

And He'll Be Mine

Program Notes & Texts

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Modern Love Songs by Chester Biscardi

Program Notes

Modern Love Songs (1997-2002) evolved from the collaboration between composer Chester Biscardi and writer William Zinsser that reflects their shared passion for the American Songbook; the cycle that results sits somewhere between cabaret/standard tunes and art songs. As the title suggests, these songs look at the myriad possibilities found in modern romance: coincidence, self-examination, astonishment, luck, and loss. "What a Coincidence" (1997) is about being lucky in love; "I Wouldn't Know About That" (1997) is about needing love; "Someone New" (1999) is about finding love, about love being transformative; "Now You See It, Now You Don't" (1998) is about losing love; and "At Any Given Moment" (2002) is about the quantity and quality of love, about love being thankful/prayerful. — Chester Biscardi

Texts

Lyrics by William Zinsser

What a Coincidence

What a coincidence!
That you should come along
Just when I was wishing
That someone just like you
Would come along and end my lonely night.

What a coincidence!
That you should prove me wrong
Just when I was thinking
That nothing in my world
Was going right.

What a fantastic, amazing contradiction of the odds!
My lucky day!
What a roll of the dice,
Suffice it to say
You're a gift from the strict, unpredictable gods.

What an astonishment!
That you were lonely too.
Just when you were wishing
That someone you could love
Might possibly be waiting, waiting just for you.
What a coincidence!
Or was it always meant to be?
That the someone who was waiting,
Who was always meant to love you,
Was me?

I Wouldn't Know About That

When you're in love, they say you walk on air,
I wouldn't know about that.
When you're in love, ev'ry day's a country fair.
I wouldn't know about
That kind of transcendental state.
I wake up to the same old world,
The same plat-du-jour on my plate.

When you're in love, they say your heart beats fast,
I wouldn't know about that.
All you can think is, "It's much too good to last,"
And yet it does.
I wouldn't know about
That kind of buzz,
My pulse is slow,
My heart is steady.
I only know
I'm ready . . .

Ready for that once-in-a-lifetime kick,
The click/that's heard in ev'ry romantic plot,
But not by me.
Why can't that happen to me?
Please make that happen to me!

Now You See It, Now You Don't

What happened during the night?
I don't understand.
Was it a magic act, was it sleight
of hand?
Have I been some sorcerer's old fool.
Dazzled by the mirrors and smoke?
I loved magic as a child in school.
Funny, I no longer get the joke.

Now you see it, now you don't.
Pardon my confusion.
Yesterday
I was love's Exhibit A.
Was that an illusion?

Now you hear it, now you don't.
Do my ears deceive me?
Yesterday
I could hear somebody say
"Good morning" when I woke up.
It never crossed my mind that she [he] might leave me.

Did some magician wave his wand
When my back was turned?
"Absence makes the heart grow fond"
(They say).
Try telling that
to someone who's been burned.

Now you see it, now you don't.
The rabbit's been put back into the hat.
The show is over and I won't
pretend to know how it was done.
I only know that it was so much quicker than the eye.
Can you see my love anywhere?
Neither can I.

At Any Given Moment

As the poet said:
How do I love you?
Let me count the ways.
But I'd like to rephrase
the question and start again.
Not with how do I love you,
But when?

At any given moment
Of any given hour
Of any given day
You are somewhere in my mind.

At any given drop of sand in the hourglass,
At any given tick of the clock,
At any given shift in the sun's position
I get that shock
Of recognition.

I'm ready for that thunderbolt
that suddenly knocks you flat.
I'd like to know about that.

Someone New

Where did he [she] go?
The boy [girl] I was this morning?
Who never knew that birds could sing
and skies could be so blue.

Where did she [he] come from?
She [He] wasn't here this morning.
She [He] chased away the other me
and brought in someone new.

How could that melancholy former me
Slip away?
I could have sworn that he [she]
Was here to stay.

Where did he [she] go?
He [She] left without a warning.
But here's the thing
I'm really certain of:
That missing he [she]
Has left a brand new me,
A brand new boy [girl] in love.

It's you again!
Come to remind me
Of all our times together since we met
Not that I could ever forget.

At every given moment
Of every given hour
Of every given season
Of the year
You appear.

“Here” from *Gay Life* by David Del Tredici

Program Notes

Gay Life was initially envisioned as a cycle of eight songs, each touching on the “gay experience” from a different angle. The music came to me in a burst — a burst, really, of gay pride. It began in August 1996 as a result of my experience at The Body Electric School’s weeklong retreat called “The Dear Love of Comrades.” As well, I encountered the poetry serendipitously. The first two songs are settings of poetry created spontaneously by two comrades during the excitement and joy of the retreat. After a Lincoln Center concert where both Allen Ginsberg and I performed, I asked the iconoclastic poet to recommend some of his favorite erotic poetry. In his simple, Buddhist way, he responded by handing me a copy of his own poetry, dog-eared to his favorites. Paul Monette’s mourning of his lover, Rog, in “Here,” touched on my own loss of a lover. The brief Thom Gunn poem, fueled by my mother’s sudden death, spun itself out into a fifteen-minute farewell. To bind the songs more closely, I composed interludes connecting each to the next. (Alternate endings, however, permit individual songs to be extracted as stand-alone pieces.) [...]

The tragedy grows still more personal with Paul Monette’s “Here,” as open fifths provide a stark accompaniment to a man’s shell-shocked soliloquy, intoned on a single pitch: He lies beside his lover’s grave, remembering the horror of the final weeks. Emptiness is the hallmark of this quiet piece, but ultimately anger, sorrow and despair well up and are released in a final wail. “Here” is written in memory of my lover, Paul Arcomano, who died of AIDS in 1993, at thirty-four. Six-foot-three, devastatingly handsome, twenty years my junior, we were together for seven years. This song was written in one day, and I cried the whole time — the first, and only, time this has happened. The subsequent interlude’s long decrescendo brings emotional respite. — David Del Tredici

Texts

Here

everything extraneous has burned away
this is how burning feels in the fall
of the final year not like leaves in a blue
October but as if the skin were a paper lantern
full of trapped moths beating their fired wings
and yet i can lie on this hill just above you
a foot beside where I will lie myself
soon soon and for all the wrack and blubber
feel still how we were warriors when the
merest morning sun in the garden was a
kingdom after Room 1010 war is not all
death it turns out war is what little
thing you hold on to refugeed and far from home
oh sweetie will you please forgive me this
that every time I opened a box of anything
Glad Bags One-A-Days KINGSIZE was
the worst I'd think will you still be here
when the box is empty Rog Rog who will
play boy with me now that I bucket with tears
through it all when i'd cling beside you sobbing
you'd shurg it off with the quietest I'm still
here I have your watch in the top drawer
which I don't dare wear yet help me please
the boxes grocery home day after day
the junk that keeps men spotless but it doesn't
matter now how long they last or I
the day has taken you with it and all
there is now is burning dark that only green
is up by the grave and this little thing
of telling the hill I'm here oh I'm here

Three Lullabies by Zachary Wadsworth

Program Notes

The three poems in this set of lullabies reveal their genre's true emotional complexity. Traditionally, the lullaby song is one sung by a parent to their child in order to lull them to sleep. Below this simple and tender surface, however, lies a more complicated emotional landscape, steeped in parents' anxieties about the safety of their child in a dangerous world.

The first song follows many lullaby conventions: triple meters, a tendency towards flat keys, and a folk-like, strophic melody. This simple tune, though, floats above a harmonically turbulent accompaniment, painting the poem's lurking dichotomy of "wonderland" versus "underland." The second song is set in a triumphant (if ridiculous) bel canto, evoking more the opera house than the rocking-chair. Its extravagantly nightmarish symbolism and momentary lapses into dreamy melody paint a picture of heroic conquest, where sleep is only won through gallant defense from the many fearsome creatures lurking close by. The final song, drenched in a new mother's anxiety for her husband's safe return from sea, occupies an altogether darker universe than the previous songs. Here, the throbbing rhythm of the ocean wind is a constant reminder of her husband's perilous distance. Despite her fears, the mother, with great hope, sings her restless child to sleep.

These lullabies are dedicated to Laura and Derek Chester, on the birth of their first son, Zachary. — Zachary Wadsworth

Texts

Rockaby, lullaby

Rockaby, lullaby, bees in the clover!
Crooning so drowsily, crying so low,
Rockaby, lullaby, dear little rover!
Down into wonderland,
Down to the under-land,
Go, now go!
Down into wonderland go.

Rockaby, lullaby, rain on the clover,
(Tears on the eyelids that waver and weep!)
Rockaby, lullaby—bending it over!
Down on the mother-world,
Down on the other world,
Sleep, oh sleep!
Down on the mother-world sleep.

Rockaby, lullaby, dew on the clover,
Dew on the eyes that will sparkle at dawn!
Rockaby, lullaby, dear little rover!
Into the stilly world,
Into the lily world,
Gone! now gone!
Into the lily world gone.

— Josiah Gilbert Holland

You spotted snakes...

You spotted snakes, with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong;
Come not near our fairy queen.

Philomel, with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby;
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby:
Never harm,
Nor spell nor charm,
Come our lovely lady nigh;
So, good night, with lullaby.

Weaving spiders, come not here;
Hence, you long-legg'd spinners, hence!
Beetles black, approach not near;
Worm, nor snail, do no offence.

Philomel, with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby;
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby:
Never harm,
Nor spell nor charm,
Come our lovely lady nigh;
So, good night, with lullaby.

— William Shakespeare

Under the silver moon

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea,
Low, low, breathe and blow,
Wind of the western sea!
Over the rolling waters go,
Come from the dying moon, and blow,
Blow him again to me;
While my little one, while my pretty one, sleeps.

Sleep and rest, sleep and rest,
Father will come to thee soon;
Rest, rest, on mother's breast,
Father will come to thee soon;
Father will come to his babe in the nest,
Silver sails all out of the west
Under the silver moon:
Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep.

— Lord Alfred Tennyson

Three Poems of Thomas Moore by Darien Scott Shulman

Program Notes

Three Poems of Thomas Moore was commissioned in 2007 by The Tobenski-Algera Concert Series for Marc Peloquin and Dennis Tobenski.

Texts

Texts by Thomas Moore

If Thou'lt Be Mine

If thou'lt be mine, the treasures of air,
Of earth and sea, shall lie at thy feet;
Whatever in Fancy's eye looks fair,
Or in Hope's sweet music is most sweet,
Shall be ours, if thou wilt be mine, love!

Bright flowers shall bloom wherever we rove,
A voice divine shall talk in each stream,
The stars shall look like worlds of love,
And this earth be all one beautiful dream
In our eyes, if thou wilt be mine, love!

And thoughts, whose source is hidden and high,
Like streams that come from heavenward hills,
Shall keep our hearts — like meads, that lie
To be bathed by those eternal rills —
Ever green, if thou wilt be mine, love!

All this and more the Spirit of Love
Can breathe o'er them who feel his spells;
That heaven, which forms his home above,
He can make on earth, wherever he dwells,
And he will — if thou wilt be mine, love!

An Argument

I've oft been told by learned friars,
That wishing and the crime are one,
And Heaven punishes desires
As much as if the deed were done.

If wishing damns us, you and I
Are damned to all our heart's content;
Come, then, at least we may enjoy
Some pleasure for our punishment!

Come Rest in This Bosom

Come, rest in this bosom, my own stricken deer,
Though the herd have fled from thee, thy home is still here;
Here still is the smile, that no cloud can o'er cast,
And a heart and a hand all thy own to the last.

Oh! what was love made for, if 'tis not the same
Through joy and through torment, through glory and shame?
I know not, I ask not, if guilt's in that heart?
I but know that I love thee, whatever thou art.

Thou hast call'd me thy angel in moments of bliss,
And thy Angel I'd be, 'mid the horrors of this, —
Through the furnace, unshrinking, thy steps to pursue,
And shield thee, and save thee, — or perish there too!

And He'll Be Mine by Dennis Tobenski

Program Notes

And He'll Be Mine, for tenor and piano, was written in late 2005 and premiered on April 26, 2006 by Robert Frankenberry and pianist Marc Peloquin on the inaugural concert for the Tobenski-Algera Concert Series.

For the cycle, I chose eight poems (two of which were halved and made into a single song) by 18th century Scottish poet Robert Burns which are mostly from the point of view of a woman, and, by using a male singer, inverted the sexual intention of the texts. While this swapping of genders causes the piece to be a “gay” song cycle (which was my primary intention, to suit my own sexuality, and to fill my own need for art song with a clear gay intention), it also fits in with the folk song tradition of Scotland and Ireland, which allows specifically gendered songs to be sung by members of the same sex that is being sung about. And although my intention is for the cycle to be sung by a man, I do not object (and, in fact, welcome) that it be sung by a woman. (In my life as a singer, I have occasionally sung art songs written specifically for sopranos because the texts suited my personality or the needs of a program that I was putting together.)

The cycle opens with “Braw, Braw Lads o' Galla Water”, a declaration of love, albeit a secret love – an idea familiar to gay men who are still on the road to accepting their sexuality. And, indeed, to those who have, but who harbor feelings for someone who they know cannot or will not return their affection.

“Craigieburn Wood” speaks more of secret love and the heartbreak that it inevitably brings. When I wrote this song, I had been “out” for several years, but still remembered keenly the longing and pain that I had suffered when I had harbored secret “crushes” on several young men prior to my coming out.

“Him That's Far Away” draws from two different Burns poems – “The Bonnie Lad That's Far Awa” and “Talk of Him That's Far Awa” – and talks of an experience that I have thankfully never had, but which many young (and not young) gay men have: that of being ostracised for their sexuality. My first boyfriend, just prior to the beginning of our relationship, had been disowned by his parents when he came out to them, and I drew on my intimate knowledge of his pain and loneliness when writing this song. I heightened those feelings by stripping away the piano for this song, leaving the singer alone and exposed.

“Him That's Far Away” runs directly into “Lament”, which I dedicated “to those who have lost a loved one to AIDS”. The poem is originally titled “A Mother's Lament for the Death of Her Son”, but I felt that it expressed equally validly the pain of losing a lover or brother or son or father or friend to the AIDS epidemic. Rather than create a song that is angry or despairing or in any way hysterical, I chose to set the song in an emotional wasteland – a place of utter shock. To achieve this, I gave the right hand of the piano an ostinato figure on C, which never changes throughout the entire song, and the voice and the left hand of the piano make use of a 9-tone row which is very occasionally inverted or retrograded. The static nature of the musical material I think creates a haunting and shell-shocked emotional landscape.

In stark contrast to the psychological starkness of “Lament”, “Bonnie Dundee” is light and airy. Like “Lament”, the poem is intended to be from the point of view of a mother, though about her infant son, who she is admiring and doting over; however, by placing the poem in the context of gay life, it takes on a wholly different meaning – that of the “Daddy/Son” relationship, or that of an older man with a younger. The line “And mak thee a man like thy daddie dear” inspired the song when it piqued my sense of playfulness.

“The Gallant Weaver” is a theme & variations, and the emotional high point of the cycle. Each verse grows in complexity, starting with the simple vocal line and the piano's parallel sixths and sevenths over a wandering bass line in the first verse, followed by the canonic second verse in which the two hands of the piano anticipate the vocal line with octave displacements, and the quasi-minimal caccia of the third verse, until the final verse with its widely-spaced block chords that march joyously to the final declaration “I love my gallant Weaver”!

The cycle comes to a peaceful, tender close in “John Anderson, My Jo” with its gently rocking accompaniment and simple vocal line. The poem still has the ability to bring a tear to my eye when I hear it read or sung. Here, the singer addresses his lover toward the end of their lives, reflecting on their long and happy relationship. Having spent so much of their lives together, they have “climbed the hill”:

Now we maun totter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go,

And sleep thegither at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo.

— Dennis Tobenski
Texts

Texts by Robert Burns

Braw, Braw Lads o' Galla Water

Braw, braw lads on Yarrow-braes,
They rove amang the blooming heather;
But Yarrow braes, nor Ettrick shaws
Can match the lads o' Galla Water.

But there is ane, a secret ane,
Aboon them a' I loe him better;
And I'll be his, and he'll be mine,
The bonie lad o' Galla Water.

Craigieburn Wood

Sweet fa's the eve on Craigieburn,
And blythe awakes the morrow;
But a' the pride o' Spring's return
Can yield me nocht but sorrow.

I see the flowers and spreading trees,
I hear the wild birds singing;
But what a weary wight can please,
And Care his bosom wringing!

Fain, fain would I my griefs impart,
Yet dare na for your anger;
But secret love will break my heart,
If I conceal it langer.

If thou refuse to pity me,
If thou shalt love another,
When yon green leaves fade frae the tree,
Around my grave they'll wither.

Him That's Far Away

O how can I be blythe and glad,
Or how can I gang brisk and braw,
When the bonie lad that I lo'e best
Is o'er the hills and far awa!

My father pat me frae his door,
My friends they hae disown'd me a';
But I hae ane will tak my part,
The bonie lad that's far awa.

Ye whom sorrow never wounded,
Ye who never shed a tear,
Care—untroubled, joy—surrounded,
Gaudy day to you is dear.

Gentle night, do thou befriend me,
Downy sleep, the curtain draw;
Spirits kind, again attend me,
Talk of him that's far awa!

Lament

Fate gave the word, the arrow sped,
And pierc'd my darling's heart;
And with him all the joys are fled
Life can to me impart.

By cruel hands the sapling drops,
In dust dishonour'd laid;
So fell the pride of all my hopes,
My age's future shade.

The mother-linnet in the brake
Bewails her ravish'd young;
So I, for my lost darling's sake,
Lament the live-day long.

Death, oft I've feared thy fatal blow.
Now, fond, I bare my breast;

Bonie Dundee

My blessin's upon thy sweet wee lippie!
My blessin's upon thy e'e-brie!
Thy smiles are sae like my blythe sodger lad
Thou's aye the dearer, and dearer to me!

But I'll big a bow'r on yon bonie banks,
Whare Tay rins wimplin' by sae clear;
An' I'll cleed thee in the tartan sae fine,
And mak thee a man like thy daddie dear.

The Gallant Weaver

Where Cart rins rowin' to the sea,
By mony a flower and spreading tree,
There lives a lad, the lad for me,
He is a gallant Weaver.
O, I had wooers aught or nine,
They gied me rings and ribbons fine;
And I was fear'd my heart wad tine,
And I gied it to the Weaver.

My daddie sign'd my tocher-band,
To gie the lad that has the land,
But to my heart I'll add my hand,
And give it to the Weaver.
While birds rejoice in leafy bowers,
While bees delight in opening flowers,
While corn grows green in summer showers,
I love my gallant Weaver.

John Anderson, My Jo

John Anderson, my jo, John,
When we were first acquent;
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonie brow was Brent;
But now your brow is beld, John,
Your locks are like the snaw;
But blessings on your frosty pow,
John Anderson, my jo.

John Anderson, my jo, John,
We clamb the hill tegither;
And mony a cantie day, John,
We've had wi' ane anither:
Now we maun totter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go,
And sleep together at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo.

O, do thou kindly lay me low
With him I love, at rest!