

Genesis of *The Gift of Life*

Chester Biscardi

The Gift of Life, for soprano and piano (1990-1993), is a song cycle with texts by Emily Dickinson, Denise Levertov and Thornton Wilder. These songs were written for soprano Judith Bettina, who first performed them with her husband, James Goldsworthy, in Palo Alto, California on June 27, 1993. The poem by Emily Dickinson, "Mama Never Forgets Her Birds," is set as a lullaby, written to celebrate the birth of their daughter, Ariana Tamar Goldsworthy. The cycle, continuing with "The 90th Year," by Denise Levertov, and an adaptation of the last lines of Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, speaks of birth, life, memory, loss, death, and, finally, love. This cycle grew directly from my work with text and characters in *Tight-Rope*, an opera I wrote with Henry Butler in 1985. In these songs I chose texts according to their power to generate musical images concerning memory, time, and the cyclical nature of existence, themes which are recurrent in my music.

Genesis:

The Gift of Life, written between 1990 and 1993, grew directly from my work with text and characters in my opera, *Tight-Rope* (1985). It also emphasized the lyrical aspect of my music, which had become more pronounced since the writing of the opera. It is a song cycle that speaks 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 which are recurrent in much of my vocal as well as instrumental music.

The text covers two pages in the score in order to honor the linebreaks in each poem and lyric (based on a narrative text) and to show exactly how the writer visualized them. This was particularly important when I started working with Denise Levertov.

Initially, I found the Emily Dickinson poem when I was looking for a text appropriate as a lullaby for the birth in 1990 of Ariana Tamar Goldsworthy, daughter of the soprano Judith Bettina and pianist James Goldsworthy, both close friends. Judy then asked me to write a cycle for her, and so I started looking at other things that I had wanted to set. Which led me to Denise Levertov. I had first discovered Levertov in 1974 through her poem, "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," which my partner, Russell Merritt, had written out for me in a beautiful, black leather-bound book. In 1978 I heard her read on a day in honor of Muriel Rukeyser at Sarah Lawrence College where I had recently started teaching. I finally corresponded with Levertov whose address I got from Sara Doniach, a piano teacher she studied with when she was at Stanford who was also a close friend of Judy Bettina.

In 1988 I wrote Levertov about granting me permission to set “A Tree Telling of Orpheus.” She said “No!,” that her poetry already had a musical line embedded in it. I said, of course, I knew that, and I certainly wouldn't get in the way of her musical line, that I would write my music from a different perspective that would show her words and ideas in a different light. I have always felt about my approach to text setting that my added musical line is not simply in counterpoint to the words, that it should add a different level of meaning. She recommended that I listen to her read her poetry on cassette [Watershed Tapes' "The Acolyte"] and then read two chapters in her book, *Light Up the Cave*, "On the Function of the Line" (linebreaks, indentions) and "Technique and Tune-up." I did. We talked some more about setting other poems, and then I gave up the idea. Until June of 1988 when I wrote to her about my interest in her “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus.” I didn't hear back from her, however, until July 1989 when I was about to leave for Tokyo for a year's residency on a fellowship from The Japan Foundation. She wrote to me: “I'd love to hear how your plans to set my “Mass” have developed – if they have.” I was both amazed and amused!

Then in 1991 I was looking for poetry to connect with the Dickinson and rediscovered Levertov's “The 90th Year,” with its opening image of Levertov's mother looking up and not being able to see or hear the bird in a jacaranda tree – a mirror image of what is happening in the Dickinson, where the mother is looking down from heaven (Dickinson's mother, who lived a very different life from Emily's, had, in fact, just died). The Dickinson is about birth and joy. The Levertov kicks off into memory; then meditation, analyzing the deep stuff of "mother," idle before death, concerned with the mundane; then the recognition of mortality – of mother and of self – the realization that there really is nothing more to be said in response to this recognition – which inspired the one moment of silence in the piece when she watches her mother sleeping. The "gift of life" line is written in a letter from her mother when Levertov had returned home after the visit. And it is partly for that reason that I return to the opening of the lullaby music "held back."

The poem is part of Levertov's *Homage to Pavese* series, Pavese being the basis for my undergraduate thesis – a very powerful early influence on me [his *Il mestiere di vivere* (The Business of Living) influenced *Mestiere*, for piano (1979) and *Di Vivere*, for clarinet in A and piano with flute, violin and violoncello (1981)]. I asked her for permission for this poem which she finally granted. She said: "I'd be happy to have that poem of mine set by you ([although] it seems an unlikely choice to me as it is more meditative than lyrical in form, but composers have their own mysterious reasons!, e.g., Ned Rorem wrote to say he was setting a quite didactic poem of mine called “Making Peace” . . . I could see why as a Quaker he was in ideological agreement with it but it surprised me none the less!)."

Around the same time I rediscovered “The 90th Year,” I was rereading Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* about five pilgrims on the way to a shrine in Peru who die when the bridge they're crossing collapses. The novel looks at their lives before the accident, how they interconnected, and how they were individually and collectively important in the world. The bridge is "love," what connects the living to the dead; it lifts the numbness of loss and allows us to be free. Also, the line in the Wilder, "all the impulses of love return to the love that made them," is prefigured in the Levertov when

she mentions Theilard du Chardin's *The Divine Milieu* where each one of us is a Center of Love and God is the Center of Centers [which figures in *At the Still Point*, my orchestral work from 1976] (which has a brief melody in counterpoint to it, a composite of the melodic lines in m. 8 of the Dickinson – "and just as tenderly" and m. 142 – the "all the impulses" line from the Wilder). (I had written part of the Wilder before I had actually begun setting the Levertov which allowed me to hint at ideas earlier on that I had already written – a trick I learned from writing *Tight-Rope* where I couldn't write everything in chronological order.) The Wilder is meant as an affirmation, not a dirge. Every so often my music is self-referential, and that is true in this piece where the line in the Levertov, "I am so tired of appreciating the gift of life," is musically similar to my setting of Henry Butler's words in *Tight-Rope*, "not every carpenter you meet is rehearsing for his resurrection." So, the cycle finally fell into place.

As far as the pitches – E#, G# and F# are important. And the piece plays with tonality, but certainly not in an hierarchical way. My music wasn't flirting with tonality until 1983 (*Piano Concerto*). Before then I had worked mostly with modulating cells, using frozen registration as a backdrop, and so on. I certainly stayed away from octaves, triads, etc., as dictated by one of the major trends of the '70s. But since '83 each piece plays around with consonances in different ways. In *TGOL* the C#-ness of the piece keeps it kind of static, especially during the Levertov, which is long and narrative and meditative. The lullaby based on Dickinson was written very quickly and is clearly D-flatish. At the end of it, vis-à-vis intervals, the setting of the word "above" goes from an A-flat to an F. The Levertov starts on that same F, enharmonically written as an E#. It ends on the words "of life" set to F and D#. The Wilder starts on that same D# and ends on "meaning" set to E# and G#, the G# is enharmonic with the A-flat that starts the whole cycle. So, E-flat, F and A-flat become important pitches, as outlined in m. 3 in the piano – a simple little game that gave me some structure (realized, actually, mostly after the fact.) I had originally set "meaning" in the Wilder as a C# down to a D. Adding those two notes to the original three-note set, I arrived at the chord that underlines the setting of "the love will have been enough": D, A-flat (G#), C# (D-flat), E-flat and F. And the setting of "the gift of life" uses the three-note set with the added C#. (I wonder what happened to the D?!) So, much of the harmonic basis seems to circle around the pentad made up the five notes above.

The different natures of the three texts – two poems and an excerpted narrative – demand different settings/lines – because of the rhythms and pitches inherent in them – because of linebreaks, indentions, and longer and shorter structures. The piano's role creates texture as well as forward movement, and it is another player (beyond text and voice) helping to create the drama in the work. It is integral to interweaving and moving the words along. It adds "irrational" rhythms to the narrative that frees up the voice to express the text and feelings in much the same way as the basso continuo/thoroughbass does in Baroque music. This is kind of a dramatic scene, if not a mini-opera. It does contrast musical and registral space, which have also been major concerns of mine since the '70s.

Judith Bettina's Tessitura in 1990

don't sit; juicy dull; good good good no good best high good depends uncom-
for color for color fuzzy midrange midrange midrange midrange midrange midrange on vowel fortable
"aw" or
"ah"

ED: DL: TW: under "The love will have been enough"

"a-bove" "of life" "mean-ing" (registral (discarded
displacement & "mean-ing"
2-3 suspension now hidden
to D-flat) in chord and
part of "the
gift of life") "the gift of life"

Therefore, this C#-ish pentad:

(enharmonic D-flat for C#, etc.) 2-3 suspension; mm. 2-3

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D^b -ish
 $E^b \rightarrow F \rightarrow A^b$
 D^b
 (2-3 suspension)

Mama never forgets her birds,
 Though in another tree –
 She looks down just as often
 And just as tenderly

ends
 $A^b \rightarrow F$

As when her little mortal nest
 With cunning care she wove –
 If either of her "sparrows fell,"
 She "notices," above. (notices birds above)

begins
 $E^\# (F)$

Emily Dickinson (ca. 1860)
 1) Kick off into memory
 High in the jacaranda shines the gilded thread
 of a small bird's curlicue of song – too high
 for her to see or hear. (birds too high to hear)

I've learned
 not to say, these last years,
 'O, look! – O, listen, Mother!'
 as I used to.

2) Meditation; flowers

(It was she
 who taught me to look;
 to name the flowers when I was still close to the ground,
 my face level with theirs;
 or to watch the sublime metamorphoses
 unfold and unfold
 over the walled back gardens of our street . . .

3) Deep stuff of mother

It had not been given her
 to know the flesh as good in itself,
 as the flesh of a fruit is good. To her
 the human body has been a husk,
 a shell in which souls were prisoned.
 Yet, from within it, with how much gazing
 her life has paid tribute to the world's body!
 How tears of pleasure
 would choke her, when a perfect voice,
 deep or high, clove to its note unfaltering!)

4) Idle before death; mundane

She has swept the crackling seedpods,
 the litter of mauve blossoms, off the cement path,
 tipped them into the rubbish bucket.
 She's made her bed, washed up the breakfast dishes,
 wiped the hotplate. I've taken the butter and milkjug
 back to the fridge next door – but it's not my place,
 visiting here, to usurp the tasks
 that weave the day's pattern.

Now she is leaning forward in her chair,

by the lamp lit in the daylight,
 rereading *War and Peace*.

5) Recognition of mortality - of mother, of self
 When I look up

from her wellworn copy of *The Divine Milieu*,
 which she wants me to read, I see her hand
 loose on the black stem of the magnifying glass,
 she is dozing.

'I am so tired,' she has written to me, 'of appreciating
 the gift of life.'

6) How do you respond? Nothing to say; silence
 (Musically quotes Tight-Rope:
 'Not every carpenter you meet
 is rehearsing for his resurrection.'

ends
 F → D#

Denise Levertov, "The 90th Year" (for Lore Segal) from
 the *Homage to Pavese* section of *Life in the Forest*

begins
 D#

(Musically recaps Dickinson, m. 10)

Soon we shall die
 and all memory of those we have lost
 will have left the earth . . .
 We shall die
 and all memory of those we have lost
 will have left the earth,
 and we ourselves shall be loved for a while
 and forgotten.

The love will have been enough; (Includes D-c# discarded 'meaning')
 all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. (Prefigured in and recaps
The Divine Milieu, mm. 103-104)

ends
 E# → G#
 (Ab at the
 beginning)

There is a land of the living and a land of the dead,
 and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.

Thornton Wilder, adapted from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

take time

the gift of life.'

Changes to *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*:

Narrative passage from novel (from the final paragraph and the end of the book):

“Even now,” she thought, “almost no one remembers Esteban and Pepita, but myself. Camila alone remembers her Uncle Pio and her son; this woman, her mother. But soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

In *TGOL*:

Soon we shall die
and all memory of those we have lost
will have left the earth . . .
We shall die
and all memory of those we have lost
will have left the earth,
and we ourselves shall be loved for a while
and forgotten.
The love will have been enough;
all those impulses of love return to the love that made them.
There is a land of the living and a land of the dead,
and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.

Some ideas on text setting:

I always start with the words, and as I see it there are three important steps:

- 1) Honor the meaning and form of the text (narrative or otherwise) or lyric or poem, reflecting the music and rhythm inherent in the words as well as the structure found in linebreaks and indentions;
- 2) The melody needs to stand alone without accompaniment and be beautiful and interesting in and of itself (in more abstract songs melodic shapes or “cells” might be filled in by instrumental music or silence);
- 3) Create a supporting harmony and texture and counterpoint that is as much the composer’s signature as the melody.

Making sure that the story is being told is clearly important. How does the art song differ artistically and aesthetically from a poem? The art song becomes a new form, it keeps the integrity intact of the original poem and necessitates a music that not only gives different perspectives to the meaning of the words and their structure but also creates its own integrity. When a poem is read by itself it comes out of silence and goes back into it. It is not grounded by music.

Excerpts from *A Celebration of Words and Music* at Cornell, March 14, 1995:

Chester Biscardi: Because words have meaning where music doesn't have meaning in the same way, it is so enticing when you find the poetry that really means something to you. There's a specific thing that has to hit, and when it does and I feel connected to it that opens up the inspiration that is musical. Painting the deeper levels of understanding of that meaning, maybe that's it. It's not necessarily adding a line of counterpoint that's literally adding a line of counterpoint, but it's really about enlivening something – you can't do it any other way. The voice has limitations and possibilities like any other instrument. You can write excruciatingly difficult things for the voice and destroy it. You can work against the voice, you can work against the poetry. How it's really different from writing for instruments is that there's something so extraordinary about the natural ability of the body singing, and that you have a word and the word dictates a certain gesture, a certain way to be set. You can fight that or not. That is a very different thing than for writing for the violin, even though it has its own limitations.

Denise Levertov: The poem is a score – on the page – for how it is to sound when it is read as a poem. And so the problem for the poet is that when the composer comes along whose music the poet may like very, very much, the composer imposes another layer of his on top of the already existing verbal use. And this is very difficult for the poet to come to terms with however much they like the quality of the music as music. A poet's music is not only a matter of rhythm nor is it only a matter of rhythm combined with the way that vowels and consonants interact due to the juxtaposition of the words. It also has melody, and the melody is driven into the poem from the very beginning, and it is melody which is based on the intonations and intervals – the ups and downs – of the speaking voice, somewhat intensified. One way that the composer can go along with that is to follow the same graphs – so to speak – of ups and downs, only bring it to a still more intense point, but do it on a larger scale. Most composers do not want to do that because when they did that the only repentant sense of the emotional meaning to them of that poem is not fulfilled, then they're limited to what the poem already has that they are religiously following, and they want to articulate their own personal sense of the poem. And I think that this is the difficulty that we have, and if the composer and poet are friends and can talk about it they can come to a sort of synthesis, which will satisfy them both at least to a certain extent.

The differences between different people's reading aloud of a poem, given that they know how to read aloud at all, will differ only in the way that the same number of different pianists – let us say – would perform a piece of piano music. In other words, some people will take the allegro faster than others or the adagio slower than others; the key, however, will remain the same; the barlines, the measures, are observed. And there is not a radical difference between any number of good – in the sense of simply competent, efficient – readings of a well-written poem. Because the poem, as I started by saying, is a score, and that score will be observed by a reader who knows something about reading out loud.