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An Old German Song Cycle and Some New American Music

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“An Old German Song Cycle and Some New American Music” is, at its core, a straightforward art song recital. As to its form, the only thing that could be considered even remotely revolutionary was my decision to perform the small collection of unrelated pieces in the second half, following the large, segmented work—an order that, in most traditional concert settings, is reversed.

The project was comprised of preparing and performing Robert Schumann’s (1810-1856) *Liederkreis*, Op. 39, and four modern American songs I have collected over the years. The *Liederkreis* is a song cycle consisting of twelve unrelated vignettes, each a setting of a poem from Joseph Eichendorff’s *Intermezzo*, and represented the bulk of the preparatory challenge that was this project. The four American songs consisted of the first scene of Lothar Klein’s (1932-2004) *Six Scenes from the Old Man and the Sea*; “The Moon is distant from the Sea”, a setting of Emily Dickinson’s poem of the same name by recent Bard graduate R. Luke Koenig (1995-); “Look Down, Fair Moon”, a setting by Ned Rorem (1923-) of Walt Whitman’s text of the same name; and Kyle Gann’s (1955-) “Alba (En un vergier sutz fuella d’albespi)”, a troubadour song from his 2016 collection *Songs from Proença*. The American songs were chosen to contrast the song cycle—indeed, the cycle was written around 150 years ago, while none of the American songs are even old enough to retire. They differ drastically in content, form, and compositional intent, and so presented challenges that were different and distinct from those of the Schumann.

Perhaps I should elaborate on what it means to “prepare” a song cycle. In the traditional sense, preparing a song involves learning the melody, translating the text, studying & absorbing the text with its direct translation and how the composer has set it, discovering the nuances and how the whole thing fits together, and finally singing it into the voice and committing it to memory. These were all steps which I completed to a self-satisfactory level, something I find very difficult. In many

ways, though, this concert represented years of work—working hard or barely working, as it may be—and an immense amount of personal development. I have grown to love this music more deeply than I ever expected I could, and, in turn, have grown to realize just how much I really love my own art.

The voice is something peculiar among the musical instruments. Unlike almost every other instrument, the voice is not something separate from you. The voice is not something you can save up that extra \$2,000 and upgrade to radically increase your sound quality in a near instant. The voice is not something you can play for six or seven or nine hours a day. The voice is something innate to us, something that we are born with, something intrinsic, and something that is deeply, so deeply connected to us that if we do not love ourselves and take care of ourselves both physically and psychologically it becomes difficult to coax the instrument into even producing sound. The voice is such a subtle art I can barely wrap my head around it. It's almost as subtle as life itself. To get the most out of it requires you to sink into a deep place, to relax into all the feelings and sensations, to not panic, and to approach it gently but firmly and with deep-seated compassion.

Hours were spent ignoring this music, wishing I didn't have to learn it, and pretending that it would all just go away if I worked on something else. Hours were spent in the practice room, literally banging my head against the wall, convinced that I was unable to sing, and hours were spent doing “other SPROJ”, putting my heart in a different place, not realizing how much I deeply cared about this project and this music. A recording will be available at:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1xjJ0R_oeMZ9xOj0yTy0J51F5kLSNKVhF

