

VOCAL
REPERTOIRE
FOR THE 21ST
CENTURY

WORKS
WRITTEN
BEFORE

VOLUME I

2000

JANE MANNING

Vocal Repertoire for the Twenty-First Century

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VOLUME 1

WORKS WRITTEN BEFORE 2000

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Preface

The rewardingly intimate medium of the song recital has refused to go out of favour with singers and public, although more imaginative contexts and settings have continued to enliven its scope.

My two earlier *Vocal Repertory* books for Oxford University Press UK¹ sprang from clear signs of a need for someone to sift through and pick over the bewilderingly diverse array of contemporary vocal music available, and point to specific pieces for different voices, abilities, and occasions. Happily, singers and their teachers appear to have found the suggestions useful and a good number of recommended works have found their way into the repertoire. I have now had the opportunity to expand the format further in two volumes (divided between twentieth and twenty-first centuries according to date of composition).

The previous century provided us with the richest possible variety of musical styles, so this, Volume 1, is inevitably the larger. Since the new books are intended eventually to supersede the earlier ones, I have also included some revised, updated chapters on works featured last time, in order to keep them in circulation.

In each volume I have aimed for the broadest possible selection of works, confining myself to settings of the English language (just two works in Latin are the exception, as well as one piece in fake Russian), as this still seems to be the area of the repertoire most in need of a boost. Teachers can be inclined to steer students in the direction of pieces they already know. Certain songs, culled from some diploma syllabus many years ago, do seem to have progressed unchallenged through successive generations, despite a wealth of viable alternatives.

In choosing these works, musical quality has been my prime criterion, with vocal practicality an important factor. Choices range from substantial song cycles to shorter pieces suitable for encores, examinations, or auditions. Almost all works are for voice and piano, but there are some for solo voice, since it is my experience that these can often make a memorable contribution to a traditional recital programme. There are a handful of works for voice and electronics (one in Volume 1, and two in Volume 2), and a few require a simple percussion part to be played by the vocal performer.

The selection is not intended to be comprehensive, and doubtless exposes some idiosyncrasies, but it is based on fifty years of performing contemporary music of all kinds, working closely with many different composers worldwide.

Aware that intelligent, musicianly singers now seem to be in abundance, I've felt able to include a few relatively demanding pieces for those of special capability, but there is plenty of less challenging material suitable for general use. The selection also reflects the fact that, in the period covered by this volume, especially the 1960s and 1970s, many of the artists working closely with composers tended to be sopranos and mezzos, hence the preponderance of pieces for those voices.

All styles have been welcome, but personal taste has inevitably coloured final decisions. It has been a tremendous boon to be able to receive scores and recordings by email, and to communicate instantly, at the touch of a button, with composers all over the world. Some discoveries were serendipitous, resulting from random trawls through the Internet. Trusted colleagues and friends have drawn my attention to some lesser-known figures, especially from the USA. The works of composers such as Britten, Barber, Copland, Ives, Tippett, and Walton

are already established in the repertoire, and successful and prolific vocal composers, such as Bolcom, Rorem, and Argento, already have their deservedly enthusiastic followers, and are in little need of special advocacy. I am well aware that for all the many fine composers I have managed to include, there are countless others of equal stature that could have had a place, and this selection only scratches the surface. I have made a special effort to remind readers of figures, some no longer with us, whose creative years preceded the digital age, and who richly deserve greater recognition. (Sadly, several distinguished composers, many of them good friends and colleagues, have passed away while I was writing this book.)

Each composer is represented by a single work, although many have other vocal pieces worthy of attention, and the reader is urged to explore further. The treatment of each work is extremely detailed, and covers specific problems from the viewpoint of both performer and teacher. A musicological analysis is not intended, although I do attempt to describe basic structural features.

A clear distinction must be made between the standard of vocal technique needed and the level of musicianship required. These are separate matters. Simple music may expose technical insecurities, while complex scores can mask them. The ability to cope with challenging rhythms and pitches does not necessarily go hand in hand with perfect vocalizing. Effective interpretation is largely a technical issue, since imaginative ideas of varying dynamics, inflections, or timbres cannot be put into practice unless the voice is well under control.

I have therefore graded all works in two categories: technical (T) and musical (M) ranging in difficulty from I to VI.

It is to be assumed that most singers can find versatile, accomplished pianist partners, so comments on piano parts are descriptive rather than technical.

I have long held the view that, though musical gestures may vary, vocal production should remain consistent, in detailed awareness, coordination and control of air, resonance, and muscle, and that the speaking voice should be treated to the same disciplined approach as the singing voice. I have never quite understood what is meant by 'extended vocal techniques', which seem to me to be merely the annotating and rationalizing of a kaleidoscope of sounds, some of them more familiar in a playground (or farmyard). These often require command of a wide variety of speech-related effects, often highly dramatic and declamatory. Whispering and screaming need special skill and care, especially if attempted by an inexperienced singer.

The most crucial aspect of vocal writing remains the way that texts are set. When successions of proliferating syllables are set high in the female voice, for instance, singers are often unfairly blamed when tone and audibility suffer.

Fifty years of working on that undisputed contemporary masterpiece, Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21² has taught me more about vocal production and articulation than any other work. Schoenberg, in setting his own language, exposes in minutest detail the inflections of every syllable, so that every phrase can be carefully sculpted and timed, using the full technical resources of the trained singer.

Vocal tastes and fashions continue to evolve, and the early music movement has led to a vogue for lighter voices, well suited to the recording studio, but perhaps less comfortable with the longer phrases and physical stamina required for more dramatic pieces.

John Cage and his followers were prone to express their preference for the 'untrained' voice—a somewhat irksome requirement for a professional, forced to abandon technical refinement in favour of an assumed naïvety.

Musical fashions continue to be unpredictable, blown hither and thither by the whims of a fickle, impatient public bent on instant gratification. Advances in technology, while making a hugely valuable contribution to the availability of material, have led to an added need for taste and discrimination.

In the 1960s and 1970s, pioneering vocal works were written for iconic individuals whose charisma and dramatic presence carried all before them. Less gifted imitators found themselves high and dry when their vocal abilities were found lacking for standard repertoire. Personal vehicles can certainly be a trap. Pieces created for specific artists may deter others from taking them up.

Judith Weir's solo 'opera' *King Harald's Saga*,³ which I commissioned in 1979, has had an exemplary outcome. Enjoyable to perform and listen to, it has proved adaptable to all kinds of situations, and is now established as a popular favourite of singers worldwide, who have proved more than ready to tackle its musical and vocal challenges. Its textual clarity is a prime advantage.

In today's world it can be hard for young singers to find work. The most promising are often spotted at college level and given demanding operatic roles before their technique is consolidated. Only a few exceptional artists manage to sustain a professional career on the recital platform. However, for amateur, student, and professional alike, the intimate medium of art song remains a special joy.

The best-loved singers are those able to transcend the superficial, and allow one a glimpse of their inner world. Conviction and sincerity can carry an audience along in the short term, but without a reliable technique, careers can founder. The physical nature of the vocal instrument means that it is vital to keep it in prime condition. There are no short cuts to the acquisition of good vocal habits. If they are deeply ingrained at an early stage, under close supervision, they should eventually become second nature, standing one in good stead whatever the musical demands. Interpretative flair tends to develop gradually with growing confidence and experience.

Finally, I would exhort all singers to make it a priority to initiate and commission new works, and encourage young composers to enlarge the repertoire. This is a duty that should also be a pleasure. Exciting new figures are emerging all the time, and collaborations between singer and composer can be infinitely rewarding. Composers are always in need of sympathetic singers willing to share their expertise and insights. It is a rare privilege to have the chance to make a creative contribution to the future of the art form. The composer's vision is distilled through the medium of the performer. Since the human voice is, arguably, the most directly personal and communicative of instruments, this subtle, elusive task is a responsibility not to be taken lightly.



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Jane Manning
London, 2019

NOTES

1. Jane Manning, *New Vocal Repertory: An Introduction* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1986; repr. as a Clarendon Paperback by Oxford University Press, 1994); Jane Manning, *New Vocal Repertory*, Volume 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press (an imprint of Oxford University Press, 1998).
2. Jane Manning, *Voicing Pierrot* (Glasgow and Canberra: Southern Voices, 2012).
3. Judith Weir, *King Harald's Saga* (London: Novello/Music Sales Group, 1979); miniature opera in 3 acts and an Epilogue, lasting around 10 minutes, for solo soprano, who takes all the roles, including those of King Harald, his two wives, and the whole Norwegian Army. It relates the disastrous expedition to England by King Harald of Norway in 1066, just before William the Conqueror's successful invasion. Libretto by the composer based on an Icelandic saga.

Guide to Gradings

These are of necessity highly subjective and cannot cover all aspects of performance. Levels of technical and musical difficulty do not often coincide, and will vary considerably from singer to singer.

TECHNICAL difficulty (T) refers to basic requirements of control: lung capacity, range, stamina, projection, intonation, evenness of tone, flexibility, and articulation, as well as a command of contrasting timbres and dynamics. It also covers the ability to negotiate specific tasks such as coloratura, trills, *Sprechstimme*, and microtones.

MUSICAL accomplishment (M) is measured first by the ability to cope with challenges of pitching and of intervals, especially in atonal music; also complex rhythms, which may affect ensemble with other performers. However, it also encompasses less tangible qualities of musicality, such as imagination, concentration, an instinctive grasp of musical processes, a natural sense of phrasing and shaping, empathy, and adaptability. Such attributes can develop with experience, but may not show themselves until confidence is gained by way of technical security.

Characterization and interpretative skills therefore tend to straddle both categories.



TECHNICAL (T)

- I. Skempton.
- II. Allbright, Antheil, Beckwith, Bennett, Cage, Child, Hagen, Harrison (L.), Humble (except No. 8), Husa, Crawford Seeger, Kim, Larsen, MacMillan, Musgrave, Previn, Primosch, Ritchie (J.), Romano, Silver, Stravinsky, Wheeler.
- III. Aston, Babbitt, Bauld, Bedford, Crockett, Currier, Dickinson, Edwards, Field, Fine, Grant, Harbison, Henze, Holman, Horovitz, Lees, McCabe, McDowall, Marsh, Milner, Perera, Philips, Picker, Rochberg, Salter, Samuel, Schuman, Wilson.
- IV. Alwyn, Asia, Del Tredici, Emmerson, Firsova, Haladyna, Humble (No. 8 only), King, Lutyens, Maconchy, Martino, Matthews (D.), Mathias, Maw, Payne, Pécou, Rainier, Sessions, Singer.
- V. Adès, Bingham, Blake, Cresswell, Crumb, Gorb, Knussen, Krenek, Lefanu, McLeod, Powell, Sohal, Somers, Whitehead, Williamson.
- VI. Carter, Casken, Maxwell Davies, Schwantner, Wiegold.

MUSICAL (M)

- I. Cage (*A Flower*), Harrison (L.), Skempton.
- II. Antheil, Beckwith, Currier, Harrison (L.), CAGE (*The Wonderful Widow*), Humble (except No. 8), Husa, McDowall, MacMillan, Musgrave, Perera, Wheeler, Wilson.

- III. Alwyn, Aston, Bauld, Bedford, Child, Crockett, Dickinson, Field, Grant, Hagen, Haladyna, Harbison, Horovitz, Kim, Larsen, Lees, Mathias, Milner, Philips, Picker, Primosch, Previn, Rainier, Ritchie (J.), Romano, Rochberg, Salter, Samuel, Silver.
- IV. Allbright, Crawford Seeger, Cresswell, Edwards, Emmerson, Gorb, Henze, Humble (No. 8 only), King, McCabe, Maconchy, Marsh, Matthews (D.), Payne, Schuman, Sessions, Somers, Wiegold, Williamson.
- V. Adès, Asia, Bingham, Blake, Casken, Del Tredici, Fine, Firsova, Gorb, Martino, Maw, Stravinsky.
- VI. Babbitt, Carter, Crumb, Krenek, Knussen, Lefanu, Lutyens, McLeod, Maxwell Davies, Pécou, Powell, Schwantner, Whitehead.

About the Companion Website

www.oup.com/us/vocalrepertoirevolume1

Oxford has created a website to accompany *Vocal Repertoire for the Twenty-First Century*, Volume 1, which carries supplementary information to encourage further detailed study. A short general biography of each composer outlines their background, studies, musical characteristics, and main achievements.

There is also a list of recommended recordings additional to those found in the book. Priority is given to vocal works, including choral, but, in the absence of these, other works may afford an overview of a composer's style. Recordings no longer in the catalogue can often be found in libraries or archives, and readers are also advised to consult composers' own websites. Where no recordings exist, reference is made to other vocal works.

Featured Works



THOMAS ADÈS (b. 1971)

Life Story (1994)

Text by Tennessee Williams

Soprano (or other voice) and piano; Range: 

Duration: 7'

T IV; M V



THOMAS Adès has rapidly outgrown an early reputation as a prodigy to become recognized internationally as one of the most important and influential of living musicians. Like Britten before him, he enjoys a triple career as composer, pianist, and conductor in addition to his composing activities. His breadth of culture is a considerable asset, and his impressive body of work now includes a clutch of highly acclaimed operas which have entered the repertoire of companies worldwide.

His vocal writing in this early piece is by no means easy at first, but rewards study. Packed with detail, including complex rhythms, it could be regarded as a highly refined form of

written-out rubato, in which the lines fall naturally according to the inflections of declamatory speech.

The piece is highly entertaining and has been taken up by a wide variety of singers, including some from the worlds of jazz and cabaret. Although written originally for soprano and ensemble, it could suit any flexible voice. A is the highest note, and there are plenty of low pitches to provide relaxation and avoid tiredness. In view of the composer's command of the keyboard, it is no surprise that the piano part is somewhat formidable. An able pianist will welcome the challenge. Ensemble is crucial, and quick responses are needed. The singer usually takes the lead, but the effect must seem spontaneous. The text takes the form of a rambling anecdotal confession, cynical and sardonic. It is both a bitterly humorous reflection on the futility of efforts to communicate, and a protracted demonstration of self-absorption. It would be difficult to envisage it with anything other than an American accent, preferably a Southern one.

It is important to read the composer's own note on vocal style. He advocates study of the late work of Billie Holliday (1915–59) as a model. The piece is notated conventionally, the only unusual marking being wavy versions of 'hairpins' (commonly used for crescendo/diminuendo) to indicate degrees of intensity of vibrato. Experience of jazz singing will prove an advantage. The composer also wishes other gestures, such as glissandos and cross-rhythmed accents, to be unified stylistically. This is quite a task for the average classically-trained singer, but the good breath support and wide range that most possess should help. It can be liberating to be confronted by such a fresh approach to working.

Reading through the piece in a quasi-improvisatory way is enlightening. The piano part is peppered with pitch cues, cunningly embedded in the texture, guiding the singer through some of the more hectic moments. Unencumbered by worries over detail, aiming to give a general picture, it is surprisingly hard to go too far astray: notes seem to fall almost by chance onto many of the correct pitches, and rhythms which appear dauntingly complex are gratifyingly manageable in context. This opens up a whole new approach to the learning process. If one plunges boldly in, an approximation affords an immediate idea of breath spans and mood, and with these an insight into the whole work. Details can then be added and polished over time. It is the opposite method to the usual one of dividing a piece into sections, honing each to perfection before moving on to the next. It is heartening to find that what may seem to strain the bounds of practicality is, in fact, conceived so precisely that it lies well within one's grasp. Adès's own joy of performing pervades the entire work, and it is a most rewarding tour de force.



The piano sets the scene, marked 'vehement and exhausted'. It lies rather low in the instrument, proceeding in fits and starts, snarling and rumbling, in violently contrasting dynamics. The tempo is slow (quarter note = 40), but with so many short-value notes crammed into beats, it will not seem so. Just before the voice enters, it moves into a higher, lighter range. Helped by a clear cue of the opening pitch (low B) at the top of the piano's held chord, the singer enters, almost casually, in a low, comfortable register. Lines are gently conversational, with a few smooth longer notes. The sustained 'or' is the first example of the 'Billie Holliday' graduated vibrato, surrounded by glissandos. Closing early on to the American 'r' helps achieve an effective oscillation, as long as the throat remains open, and the principle of using final syllables in this way can be applied throughout the piece. Breath spans are well judged: brief rests precede each phrase, and serve as natural punctuation.

The vocal style should be close to speaking, so it will help to prepare by reading the text aloud. As is usual with an American text, ‘r’s should definitely not be rolled, and percussive consonants should not be articulated too aggressively. ‘Liquid’ consonants will aid a legato flow. The composer is obviously aware of the way syllables fall: he marks *parlato* for a passage of clipped sounds (‘The other party often says’). The short downward glissando on ‘you’ needs to be emphasized, its crescendo paving the way for the rhetorical ‘Tell me’, at which point the voice warms to an expressive lyricism, with a chance to practise those special vibrating hairpins at greater length on an E flat and a C. There is a general sense of world-weariness in the narrative. A rapid fade to *ppp* bears the instruction *più disperato* (more desperate). The composer’s many detailed markings are a reliable guide for the performers. The impressively assured and homogeneous piano part is full of filigree rhythmic flourishes, spiky accents, and subterranean growls, in fluctuating dynamics of light and shade. The composer is acutely aware of balance: textures are always translucent, despite the virtuosity of the piano writing, and frequent brief rests allow for ‘windows’ that contribute to a feeling of lightness and buoyancy.

The singer’s confiding ‘asides’ are set deftly (Ex. 1), and the wheedling slides on ‘sincerely’ work very well. This is quite a long phrase, so breath can be taken before ‘your life’ to allow room for negotiating the jazzy ‘hairpin’ on F. The downward portamento on ‘story’ will provide rest.

Ex. 1

The musical score for Ex. 1 consists of four staves of vocal melody in 4/4 time. The lyrics are: (A)nd you think may - be they real-ly and tru-ly do sin - - - cere - ly want to know your life sto - ry, %

Performance markings include: *pp narr.* (pianissimo, narrative), *poco* (a little), *(cresc.)* (crescendo), *poco f* (poco fortissimo), *molto* (much), and *pp* (pianissimo). There are also hairpin symbols indicating dynamics and a wavy line indicating vibrato.

The next section continues in casual conversational mode. The lighting of a cigarette is portrayed by snapping both fingers, and lines flow easily up and down. Although rhythms are offbeat, they run quite naturally in context. ‘Like a pair of rag dolls, etc.’ has triplet sixteenth-note groups in ‘swung’ rhythms. The phrase cuts off suddenly, interrupted by a *fortissimo* howl. A bracketed grace-note just before a swoop up a minor tenth on ‘Y-you’ provides a springboard for the voice to release a free, open sound. The piano’s lengthy trills complement the singer’s pulsing vibrato, creating a distinctive, bubbling sound world. An extended passage of repeated

'Oh's gives the voice full rein, in expansive, lyrical lines with athletic leaps and darting glissandos (the composer suggests modifying the vowel if necessary). After the piano's tremolandos (marked *non agitato*), the music gradually subsides into a series of sighs, turning to groans, and, finally, after a short pause, a *Sprechstimme* 'grunt'—brilliantly effective and easy to perform. A low, quiet parlando concludes this expressive interlude, ending almost in a whisper at the words 'an audible breath'.

A short, mercurial piano solo leads to the continuation of the narrative. More mundane observations are thrown off with insouciance and resignation. Seemingly complicated combinations of rhythm and accent fall into place with relative ease. A *pianissimo* at 'or one of you rises' is marked *poco fantastico* for an especially roguish reference. As before, the voice suddenly launches into a different gear on a surge of energy. The conspicuous vibrato on the held high G flat should be tellingly incisive. The second cadenza of repeated 'Oh's', where roles of speaker and listener are ironically reversed, is even more violent than before (*quasi tutta forza*).

Subtle variations in dynamic and mood (for instance, *dolente*, sorrowfully) must be carefully observed. This time the final 'groan' is longer, and more spacious. The low parlando ending recurs in slightly varied form, this time fading to an 'audible sigh'. The swinging triplets are left unaccompanied, so that the breathier tone can be heard clearly. Certainly, the 'sigh' may be exaggerated, with all remaining breath expelled in a rush. The singer must be careful not to jar the voice and spoil the vital conclusion of this mini-drama.

The ending is masterly: the narrative proceeds in a dark, expressive undertone, and quite suddenly peters out. After a questioning, inflected 'Then?', and a well-timed pause, comes the dénouement. The two protagonists lapse into sleep, and disaster strikes, in a throwaway line, immediately after the work's longest-held note. Coordinating all these elements is the work's major technical hurdle. Not only must the B flat be held, and its graded vibrato controlled, but the final few words have to make their full impact within a soft dynamic. Timing is all-important, and the singer can make the most of the 'hissed' consonants of 't' and 'th' (Ex. 2). Any fatigue is likely to show in the voice, so it is prudent to conserve energy during the rests in this final section.

Ex. 2

p marcatiss

(a)nd that's how_

ppp e dim. (sempre marcatissimo)

peo - ple burn_ to death in ho - tel rooms. %

This remarkable work is quite unlike a conventional song cycle. It lies somewhere between an operatic scena and an extended show song. It will make a strong impression, set alongside established repertoire pieces, but could also make an excellent centrepiece to a cabaret evening, including songs from classic American musicals. It is a fine showpiece for a gifted and versatile singer.



TERENCE ALLBRIGHT (b. 1946)

Two Songs (1999)

Texts by Stevie Smith

Baritone and piano; Range: 

Duration: c.4' 30"

T II; M IV



A BRIEF but distinctive cycle by a gifted and highly-experienced composer-pianist. The music, freely atonal but meticulously worked and rhythmically inventive, demonstrates a deep affinity with the poetry. The verses show Stevie Smith in characteristically astringent vein, peeling away any traces of sentimentality, and making uncomfortable points with piercing accuracy. The vocal tessitura is relatively modest—unusually, it often stays in the lower range, sometimes intertwined

with the broodingly intricate (and fairly demanding) piano parts. Allbright is successful in conveying the introspection and finer subtleties of meaning underlying the texts' spare lines. Nothing is overstated but an inner turbulence is palpable. Words are set with clarity and sensitivity, and vocal phrasing should not be a problem. The darker colours of the baritone voice are used to considerable effect, with dynamic nuances precisely calibrated. The singer's principal challenge is to negotiate the varied rhythms, so that they seem to flow without effort. In the first song, some sinewy, lilting figurations recall baroque models. There is a degree of formality and discipline which guards against excessive expressionism. The second poem deals more obviously (and typically) with the topic of death by suicide, a familiar preoccupation of the poet. The watery images are mirrored in engulfing wave-like surges in voice and piano. The songs are ideally contrasted to make a satisfying concert item that will engage the audience in thoughtful empathy.

1. IS IT WISE?

The question posed in each of the three verses is answered in the negative, with a quiet, rueful refrain. The composer employs the middle of the voice for the much-repeated 'wise', ensuring that the note can be placed securely and steadily, making use of the 'w' for careful tuning. He chooses not to follow the poem's repetitive structure too rigidly, but keeps rhythms pliable and varied within a flowing *Allegretto* motion, while time signatures fluctuate subtly. The opening phrase exposes shapely Purcellian figurations which pervade the song, contributing a courtly elegance, but also adding a caustic edge to words such as 'corruptibility'. At the centre of the first two verses the voice warms to a smooth, arching cantabile, aptly painting the words 'garland' and 'song', only to recede gently back to the admonishing 'answer' (Ex. 1). The piano weaves intriguing webs of sound, which occasionally burgeon into full chords, exploring darker, chromatic harmonies. Deep piano trills introduce the third verse, helping to build intensity as the singer rises to an impassioned, accented outburst. This is followed by a reflection on the desirability of death, and a tender, introspective final 'answer'. The singer's last 'wise', on a sustained G natural, is marked *bisbigliando* (whispering)—quite difficult to achieve in the absence of verbal sibilance. A slightly breathy quality could be appropriate for the vowel, but it must still have presence. The 'z' of 'wise' can begin early, in order to propel the voice into a suitably thread-like sound that nonetheless retains some resonance, perhaps helped by allowing the tip of the tongue to touch the teeth.

Ex. 1

To make a song_____ of Cor - rup - ti - bi - li - ty_____

_____ A chain_____ of linked lies_____

_____ To_____ blind Mu - ta - bi - li - ty?

No,_____ it is not wise._____

2. FLOW, FLOW, FLOW

One is reminded of Stevie Smith's most famous poem 'Not Waving But Drowning' (1957) but the bleak humour is missing here. The piano carries much of the weight of the song. Its rippling, overlapping figures support the singer's smooth melodic lines, which are composed mainly of close intervals. There is a hefty crescendo, which brings the voice to a sudden, violent *fortissimo* exhortation (Ex 2), underlined by heavily accented chords. The final paragraph is, in complete contrast, faster and lighter. A 'ghostly' vocal timbre will be suitable here; the singer spins a warm 'caressing' line as if welcoming final repose on the ocean floor. Chromatic piano chords portray the enveloping waves, as the voice descends to a soft, slow close in carefully poised, sustained semitones.

Ex. 2

Let all thy wa-ters go___ o - ver___ my___ head,___

These fastidiously written songs have a flavour all their own, and will prove even more satisfying with each hearing.



WILLIAM ALWYN (1905–1985)

Mirages (1970)

Texts by the composer

Baritone and piano; Range: 

Duration: *c.* 23'

T IV; M III



WILLIAM Alwyn's career as a prolific and much-sought-after film composer, has, unfortunately, meant that his impressive concert music (which includes large-scale works and two neglected operas) has sometimes tended to be overlooked. A former virtuoso flautist (and one-time Principal with the London Symphony Orchestra), he frequently wrote his own texts, and was an accomplished artist. His wife Doreen Carwithen (1922–2003) was also a gifted

composer. She devoted her energy to supporting his work, and her own music is currently being rediscovered.

Almost every one of the six settings of this cycle is a tour de force for both singer and pianist. Substantial opening and closing movements frame briefer, contrasting songs. The piece suits a dramatic voice capable of a wide range of timbres, and fine control of vibrato and dynamics. A compelling stage presence will be a vital attribute.

The musical style is a modernist 'take' on romanticism, and standard notation is employed. Alwyn used a personal compositional discipline as an alternative to twelve-tone serialism, and was not averse to dissonance.

1. UNDINE

This is a dramatic scena of remarkable power. Swirling, repeated piano figures create a watery texture and an air of mystery. They surge forward, then hold back, with a *colla voce*, to enable the singer's first utterance to make its full effect. Lyrical vocal lines rise and fall according to the musical contours, reaching a high E on 'Suddenly', which is given extra impetus by a sweep of grace notes on the piano. A strenuously high passage follows, with a *poco più mosso* at 'Gold', impelled by another grace-note flourish. This leads to an incisively accented figure which includes a high F sharp. A lower ossia is supplied (Ex. 1). The composer wisely allows the singer a quieter entry for the next phrase, which soon gathers strength, but this time it is the piano's turn to project the climax in cascading sextuplets that gradually unravel. The texture becomes thinner, coming to rest on a suspended *pianissimo*. The singer's breathless wisps of narrative, though hushed, must be crisply articulated. The piano's opening music returns, stopping abruptly for a brief *martellato* (hammered), heralding a series of desperate calls. Right-hand piano harmonies double the vocal melody, while the left hand has chugging repeated chords, as in an Italian operatic aria. The pianist establishes a more tender mood, and the singer must find a soft, magical legato for the prolonged *dolcissimo*. Dynamics rise as passion increases. The singer should be well warmed up by now, and ready for more expansive phrases, including one with a glottal attack on high F sharp ('all'), and, needing even firmer support, an exposed stretch of high *pianissimo* (the final high E natural can be sung an octave lower if necessary). The singer's last, quiet phrase must be tuned scrupulously in view of its close intervals, and the final monotone, a mere thread of sound, recedes into falsetto.

Ex. 1

Allegro ma non troppo **Poco più mosso**

f *ff*

her hair_____ is spun - gold strea- ming_ on her

Ossia

should - ers in a tor-rent of fire._____

2. AQUARIUM

This delicate, haiku-like miniature is in starkest possible contrast, with its spare, icy calm and concise imagery. It demands a cool, pure tone, with little vibrato and an inscrutable demeanour. The singer will need much skill and control to float and maintain *pianissimo* whilst articulating a rich mix of onomatopoeia, alliteration, and decoration. The rapt tenuto on high F can be sung falsetto, and the singer has ample time to poise the accented notes that precede it. Substituting the German ‘ch’ for the ‘h’s gives clarity and does not waste air. The *meno mosso* closing section is moving in its simplicity. In the final ad lib, marked *ppp*, sibilant ‘sh’ syllables can be gently emphasized.

3. THE HONEYSUCKLE

A beautiful song, in ABA form. The highly erotic text compares the sleeping beloved to the eponymous plant. Shimmering piano figures create a sensuous, drowsy texture. The singer’s rapturous, weaving phrases (evoking winding tendrils) swell gradually to a fervent *fortissimo*. The piano texture becomes calmer, and the voice’s ecstatic utterances, at first fragmentary, gather potency and ardour, culminating in a high, piercing ‘Do not ever leave me!’ The second verse starts serenely, repeating the ‘weaving’ phrases of the opening, with the piano at a lower octave. The singer should avoid using up too much air on the ‘h’s and ‘p’s of the text, which could endanger breath control. Vocal lines intensify and then unfold, cadencing in a yearning mood as the music slowly fades.

4. METRONOME

A steady beat, appropriately, pervades this movement. The ominous tread of the piano’s left hand (marked *Tempo di marcia lento*) is punctuated by dry, staccato right-hand ‘ticks’. The singer’s incantatory lines require tonal and rhythmic rigour. Tessitura and dynamics gradually rise, peaking in a sequence of searing, full-throated phrases, each of which starts with the words ‘Measured against’. (Vocalizing the ‘m’ should ensure a secure projection.) A sudden quiet parlando passage calls for a more detached delivery, with consonants exaggerated, in contrast to the piano’s *legatissimo*. The section halts on a pause, and a muted piano solo leads to a recitative-like series of vocal questionings, quivering with suppressed tension and poignancy. A strict tempo returns, with sporadic piano fragments, rudely shattered by a final blazing cry of anguish, which is reinforced by the piano’s chords (*con tutta forza*) to riveting effect.

5. PARADISE

The composer’s visionary text is given music of unflagging energy, in a movement that goes by in the blink of an eye. High, clanging piano chords oscillate in cross-rhythms, maintaining a thrilling onward momentum, while the singer projects a series of vibrant, seductive images, in simple time against the piano’s triple beats—a test of musical aplomb and disciplined breathing. A high point is reached on ‘Stars’. The title is, however, double-edged; disillusionment sets in at the second verse. Piano sonorities darken, trills rumble deep in the bass line, and the voice taps a vein of bitter pessimism. The baritone’s dramatic abilities will be fully tested: after a snarling

climax on the loudest reiteration of 'Fools' Paradise', a devastating coda requires him to reduce dynamics exponentially, ending in a virtual echo.

6. PORTRAIT IN A MIRROR

The cycle is brought to a close in deeply contemplative mood, with this almost unbearably touching, honest appraisal of the ravages of old age. The intricate piano writing is especially arresting. Its introduction is written in invertible counterpoint, and this recurs as a postlude. Flexible vocal phrases in recitative style follow the text's natural speed and inflections. The text's syllables ('word music') contribute strongly to the unflinching description of the face in the mirror (Ex. 2). After a swell to *fortissimo*, there is an important comma; the singer re-enters with two chillingly soft glissandos down a major seventh on 'Wrinkled', and 'Neanderthal'. Since these are *colla voce*, and followed by a (horror-struck) silence, the singer has time to place a special tone quality, perhaps slightly emaciated and reedy, yet avoiding caricature. In an *Andante sostenuto* the flowing vocal lines are underpinned by quietly throbbing piano chords, which gradually build, until brutal reality brings an explosion of grief-stricken despair. The desolate recitative mode returns for the singer's final paragraph. There is one last hurdle: he must effect a diminuendo, and then float the first syllable of 'innocent' on high E, in a sudden *ppp*. Falsetto should be a safe choice, but infinite care must be taken to preserve evenness. As with Schumann's major cycles, it is left to the piano to finish the work and convey thoughts that lie beyond words.

Ex. 2

Andante, ma con moto

Quasi recit. - ad lib.

pp

Sure - ly that is not I

lips drawn back from dog-eared teeth in a si - mi - an

grin. Brush-wood eye - brows,


squat nose_____ and bris-tled chin,



GEORGE ANTHEIL (1900–1959)

Five Songs (1919–1920)

Text by Adelaide Crapsey

Soprano (or tenor) and piano; Range: 

Duration: c.6'

T II; M II



THIS could hardly be called ‘contemporary’, in view of its date, but the work of the maverick composer George Antheil is unlikely to be familiar to many singers. Regarded as a modernist innovator, he has come to enjoy cult status amongst cognoscenti. A bestselling autobiography, *Bad Boy of Music* (1945),¹ charts his activities as composer and pianist in Europe and the USA, championed by the artistic elite of his time, including Pablo Picasso, James Joyce,

W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Erik Satie. Eventually moving to Los Angeles, he orchestrated film scores, wrote a 'lonely-hearts' column, and, collaborating with film actress Hedy Lamarr (1914–2000), invented a new type of torpedo.² He also wrote a mystery novel under a pseudonym, and became an expert in endocrine criminology.

One of the first composers to incorporate jazz elements in a classical context, he was fond of experimenting with odd instrumental combinations and electronic devices. A distaste for the romanticism of Strauss and what he termed the 'fluid diaphanous lechery' of the impressionists, led him to develop a style featuring the chugging, mechanistic rhythms and striking percussiveness now, so many years later, much in vogue. His most famous work *Ballet mécanique* (1926), originally conceived as a film score, includes eight pianos, a player piano, electric bells, two propellers, and a siren. Later works welded folk and jazz influences into a quasi-classical lyricism.

His small output of songs, often setting major poets, is well worth seeking out. The present brief but striking example of his vocal work is, as might be expected, quirky and original. Such compact works are always useful for concert purposes. The piano writing is dramatic and characterful, and often dense in texture. Interestingly, the vocal tessitura descends as the cycle progresses, whilst the piano becomes more dominant. The first three songs are very short, but the last two have an almost orchestral richness. Texts are aphoristic and concise, and voice parts are correspondingly plain and unadorned, moving for the most part in a combination of declamatory speech patterns, long slow spans, often on a monotone, and close intervals, leaving the piano to illustrate the imagery and atmosphere of the words.

1. NOVEMBER NIGHT

A song in B major, with tonic and dominant sounding throughout in the piano part. Soft, high chromatic chords create the misty 'nebulous' effect required, with an added 'frostiness' conveyed by tenuto accents. Above this the singer floats a sustained line. No vocal dynamic is marked for the start, but it is assumed that the voice will match the piano's basic level. A lean, precise quality is needed to pitch notes accurately in tune with the piano's chords. An icy non-vibrato could work well, and the prolonged 'ghosts' on high G should sound disembodied. A quick breath after 'crisped' will guard against tiredness for this high-lying passage. Word-setting is not ideal here, and the singer must keep the throat relaxed and not allow the tone to thicken. The voice rises to high A sharp and then curves down on to a falling semitone, which is repeated. There can be a slight, rapt lingering on the high note, to leave time for the marked crescendo and diminuendo.

2. TRIAD

This is the merest fragment, centred around A minor, and highly evocative, reminiscent of Charles Ives's shorter songs. The piano has gently throbbing triads, scant at first, but gradually gathering force and richness. The voice stays within a restricted range, with close chromatic intervals and repeated notes, so intonation must be scrupulous. Phrases are short and undemanding, preparing the way for the contrast to come.

3. SUZANNA AND THE ELDERS

Another fleeting miniature in the form of an emotional, dramatic recitative, containing violent fluctuations of mood and dynamic within its brief span. The composer's instructions appear

in boxes: ‘hard’, ‘more softly’, ‘tenderly’, ‘defiant’. The piano’s punctuating chords range widely in volume. After an angry opening outburst, the voice subsides to *pianissimo* (‘beautiful’, ‘delicate’). The last bar features a searing, defiant cry of ‘Therefore’ on high G, which is left ringing in the air, while the piano’s strident chords suddenly fade.

4. FATE DEFIED

The final two songs are longer, and rather more radical in style, reflected especially in the piano accompaniments. There are startling changes of mood and idiom, and the music crackles with energy and fresh invention. The singer begins with a simple, intoned introduction, *pianissimo*. The pianist then begins a lengthy sequence of scintillatingly rapid, high arpeggios. Against this the voice spins long lines on repeated pitches in mid-register, ‘defiantly’ at first and then ‘with muted voice’. It is difficult to decide how best to achieve these effects without disturbing legato. Intense concentration will be needed. An effect of singing through clenched teeth could help, also heightening the consonants, highlighting especially the ‘defiant’ word ‘grey’. Breathiness must be avoided here, and relief comes with the phrase marked ‘Radiantly’ (on a series of B naturals). Phrasing needs to be planned: a break before ‘clad’ will work well, but another may be necessary after it, in order to maintain a penetrating line and save something for the crescendo, since the piano now becomes increasingly loud and manic. Another breath can be taken after ‘like’. The singer is given a higher ossia at the end which may ride the texture better. The long E could be difficult to manoeuvre, especially as it is followed by an awkward change to E flat with a sudden diminuendo. After a pause, the singer intones, strongly, a last fragment on B natural and the piano has a forceful postlude.

5. THE WARNING

This begins with a lengthy piano solo, dark and brooding, with arpeggio flourishes. The voice proceeds in clear, brief phrases, relatively low in range. The composer’s instructions are now somewhat bizarre: he asks for ‘strangled tone’ on the word ‘flew’ (a difficult choice because of the roundness of the vowel). Perhaps the ‘f’ and ‘w’ can be exaggerated, but the lips must be released quickly after the latter. Diamond-shaped noteheads would seem to indicate a sudden stifling of the sound, which also occurs, twice, on the word ‘cold’ (here the singer can move swiftly to the ‘-ld’, ‘snuffing out’ the vowel) (Ex. 1). The piano, meanwhile has wild, pounding chords and tremolandos. After the voice has ended, the piano dies away, repeating its opening flourishes.

Ex. 1

strangled

slower, more deliberate

a white moth flew...

Why am I grown so cold? so cold!

NOTES

1. *Bad Boy of Music* (New York: Doubleday, Doranz & co. Inc., 1945).
2. This special collaboration is featured in the documentary film *Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story* (2017), directed by Alexandra Dean.



DANIEL ASIA (b. 1953)

Pines Songs (c.1984)

Texts by Paul Pines

Soprano or mezzo-soprano and piano; Range: 

Duration: 15'

T IV; M V



DANIEL Asia's music, intrinsically American in flavour, displays striking individuality and sureness of touch. With winning fluency, he is able to reference a kaleidoscopic mix of styles, with strong jazz overtones. The five settings can be sung as a cycle or performed separately. The composer does not, however, wish the last song to appear alone. There is also a version with chamber ensemble, but the piano parts amply convey the music's harmonic richness and textural variety. The mordantly pithy poems are complemented by elaborate piano writing, with lengthy solo passages that illustrate and amplify the poems' imagery. Words are

set in a highly personal way and rhythms are always lively. The composer often embellishes and extends phrases with melismas and hummed musings. Satisfyingly expansive lines use the voice's full capacity, and intricate details never impede the music's natural flow.

An idiomatically American way of delivering the texts is inbuilt. Exaggerated projection of percussive consonants would be unsuitable. Enunciation should be as smooth as possible, with an easy pliability—a feeling for jazz will be an advantage. Clarity should not, however, be sacrificed: the American way of sounding all 'r's, even in the middle of words, and the crisp 'wh' (as in a Scottish accent) are examples where the English pronunciation lacks definition by comparison. The composer's interpretative instructions are useful, and he shows care and sensitivity in his phrasing and dynamics. Good breath control will be called upon at all times. The main musical problems will be rhythmical: frequent syncopations and changes of metre have to sound effortless. The style may take a while to acquire, but once words and music coalesce, it should all fall comfortably into place.

1. WHITE PILLARS

A piano introduction creates a restless, distracted atmosphere. The singer enters at a steadier tempo, floating between regular and dotted eighth notes in disjointed phrases with rapidly changing dynamics. The opening paragraph divides into two phrases, with breath taken only after 'floor'. Speaking the words (they are marked 'somewhat ponderously') can help establish the requisite elasticity of style. The voice recites 'the clock has a picture of Sir Walter Raleigh' on a monotone, drawing the audience instantly into the poet's ironic humour. 'On', unexpectedly, has a rocking melisma, followed by a separate 'it', which has to be clipped off *subito piano*. The comma preceding it indicates a glottal entry, not a breath. The piano has a dazzling solo, which slows down ready for the voice's re-entry. Fast and slow tempos alternate, culminating in an overtly personal utterance, which climbs to a hushed *mezzo piano* on 'I can't read' (Ex. 1). The higher alternative provided will make a tremendous effect if the singer has the confidence to float it almost without vibrato. Breath can be taken before 'perusing'—any other choice would interrupt crucial crescendos. The proliferation of swells and fades reminds one of Elliott Carter's vocal writing, which also requires much forethought as regards phrasing. Where musical and verbal considerations seem at odds, it is usually best to put the music first. Rhythms start smoothly until the line rises and becomes declamatory. An imperceptible breath may be snatched before 'has' so that dynamics are not inhibited. After a pause there is time to place the final, poised entry, separating each syllable. Once again an ossia is supplied, but, in this case, a lower one. The high A is perhaps easier to sustain without wavering. The 'squ' of 'squares' focuses the sound, and the singer should delay the ending of the word as long as possible, slipping the 'r' and 's' ('z') neatly into the gap before the piano's last chord.

Ex. 1

The musical score for Ex. 1 consists of two staves. The first staff is in 9/16 time and the second in 5/8 time. The lyrics are: "I at the coun - ter per - us - ing a men - u I can't read". The dynamics are marked as *mp*, *mf*, *f*, and *p*. The tempo changes from 9/16 to 5/8. The lyrics are: "I at the coun - ter per - us - ing a men - u I can't read".

2. I'LL NEVER UNDERSTAND

A substantial, basically contemplative movement (marked 'Very freely, wistfully'), whose fine-spun phrases, decorated by shapely melismas, lie beautifully in the voice. Some extremely long notes will test the singer's breath control. Rhythms are enjoyably supple, and come across as written-out rubato. The singer's opening C natural can be picked up from the penultimate chord of the piano's introduction. Each of a series of gliding, graceful lines is heralded by a split chord, with time to savour each sound. The piano has bell-like repetitive figures and an extensive solo passage. A soft piping tune is heard 'emerging' (the composer's word) as the singer re-enters, with an appealing legato section, in which fluctuating time signatures should not hamper the music's natural swing. Well exercised from negotiating the sprightly rhythms, the voice will relish the sudden lengthy note. The 'I' of 'lines' should be placed well forward, and this will help secure the upward curve at the end. A syncopated phrase climbs to G flat, dips slightly, and then, with ample time to breathe, reaches a loud climax on 'ratio'. After a final piano interlude, the voice has two passages of unaccompanied humming (marked 'dreaming'). Rhythms swing along naturally, but intervals are tricky. The poem's last line is set memorably: a glorious solo phrase covers a huge dynamic range, sliding down a tritone to a slow, rapt close. A marked comma signals this radical change of mood. The last few measures need exceptional control of air and intonation, in the vulnerable register-break area. A breath could be snatched before 'as', and the last pure thread of tone can be held as long as possible.

3. A LITTLE GIRL

This brief movement aptly encapsulates its subject, and the music trips along with vivacious charm. The composer's command of speech rhythms is invaluable here, as are his expressive details, especially the staccatos and the glissando on 'fall down'. The singer's final phrases range widely and eventually melt into humming. The leap up a tenth from middle C is exhilarating, but closing on to the 'm' of 'Poem' (set as a monosyllabic 'Pome') is not easy. It is best to keep the lips slightly open (think 'ng' rather than 'm') until a 'safer' low register is reached for the arching phrase that ends the song with silky smoothness, sliding up the final fifth to a luxuriantly long, paused A.

4. DEAR FRANK

This song consists of just two vocal phrases: a question and its teasingly surreal response. After a lengthy introduction, the piano provides a texture of drumming left-hand repeated notes. The vocal tessitura is ideally chosen for clarity and natural flow. The 'answering' fragment begins in a matter-of-fact way, but swoops up to *subito fortissimo* on 'Mexicans', then descends a tritone, prolonging the 'n' and 's(z)' at the end of the word. The singer must somehow keep the dynamic level high enough to sound above the piano's scintillating sixteenth notes and reiterated high octaves. Lips should remain parted, to allow as much resonance as possible.