Ostinato My Ass: Finding a Voice in the 21st Century

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Bard College
Ostinato My Ass:
Finding a Voice in the 21st Century

A Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Arts of Bard College

By
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Vitalis Im
Muir Ingliss
Marisol Ortiz
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Artist Statement

This senior project is comprised of two concerts and an orchestral piece for violin and orchestra.

Concert One

At the beginning of the year I set out to write a religious cantata using a handful of quotes from the Bahá’í Writings. This piece grew out of my interest in J. S. Bach’s cantatas, borrowing aspects of the forms he uses within individual movements as well as the general structure of the whole work. The decision to use texts from the Bahá’í Faith was based on my own familiarity with the Bahá’í Writings and my desire to set music to a religious text, compared to previous projects of setting music to secular poetry.¹

On the program, my cantata was coupled with selections from R. Schumann’s song cycle Dichterliebe. I wanted to make an all-vocal program that would be contrasted second semester with an all-instrumental program. Though that’s not quite how it worked out—vocal music made its way onto my second concert—there still remained a distinct difference between the two. The following discussion is my reflection on the creation of Devotional Cantata.

The Devotional Cantata is set up in the following format:

I. Intros – Meditation
II. Recitative 1 (Mezzo-Soprano): “Praise be unto Thee, O Lord”
III. Aria (Tenor): “I have arrived at Thy Gate”
IV. Arioso (Bass): “Make manifest the rivers”
V. Recitative 2 (Mezzo-Soprano): “What a power is love”
VI. Chorus (MS/T/B): “Whatever is done in love” / “Is there any remover of difficulties”

This format does not follow any particular Bach cantata but is a general reflection on the master’s structures. An ensemble of violin, viola, cello (or bass), and piano supports the

¹ In 2016 to poetry by Emily Dickinson and in 2014 to poetry by myself.
vocalists, which is typical of many of Bach’s cantatas, with piano in place of harpsichord/organ.\(^2\) The Intro, ‘Intros – Meditation,’ is around 45 seconds of meditative instrumental ground laying, with sighing figures from the upper strings. The first recitative is my own take on Bach’s soprano recitative “Wie hast du dich, mein Gott” from BWV 21 “Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis.” In it, the upper strings and continuo set the backdrop for the soprano’s dramatic narrative. There is a contemplative aspect to the strings as they respond directly to what the soprano is singing, a light form of text painting.

The tenor aria begins with what could be considered in Bach’s time as the obbligato, an instrumental part that is obligatory, or necessary, for the performance. In Bach’s time, these obbligatos tended to be incredibly virtuosic and were often the leading line over the voice itself. In “I have arrived at Thy Gate,” the viola begins this obbligato, but passes it to the violin during the second play-through where they finish the phrase and leave the piano alone, where the tenor enters. Fragments from the obbligato enter via strings into the texture of voice and piano to create a subtle fusion of hip-hop, contemporary classical, and jazz. The Bass Arioso looks back even further than Bach to a Renaissance tradition of song that is halfway between an aria and a recit. There is no obbligato, but the strings play an active role of text painting, particularly on the word ‘rivers.’

The second recit., “What a power is love,” is a short recitative with mezzo, violin, and piano. This is perhaps the most original movement in regards to form in the whole work. The violin and piano create less of an atmosphere and more of an abstract response to what the mezzo is singing about. The final chorus is my attempt at creating a three-part vocal texture with string and piano accompaniment over an ostinato. This movement was inspired by the closing number

\(^2\) An earlier version of Devotional Canata included a part for electric organ.
of Bach’s Canata BWV 150 “Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich:” Chorus “Meine Tage in dem Leide” for four voices and string ensemble. They share similar qualities such as the steady bass, triplet feeling, and a somber character. What is magical about this piece is that Bach is not afraid to modulate even when he is using a ground bass. In my Chorus I imitated Bach’s modulations in terms of placement between vocal and instrumental sections. During the writing process I preferred to interpret “Meine Tage” by ear rather than by a formal harmonic analysis because I felt it would give me more creative freedom. Even the instrumental break in “Meine Tage” is imitated, towards the recapitulation (return to D minor) in “Whatever is done in love.” There are points where I diverge from Bach’s writing, adding my own voice in use of harmony and counterpoint, the mixed meter ostinato of 9 beats (6/8 + 6/8 + 9/8), and the descending rather than ascending bass.³

Devotional Cantata is imbued with my own voice as is evidenced in a wide chordal palette and a rich mix of counterpoint and varying textures, even as it reflects on older themes and forms. The experimentation that occurred was confined by set limits of form and stylistic integrity. It was a vastly useful experiment in writing for independent voices in a heavy texture through a variety of forms, all while retaining the constraints of a self-contained multi-movement work.

Concert Two

The second concert featured two pieces I worked on in the Spring 2017 semester: Three Dickinson Songs composed for the Music Alive concert, and Still Life for violin and orchestra. The Dickinson songs picked up where I had left off on my previous Dickinson song cycle. I approached it largely in the same method, first by narrowing down my options to a small handful

³ See Figure 1 and 2 for a comparison between my ostinato and Bach’s.
of poems, identifying which ones sounded the most musical—the most potential to be transformed into music—then selecting the poems. From the beginning I knew it would be at least two poems. At first I tried to identify a common theme I could use, and found several poems that dealt with death in a sullen character, but they never quite spoke to me. In the end I settled on three poems with little to no continuity in subject matter, each one obscure and strange. Though quite beyond my comprehension, the words still found a musical expression.

Reading Dickinson is similar to the feeling of discovering an inner truth of a complicated puzzle, seeing the answer with your eyes, but words and thoughts cannot connect—they glaze over and are totally lost by the end. Grasping at one or two words does not help, it is the “Insect’s futile forces.”

An added layer of challenge manifested in the cello part for the three songs; I wanted to use an instrument that could warmly support and mingle with a tenor’s range. In the first song it is tacet, but joins in “To be alive—is Power—” (876), an impassioned and fiery setting to a poem that I can hear Dickinson practically shout from her room 153 years ago. I wrote it piecemeal, writing a bit of the piano and vocal part, filling in the cello part, or vice versa. It utilizes a heavier texture than I normally rely upon, which creates a hurried intensity quite desirable for the poem. The last song, “Patience—has a quiet Outer—” (842), contrasts with “To be alive,” as it opens onto stillness, which is often not heard in my Dickinson settings. The song is filled with pauses, open 5th doublestops in the cello with a brief piano interlude in the middle. It follows the simple format of AAB with the second A a direct repetition, one I felt was needed to allow for the space in between the two stanzas.

My second program ended with the last part of my senior project, a reduction of

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4 See “Patience—has a quiet Outer—” (842) on the program for Senior Concert 2
Still Life, for violin and orchestra

This project ended up as a collaboration between another graduating senior, Labeeby Servatius, and I. We were both given the opportunity to have a piece on the Commencement Concert: her as a violinist, I as a composer. We decided to team up, I would write a violin concerto, and she would perform it. At first it seemed like the piece would be a reflective song like The Lark Ascending by Vaughn-Williams, but during the writing process I found that what I wanted to write would be a bit more virtuosic. It ended up informally as a violin concerto with orchestra, one that has potential to expand into other movements.

The writing process was naturally divided into two equally challenging halves, the first part—the creative process of writing the piece—was the ficklest portion, in that it relied on short bursts of creativity. I followed no strict form for the piece, allowing it to grow organically out from itself, utilizing only those themes found within the first minute to cement and solidify in the ear. Some conception of the orchestration was always on my mind while writing out the first manuscript, and during the second phase of the process—the orchestration—I found it to be quite liberating: the orchestra at your fingertips is a powerful instrument, there are so many combinations of sounds and colors that can be created, careful selection of which shows both skill and ingenuity. I faced the task of writing for the orchestra always in service to the violin, which needed to shine through, and could never be covered. I hope I have created a piece that is worthy of the long and battered history of violin concertos before it, or at least one that is enjoyable to listen to—which can invigorate some emotion of the spirit.
Appendix

Figure 1: Koenig ostinato from Devotional Cantata, No. 6 Chorus: “Whatever is done in love”

Figure 2: Bach ostinato from BWV 150, No. 7 Chorus: “Mein Tage in dem Leide”
September

Luke Koenig

Muir Ingliss, bass-baritone

Text by Linda Pastan

Dichterliebe, op. 48

Robert Schumann

Text by Heinrich Heine

1. Im wunderschönen Monat Mai
4. Wenn ich in deine Augen seh'
6. Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome
7. Ich grolle nicht
9. Das ist ein Flöten und Geigen
10. Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen
11. Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen
12. Am leuchtenden Sommernachmittag
13. Ich hab' im Traum geweinet
16. Die alten, bösen Lieder

Vitalis Im, tenor

brief pause

Devotional Cantata to selected Writings of The Bab, Babá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Babá

1. Intros – Meditation
2. Mezzo-Soprano Recitative: “Praise be unto Thee, O Lord”
3. Tenor Aria: “I have arrived at Thy gate”
4. Bass Arioso: “Make manifest the rivers”
5. Mezzo-Soprano Recitative (2): “What a power is love”
6. Chorus: “Whatever is done in love” / “Is there any remover of difficulties”

Hannah Baird, mezzo-soprano
Vitalis Im, tenor
Muir Ingliss, bass-baritone
Labeeby Servatius, violin
Matthea Rile-Schmidt, viola
Andrew Flores, double-bass
Jackson McKinnon, piano
Dichterliebe, op. 48
Robert Schumann — Heinrich Heine

Dichterliebe

1.
Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,
Als alle Knospen sprangen,
Da ist in meinem Herzen
Die Liebe aufgegangen.

Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,
Als alle Vögel sangen,
Da hab' ich ihr gestanden
Mein Sehnen und Verlangen.

4.
Wenn ich in deine Augen seh',
So schwindet all' mein Leid und Weh!
Doch wenn ich küsse deinen Mund,
So werd' ich ganz und gar gesund.

Wenn ich mich lehn' an deine Brust,
Kommt's über mich wie Himmelslust,
Doch wenn du sprichst: ich liebe dich,
So muß ich weinen bitterlich.

6.
Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome,
Da spiegelt sich in den Well'n,
Mit seinem großen Dome
Das große heilige Köln.

Im Dom, da steht ein Bildnis
Auf goldenem Leder gemalt.
In meines Lebens Wildnis
Hat's freundlich hineingestrahlt.

Es schweben Blumen und Englein
Um unsre liebe Frau,
Die Augen, die Lippen, die Wänglein,
Die gleichen der Liebsten genau.

A Poet's Love

1.
In the wondrous month of May,
When all buds were bursting into bloom,
Then it was that in my heart
Love began to blossom.

In the wondrous month of May,
When all the birds were singing,
Then it was I confessed to her
My longing and desire.

When I look into your eyes,
All my pain and sorrow vanish;
But when I kiss your lips,
Then I am wholly healed.

When I lay my head against your breast,
Heavenly bliss steals over me;
But when you say: I love you!
I must weep bitter tears.

In the Rhine, the holy river,
There is reflected in the waves,
With its great cathedral,
Great and holy Cologne.

In the cathedral hangs a picture,
Painted on gilded leather;
Into my life’s wilderness
It has cast its friendly rays.

Flowers and cherubs hover
Around Our Beloved Lady;
Her eyes, her lips, her cheeks
Are the image of my love’s.
7. Ich grolle nicht, und wenn das Herz auch bricht, Ewig verlor’nes Lieb, ich grolle nicht. Wie du auch strahlst in Diamantenpracht, Es fällt kein Strahl in deines Herzens Nacht, Das weiß ich längst. Ich sah dich ja im Traume, Und sah die Nacht in deines Herzens Raume, Und sah die Schlang’, die dir am Herzen frisst, Ich sah, mein Lieb, wie sehr du elend bist. 7. I bear no grudge, though my heart is breaking. Our love forever lost! I bear no grudge. However you gleam in diamond splendour, No ray falls in the night of your heart. I’ve known that long. For I saw you in my dreams, And saw the night within your heart, And saw the serpent gnawing at your heart – I saw, my love, how pitiful you are.


10. Hör’ ich das Liedchen klingen, Das einst die Liebste sang, So will mir die Brust zerspringen Von wildem Schmerzendrang. Es treibt mich ein dunkles Sehnen Hinauf zur Waldeshöh’, Dort löst sich auf in Tränen Mein übergroßes Weh’. 10. When I hear the little song My beloved once sang, My heart almost bursts With the wild rush of pain. A dark longing drives me Up to the wooded heights, Where my overwhelming grief Dissolves into tears.

11. Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen, Die hat einen Anden erwählt, Der Andre liebt eine Andre, Und hat sich mit dieser vermählt. 11. A boy loves a girl Who chooses another; He in turn loves another And marries her.
Das Mädchen nimmt aus Ärger
Den ersten besten Mann,
Der ihr in den Weg gelaufen;
Der Jüngling ist übel dran.
The girl, out of pique,
Takes the very first man
To come her way;
The boy is badly hurt.

Es ist eine alte Geschichte,
Doch bleibt sie immer neu,
Und wem sie just passieret,
Dem bricht das Herz entzwei.
It's an old story,
Yet remains ever new;
And he to whom it happens,
It breaks his heart in half.

12.
Am leuchtenden Sommernorden
Geh' ich im Garten herum.
Es flüstern und sprechen die Blumen,
Ich aber wandle stumm.
One bright summer morning
I walk around the garden.
The flowers whisper and talk.
But I move silently.

Es flüstern und sprechen die Blumen,
Und schau'n mitleidig mich an:
Sei unsrer Schwester nicht böse,
Du trauriger blasser Mann!
The flowers whisper and talk,
And look at me in pity:
Be not angry with our sister,
You sad, pale man.

13.
Ich hab' im Traum geweinet.
Mir träumte, du lägest im Grab.
Ich wachte auf, und die Träne
Floss noch von der Wange herab.
I wept in my dream,
I dreamt you lay in your grave.
I woke, and tears
Still flowed down my cheeks.

Ich hab' im Traum geweinet.
Mir träumt', du verließest mich.
Ich wachte auf, und ich weinte
Noch lange bitterlich.
I wept in my dream,
I dreamt you were leaving me.
I woke, and wept on
Long and bitterly.

Ich hab' im Traum geweinet,
Mir träumte, du wärst mir noch gut.
Ich wachte auf, und noch immer
Strömt meine Tränenflut.
I wept in my dream,
I dreamt you loved me still.
I woke, and still
My tears stream.
16.
Die alten, bösen Lieder,
The bad old songs,
Die lasst uns jetzt begraben,
Let us now bury them,
Holt einen großen Sarg.
Fetch me a large coffin.

Hinein leg’ ich gar Manches,
I have much to put in it,
Doch sag’ ich noch nicht was.
Though what I won’t yet say;
Der Sarg muss sein noch größer,
The coffin must be even larger
Wie’s Heidelberger Fass.
Than the vat at Heidelberg.

Und holt eine Totenbahre
And fetch a bier
Und Bretter fest und dick;
Made of firm thick timber;
Auch muss sie sein noch länger
And it must be even longer
Als wie zu Mainz die Brück’.
Than the bridge at Mainz.

Und holt mir auch zwölf Riesen,
And fetch for me twelve giants,
Die müssen noch stärker sein
They must be even stronger
Als wie der starke Christoph,
Than Saint Christopher the Strong
Im Dom zu Köln am Rhein.
In Cologne Cathedral on the Rhine.

Die sollen den Sarg forttragen,
They shall bear the coffin away,
Und senken in’s Meer hinab;
And sink it deep into the sea;
Denn solchem großen Sarge
For such a large coffin
Gebührt ein großes Grab.
Deserves a large grave.

Wisst ihr warum der Sarg wohl
Do you know why the coffin
So groß und schwer mag sein?
Must be so large and heavy?
Ich senkt’ auch meine Liebe
I’d like to bury there my love
Und meinen Schmerz hinein.
And my sorrow too.

Heinrich Heine

Translation by Richard Stokes
Devotional Cantata

*to selected Writings of The Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*

2. *Mezzo-Soprano Recitative*

PRAISE be unto Thee, O Lord. Forgive us our sins, have mercy upon us and enable us to return unto Thee. Suffer us not to rely on aught else besides Thee, and vouchsafe unto us, through Thy bounty, that which Thou lovest and desirest and well beseemeth Thee. Exalt the station of them that have truly believed and forgive them with Thy gracious forgiveness. Verily Thou art the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

- The Báb

3. *Tenor Aria*

VERILY I am Thy servant, O my God, and Thy poor one and Thy suppliant and Thy wretched creature. I have arrived at Thy gate, seeking Thy shelter. I have found no contentment save in Thy love, no exultation except in Thy remembrance, no eagerness but in obedience to Thee, no joy save in Thy nearness, and no tranquillity except in reunion with Thee, ... Whenever I attempt to approach Thee, I perceive nothing in myself but the tokens of Thy grace and behold naught in my being but the revelations of Thy loving-kindness. How can one who is but Thy creature seek reunion with Thee and attain unto Thy presence, ... How is it possible for a lowly servant to recognize Thee and to extol Thy praise, ... by Thy might, I yearn for naught but Thine Own Self and seek no one other than Thee.

- The Báb

4. *Bass Arioso*

GLORY be to Thee, O Lord my God! Make manifest the rivers of Thy sovereign might, that the waters of Thy Unity may flow through the inmost realities of all things, in such wise that the banner of Thine unfailling guidance may be raised aloft in the kingdom of Thy command and the stars of Thy divine splendor may shine brightly in the heaven of Thy majesty.

Potent art Thou to do what pleaseth Thee. Thou, verily, art the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

- Bahá’u’lláh

5. *Mezzo-Soprano Recitative (2)*

What a power is love! It is the most wonderful, the greatest of all living powers.

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

6. *Chorus*

Whatever is done in love is never any trouble, and—there is always time.

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

IS there any Remover of difficulties save God? Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His servants, and all abide by His bidding!

- The Báb
Special Thanks to:
George Tsontakis
Erika Allen
Erica Kiesewetter

and thanks to everyone for coming!

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LUKE KOENIG
SENIOR CONCERT 2

Sunday, April 30th | 6pm
Chapel of the Holy Innocents | Bard College
No. 1203
On the World you colored
Morning painted rose—
Idle his Vermillion
Aimless crept the Glows
Over Realms of Orchards
I the Day before
Conquered with the Robin—
Misery—how fair
Till your wrinkled Finger
Shoved the Sun away
Midnight’s awful Pattern
In the Goods of Day—

No. 876
To be alive—is Power—
Existence—in itself—
Without a further function—
Omnipotence—Enough—

To be alive—and will!—
’Tis able as a God—
The Maker—of Ourselves—be what—
Such being Finitude!

No. 842
Patience—has a quiet Outer—
Patience—Look within—
Is an Insect’s futile forces
Infinites—between—

‘Scaping One—against the Other
Fruitlesser to fling—
Patience—is the Smile’s exertion
Through the quivering—
R. L. KOENIG

STILL LIFE
FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA
for all of my violinist friends.

**STILL LIFE**

2 Flutes (Fl. 2 doubles Picc.)
1 Oboe
1 English Horn
2 Clarinets in A
2 Bassoons
2 Horns in F
2 B-flat Trumpets
2 Trombones
1 Tuba

3 Percussionists:
   - Chimes
   - Crotales
   - Marimba
   - Splash Cymbal
   - Suspended Cymbal
   - Tam-tam
   - Triangle (small)
   - Vibraphone

Harp

Solo Violin

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello
Double Bass (with optional C string)

“Solange die Nachtigall singt,
    muss man den Spargel stechen!”
STILL LIFE
for Violin and Orchestra
Dedicated to all my Violinist Friends

R. Luke Koenig

Somewhat slow, tenderly \( \frac{d}{\text{tempo}} = 72 \)

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STILL LIFE

Perc. 3

E. Hn.

Bsn. 1

Bsn. 2

Hn. 1
* Bass notes in small print are for an optional C string; players with the extension should prefer C string notes.
Adagietto $\frac{1}{4} \cdot 66$ (colle parte)
STILL LIFE

molto rall.
moving forward (poco accel. to $q = 72$)

moving forward (poco accel. to $q = 72$)
Poco piu mosso (Andante con moto) \( \frac{q}{=72} \)  poco string.

Duet with Fl. 1

Duet with Fl. 2

poco string.
Allegro–spirited $= 124-130$

STILL LIFE
L'istesso tempo con moto (animando)