

Chester Biscardi—A Voice for Our Time

Richard Sjoerdsma



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LATE IN 2006, WHILE I WAS PREPARING A GUEST CONTRIBUTION to the “Popular Song and Music Theater” column, the name of American composer Chester Biscardi leaped from the page to capture my attention, largely because of his association with the city in which I live.¹ Curiosity piqued, I opened communications with the composer that led to initial interest, then subsequent examination of his life and works. For one who can boast of an expansive catalog of compositions, an impressive array of awards and recognitions, and wide critical acclaim, his songs remain relatively little known, a circumstance that this introduction is intended to rectify.

Born in 1948 in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Biscardi began writing music at age nine; his childhood musical hero was George Gershwin. Avoiding familial pressures to become a lawyer, Biscardi’s interests shifted to English literature with a heavy dose of Italian language, currents that became an important influence on his musical creative life. He graduated with a BA in English Literature, an MA in Italian Literature, and an MM in Musical Composition from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Additionally, Biscardi received the MMA and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from Yale, having studied composition there with Morris, Penderecki, Takemitsu, and Wyner.² He is Director of the Music Program at Sarah Lawrence College, where he was the first recipient of the William Schuman Chair in Music (1994–2007), and currently holds the Margot C. Bogert Distinguished Service Chair.

Chester Biscardi’s catalog includes works for opera, chorus, voice and piano, orchestra, chamber ensembles, and solo piano, as well as incidental music for theater, dance, and television. His music has been performed all over the world, in Western Europe, Asia, and South America, as well as in the United States. Numerous awards include the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Aaron Copland Award, fellowships from the Bogliasco Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, and the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as grants from the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard, the Martha Baird Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Entering the company of composers such as Britten and Bartok, Biscardi recently received a commission from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress, which will generate *Summons, Visit and Grace* for baritone and piano quintet. Milton Babbitt’s citation for the Academy Award, which Biscardi received last spring from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, reads:

When Chester Biscardi was awarded (in 1975) a Charles Ives Scholarship by the Academy, it was for a body of compositions that was predominantly and singularly vocal, reflect-

ing the composer's study of and devotion to literature, particularly Italian literature. The music has changed but the poetry remains, not only in the vocal music but in the chamber and orchestral music, as the composer himself asserts in one of his later works: *The Viola Had Suddenly Become a Voice*. One can foresee that, in the shapeliness of creative things to come, there will be even longer lyrical lines, illuminating other lines and speech lines in a developing succession and contextual counterpoint unprecedented and unparalleled.³

Since even Biscardi's early instrumental compositions are inspired by literature or literary metaphor, it is not surprising that he increasingly turns to text setting as a major compositional concern. His songs are unabashedly melodic, couched in expanded, chromatic harmonies that nevertheless remain essentially tonal. His harmonic language as well as his delicate, transparent textures remind one somewhat of Copland, but in his own uniquely distinctive voice. I often tell my students, or whoever will listen (the former do not necessarily fall into the latter category) that no one squeezed more out of the major triad than Franz Schubert. The same may be said of Chester Biscardi with regard to the major and minor second. His songs, as well as his instrumental music, often display long, lyric lines that evolve out of small cells, or motives, based on these intervals, lending an overarching unity to his music. Finally, his expressively idiomatic writing for the piano indicates his training as a pianist. In his own words, "I tend to make the piano an equal partner when I'm writing vocal music."⁴ Perhaps Biscardi's philosophy as a song composer and his approach to the art song genre is best summarized in his personal journal entry for 28 May 1999.

[F]or me as the composer setting lyrics and texts (I always start with the words) is both seemingly simple and considerably complicated . . . and time consuming, heart wrenching, etc. As I see it there are three important steps:

- 1) Honor the meaning and form of the text or lyric;
- 2) The melody needs to stand alone, without accompaniment, and be beautiful, interesting, whatever;
- 3) Create a supporting harmony and texture (and counterpoint) which is as much the composer's signature as the melody.⁵

Composed for soprano Judith Bettina, who premiered the work with her pianist husband James Goldsworthy, *The Gift of Life* (1990–1993) is a song cycle on texts of Emily Dickinson, Denise Levertov, and Thornton

Wilder that speak of birth, life, memory, loss, death, and, finally, love.

In these songs I chose texts according to their power to generate musical images concerning memory, time, and the cyclical nature of existence, themes that are recurrent in much of my vocal as well as instrumental music.⁶

A cycle in the true sense of the term, there is a continuous flow from one text to another, with few discernible divisions or traditional cadences. It is a kind of dramatic scene, if not a mini-opera, and the idiomatic vocal writing is very lyric and extraordinarily beautiful.

The piece opens with a characteristic motive that appears in various guises (enharmonic, retrograde, rhythmically altered, etc.) and transpositions throughout the cycle (Example 1). In fact, the three pitches—E[#], G[#], and F[#]—are pivotal to the work, both linearly and harmonically, in voice and piano. These are powerful texts, although with a gentle philosophy, and the melodic lines are consistently and expressively evocative of the emotions of the texts.

The setting of Emily Dickinson's "Mama never forgets her birds . . ." which opens the piece, is nearly perfect in its matching of harmonic rhythm to poetic rhyme and meter.⁷

The rather static—but by no means uninteresting—rhythmic structure reflects the meditative quality of the work. In view of the Schubert analogy established earlier, another apt comparison occurs in Biscardi's use of recitative-like, *parlando* passages, sometimes unaccompanied, for particularly dramatic effect (Example 2). At the end of this moving cycle, the text affirms that "the bridge is love," connecting the living to the dead, lifting the numbness of loss, and allowing us to be free;⁸ at this intensely expressive moment, the chief motive, introduced in the opening lullaby, reappears, tying the whole work together (Example 3). That the motive remains incomplete in the voice part at the end may suggest that the individual is left to fulfill the "meaning."

Modern Love Songs, five settings lyrics by William Zinsser, represents a new direction by Biscardi, an amalgamation of cabaret, standard song, and art song styles in a refreshingly innovative, individual approach. Perhaps somewhat more immediately accessible than *The Gift of Life*, these five songs nonetheless demonstrate considerable compositional sophistication and care in the

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 58-60$

mp

Ma - ma ne-ver for-gets her

mp R.H.

4

birds, _____ Though in an-oth-er tree— She looks down just as

$\text{♩} = \text{♩}, \text{etc.}$
poco rit. / A tempo

8

of - ten - And just as ten-der - ly As

Example 1. Biscardi, *The Gift of Life*, mm. 1-11; used with permission.

union of word and tone. The beginning piece, “What a Coincidence,” is cabaret pure and simple, in straightforward AABA form. The insistent opening melody recurs throughout, and its materials govern the musical explanation of this haunting little song (Example 4). “I Wouldn’t Know About That,” following the rather conversational nature of its opening, is a little more complex in form and style, with longer vocal lines and interesting countermelodies in the piano. “Someone New” also shows cabaret leanings, but not nearly so pervasively as in the first song. As in much of Biscardi’s music, the interval of the second pervades this song; even in the middle section, the characteristic minor seventh may be seen as simply an inverted major second. The final two pieces,

“Now You See It, Now You Don’t” and “At Any Given Moment,” lie more firmly ensconced in the art song genre. Interestingly, especially because *Modern Love Songs* is not a cycle, a minor third dominated motive in the former also appears in the latter (Example 5).

“Recovering” is a single song that reflects still another aspect of Biscardi’s compositional genius. It is a setting of two poems by Muriel Rukeyser, including two lines from “The Poem as Mask: Orpheus” and the entirety of “Recovering.” A fascinating art song of considerable substance, it opens with a motto beginning constructed from a motive consisting of a perfect fourth and augmented fifth, a figure that pervades especially the opening section of the piece. Somewhat atypically for Biscardi’s

**Meno mosso,
freely**

103 *ten.*

well-worn cop-y of The Di - vine Mi-lieu, which she wants me to read, I see her

poco ten.

107 *definite* *poco ten.* *poco*

hand loose on the black stem of the mag-ni-fy-ing glass, she is doz-ing.

poco ten.

Example 2. Biscardi, *The Gift of Life*, mm. 103–112; used with permission.

Take time **(A tempo)** **Meno mosso**

144 *poco ten.*

made them. There is a land of the liv-ing and a land of the dead, and the

poco ten.

bell-like

148 *poco ten.*

bridge is love, the on-ly sur - viv - al, the on - ly mean-ing.

poco ten.

Example 3. Biscardi, *The Gift of Life*, mm. 144–150; used with permission.

Slowly ($\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 40-44$) *poco rall.* *mf* /

Voice

Piano

What a co -

5 *Più mosso* ($\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 66-72$)

in - ci - dence! — That you should — come a - long Just when I was wish - ing — That

9 *relaxed*

some - one just like you — Would come a - long — and end my lone - ly

Example 4. Biscardi, "What a Coincidence," mm. 1–10; used with permission.

usual melodic style, one encounters a great deal of trance-like single pitch repetition in the voice part, an expressive depiction of the "dream of the dead." While this repetition occurs to some extent also in the accompaniment, one finds much melodic and contrapuntal interest in the piano score as well. Interestingly, the second poem is framed by (modified) musical quotations of a chorale tune upon which Bach's cantata BWV 9, *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*, is based (Example 6).

I have selected these three works as representative of the wealth of invention found in the compositional art of Chester Biscardi. Surely this is a major American composer, a remarkably talented, imaginative, and mature voice of one whose oeuvre seem destined to enter the canon of important contemporary American song literature. These, along with those works listed the catalog below, will richly reward serious study and performance.

♩ = ca. 66
mf freely

Voice
 What hap-pened dur-ing the night? I don't un-der-stand. Was it a

Piano
mf (bring out l.h.)

hold back slightly *Meno mosso* (*♩* = ca. 50)

ma-gic act, was it sleight of hand?

7 Have I been some sor-cer-er's old fool. Daz-zled by the

(9)

Example 5a. Biscardi, "Now You See It, Now You Don't," mm. 7-8; used with permission.

15

an-y giv-en mo-ment Of an-y giv-en hour Of an-y giv-en

15

Example 5b. Biscardi, "At Any Given Moment," mm. 15-19; used with permission.

Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass

Es ist das Heil uns kommen her Von Grad und lauter Güte.
Die Werk, die helfen nimmermehr, Sie mögen nicht behüten. Der

5
Glaub sieht Jesum Christum an, Der hat genug für uns alle getan, Er ist der Mittler worden.

Example 6a. Bach, "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her" (ed. by Ross W. Duffin).

17
moltiss. rall. / A Tempo 1° (♩ = ca. 42-48)
rall. / Più mosso (♩ = ca. 52-58)
poco ten. mp
Dream of the world speak - ing to me. The dream of the
poco ten.
poco ten. bring out Lh. sub. mp
poco ten.

Example 6b. Biscardi, "Recovering," mm. 17-27; used with permission.

NOTES

1. Eric Bronner, "New 'Standards' for Singers: The Next Generation of Great American Songbook Writers," *Journal of Singing* 63, no. 4 (March/April 2007): 458.
2. James Chute, article "Biscardi," in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition, vol. 3 (London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 2001): 627.
3. The American Academy of Arts and Letters, *Ceremonial Program* (May 16, 2007): 6.
4. Letter to the author, 1 March 2007.
5. Chester Biscardi, lecture recital notes, 5 December 1999.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Robert Carl, Review for *At the Still Point*, CRI CD 686, *Fanfare* 19, no. 1 (September/October 1995): 146–147.
8. Biscardi.

CHESTER BISCARDI: VOCAL WORKS

Publisher key:

BMP Biscardi Music Press
 CFP C. F. Peters
 CVR Classical Vocal Reprints
 MM/TP Merion Music of Theodore Presser

"Baby Song of the Four Winds," for mezzo soprano and piano (1994) [(G[#]₃ optional) A₃–F₅] BMP/CVR No. B48–94–1a / CVR3613
 ca. 3 minutes
 Text: Carl Sandburg

"Baby Song of the Four Winds," transposed for soprano and piano [C₄–A₅] BMP/CVR No. B48–94–1b / CVR 3614

"Chez Vous," for soprano and piano (1983) [C₄–G₅] BMP No. B48–83–1
 ca. 3 minutes
 Lyrics: Sheldon Harnick

"The Child Comes Every Winter," for voice and piano (1999) [C[#]₄–C[#]₅] BMP/CVR No. B48–99–1 / CVR3615
 ca. 3 minutes
 Lyrics: William Zinsser

The Gift of Life, for soprano and piano (1990–1993) [B₃–A₅] CFP No. P67595
 ca. 10 minutes
 Text: Emily Dickinson, Denise Levertov, and Thornton Wilder

"Guru," for voice(s) and piano (1995) [D₄–D₅] BMP/CVR No. B48–95–1 / CVR3640
 ca. 1 minute; appropriate for an encore
 Text: Allen Ginsberg

Modern Love Songs, for medium voice and piano (1997–2002) [A₃–E₅] BMP/CVR No. B48–97 / 022–1a / CVR3617
 ca. 15 minutes
 Lyrics: William Zinsser

Modern Love Songs, for high voice and piano [C₄–G[#]₅] BMP/CVR No. B48–97 / 02–1b / CVR 3618

"What a Coincidence" [B^b₃–D₅] [D₄–F[#]₅] BMP No. B48–97–1
 ca. 3 minutes

"I Wouldn't Know About That" [A₃–E₅] [C₄–G₅] BMP No. B48–97–2
 ca. 3 minutes

"Someone New" [A[#]₃–E₅] [D₄–A^b₅] BMP No. B48–99–2
 ca. 3 minutes

"Now You See It, Now You Don't" [B₃–D₅] [D[#]₄–F[#]₅] BMP No. B48–98–2
 ca. 3 minutes

"At Any Given Moment" [C[#]₄–E₅] [F₄–A^b₅] BMP No. B48–02–1
 ca. 3 minutes

"Poet's Aria," for baritone and piano (1985), from Scene I of *Tight-Rope*, a 90-minute chamber opera in nine uninterrupted scenes (1985), on rental from MM/TP [B^b₂–G₄] BMP/CVR No. B48–85–1a / CVR3619
 ca. 3 minutes
 Text: Henry Butler

"Poet's Aria," transposed for tenor and piano [C[#]₃–B^b₄] BMP/CVR No. B48–85–1b / CVR3620

"Prayers of Steel," for baritone and piano (1998) [B₂–F[#]₄] BMP/CVR No. B48–98–1 / CVR3621
 ca. 3 minutes
 Text: Carl Sandburg

"Recovering," for tenor and piano (2000) [D₃–G[#]₄] BMP/CVR No. B48–00–2 / CVR3622
 ca. 6 minutes
 Text: Muriel Rukeyser

Versions for soprano [D₄–G[#]₅] and mezzo soprano [C^b₄–F₅] are also available from the composer.

"Trusting Lightness," for soprano and piano (1975) [B₃–A₅] BMP No. B48–75–1
 ca. 6 minutes
 Text: from *Requiescat in Pace* by Jess Anderson

"You've Been On My Mind," for voice and piano (2007) [G[#]₃–C[#]₅] BMP No. B48–07–1
 ca. 2 minutes
 Lyrics: Shirley Kaplan

Vocal Discography

At the Still Point, Judith Bettina, soprano, James Goldsworthy, piano; includes *The Gift of Life*. CRI CD 696 (New York: 1995). *Songs & Encores*, Judith Bettina, soprano, James Goldsworthy, piano; includes "Baby Song of the Four Winds," "Recovering," "Guru." Bridge 9199 (New York: 2006).

Contact

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Richard Dale Sjoerdsma received his AB degree from Calvin College, an MM in voice from the University of South Dakota, and a PhD in musicology from The Ohio State University. His research and dissertation on the music of Franz Christoph Neubauer (1760–95) have rendered him an authority on this composer, resulting in contributions to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and *The Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

Additionally, he has written articles for *The NATS Journal*, penned reviews for *NOTES* and *The Piano Quarterly*, and has authored a book on Neubauer published by A-R Editions.

He recently has retired from a 39-year career at Carthage College, Kenosha, WI, where he taught studio voice, opera, vocal literature and diction, voice pedagogy, and directed opera productions. During that time, he served almost three decades as Chair of the Department of Music and eight years as Chair of the Fine Arts Division. Dr. Sjoerdsma, a tenor, also has performed widely in opera, oratorio, concert, and recital, both in the US and in Western Europe, principally in Germany, but also in Sweden, Hungary, Austria, and France.

After having managed the "Bookshelf" column since 1972, begun under editor Harvey Ringel, Sjoerdsma was appointed Editor in Chief of *Journal of Singing* in 2001, a post that occupies a large part of his retirement. He has been a member of NATS since 1971, and was invited into membership of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS) in 2002.

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