

4-2018

Across the Ages of Music and Emotions: What It Is To Be Human A Reflection on My Senior Voice Recital

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Recommended Citation

Haverdink, Amanda, "Across the Ages of Music and Emotions: What It Is To Be Human A Reflection on My Senior Voice Recital" (2018). *Honors Projects*. 671.

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Across the Ages of Music and Emotions: What It Is To Be Human
A Reflection on My Senior Voice Recital

Overview

Grand Valley State University theatre professor Karen Libman once taught her Acting Process students that creators and artists involve themselves in the passion and process of art as a way to discover what it is to be human. Such a notion has been central to my experiences at Grand Valley, growing as a student, as a performer, and as an individual. This recital addresses four primary feelings (love, sadness, longing, and passion) that remind each of us what it is to be human. The pieces featured in this recital explore a range of interpretations based on each emotion, depicting the multi-faceted and personal experience of feeling. In the same way that every musician creates a meaningful composition, every performer has a unique interpretation of what a composer and librettist attempt to convey through compositions. Each movement, dynamic change, and accent requires an intention and a purpose that is specifically designated by the performer. Because of the nature of creation and performance, no two interpretations of a piece are the same. Each composer has, with dedication and attention, inspired their own compositions arising out of an emotional experience, allowing modern performers to fully explore the nuances of each emotional category. This essay explores the musical technicalities incorporated into each composition, as well as the emotional intention of the artists, both composer, librettist, and performer.

Themes of Love

I can't be talkin' of love by composer and lyricist John Duke

Duke's modern cabaret-style interpretation of love portrays a character who dismisses the notion of discussing love, yet teases the listener with a secret storage of love. "I can't be talkin' of love, dear. If there be one thing I can't talk of, that one thing do be love" she sings, in a teasing manner which hints that the one thing she does want to discuss is, in fact, love. A light, bouncy piano accompaniment insinuates a playful atmosphere. American composer John Duke, born 1899, originated his musical studies as a pianist and composer who frequently explored linear musical compositions. Naturally, Duke's contributions to song incorporate a great deal of explorative piano accompaniment, including lines that seem to float the listener along. Finally overcome by her own feelings of love for the subject of her heart's desire, the singer gives in to the standoffish cover, finally singing "but that's not sayin' that I'm not lovin'. Still waters you know run deep...and I do be lovin' so deep, dear, I be lovin' you in my sleep."

Nineteenth century lieder composers, including Duke, are often well-known for their ability to compose relatable, vocally challenging songs that are often sung by both males and females. Perhaps Duke's composition of *I can't be talkin' of love* was inspired by his personal life. As a performer, I found the repetitive phrase "I can't be talkin' of love" most indicative of the composer's intention. It became clear, through the use of playful, bouncy accompaniment and through the repetitive text, that the singer is truly bubbling over with love for the subject. The repetition of text becomes a thin facade behind which she playfully tries to hide. Then, if only for a moment, she gives in to her own excitement and confesses her true emotions. As if to tease her subject further, she continues with her original facade, once again hiding her true passion and love behind a giggly front.

Rastlose Liebe by composer Franz Schubert and lyricist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Rastlose Liebe addresses the more frustrating feelings of being in love, as Schubert's agitated melody and sequential rhythm restlessly search for peace for a love-consumed soul. Schubert, who began his musical studies and career at just six years old, specialized in music theory, piano, and composition. While studying at the Imperial Seminary, Schubert developed a desire to modernize the sounds produced by composers of his time. As such, Schubert's own compositions began to develop their own unique and recognizable qualities. *Rastlose Liebe* serves as a perfect example of such qualities. With its use of challenging, continually changing intervals, and upbeat tempo, Schubert encapsulates the feeling of overwhelming love and confusion. Little time is left for reflection and breath, suggesting that the singer is speaking as quickly as the thoughts come to her mind. Librettist Goethe's text indicates a frustrated, hopeless voice overcome by love. The original poetry remains fairly simple and straightforward: "Peace, rest have flown! Turbulent bliss, love, thou art this!" Goethe, however, was less inclined to incorporate intense drama and emotional duress in his works. He expressed a great deal of disdain for Schubert and

his compositions, and was unhappy that Schubert set his poetry to music. With Goethe's quiet sense of loss portrayed through text, and Schubert's outbursts of interval leaps and speeding tempo, the pair have quite a different interpretation of overwhelming love.

As a performer, I felt that it was necessary to incorporate both sensations in my performance. Goethe's text allows for more reflection and realization, while Schubert's reeling composition allows for a continuous stream of thought and emotion. I also wanted to incorporate the original emotion of love in my performance. Yes, the singer is overwhelmed and at a loss, but it is the feeling of being in love for the first time that sets her into a spiral. I hoped to breathe beauty and some happiness into the somewhat dismal text and dramatic melody provided.

Sérénade by composer and lyricist Charles Gounod

The ascending and descending melody line in Gounod's *Sérénade* suggests a calm and contented floating feeling as it depicts an admiring sense of love for both the unassuming joy of children and the powerful grace of God. French composer Gounod was best known for his sacred works, and was praised as "the real founder of the *mélodie* in France" due to his remarkable compositions. Truly, such beauty is seen in *Sérénade*, as a gorgeously soaring melody serves as the vessel for which the text is conveyed. Each musical line seems to mirror the speaking pattern one would take when telling a story of love and compassion. The text speaks of the happy, innocent joy of children, and conveys the utter admiration that the singer holds for them. The singer begs God to remind her, when she has seemingly lost her way, that He is able to share with her the same joy that the children hold. Gounod heralds his sacred upbringing and experience in this regard, reflecting the same admiration and reverence for God for which he was praised during his work in the church.

My performance was inspired by the beautiful, flowing melody composed by Gounod. Each word and intention seems to roll gently off the singer's tongue, falling lightly upon the audience's ears. The gentle and serene text conveys a deep sense of admiration and deep joy, a feeling that I hoped to rely heavily on in my performance. The singer appeared to be truly at peace in the first and final verse, both when describing the joy of children and when asking God to share that joy with her. The second verse, however, insinuated a bit of upheaval and inner turmoil as the singer begins to describe the feeling of losing her way and forgetting how to be joyous. A sense of peace once again returns when the singer expresses her desire to constantly pray for the peace that children bring.

Before I gaze at you again (from *Camelot*) by composer Frederick Loewe and lyricist Alan Lerner

Lerner and Loewe's approach to love depicts Guinevere's emotional complexity as she faces the impossibility of falling in love with her husband's best friend. With a balance of maturity and gravity, *Before I gaze at you again* once again reminds listeners of how all-consuming and genuine love can be. Queen Guinevere, who has found herself falling in love with her husband Arthur's friend

Lancelot, seems to insist against her own desires. Guinevere does not wish to violate her marriage vows and destroy the love she shares with Arthur, and instead suggests that Lancelot stay far away until she is able to look upon him once again without feeling hopelessly in love. Lyricist Alan Lerner struggled through the production of Camelot, facing many health and relationship woes. Composer Frederick Loewe no longer saw eye to eye with Lerner's musical ideals and preferences, and the two decided that Camelot would serve as a last-ditch effort to collaborate together. Should the work go poorly, Lerner would no longer continue in musical theatre. If the performance went well, the pair might have another go at a partnership. Such relationship woes reflect the internal struggle that Guinevere battles in *Before I gaze at you again*. Guinevere ultimately takes the most mature route possible, holding true to her promise to love and honor her husband Arthur, forsaking her love for Lancelot.

As a performer, I hoped to convey the bittersweet sadness with which Guinevere makes her final decision. While Guinevere recognizes her passion for Lancelot, even referring to him as "my love," she knows that she must continue on without him. A quiet dignity and resolve follow the soft melody and slower repetition as the song comes to a close.

Themes of Sadness

Chanson triste by composer Henri Duparc and lyricist Henri Cazalis

Duparc's *Chanson Triste*, with its gentle rhythm and tender melody, depicts a grieving soul who is desperate to cling to a new love in order to finally be freed of her past sadness. Duparc, who led a quiet and reserved life, was responsible for the demolition of many of his own compositions. A perfectionist who was rarely satisfied with his own works, Duparc left few compositions preserved for the modern era. If any perfected work were to exist, Duparc's *Chanson triste* would rise among them. Cazalis's tender and passionate text, which features a singer desperate for the dream-like mirage of a lingering relationship, is accompanied by Duparc's flowing and elegant piano melody. "I will forget past griefs, my love, when you rock my unhappy heart and my thoughts in the loving tranquility of your arms," the singer praises. However, the singer's happiness soon turns to longing as they fall into despair upon realizing that they are damaged and perpetually saddened by the end of the relationship. "Perhaps at last I will be healed," the singer laments, reflecting upon the happiness they feel only through their own memory and imagination. Cazalis, who was fond of writing on dark images and death, shines in this depressingly longing text.

My intention in this performance was to instill both a sense of sadness and loss, but also a sense of happiness and passion. After all, the singer once felt a shared love and desire for the subject of the song. Despite the fact that they were once partnered in their love, the singer now feels alone and lost, deeply longing for the happiness that once accompanied their relationship and life.

Lost in the Stars (from *Lost in the Stars*) by composer and lyricist Kurt Weill

Weill's *Lost in the Stars* continues the lonesome theme as the singer mourns in their revelation that they has been abandoned and left wandering the stars alone. German composer Kurt Julian Weill believed that music served as a socially useful purpose, and *Lost in the Stars* is no exception. The original context of the song features a father addressing his sense of loss over the imprisonment and inevitable death of his son. Having recently committed homicide, the son is now destined to receive the punishment of death. Now, the father laments the son's lack of future and the seeming disregard of God to save him. "Sometimes it seems maybe God's gone away, forgetting the promise that we heard him say. We're lost out here in the stars, blowing through the night" he sings. Indeed, this text serves a socially useful purpose, inciting feelings of loss, longing, and understanding for those who have experienced such loss and longing. Weill, who was raised Jewish and fled from Germany during World War II, was hailed as "the most original single workman in the whole musical theater, internationally considered, during the last quarter century...Every work was a new model, a new shape, a new solution to dramatic problems." Indeed, *Lost in the Stars* is a style all its own, featuring a free-flowing melody, specific repetition, and quietly reflective piano accompaniment.

My performance was originally given as if singing to a small child. The singer first tells the story of God creating the sea, the land, and the stars, promising to watch over every single one so that they were never hurt or lost. However, the sentiment shifts as the singer begins to describe how they once felt that God was watching over them as well, but no longer feels that He is attentive. Perhaps these feelings of loss and uncertainty were inspired by Weill's own lack of safety and well-being while living in Germany. Regardless, I hoped to convey the sense of peace and safety that the singer once felt in contrast to the sense of loneliness and loss that was now prevalent. A small glimmer of hope remains as the singer reflects and longs for peace once again.

Home (from *Beauty and the Beast*) by composer Alan Menken and lyricist Howard Ashman

Menken's *Home* is tinged with a sense of regret and desperation as the singer begins to realize that she will never again lead the happy life she once had. Belle has been captured by a demanding beast in exchange for the life of her father, resulting in her permanent, unhappy residence in his lonely castle. Ashman and Menken began their partnership early on, collaborating on musical victories such as *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Aladdin*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. Each character and story is treated with attention and sensitivity, inevitably creating a character who is flawed, lovable, and unique. The same is true for Belle in *Home*. While the singer recognizes that she is now trapped of her own accord, she still regards her captor as a cruel monster. Still an innocent young girl, Belle becomes desperate for her father and the life she once led. She is afraid of the life she must now live, singing "is this home? Is this what I must learn to believe in?" Still, Belle is steadfast and strong, resilient in her hope for the world she may once again re-enter. "Oh, but then as my life has been altered once it can change again. Build higher walls around me. Change every lock and key. Nothing lasts, nothing holds all of me. My heart's far, far away, home and free." Such sensitive and timeless lyrics by Ashman eagerly portray the distant hope and resiliency that such a young and impressionable girl can feel while being oppressed. Menken gives life to these passionate and sensitive lyrics with a strong, empowering melody that grows throughout its development. Belle's final sentiment, "my heart's far, far away, home and free" gradually and dramatically soars upward, as does the hope she feels.

Belle has always been a favorite Disney character of mine, and I always admired her ability to be strong and vulnerable at the same time. I intended to convey the sadness and devastation that she feels while trapped in a lonely kingdom, as well as the glimmering hope and passion that she holds for the life she led and may once again lead. My interpretation of the text ends in pure hope as Belle recalls her own resiliency and hope for the future.

Themes of Longing

Après un rêve by composer Gabriel Fauré and lyricist Romain Bussine

The frequent use of triplets gives voice to the weeping melody featured in Fauré's *Après un rêve* as one longs for the comfort and happiness once found in a dream. The singer recalls the soft eyes and pure voice of their love, singing of the feeling that the world was open to them. However, the singer's passion and happiness comes crashing back to earth as they realize that they have simply awoken from a dream. The singer then begs for night to return so the radiant mirage of their lover will linger slightly longer. Fauré's lifelong experience in piano and organ aid in his recognition as the most advanced composer of his generation in France during the 20th century. Such accolades are greatly deserved, as illuminated in *Après un rêve*. A continually ascending melody line draws audiences in with a sense of elation before crumbling ever so slightly with descending triplets which hearken the sound of weeping. Large intervallic leaps seem to indicate and reflect the dramatic emotional contrasts demonstrated by the singer. French poet Bussine's text allows for a great deal of exploration when set by Fauré. "You shone like a sky lit up by the dawn," the text whispers, "You called me and I left the earth to run away with you toward the light." The singer seems to be willing to follow their love to the ends of the earth and the borders of heaven simply to be with them once again.

As a performer, I hoped to convey a distinct breaking point between the singer's passionate description of her lover and the stark realization that it was but a dream and the subject will never again return to earth to be with her again. As the piece ends, the singer begs for night and slumber to return once again, as it is only through dreams that she will ever encounter her love again. I hoped to leave audiences feeling the singer's love, loss, and continued longing for the happiness she once had, if only in a dream.

Bilbao Song (from *Happy End*) by composer and lyricist Kurt Weill

In Weill's *Bilbao Song*, the object of desire is not a person but a time and place. The singer fondly recalls the beer hall she frequented in a past life, offsetting her nostalgia of the place with the realization that everything she loved about it has been changed. The frequent, sequential use of eighth note patterns contrasted with gentle, piano passages heightens the sense of excitement contrasted with nostalgia. Weill, having fled his home country of Germany in hopes of a better, safer life in America, may well have written *Bilbao Song* as a personal reflection on the place and characteristics of his own home town and the things he was forced to leave behind. A bouncy, staccato piano accompaniment at the beginning sets the stage for a vibrant, jovial description of the singer's favorite place - a beer hall in Bilbao. The singer recalls the beautiful music that used to be played, she calls out to the pianist to let her experience it once again. As the pianist leaves behind the bubbly, joyful accompaniment in favor of a legato, beautiful melody hearkening the music played in Bilbao, the singer is overcome with longing for a time that was long ago. "I don't know if it would have brought you joy or grief, but it was fantastic!" she sings,

celebrating the sticky floors and damaged roof that allowed the moon to shine through. The moment the singer has snapped out of her longing trance, the bouncy accompaniment returns.

The character of this piece was intriguing to me. A sassy, spunky, and damaged singer who loves the odd things in life: bar fights, dusty stools, and sticky floors. She is driven by her deep adoration for one specific place, and while she knows that it may not be for everyone, she desperately misses the days when the beer hall was just the place for her. I hoped to convey her unique attitude, joy, and inevitable sense of longing, even in her somewhat victorious ending.

No One Else (from *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*) by composer and lyricist Dave Malloy

Malloy's *No One Else* recounts the fond memories of a couple enjoying the snow in the moonlight, and the singer's desire to be together again. Malloy, who remains a fairly fresh newcomer to the theatre world, created a stunning and reflective depiction of a girl's longing for her lover with this adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace. The young woman singing is Natasha, a Russian countess awaiting her fiancée's return from war. A music-box-like melody returns throughout the development of the song, seeming to call to Natasha and remind her of soft memories she shared with her beloved Prince Andrey. Natasha recalls the first time she met him, singing "moonlight burst into the room. I saw your eyes, and I saw your smile, and the world opened wide." Andrey became the picture of perfection in Natasha's eyes, and she sings longingly of their time together, saying "I'll never be this happy again." Textual phrases such as "I love you, I love you, I love you," and "I'll never be this happy again" are accompanied by a quickly ascending melodic pattern which seems to indicate Natasha's inability to hold in her love any longer. Her passion and excitement builds as she repeats "you and I," willing him nearer to her with each repetition before pausing and quietly if not playfully adding "and no one else."

This was one piece that I knew I wanted to include in my recital the first time I heard it. The hauntingly beautiful piano accompaniment and desperately longing lyrics drew me in immediately and I felt that Natasha's was a story well worth telling. Natasha seems to know, deep down, that Andrey is unlikely to return from war. The song ends with her seeming to trick herself into believing "maybe he came today. Maybe he came already, and he's sitting in the drawing room...and I simply forgot." This line was pivotal for my performance. I wanted to convey the heightened sense of longing Natasha feels when she realizes she will likely never see Andrey again, despite every joyful memory they have shared.

Journey to the Past (from *Anastasia*) by composer Stephen Flaherty and lyricist Lynn Ahrens

Newman's *Journey to the Past* looks to the future as the singer describes her deep longing to know of her past and discover who she truly is. Flaherty, who began his musical career by studying piano at the young age of seven, incorporated his passion for piano score into this song. Key to the title character's memory in *Anastasia* is a music box which she uses to gradually recall the memory of her childhood. A light, tinkling melody signals this faint music box. Anya (*Anastasia*) is driven by the

idea that as she continues her journey, she will slowly learn more about who she was and who she is to become. Flaherty plays on this excitement by building each musical phrase both in ascending melody and volume, ending large phrases with the exclamation that this is not just a physical journey, but a mental “journey to the past.” Lyrics by Ahrens beautifully describe, with childlike simplicity, the longing that Anya feels to know who she is. She suddenly realizes that home, love, and family are things she must have had once upon a time, and this realization drives her to discover just what her home, loves, and family were. Ahrens and Flaherty began their musical collaboration after graduating from university, working on hits such as *Schoolhouse Rock!*, *Once on this Island*, *Ragtime*, and *Seussical the Musical*. The pair excel at effortlessly conveying the childlike passion and simplicity of life with a mature understanding of what each character truly desires and searches for.

I hoped to convey the building sense of excitement and passion Anya feels as she takes one step further down the path to her past with every new verse. However, I also wanted to feature the moment she pauses her step, almost as if something has blocked her passage, when the words “home,” “love,” and “family” suddenly come to the forefront of her mind. These words almost catch her off guard before realizing that she can search them out and find them once again, thanks to this journey. Her youthful joy overcome any trepidation sensed at the beginning, longingly and happily exclaiming that she hopes this journey will bring her home at last.

Themes of Passion

La regata veneziana Anzoleta dopo la regata by composer Gioachino Rossini and lyricist Francesco Piave

Rossini's *La regata veneziana Anzoleta dopo la regata* features the excitement and trepidation of a Venetian boat race, the singer watching in anticipation as a loved one makes their way toward the finish line. Rossini's use of staccato notes, trills, vocal runs, and sharp dynamic contrasts emphasizes the singer's anticipation and emotional journey while watching the race. Recognized as the greatest Italian composer of his generation, each of Rossini's compositions regale a unique character and delivery. Piave, who worked as both a poet and stage director, giving his lyrics an impressive spin in favor of the stage. The piece begins with a festive, excitable piano accompaniment as the singer begins to see her love, Momolo, approaching in the distance. She continues to cheer him on, trilling in descending patterns as if shocked and thrilled over how the race is turning out. However, the singer becomes worried. Perhaps someone has overtaken Momolo's position, or perhaps someone has capsized their boat. The singer becomes increasingly concerned about Momolo's placement and well-being. Soon enough, though, the singer realizes that Momolo is, in fact, sure to place first. She becomes elated and thrilled, cheering him on to the finish line and prematurely proclaiming him the victor.

In my performance, I hoped to convey the sense of trepidation, excitement, pride, and satisfaction that are encapsulated within the singer's passion. I wanted there to be a stark contrast between passages where the singer was excited and eager and where she was nervous and uncertain. The primary feeling, however, remains her love for Momolo and her passion for Momolo's abilities.

Watch What Happens (from *Newsies*) by composer Alan Menken and lyricist Jack Feldman

Menken's *Watch What Happens* features the internal dialogue of an aspiring reporter as she finds herself on the verge of a courageous upcoming story. Set during the newsboys revolution of 1899. Katherine Plumber, daughter of the very newspaper against which the boys are holding their uprising, has a passion for writing articles, much to the dismay of her father. Katherine strikes up a friendship with the boys spearheading the revolution, and agrees to write their story in hopes of getting the article published and shared. Katherine is young, spunky, and full of energy, and the music reflects that very nature. Menken's fast paced tempo and lack of pause for reflection seems to indicate that the singer's words are coming as quickly as her thoughts. As the song continues, a key change makes the melody even higher and more intense than before. Katherine ends her soliloquy victoriously, exclaiming "whatever happens, let's begin!" New lyricist Feldman was brought in as Menken's regular collaborator, Howard Ashman, was too ill to work on the project. Feldman's lyrics play a great deal on Katherine's spunk and sass as she interrupts even her own thoughts to dwell on how cute Jack Kelly is, how she's going to shock all the sexist reporters with her stories, and how she's worried about what will happen to her newfound friends.

This song is so fun and bubbly, but still has a dark underlying tone. Katherine discusses the injustice that the newsboys are facing and notes how difficult it will be for them to succeed and be treated fairly. While Katherine's song is exciting and humorous at times, I still wanted to be able to share the emotional depth that comes along with the story of the revolution. My intention was to keep Katherine as three-dimensional as possible throughout the performance.

Vanilla Ice Cream (from *She Loves Me*) by composer Jerry Bock and lyricist Sheldon Harnick

Bock's *Vanilla Ice Cream* follows the back-and-forth passion of a young woman recounting her unfortunate blind date and her coworker's sudden interest in her love life. Amalia Balash, a young shopkeeper in Budapest, has been writing letters to a secret pen pal whom she refers to as "Dear Friend." What Amalia does not know, however, is that Dear Friend is actually her coworker, Georg Nowack, whom she despises. *Vanilla Ice Cream* comes after Georg visits Amalia, sick in bed, and brings her ice cream. Amalia is in the process of writing a letter to Dear Friend apologizing for having missed their date the night before. Throughout *Vanilla Ice Cream*, Amalia bounces back and forth between writing her letter of apology to Dear Friend and realizing how strange Georg has been acting. Composer Jerry Bock, who began composing musicals at school age, partnered with lyricist Sheldon Harnick for *She Loves Me* and other famously known works. In *Vanilla Ice Cream*, Bock's use of elegant legato passages and upbeat bouncing passages perfectly contrasts Amalia's attitude toward either Dear Friend or Georg. Amalia often interrupts herself and returns to her letter after discussing Georg, and the melody changes with her each time. Harnick's witty and clever use of lyrics give way to Amalia's high-spirited and passionate personality, highlighting her humor and satirical mindset throughout the event.

I absolutely adore this story, and wanted to modernize it in some way. *You've Got Mail* incorporated the early-2000s email when retelling the story, and I found a way to incorporate the cell phone. Instead of writing an old fashioned letter, my Amalia wrote texts to her Dear Friend. This allowed me to play with looking at and away from the phone when a new thought arises. I wanted to convey Amalia's kindness and thoughtfulness as well as her sass, spunk, and wit.

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