Va tacito e nascosto

Georg Friederich Händel, the composer of this aria, was born in Prussia in 1685 and died in England in 1759. He spent most of his career in London after studying in Hamburg and Italy. Händel is known for his strong baroque influences, which shines through this aria from his opera, Giulio Cesare (1724). Other artists who contributed to the making of this opera are Giacomo Francesco Bussani, who wrote the original libretto, Nicola Francesco Haym, who revised the libretto. During this piece, Cesare is residing at Tolomeo’s home, where he confesses to Curio (his guard) that he believes Tolomeo will betray him. The theme of the song is the relationship between hunter and prey, and a calculating Cesare does his best to reverse the roles. Listen for the chase of the piano creeping up on its prey, which was originally intended for solo horn.

Thy rebuke hath broken his heart/Behold and see

Another great Händel work, from Messiah. It’s said that after the gigantic success of Messiah, Händel never wrote another Italian opera again. Even though this work was composed in 1741 (with the help of Charles Jennens, who compiled scriptural text form the King James Bible), Händel’s Messiah is still performed near Christmastime every year all around the world. Part I of Messiah is the telling of prophecies, including a visit from angels foretelling the birth of Christ. Part II retells the life and death of Jesus, and the sacrifices He made for us. Lastly, Part III of Messiah highlights the resurrection and the glory of Christ in heaven. “Thy rebuke” and “Behold and see” falls in the middle of Part II. “They rebuke” mourns the death of Christ, and “Behold and see” is associated with the virgin Mary and the destruction of Jerusalem (from the Book of Lamentations).

Wiewohl mein Herz in Tränen schwimmt/Ich will dir mein Herze schenken

This recitative and aria are from a larger work, the St. Matthew Passion, written by Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach was born in 1685 in Germany, and died in 1750. Bach worked as a musician for protestant churches and courts in Weimar and Köthen. He also worked as a cantor and composer at multiple lutheran churches in Leipzig. Bach is mostly known for his baroque-style chamber and keyboard music. The St. Matthew Passion was written in 1727 and revised in 1736 with the help of librettist, Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici). This oratorio is about the suffering of Christ, although it does not mention the resurrection (which is a practice originating from the liturgies of Palm Sunday). “Wiewohl mein Herz in Tränen schwimmt” and “Ich will dir mein Herze schenken” are about the eternal love that Jesus has for us, and our willingness to devote our lives to Him in return.

Ganymed

Ganymed was written by the Austrian composer, Franz Schubert (1797-1828). Schubert studied the music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, whose influences bolster Schubert’s romantic tendencies. Despite his short lifetime, Schubert left behind a huge legacy of over 600 vocal pieces, most of them lieder (German art song), seven complete symphonies, some operas, and even piano and chamber music. After excelling in school, Schubert studied under Antonio Salieri, who is best known for his work in the opera field. “Ganymed” was originally a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, about a divine hero named Ganymede. It is a grecian myth in which Ganymede, the most beautiful human on Earth, is adored so much by Zeus that he is captured and given the job of cup-bearer in Heaven. The poem was set to music by Schubert in 1817. In Schubert’s version, Ganymede is still on Earth as his younger self and is seduced by God through the beauty of Springtime.
Sonntag
"Sonntag," or "Sunday" in German, was composed by Johannes Brahms in 1859. Brahms was born in 1833 in Hamburg and died in 1897 in Vienna, where he spent most of his professional life. Not only was he a great composer for symphony orchestra, piano, organ, and voice, but he was a virtuosic pianist as well. Brahms is considered to be a traditionalist, though one wonders if he explored newer ideas; he was such a perfectionist that unfortunately, he threw much of his own music away, so it’s impossible to say. "Sonntag," is one of his more traditional compositions, about a person reminiscing about seeing their love last Sunday, and wishing they could see them again soon. The song is based on a text by Johann Ludwig Uhland, first published in 1845.

Les berceaux
Gabriel Fauré was another French composer and pianist, who was born in 1845 and died in 1924. He is best known for "Après un rêve" and "Claire de lune." Fauré’s influences as a composer include complex harmonies and melodic styles, which made him a trailblazer for the transition from the romantic period into the modern period. His compositions were widely applauded in France and Britain during his lifetime, but took longer to be accepted outside of these two countries. To put it into perspective, Chopin was still composing at Fauré’s birth, and jazz and atonal music were just starting to formalize as styles at the time of his death. "Les berceaux" was originally a poem written by Sully Prudhomme (the first ever winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1901). The text tells the tale of the relationship between working men and working women, men working away at sea and women working ceaselessly at home.

Les temps a laissié son manteau
The composer of this song, Claude Debussy, was born in France in 1862 and died in 1918. Most people identify him as the first impressionist composer, although he hated the term and would have never self-identified as such. Debussy was so talented as a pianist that he was admitted into one of France’s finest college conservatories at the age of 10, where he realized his passion was more in line with composition rather than with piano. Debussy is known for rejecting the classical tradition and introducing new ideas, such as non-functional harmonies and the use of whole-tone and pentatonic scales. The impressionist “feel” is not lost in “Les temps a laissié,” composed in 1904, where the singer often separates harmonically from the accompanist. It was originally a poem by Charles d’Orléans from the early 1400s. The text speaks of Time and how he changes the seasons.

Love’s Philosophy
"Love’s Philosophy" was written by English composer, Roger Quilter, who was born in 1977 and died in 1953. Quilter was born into a wealthy family, which allowed him to attend primary school in England and later study composition in Germany. Roger Quilter was one of the leading lighthearted composers of his time; he is known for his light music (a less serious version of the classical genre) for orchestra, as well as his nursery rhymes. The text of “Love’s Philosophy” comes from the poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Quilter’s arrangement was first published in 1905. Listen for the sweeping lines of the soprano, painting the text of the waves and metaphorical “push and pull” of the nature of love.

At the River
“At the River" is a sentimental piece about meeting again in the afterlife, and that is why I dedicate this song to my Uncle Charlie, who passed away this June of 2020. The original text of the song is by Robert Lowry (1826-1899), and was set by Charles Ives in 1916. Charles Ives was a modern American composer, born in 1874 and died in 1954. Because most of his music was experimental and included new techniques such as tone clusters and polytonality, his compositions were not revered until later in his life. Charles Ives’ father was a musician as well; he performed as a band leader in the American civil war, directed orchestras, and taught music theory. It’s easy to see were Charles Ives got his inspiration. In this song, listen for the rhythmic disparities between the accompaniment and singer near the end of the song.
Eccola, oh Dei!/Ah, perdona, al primo affetto
Finally, this recitative and duet pair comes from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera, *La clemenza di Tito (the Clemency of Titus)*, which first premiered at the Estates Theatre in Prague, in 1791. The librettist of the opera is Caterino Mazzolà. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in 1756 in Salzburg and died in 1791. He is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished classical composers of all time, and for his many operas, symphonies, concertos, and art songs of the classic genre. *La clemenza di Tito* takes place in first century A.D. Rome, and is about Tito's (the Roman emperor) quest to find love, avoid assassination, and keep the throne for himself. Annio, one of the right hand men to Tito, is in love Servilia, a woman of the court. Annio learns that Tito plans to marry Servilia, and diplomatically welcomes the decision since Tito is unaware of the affair between Annio and Servilia. "Eccola, oh Dei!" is the scene where Annio must break the bad news to Servilia, and "Ah, perdona, al primo affetto" is the duet that transpires from their realization that they cannot live without each other.