

The Songs of John Greer: Creative Programming for Today's Recital

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What is always at issue in creative concert programming is finding that combination of inventive musical approach and stimulating text that engages and excites an audience's imagination. The works of Canadian composers present a virtually untapped resource in programming options for recital or study. As a brief introduction to some of the works available, I have chosen to focus on the song cycles for soprano voice of Canadian composer, John Greer.¹

Pianist, coach, and composer John Greer was born in 1954. His earliest compositions grew from his primary employment as coach accompanist with the University of Toronto's Opera School, where he was asked to write vocal arrangements of folk songs that were to be included in recital. The success of these works led to subsequent commissions and a secondary career in composition was begun.

Certainly Greer's compositional output shows a particular fondness for the voice and his compositions for solo voice include nine song cycles for varying vocal types. Of Greer's song cycles, I will examine examples from three that have been chosen for their thematic and musical diversity. These cycles illustrate the variety of style and flexibility of his vocal writing. They are *Studies and Rambles of Wasagewanoqua*, *Allegory of Sweet Desire*, and *A Sarah Binks Songbook*.

The first cycle, *Studies and Rambles of Wasagewanoqua*, is inspired by Anna Brownell Jameson's (1965) memoirs of her travels in 1836 entitled *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*. Her book is replete with her original and humorous observations of life in the 1800s and is sprinkled throughout with the erudite Anna's quotations of poetry ranging from Shakespeare to Coleridge. *Wasagewanoqua* means "lady of the bright foam" in Ojibway, and was the name given to Anna Jameson by an Ojibway tribe during her arduous travels through Upper Canada (now known as Ontario).

In an attempt to be as true to the literary model as possible, Greer has designated the songs as *studies* or *rambles* mirroring the structural division of Jameson's book. Songs that include direct quotation from the novel (either quotation from Jameson or the additional observations of W. Irving) are referred to as *rambles*, while pieces that use ancillary texts, such as poems or song texts that are included in the novel, are *studies*. This form has the benefit of providing a structural framework for the cycle but offers latitude with regard to its inner components.

John Greer has no one particular compositional style; he is influenced first by the intent and structure implied by the text and, secondly, by his wish to challenge himself as composer. Therefore, he will use whatever compositional technique is called for to achieve the desired musical or textural effect. Unlike many contemporary composers, he wholeheartedly admits that his work is firmly rooted in the past. His music is a blend of the neo-classical, neo-romantic, and contemporary and his compositional techniques may include parody, quotation, polytonality, or serialism.

With this in mind, I approach the first work in the cycle, "Voyage to Canada." It is based on a text that is beyond the immediate scope of Jameson's novel. This text from "Die Größe

der Welt" by Friedrich von Schiller was selected because it reflected the fundamental spirit of the cycle, that of adventure and discovery, and provided a context for the coming textual material by Anna Jameson.

"Voyage to Canada" is composed in neo-romantic style. The expectation and excitement of travel is depicted in the arching vocal line and rolling accompaniment. Throughout, there is a subtle shifting of tonality, extended harmonic colour, and passing chromaticism with contrapuntal movement.

Although he has a great love for the piano, Greer appreciates it as an accompanying instrument. The solo repertoire appeals to him primarily in its use of vocal elements. When asked about the virtuosic nature of his writing for piano, Greer responded that he has been fortunate to have always composed music for the finest pianists. His impression is that most pianists appreciate the challenge of difficult repertoire in vocal recital, providing them with something substantial to contribute to the performance as a whole.

John Greer has worked in opera for years as coach, répétiteur, and conductor. The realization of orchestral reductions has become a speciality of sorts and this focus on operatic orchestral playing has had a tremendous effect on his compositional style. Consequently, Greer's sense is that whenever he is composing he is not just hearing the piano as a solo instrument, but trying instead to imagine orchestral colours. Certainly, if asked, any pianist would attest to the fact that his piano scores resemble orchestral reductions with their consistent use of counterpoint, thickly woven textures, and development of inner voices.

The next song, "Resurrection of Nature," has also been transcribed for two pianos. It begins with a substantial prelude in which the listener hears layers of wave-like figures depicting the mutable colours of Lake Ontario. These patterns complement an inner melody of an Ojibway tune. Greer's creative use of text painting is evident in a series of tumbling sixteenth notes; his musical depiction of Anna gasping of heat in the sweltering summers in Ontario.

John Greer's songs are highly motivic, which he attributes to his work in opera and respect of operatic composers. Rather than use these motives in a subliminal way he believes in making the intent of the composer perceivable to the audience hearing it for the first time. His treatment of recurring motivic material is evident in this piece in a clearly defined phrase of repeated triplets, clearly recognisable as the sleigh bells of an earlier song.

"Anna felt that music was necessary to portray the friendly, expressive, monotonous and changing colours of the lake as her words were inadequate" (Greer, personal communication, 2001). To this end, phonetic transcriptions of folk songs were scattered throughout her book. The addition of folk material is an important element of Greer's vocal writing style and he has written twelve arrangements of folk materials for choirs or solo voice.

"From Sault Ste. Marie en Bateau!" opens with the declamatory Jameson's recounting of her voyage into the northern regions of Upper Canada. The route travelled by Jameson goes from Sault Ste. Marie to Toronto, via Georgian Bay and the Great Lakes accompanied by the Canadian Voyageurs or Raftsmen. This ramble is a strong example of Greer's attention to the details of text setting and use of vibrant harmonic colour. In this work, he has attempted to be as faithful to the textual rhythm as possible while allowing enough freedom in the shape of each phrase for the singer to develop a unique interpretation of the text. The vocal line is accompanied by a distinctive arpeggiated accompaniment designed to depict the long, slow,

oar strokes as the raftsmen begin their journey. The paddling figures are present throughout the emerging folk songs and become increasingly energetic as the rhythm of the voyage is set.

Throughout, there is an expansion of the folk tune, frequent changes in meter, and an increasing use of chromaticism and polyrhythm. The piece ends with a finale that presents Quebecois folk material in a twentieth-century context. These folk songs are well known Canadian melodies that are included in Jameson's novel to provide "local colour." Greer selected these particular texts, as he has said, to "reflect Anna's vivid imagination and strong feminist bent" (Greer, personal communication, 2001).

The next cycle, *Allegory of Sweet Desire*, draws on translations of classical Greek and Roman love poems adapted from the book *The Sweetness of Honey and the Sting of Bees* by Michelle Lovric and Nikiforos Doxiadis Mardas (1997). When presented with these translations, John Greer was immediately reminded of a painting by the sixteenth-century Mannerist painter Agnolo Bronzino, entitled an *Allegory with Venus and Cupid*.

This painting is multi-faceted, at once suggesting the ideals of Petrarchan love and something more sordid in the almost incestuous kiss of Venus to her son Cupid. In this work, an angry Father Time draws a curtain to reveal the kissing couple while Jealousy, Play, and Deceit gaze on. Once this painting came to mind, Greer was unable to forget it and its layering of complex relationships and vivid colour; therefore, he chose to use it as a unifying factor for the cycle, so that not only the poems but also the "physical energies of this canvas" contributed to his musical inspiration.

The composer decided to combine and integrate different texts and musical styles throughout this cycle, choosing compositional techniques that heighten the discovery of the inner life of the poetry. The *Allegory of Sweet Desire* is strongly influenced by Greer's musical connection to both the immediate and the more distant past. Renaissance and Baroque references are prevalent throughout while serialism is used to highlight two texts that confront the pain and anger of jealousy.

The first song, "Dedication to Aphrodite" is in the style of a sarabande. Using elaborate structure suggesting the Baroque dance and ornamentation that could as easily have been written for harpsichord as piano, it is the perfect setting for this classical poetry. The song ends with a sudden transition to a chromatic chordal progression that represents the tonal structure of the whole work distilled into the harmonies that accompany the text, "inviolable Aphrodite."

The next song is dedicated to Hugo Wolf's *Italienisches Liederbuch*. "Presentation of the Golden Apple of Eris," is chromatic and contrapuntal and uses a swaying ostinato rhythm reminiscent of a gentle barcarole. This piece is in modified strophic form and the harmonic movement is amorphous with chromatic inner voices. In a tribute to Wolf, Greer has attempted to find a formal structure that suits the words and shifts in mood exactly. Textual rhythm has been strictly adhered to and the repetitive, distinctive musical rhythm that is present throughout the song portrays at the same time, "the poet's yearning, and hesitancy."

The final songs are from the cycle *A Sarah Binks Songbook*. Paul G. Hiebert is a former professor of chemistry at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. His book entitled, *Sarah Binks* (Hiebert, 1947), contains the fictional writings of his poetic creation by the same name, and takes a rather quirky look at the often harsh life of the Canadian prairies.

Hiebert attests that Sarah's love of German poetry developed as a result of her close association with her neighbours the Schwantzhackers, "of German persuasion, and speaking

German . . . only at home." While Sarah was not familiar with the German language, Mathilda, the youngest Schwanthacker and "least cross-eyed of the bunch," introduced her to the Germanic folk repertoire.

Sarah is best known, as Hiebert states, for her "almost perfect translations of German poetry "in particular, the poems of Heinrich Heine. Her accomplishments include translations of "Die Lorelei," awkwardly translated as "Laurel's egg" rather than the more traditional "Laura's eye," and the poem that will be examined in the next song, "Du bist wie eine Blume" or "You are like one Flower."

Sarah's unique translations seem a perfect foil for John Greer's use of homage, that is, the musical quotation of composers whose work he admires. His songs are frequently full of tributes to the past, and in that vein, the next song, "Reflections while Translating Heine," pays homage to Schumann's "Du bist wie eine Blume."

This song is in the style of a fantasia, and is offset by a segment in quasi-blues style, which uses another of Sarah's texts describing her aspirations and misguided attempts at literary stardom. This contrasting B section hints at the irony of Heine's text, and exploits the postmodernist bent of Greer's writing combining in striking fashion moments of polyrhythm and extended harmonic treatment in popular style. These musical elements demonstrate the clear blending of musical eclecticism and accessibility, for which Greer is known.

John Greer does not believe that the goal in composition is to intellectually provoke an audience *per se*, but rather embrace them. His works possess an easy accessibility for which he doesn't apologize. "I have an incredibly healthy respect for the composers of the day . . . and above all, want the work, on first listening to be appealing enough that you want to hear it again."

Reference List

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Endnotes

- ¹ Much of the information about Greer and his songs in this paper comes from a personal interview with Greer by the author on May 4, 2001.