

Her Phantom Happiness Program Notes

Dec. 9th, Pickman, 8pm

Her Phantom Happiness, text by Georgia Douglas Johnson (2017)

The wealth of literature by Black women is a mostly untapped, bounteous, beautiful resource for composers. Having come across the works of Georgia Douglas Johnson from a composer colleague and friend, I knew one day I would set her beautiful text. This song cycle uses three of her poems from her 1918 collection. I chose these three poems in this order because they imply a story of a woman who goes through a personal struggle, and gains hope to overcome this situation. Furthermore, even though Ms. Johnson does not mention race or skin color, I truly feel that the first two poems, *The Heart of a Woman* and *Foredoom* (and even perhaps the third, *Quest*), are a keen, subtle commentary on Black women in the United States around the turn of the century. Ms. Johnson herself was also a musician, and as I set her text, I encountered a plethora of musical possibilities. In the future, I may make yet another setting of these very same three works in the same order, for another voice type and instrumentation ... or even multiple settings.

How Could I Know, text by Crystal Williams (2021)

Upon receiving this text, I was immediately attracted to its simplicity, its elegance, and its complex implications. Perceiving these elements dictated the musical language: sparse, bold, supportive, yet also questioning. This song was commissioned by the Boston Opera Collaborative for their Love in the Time of ... project.

To Curse or Not to Curse, text: The Holy Bible (world premiere) (2013)

This short, "sacred" work (complete with a Landini cadence) is a musical pseudonym for the melding of religion and contradiction. The two chosen verses clearly show a discrepancy – an early Genesis selection saying God will no more curse everything living (referring to the Noah's Ark story, where Noah's family and a host of animals and plants were saved), followed by a selection from the last book of the Old Testament saying God will curse those who do not worship Him. Consequently, the piece – in two distinct parts – follows this contradiction: the first part is angry with the text asserting that no curse will happen anymore, while the last section is calm in its stating that people will be cursed for not worshipping God. Musical elements from the first section appear in the last section, and the aperiodic, fixed d4 is a musical painting of a small, yet significant link between these two verses: the heart.

p e r d u e, text by Maram al-Masri (2020)

For a birthday present, my partner purchased a poem collection titled *101 poemes et quelques contre le racisme, Anthologie*, edited by Francis Combes et Jean-Luc Despax. He purchased this in a museum gift shop, knowing that some of the poems may make for good song settings. Indeed he was right. When I read *L'exode I - L'exode II*, even though my French is not perfect, I immediately felt the power, the immediacy, and the depth of this text. As there is already such a strength to the literary atmosphere that Ms. al-Masri sets up, I knew that the musical setting had

to be equally as minimal, stark, and cutting. Gratitude to Mr. Craig Bloomfield for helping, in many ways, with the French setting; never-ending gratitude to Ms. Victoria Thomasch for commissioning and performing this difficult work.

In Between the Moon and Us, text by Enzo Silon Surin (2021)

The poem used for this song is so sensual ... at least I interpreted the poem in this manner! One wonderful aspect about poetry is how every person brings their own unique universe into interpreting text, and this text evoked feelings that I have when I am with my husband. Yet the text also makes references to the cosmos, which adds an epic vastness to the atmosphere. In my setting, I attempt to highlight the juxtaposition between the intimacy and the vastness within the text, all through the filter of being and/or falling in love. It was through *Castle of our Skins* that I first came across the text of Enzo Silon Surin, and it was a pleasure to be given his text to set. This song was commissioned by the Boston Opera Collaborative for their *Love in the Time of ...* project.

Sonnet LXXXI, text by Anthony R. Green (2006)

Sonnet LXXXI attempts to capture the raw experience of deep unrequited love, and trace its development over time. In essence, it is a microcosm of the development of the explosive nature of unrequited love, and its lasting effects. It was premiered 14 May 2006 by Ms. Marissa Clark at Boston University's Marshall Room. It has also been sung by Ms. Emily Belastock at the Music Mansion in Providence, RI, and Jordan Hall at New England Conservatory in Boston, and performed and recorded by Ms. Yael Handelman.

Three Adinkra Miniatures for Mezzo-Soprano and Violin (world premiere) (2022)

Composed for "Her Phantom Happiness", a portrait concert at the Longy School of Music at Bard College in Cambridge, MA (9 December 2022), *Three Adinkra Miniatures* is a thank you piece to one of the positive elements of Ghanaian culture that had a great impact on me. Adinkra symbols have a variety of purposes, meanings, and designs. Many come from sayings, and might also have multiple meanings. For *Three Adinkra Miniatures*, I chose three symbols that do not overtly reference Christianity. *Sankofa* indicates that in order to progress, one must (or it is better to) look back and learn from the past, ultimately deciding what – if anything – to take from the past with you into the future. *Funtumfunefu Denkyemfunefu* is a symbol comprising Siamese crocodiles joined at the stomach. They compete to catch and eat the same prey but do not know that it eventually ends up in the same place. It can be a symbol that criticizes humanity's fighting when we all are (or should be) working towards the same objectives. It can also be a symbol encouraging unity amongst communities who are fighting (and it can mean so much more). *Nkyinkyim* means "twisting", and it is a symbol of the twisting, unstable, unpredictable journey of life. These miniatures are a way to bring a sonic, musical life to these symbols, and to encourage the audience to be curious about other symbols, their meanings, and how they can relate to their lives and life in general. To Ghana: *meda ase pii...*

...On Top of a Frosted Hill... (2011)

After having overly successfully premiered *Refraction Aberrance*, a work for cello and variable ensemble of harp, guitar, and piano (thought to be impossible, but proved wrong), I knew I had to compose another piece for Mathieu D'Ordine – an amazing cellist who is musical and metaphysically sensitive. Sharing many musical interests, Mathieu suggested we perform an ambitious recital – including the Myaskovsky sonata and the Chopin sonata. I knew this would be a perfect time to also compose a piece for us to perform together, hence ... *on top of a frosted hill* ...

The work began as a piano improvisation that screamed for another voice in my ear. That voice was found through the cello, and the relationship that developed between the parts formed organically. This work is consciously similar to a previous work of mine – *Seeing Through Heaven* for flute and piano. However, this work is much more concentrated in its environment. Yet, this piece quotes one of my favorite childhood church songs. The mountainous trajectory very much belongs to the Boulder environment, which has significantly influenced my composition at a time of doctoral work, and I'm sure it will for the years to come.

... all that is good ..., text by Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth (world premiere) (2019)

Powerful Black women have paved so many paths for the numerous Black and non-Black people that exist today. In the United States, those women who somehow forged deeply cherished personalities and careers after enduring the barbaric institution of slavery hold a special place in my heart. I cannot imagine the sheer fortitude it took not only to survive enslavement, but to thrive afterwards and live a life of giving. In ...*all that is good...*, I utilize private and public texts from Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs (at the time writing as Linda Brent To avoid pursuit by her previous “master”), and Sojourner Truth. These texts speak of liberty, dignity, and the fundamental nature of “wrong” and “good.” There is such wisdom in each of these excerpts – a wisdom I attempted and failed to match musically because the task is impossible. However, it is my sincere hope that the music will help convey this wisdom to a wider audience by using the powerful medium of music, harmony & melody, and the sung human voice.