas. More complex, dramatic, and avant-garde songs of
the *mélodie* genre became a focus for solo vocal works by composers such as Gabriel
Fauré (1845-1924), Ernest Chausson (1855-1899), Henri Duparc (1848-1933), and
Claude Debussy (1862-1918) (Meister 1980, ix). Debussy was a versatile composer
whose compositions include works for piano, strings, symphonies, an opera, and vocal

pieces. His musical development can be seen throughout the course of his life with many

of his early compositions following the traditional compositional ideas that dominated

song in the nineteenth century due to his training at the Conservatoire de Paris (Lesure

and Howat 2001, 2). He utilized sonata form and composed very traditionally

conventional *mélodies,* a form of French Romantic art song comparable to the German

Lied.

While Debussy continued to write *mélodies* and other forms of more traditional

art song, he eventually created his own style that pushed music composition towards

modern conventions. It was important to explore Debussy's style and classification as a

Symbolist instead of an Impressionist in learning "Green" and "Spleen" so that I could

understand how to interpret and learn both songs. Debussy's style included techniques

such as using the octatonic-, pentatonic-, and whole-tone scale; frequent and lengthy

pedal points; the use of parallel chords; and embracing of eastern musical ideas

(Rohinsky 1987, 24). For a time, music scholars equated Debussy's musical style with

the Impressionist movement in painting. Debussy, however, considered himself a

Symbolist and was close friends with many other Symbolists of the day. C. Henry

Phillips in his article, "The Symbolists and Debussy," explains why this misclassification

is understandable but ultimately incorrect. He compares Impressionist music to

Impressionistic painting, where "if you are too close, you see little meaning in the

multitude of dabs which offends your eye" (Phillips 1932, 308). He explains that in

Debussy's music, if one listens too closely, one gets a similar feeling when confronted

with the minute details. However, Phillips argues this is the wrong way to view

Debussy's works, as one should instead look at the expression intended in Debussy's

works instead of trying to view each piece as an attempt to "incite the observer to recreate, reconstruct the picture" for themselves (Phillips 1932, 308).

The Symbolism art movement began in late nineteenth century French poetry that sought to portray reality and truth through symbolic language and metaphorical images. Among Debussy's inner circle were French symbolist poets like Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) and Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) (Rohinsky 1987). Verlaine, author of *Ariettes Oubliées,* was one of the first poets who developed Symbolism in the 1860s and 1870s (Griffiths 2001). To cement his legacy as a Symbolist, Debussy set many of Verlaine's works to music, including the *Ariettes Oubliées* that became one of his most popular sets for voice and piano.

Ariettes Oubliées, which translates to "forgotten songs," includes six settings of Verlaine's poetry and was composed mostly from 1886 to 1887 as Debussy travelled between Rome and Paris (Rohinsky 1987). The publication of the songs brought Verlaine's poetry back into public favor after it had been abandoned for many years. The last two songs, "Green" and "Spleen," are frequently performed outside of the cycle, but almost always grouped together on a recital. As the last two songs of the cycle, they provide contrasting stories about love and can be considered telling the same story from start to end. To understand how to perform each of these songs, I had to first understand Verlaine's use of symbolism in the text. After decoding the story Verlaine intended to convey, I had to understand the expansion of that story Debussy wrote in the melody and accompaniment. Debussy uses the piano as a collaborative storyteller to the text, which influences how to convey the story. Working together with my accompanist and making

sure we both had a clear idea of the emotion to convey in these was essential for successfully performing this set of the recital.

Each named with terms that were used to describe how one was feeling in the nineteenth century, the two songs mirror each other in telling a story of love (Rohinsky 1987, 126). Verlaine uses a garden in both poems to symbolize how the relationship progresses. First, in "Green," Verlaine opens the poem with a list of all the speaker can see, including "des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches" ("the fruit, the flowers, the fronds, and the branches"). Verlaine includes in the setting the speaker's heart that they are giving to their beloved in the garden. Verlaine uses the symbolism of the garden and fresh morning dew to represent this new, fresh love that has only just begun. The speaker has few requests of their lover, simply that the speaker may hold their love as they rest together.

While Verlaine uses lush, new growth as a symbol for love in "Green," he opens "Spleen" by saying "Les roses étaient toutes rouges, et les lierres étaient tout noirs" ("the roses were all red, and the ivy was all black"). This shift from present description of flowers in front of the speaker in "Green" to past tense reflection in "Spleen" signifies that the roses are no longer all red and the love is not as new and exciting. Instead, Verlaine writes from the point of view of someone terrified that their lover is on the brink of leaving forever. He writes later in the poem, "Le ciel était trop bleu, trop tendre, la mer trop verte et l'air trop doux" ("The sky was too blue, too tender, the sea too green, the air too mild"), symbolizing the regret of falling too quickly in love and knowing in the present that the love was too good to be true and lasting. Verlaine's speaker later laments

as their lover leaves that they grow weary of all that used to bring them joy except for the lover that has gone.

Debussy took his understanding of these texts and expanded upon the emotional turmoil through his musical settings. As Verlaine used nature to expand upon the emotions and settings in his poems, Debussy used the piano and voice to expand the scope in "Green" and "Spleen." Debussy has the voice and piano act as duet partners. Each one takes turns guiding the other. They alternate as leads in a dance of chromaticism exploring the heights and depths of emotion love can bring. We hear the piano begin "Green" with dramatic leaps up and down the piano's large register, symbolizing the singer's heart leaping from their chest in pure excitement. Debussy uses compound meter in places of the song the speaker describes the setting or actions that are occurring. He then switches to simple meter as the singer makes their humble request to rest a while with their lover. He encourages the vocal line to soar as it mimics the piano's trajectory at the beginning of each verse, but then allows the voice to turn sweet as the singer describes the sweetness of their lover's eyes and how the singer wishes to lay down by their lover's feet or be cradled by the lover. As the singer proclaims that their head is "sonore encore de vos derniers baisers" ("still ringing with your recent kisses"), Debussy allows the melody to mimic the ringing in the singer's head as it climbs up to a climactic G-flat. The vocal line comes back down to rest in the chest voice as they request to lay and sleep while their lover rests. Meanwhile, the piano plays deep, dark, bass chords symbolizing the return to the ground.

"Spleen" begins with the sound of a melancholic, single line that is repeated at the end of the song, giving a cyclical feel to the way the music embodies the emotions, as

if the singer continues to relive their anxiety over losing their lover. The voice enters unaccompanied and stays on a single pitch repeated in mostly eighth notes until the final words of the phrases, "rouge," or red, and "noir," or black. It is after "noir" that the piano repeats eighth-note couplets and triplets in the right hand, symbolizing the rising panic at the singer's iteration of despair caused by their lover's every move. From here, the vocal and piano lines echo each other's movements, furthering a feeling of unease and frenetic energy. The song's tempo increases in a "poco a poco animate" ("little by little animated") direction given by Debussy in the second half of the song as the singer describes how weary their surroundings make them. The "feuille vernie" ("glossy holly") and "luisant bui jes suis la" ("gleaming box-tree too") are all sights that should inspire joy and rest because their leaves remain green all season, but instead they further the singer's melancholy. Debussy has the voice exclaim how "tout" ("everything") makes the singer feel this way in a climactic phrase that ends with "tout" on a *fortissimo,* or very loud, B-flat that also signifies the first measure that resumes the original tempo of the song as the singer returns to their sense of loneliness and resignation at their situation. As the singer reflects that only their love does not make them weary, Debussy reintroduces the initial piano melody from the very beginning of the song, which leads into the singer's final, quiet sigh of "hélas", or alas, as the piano continues to rock between bass chords, symbolizing both a release and a return to utter despair.

Dissecting the text and compositions of both these songs in this manner is vital to have a clear understanding of how to perform them. I had to discover these underlying subtexts to understand why Debussy put each dynamic and rhythmic marking in the music and to ensure that I was not tempted to unintentionally go against his desire for the

performance of these pieces. For example, it would have been vocally easier to loudly sing some of the passages that are placed in my upper head voice, but Debussy marks that they are to be sung quietly to symbolize the sweetness of the text. I had to have a strong understanding of this before I could hope to perform the songs successfully with a pianist. I had to be able to communicate this interpretation with my accompanist so that we could work collaboratively, as Debussy intended, to pull out all the nuanced symbolism in the text and music.

Debussy expands upon the ideas of the Symbolist movement of poetry in his compositions and uses the piano and vocal as his own addition of Symbolism in both "Green" and "Spleen." He helps the singer understand the text and emotion behind these songs through his composition. He illustrates the setting of each of these poems through the piano and vocal line and has the music enhance and expand on the symbolism Verlaine wrote originally. As a singer, it is important to find the meaning and emotion intended by both Debussy and Verlaine in these poems, and Debussy's setting offers key clues in how to decipher Verlaine's text.

To find the meaning intended in "Green" and "Spleen," I first had to understand how to interpret the songs. I needed to know if I should interpret them as Impressionistic or Symbolistic songs. Becuase they are Symbolistic songs, I knew to look at the composition to give me clues for the emotional intent Debussy had for the piece. I also knew that the composition would give me clues for the physical setting of the scene Debussy envisioned. He used the music to symbolize the physical elements of the scene, such as low bass chords to symbolize the ground and a repeated melodic phrase to symbolize a feeling of unease. Without an understanding of Debussy as a Symbolist,

these details would have been missed in my preparation and I would not have performed

the pieces as Debussy intended.

Chapter 6

Amy Beach and the Female Perspective

Amy Beach composed her songs in a way that captured the true emotions and experiences of women. Beach herself wrote "so long as we write exactly what we ourselves feel and believe, so honest is our work and so high is its quality" (Beach 1942, 48). Beach's approach to truthfully conveying her own emotions in her songs greatly assisted me in connecting to the text and melodic composition of her works. Beach's ability to compose and portray these emotions contributed to her success as a popular composer of her day. As a classical voice performer, it is rare to be able to sing songs from classical repertoire that are about women's experiences and are written by a woman. All of the songs chosen for this recital until this point are supposed to be from a female perspective but are composed by men who are merely speculating on what a woman might feel. Amy Beach lived as a woman, fell in love as a woman, and mourned the death of her husband when she was forty-three years old. Her life experiences influenced how she interpreted the texts that she chose to set. By connecting my own experiences of love and loss to Beach's own in her settings of "Take, Oh Take Those Lips Away," "Ah, Love, but a Day," and "The Year's at the Spring," I was able to overcome the challenges of performing these pieces. I was able to successfully perform them despite the songs' complex forms, harmony, rhythms, use of large ranges, and the English language that does not lend itself to the necessary *bel canto* method of singing.

Beach composed over one hundred art songs in her life as well as symphonies, choral pieces, and chamber music (Malewey 2014, 1). Stylistically, Beach frequently used rich chromaticism, long vocal melodies, and artistic accompaniment that was heavily featured in late Romantic German Lied of the generation before her (Malewey 2014, 1). Beach's rise in compositional popularity coincided with a time when there was a lot of concern over how female artists behaved and participated in society. As Susan Mardinly explores in her article, "Amy Beach: Muse, Conscience, and Society," American society at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century was concerned with what female artistic expression could lead to. In most cases, the only options for female artists were to limit the visibility of their art be respectable in society as Fanny Mendelssohn did, or live a salacious life like the writer George Sand (Mardinly 2014, 527). Like Fanny Mendelssohn, Beach composed music to be performed in salons and small artistic circles. Before her marriage, Beach followed a similar path as Clara Schumann and performed as an acclaimed piano concerto soloist (Mardinly 2014, 528). While her husband agreed to let her pursue music after their marriage, there were limits to this agreement. As Adrienne Fried Block details in her biography of Amy Beach, they agreed that she would live according to her status as a respected doctor's wife in Boston. She would not teach piano as other female pianists of the past did. Beach was able to perform after her marriage, although the number of recitals she gave were drastically reduced (Block 1998, 47). Dr. Henry Harris Aubry Beach did encourage his wife's compositions and wanted her to devote most of her time to composing. He believed she had an "important gift" (Block 1998, 48). Her compositions grew exponentially in quality and quantity, cementing her as a popular artist of the day. Beach's settings of "The Years

at the Spring," "Ah, Love, but a Day," "Take, oh Take Those Lips Away" are exemplary of the quality and complexity of her writing.

While "The Years at the Spring" and "Ah, Love, but a Day" come from Beach's Op. 44, *Three Browning Songs*, "Take, oh Take Those Lips Away" comes from her Op. 37, *Three Shakespeare Songs*. It is not uncommon to pair "Take, oh Take" with these two Browning songs in an academic recital due to their complexity and vocal difficulty. Each piece features complex rhythm and challenging vocal lines. "Take, oh Take" is considered a "teaching piece" by many voice teachers. As Mary Katherine Kelton states in her article, "Mrs. H.H.A. Beach and Her Songs for Solo Voice" "Take, oh Take" is considered a "teaching piece" due to its melodic vocal line that helps the student learn how to navigate their upper-*passaggi* points without extending the voice to its upper limitations (1996, 12). The vocal line is written in such a way that it reinforces many techniques that *bel canto* vocal exercises strive to teach, such as keeping a connection to the *appoggio* to successfully execute long, lyrical lines (Kelton 1996, 12). Kelton argues that the Shakespeare cycle includes songs that "are not as difficult for either singer or accompanist as many of Mrs. Beach's songs" (Kelton 1996, 12). While Kelton is correct in saying "Take, Oh Take" is slightly easier to learn compared to "The Years at the Spring" and "Ah, Love, but a Day," it is not an easy piece, and the setting of "Take, oh Take" offers its own difficulties in the learning process that are different from Beach's Browning songs.

One of the main obstacles I faced in learning "Take, oh Take" was singing in my native language, as speaking in English is much different than singing in English. While singing in English, especially in the *bel canto* technique described in chapter four, I must

elongate and align my vowels as if I am singing in German or Italian, which can feel and sound incorrect to an American English speaker—especially one raised around Southern American accents. I must be conscious of not clipping my vowels and elongating my consonants, as doing so prevents the free-flowing air path that bel canto singing requires.

Another challenge in learning and performing "Take, oh Take Those Lips Away" is the that the vocal line is composed with pitches that require me to cross my upper passaggi and then extend down into my chest voice. Navigating this range without leaning too heavily into my chest or head voice resonance was a challenge when first learning this piece. To overcome this challenge, I sang on the vowels only and treated the vocal line as an exercise to establish the long, melodic line required for this style of song. All three Beach songs required this approach in learning the melodies. "The Years at the Spring" and "Ah, Love, but a Day" also feature melodies that include pitches that sit in my upper passaggi and subsequently require more air flow to successfully sing them. I utilized this approach to help prevent any vocal tension or fatigue. This technique helped to combat the American tendency to clip vowels when singing in English and the higher level of difficulty in the melody of these songs which can lead to tension. Just as "Take, Oh Take" presents challenges, "Ah, Love, but a Day" also has its own challenges.

In "Ah, Love, but a Day," Beach's setting of the vocal line and harmony add to the expression of the text. Beach seamlessly expresses both heartache and the excitement of new love for a woman in each of these pieces. Susan Mardinly discusses in detail how the setting of "Ah, Love but a Day" features Beach's use of contrasting harmonic language. This use of contrasting harmonic language helps to convey the emotions of a love that goes on juxtaposed to a love that is on the brink of giving up (Mardinly 2014,

532). In "Ah, Love but a Day," Beach sets the vocal melody securely in F minor while the piano line "meanders aimlessly from minor to major" (Mardinly 2014, 532). This harmonic contrast emphasizes the emotional turmoil the singer is experiencing over trying to decide if they will continue to be with their love even though their relationship feels like it is already over. The voice represents the desire to continue with the relationship, as the singer still feels love for their significant other, while the piano represents their mind going back and forth regarding the best course of action.

Beach uses many musical features in her composition of "Ah, Love but a Day" that resemble the songs from the Romantic era, including a modified strophic form that heightens the emotion of the piece. One of the difficulties in learning this piece lies in its modified strophic structure, as Beach uses the strophic principles in a complex way and has all similar elements shift throughout the piece (Maleway 2014, 7). This means that all musical phrases that are repeated have slight variations, either in pitch or rhythmic changes, or both. Beach repeats various phrases from the original poem throughout the song that are not repeated in the original Browning setting and adds denser textures as she does so to heighten the depth of fear over losing a love. It is important to note this change sonically as a performer so that I can use these changes to inform my interpretation of the song.

Beach uses these repeated phrases with slight differences in "The Years at the Spring." Instead of using it to convey despair, she uses this building intensity and growth into a denser texture to showcase the building excitement in a piece that opens with an immense pop of excitement. "The Years at the Spring" features the singer and pianist coming in on the same downbeat with just an eighth note rest to prepare them for the

onslaught of rapid musical phrases mimicking a heart beating out of a chest. Beach uses

another varied strophic form in "The Years at the Spring" and utilizes her technique of

changing repeated statements just slightly in either rhythm or pitch. For example, instead

of having the voice repeat the exact phrasing of the first "the years at the spring" from the

opening of the song, Beach has the second strophe begin with the same words and

rhythms but changes the pitches of the phrase so that it is a repetition of the same pitch on

each word. This feeds into the building excitement of the second strophe, versus the first

strophe that begins with excitement and energy and eventually quiets down. The second

strophe begins with an almost quiet intensity in comparison that steadily builds to the

burst of joy that "All's right with the world" at the end of the song. Beach takes the

liberty of repeating various lines for dramatic effect that were not originally repeated in

the original Browning poem, which is not uncommon for composers of vocal repertoire.

It is easier to make connections to Amy Beach's compositions as a female singer

because she wrote true to her female experiences. Knowing her importance in music

history adds to this connection and brings insight into how she composed her pieces. Her

compositions alone give many clues into how she wanted them performed and the

intention she desired for the performer to put into the songs. For me, it was important to

understand the woman behind the songs to successfully learn and perform them.

To successfully perform this set of Beach songs, I had to overcome each song's

unique challenges. I had to gain an understanding of "Ah, Love, but a Day" and its

complex use of harmony and rhythms to understand the forces in the setting that propel

the emotional movement of the song. For "Take, oh, Take Those Lips Away," I had to

understand how to navigate my voice in a healthy way in accordance with the bel canto

technique to accommodate its large range. In learning "The Years at the Spring," I had to overcome its complex use of rhythms and a varied strophic form to successfully add the nuanced differences Beach intended for each strophe. For all three of these songs, I had to overcome the pitfalls that come with singing in English while using the bel canto style. The goal in overcoming each challenge was to successfully perform the complex emotions at the heart of each text that Beach wanted to draw out of the original poems. Part of successfully performing these emotions come from using the techniques and my knowledge as a graduate student. I used these skills to analyze and study the texts and compositions and dissect them to discover the most successful strategy to sing them healthily and beautifully.

The other part of successfully performing these songs comes from connecting to the material as a woman who has had her own experiences of love and loss and can empathize with Amy Beach's own emotions written into the compositions. As a woman, I know the thrill of a new love that makes you want to burst into song, as Beach composes in "The Years at the Spring." I understand how feelings can feel as large as the vocal range in "Take, oh Take" when a love that swears to be true breaks their promise. I can empathize with the battle between your head and your heart when in a relationship that feels stale and over but is still filled with so much residual love as Beach composes in "Ah, Love, but a Day." These shared experiences add another way to connect to these songs as more than just a trained singer.

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