Songs of Love and Loss:
A Master’s Recital

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Abstract

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Repertoire selected for this recital spans several eras of music—from the Baroque era to the twenty-first century. It encompasses music that has stood the test of time, and music that has yet to face such a trial; music that feeds the mind, and music that feeds the soul. Each of the seven sections features selections that exemplify what it meant to write music at the height of its respective era. Each group of songs focuses primarily on the two most extreme emotions that we humans feel in our lives: love and tragic loss. These two emotions sit at opposite ends of the spectrum and encompass what it is to be human at its highest and most joyful level, and at its lowest and most vulnerable.

The opening section features two pieces that come to us from two of the masters of Italian opera—Handel and Mozart. Both of these selections deal with love that one human being has for another. In the first aria, Handel’s librettist has written poetry expressing how wonderful it is to enjoy love when it is faithful and true. To this simple poem, Handel wrote a lively accompaniment in mixed meter—it switches between 3/8 and 2/4—that mirrors the vocal line. In the second aria, Mozart has also set words about a faithful love. This time the words are not a reflection of the pleasure inherent in that faithfulness, but a vow. The rise and subsequent falls within the accompaniment, including the interplay with the solo violin, mirror the emotions that dwell within the
lover’s heart—the building of jubilant emotion, the uncertainty that the love will be returned, and the stereotypical sighs that escape all lover’s lips.

Several works that exemplify the art of the art song at the height of the Romantic Period are featured in the second set. Franz Schubert was one of the great masters of German Lied, and during his many years, he wrote over 600 Lieder. All three of the pieces performed in this section are from this vast creative repertoire. The pieces included all show us the different ways humans respond to Heavenly love. The first piece tells the mythological story of Ganymede, a youth who was taken to the heavens to serve the gods. However, Schubert’s words in this case deal not with the Roman gods, but instead with a youth being taken up to serve The Father. Schubert keeps this piece at a walking tempo until the moment of the youth’s ascension, when the tempo builds to the youth’s declaration of ‘All-loving Father.’ As the piece ends, the accompaniment illustrates the ascension into Heaven. The second piece is an almost silent prayer to God, praising Him for all the ways He loves us, and vowing to carry that love in our hearts wherever we shall go. Schubert wrote the accompaniment in a duet style. The piano “sings” first, followed by the singer. One of the most notable aspects of the accompaniment is that the piano is given the final statement of the melody, while the singer sounds the harmony. The third and final piece in the set is an adorably bubbly little strophic piece celebrating what life will be like in Heaven. The singer decides—after singing the benefits of life in Heaven for two verses—that it might be worth it to stay on Earth, if only Laura will look his way with a smile.

The third set includes songs from both the Romantic period and twentieth century music. The first piece is a Romantic-era piece by Henri Duparc using a text by Jean
Lahor—a pseudonym for French symbolist poet Henri Cazalis. The text, though sad, is actually a song about love that can save a life. In this piece, the accompaniment paints the picture of moonlight playing across whatever lies below through the use of arpeggiated chords that run the length of the piece. The singer and her lover have both been affected terribly by sorrows so great in number that they almost drown in them. The only salvation they are able to find is in the love they have for one another. By clinging to that love and allowing it to keep them afloat, the singer believes that there may be a light at the end of the tunnel. The second and third selections come from a song cycle by Francis Poulenc—*Airs Chantés*. In the first piece, the singer is singing of her love for the springtime and for a specific location. The piano evokes feelings of springtime jubilance. In the third piece, the singer has lost that wonderful springtime place, and mourns the loss of it. The piece begins with the singer’s cry of despair. The chordal accompaniment serves to deepen the feelings of depression evoked by that opening cry. Poulenc leaves the piece unresolved, thereby intensifying the instability and despair felt by the singer. Both of these pieces, while employing poetry that is fairly simplistic, are quite lyrical and exceptionally beautiful. The final piece, by Erik Satie, comes to us from the start of the twentieth century and is about a young can-can girl with whom all the young men fall in love. The accompaniment evokes thoughts of a casual Parisian cabaret and its playfulness during the verses mirrors the devil-may-care attitude of the little can-can girl.

The last selection of the first half is an aria from Gaetano Donizetti’s beloved opera buffa, *Don Pasquale*. Norina’s Cavatina is a playful aria about how easy it is to make a man fall desperately in love. Norina tells all who are willing to listen how well she knows all the little affectations that drive men wild, and the accompaniment reflects
her mischievous, playful nature using a repetitive rhythmic figure featuring accented grace notes.

At the start of the second half, another aria is showcased—this one from Antonín Dvořák’s masterpiece, Rusalka. In Píseň Rusalky o měsíčku, the title character—a water nymph named Rusalka—sings about her love for a human prince and begs the moon to let her love be known to him. At the start of the piece, the piano plays a thematic idea intended to evoke night. The rich harmonies in the accompaniment paint the picture of the bewitchingly beautiful forest in which Rusalka lives.

American songs from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries comprise the final group of the recital. The first two pieces from the set come from a well-known twentieth century song cycle by Aaron Copland: Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson. Both of these pieces deal with different types of loss. “11. Going to Heaven!” is the first piece of this set to be performed and in it, the singer contemplates dying and going to heaven. She playfully toys with the idea until coming to the realization that she doesn’t really believe in going and hasn’t really believed in it since she buried two people who were very dear to her. Emily Dickinson was schizophrenic, and the accompaniment only serves to intensify the idea that the singer’s psyche is not all in one piece. It does not offer any kind of tonal support to the vocal line, but instead seems to ramble off onto its own line of thought. In the second piece—“5. Heart, we will forget him”—the singer mourns a lost love and sings her wishes to forget everything having to do with him. In contrast to many of the other pieces in this cycle, the accompaniment actually supports the vocal line, both melodically and rhythmically.
The last three pieces from the sixth set are by Lee Hoiby. The first, “Lady of the Harbor,” is a patriotic piece using the famous words by Emma Lazarus inscribed on the side of the monument. The singer sings the Statue of Liberty’s loving acceptance of all who wish to be free. The accompaniment paints a picture of the waves in the harbor as they slosh against a boat full of people destined for Ellis Island and a new start in the land of the free. The second of the Hoiby selections is “Goodby, goodby world.” This piece was written for John Corigliano and is set to the words written by Thornton Wilder in his play Our Town. In this piece, Emily reflects on how valuable life is after returning to earth after her early death to relive her 12th birthday. The accompaniment uses descending lines to evoke feelings of immense sadness. As the piece builds to its emotional climax, the accompaniment—acting as her inner thoughts—begins to swirl and spin until the final descent, where Emily finally sinks into the realization that we never realize how valuable life is until we no longer possess it. The final cadence sings out Emily’s intense sadness at the realization that her life is indeed over, and she cannot have it back—leaving us all to contemplate our own mortalities and whether or not we too are letting life pass us by. The final piece of the set is Hoiby’s “The Serpent.” This song tells the tale of how a serpent, displeased with how his life lacks love, decides to take to singing. He absolutely loves to sing, and no matter how bad he may be at it, or how the other animals try to stop him, he continues to sing to his little heart’s content. Hoiby uses mixed meter to accentuate the lively and playful accompaniment, and he uses a quick tempo to keep the song light and fun.

The recital is ended with the Jewel Aria from Faust. Just before the start of this aria, two men who are in love with Marguerite have left her gifts: Young Siebel leaves a
humble gift of flowers, while Faust leaves a box of glittering jewels! Marguerite, quite
taken with the jewels, breaks out into ecstatic song! The accompaniment line mirrors the
excitement and happiness as it builds within Marguerite.

Each of the featured selections takes the audience on a different emotional
journey. They reveal something deeper about ourselves that we would not otherwise
realize, save through music. This recital’s featured repertoire perfectly displays the ability
of music to express heightened emotion that words alone are incapable of expressing.
How enlightened Victor Hugo was when he penned these immortal words:

“Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be
silent.”