Songs of Love and Loss

Early Effusions

The first set on this evening’s program comprises two pieces of “early” music. In the classical music community, “early” music is generally considered to be any music dating from prior to about 1750 CE. The first selection, “Zefiro torna” is by famous late Renaissance/Early Baroque era composer Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), from his collection *Scherzi musicali* (1623) (Musical play/musical jokes). One element of Monteverdi’s style is predominant in this number, that of text painting. For example, the words “da monti e da valli” translate to “from mountains and from valleys.” In order to “paint” this aurally, Monteverdi makes the vocal line ascend on “da monti” and descend on “da valli.” Other examples include a line being tossed between the voices at “radoppiam la harmonia” (doubling the harmony), descending by minor seconds on “piango” (I weep), quick melismatic passages on “hor canto” (now I sing), a single vocal line with little accompaniment at “sol io” (only I), and quick melismatic passages at “l'aer” (the air) and “l'onde” (the waves). The piece is a joyful effusion of the beauties of nature and the trials of love. The effusive, playful nature of “Zefiro torna” is heightened by the addition of guitar, cello, and percussion, and I am grateful to Ryan Loken, Peter Nelson, Hannah Overbey, and Evan Wood for joining Mike and I in this early music jam session. Their contributions bring a great deal of enjoyment to this set.

The second piece is by one of the few female composers of this era for whom we have a substantial body of work, Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677). The piece moves back and forth between lyric sections and quasi-recitative sections, with melismatic passages inserted. It is almost a miniature *scena* or opera. A talented singer herself, this style of singing would have enabled her to show off her prowess.

The poetry speaks of “courtly love”—love which is unrequited or not socially acceptable, and therefore hidden. This kind of love was seen as very ennobling and fashionable in Strozzi’s time. The refrain seems somber, “I want to die, rather than have my suffering discovered.” However, at this point in time “death” was often used poetically as a euphemism for sexual fulfillment. Depending on which interpretation one chooses, the speaker may or may not have hope of a return from their beloved. I leave it to the listener to determine which meaning of the word is intended.

“Zefiro torna”  “Zephyr returns”
Zefiro torna e di soavi accenti
l’aer fa grato e’il piè discioglie a l’onde
fa danzar al bel suon su’l prato i fiori.

Inghirlandato il crin Fillide e Clori
note temprando amor care e gioconde;
e da monti e da valli ime e profonde
raddoppian l’armonia gli antri canori.

Sorge più vaga in ciel l’aurora, e'l sole,
sparge più luci d’or; più puro argento
fregia di Teti il bel ceruleo manto.

Sol io, per selve abbandonate e sole,
l’ardor di due begli occhi e’l mio tormento,
come vuol mia ventura, hor piango hor canto.

- Ottavio Rinuccini

Translation:

Zephyr’s wind returns and with sweet accents
Makes the air grateful and the shore dissolve into the wave
And, murmuring in the green fronds,
Makes the flowers dance in the meadows.

It wreathes the hair of Phyllis and Chloris
With soothing notes of dear and playful love;
And from mountains and from valleys, high and low
It doubles the harmony of the singing caves.

The sun rises more lovely, and its
Scattered light is more golden; more pure silver
Emblishes Thetis’s cerulean mantle.

Only I, abandoned and alone in the woods,
The ardor of two beautiful eyes my torment,
As my fortune dictates, now weep, now sing.

- Translation: Kelsey K. Rogers

“L’amante segreto”

Voglio, voglio morire,
Piutosto ch’il mio mal venga à scoprire.

Oh, fatal misfortune,
the more my eyes see her beautiful face,
the more I must keep my desire hidden:
one who has no remedy must remain silent about his distress.
One with no luck can only look,
nor could death come from such a clear sky.

O disgrazia fatale,
Quanto più miran gl’occhi il suo bel volto
Più tien la bocca il mio desir sepolto;
Chi rimedio non hà taccia il suo male.
Non resti di mirar chi non ha sorte,
Nè può da si bel ciel venir la morte.

I look at my beautiful lady,
and she looks on me with compassion,
as if to say:
“Reveal your torment,”
for she is well aware that I’m consumed and burn. But I want to die...

La bella donna mia sovente miro,
Ed ella à mè volge pietoso il guardo,
Quasi che voglia dire:
Palesa il tuo martire,
Che ben s’accorge che mi struggo e ardo.
Mà io voglio morire...
L’erbetta, ch’al cader di fredda brina
Languida il capo inchina;
All’apparir del sole,
Lieta verdeggia più di quel che suole:
Tal io, s’alcun timor mi gela il core,
All’apparir di lei prendo vigore.
Mà io voglio morire...
Deh, getta l’arco poderoso e l’armi,
Amor, e lascia homai di saettarmi.
Se non per amor mio,
Fallo per onor tuo, superbo dio,
Perché gloria non è d’un guerrier forte
Uccider un che sta vicino a morte.

- Barbara Strozzi

- Translation: Richard Kolb
Published courtesy of Cor Donato Editions.

French Fancies

The pieces in the second set are both by French composer Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921). Although well-known for his instrumental music, much of his art song repertoire—known by the French as *mélodies*—has been forgotten. The first of these two pieces “Papillons” (Butterflies) has been set twice by the composer, once for soprano and orchestra, and again for soprano and piano. We have combined these two settings into a version for soprano, two flutes, and piano. The addition of flutes heightens the imagery of butterflies in the music, and the parts are taken directly from the orchestral score, which score was published and made available by the Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française (Venice, Italy). In particular, listen for the sound of the butterflies flying at the beginning and their departure at the very end. I appreciate the musical and incredibly dedicated contributions of both Dr. Laura Kellogg and her student, Ava Brewster, to this set.

Although the piece feels extremely light and playful—a frequent feature of Saint-Saëns’s *mélodies*—the text has a somewhat somber overtone in discussing the way a butterfly approaches death. However, the joyous abandon, the unrestrained living of life, is admired by the speaker and recommended to humanity.

The second piece in this set, “Une flûte invisible,” is in its very title a kind of musical joke. “Une flûte invisible” translates to “an invisible flute,” but Saint-Saëns has decided to make this invisible flute visible by adding it to the music. It is a lovely, charming description of pastoral life and the beauties of love.

“Papillons”

Où t’envoles-tu, si frêle,

“Butterflies”

Where are you flying, so delicate,
Petit papillon léger?
N'est-il donc pas vrai que l'aile
Se lasse de voltiger?

Ne crains-tu pas que la brise
Puisse en jouant te flétrir,
Ou que l'ouragan te brise,
Qu'un soir vienne te meurtrir ?

Oh! non, ton corps diaphane
Veut se griser de l'azur,
De la rose qui se fanne,
D'un ciel de printemps plus pur ...

Tu veux choisir le calice
D'une fleur pour ton berceau,
T'endormir avec délice
Au sein d'un jardin si beau.

Ne t'éveiller qu'à l'aurore
Et lorsque le grand soleil
Par delà les monts qu'il dore
Sourit au matin vermeil.

N'être que beauté, que vie,
Rien que tendresse et qu'espoir,
Éblouissante folie,
Et puis ... mourir un beau soir.

Mourir d'avoir fait un rêve,
Mourir d'avoir trop aimé,
D'avoir aspiré sans trêve
L'air enflammé!

Mourir d'avoir en l'espace
Eu pour règle ton désir,
D'être un papillon qui passe
Et que la mort va saisir.

Papillons couleur de flamme,
Papillons légers et fous,
Vous ressemblez à nos âmes
Qui sont folles comme vous.

Au gré de leurs doux caprices
Elles vont pour se griser
Carried along by your sweet whims
They want to imbibe
De calices en calices
Et de baisers en baisers.

Puis, quand la mort vient, cruelle,
Nos âmes, d’un large essor
S’envolent à tire d’aile
Comme les papillons d’or!
- Renée de Léché

"Une flûte invisible"

Viens! - une flûte invisible
Soupire dans les vergers. -
La chanson la plus paisible
Est la chanson des bergers.

Le vent ride, sous l’yeuse,
Le sombre miroir des eaux. -
La chanson la plus joyeuse
Est la chanson des oiseaux.

Que nul soin ne te tourmente.
Aimons-nous! aimons toujours! -
La chanson la plus charmante
Est la chanson des amours.
- Victor Hugo

Of chalices upon chalices
And of kisses upon kisses.

Then, when cruel death comes
Our souls, with a great soaring,
Fly away on the beat of a wing
As the golden butterflies!

- Translation by Kelsey K. Rogers

An invisible flute

Come! – an invisible flute
Sighs in the orchards. –
The most peaceful song
Is the song of the shepherds.

Under your glance, the wind rides upon
The dark mirror of the waters. –
The most joyous song
Is the song of the birds.

May no care torment you.
Let us love! Love forever! –
The most charming song
Is the song of those who love.

- Translation by Kelsey K. Rogers

On Wenlock Edge

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) took the poetry for his song cycle On Wenlock Edge from a collection of poems written by A. E. Housman (1859-1936) entitled A Shropshire Lad. The poetry was extremely popular, reflecting themes of love and loss, and in particular the experiences of young men, especially those who might be called to war, never to return. (Housman’s own brother was killed in the Boer Wars of the 1890s.)¹ This poetry was so meaningful to the British public that “there are stories of many young men... taking their copies of [A Shropshire Lad] with them [to battle in WWI].”²

² Ibid.
I chose this music because of its incredible beauty. Although it is typically sung by a tenor, I couldn’t get it off my mind or my heart, so I decided a soprano version was in order. I particularly love the fifth movement, “On Bredon Hill,” which seems to accurately, yet beautifully depict the joys of love and the pain of separation. When I chose this, I had no idea that my own father would pass away suddenly in February of this year. As painful as this sudden separation has been, I feel gratitude for the blessing of that relationship in my life. It has caused me to reflect further on the fleeting nature of this life, and the reality that in loving, living, and dying, humanity really has much more in common than we sometimes think. Although the themes of this music are somber, I believe their beauty is also a hopeful balm, that somehow, some way, all our suffering can be made beautiful. I am deeply grateful for music and art, that help us find the sweet in the bitter, the exquisite in the suffering. As we mark this year of so much loss and suffering for all of humanity, it is my hope that this music will soothe your soul, as it has mine.

I am grateful to Lauren Bontje, Peter Nelson, Sam Schoenwald, and especially my brother, Tobias K. Roth, for joining me in this performance. There is little I enjoy more than a good string quartet.

I. On Wenlock Edge

On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble;
His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;
The gale, it plies the saplings double,
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.

T’would blow like this through holt and hanger
When Uricon* the city stood;
’Tis the old wind in the old anger,
But then it threshed another wood.

Then, ’twas before my time, the Roman
At yonder heaving hill would stare;
The blood that warms an English yeoman,
The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet;
Then ’twas the Roman, now ’tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
It blows so hard, ’twill soon be gone:
Today the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.

II. From far, from eve and morning

From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

Now for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart.
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;
How shall I help you, say;
Ere to the wind’s twelve quarters
I take my endless way.

*Uricon was an ancient Roman settlement in what is now Great Britain.
V. Bredon Hill

In summertime on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.

Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.

The bells would ring to call her
In valleys miles away;
“Come all to church, good people;
Good people come and pray.”
But here my love would stay.

And I would turn and answer
Among the springing thyme,
“Oh, peal upon our wedding,
And we will hear the chime,
And come to church in time.”

But when the snows at Christmas
On Bredon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone.

They tolled the one bell only,
Groom there was none to see,
The mourners followed after,
And so to church went she,
And would not wait for me.

The bells they sound on Bredon,
And still the steeples hum,
“Come all to church, good people.” —
O noisy bells, be dumb;
I hear you, I will come.

VI. Clun

In valleys of springs of rivers,
By Ony and Teme and Clun,
The country for easy livers,
The quietest under the sun,

We still had sorrows to lighten,
One could not be always glad,
And lads knew trouble at Knighton,
When I was a Knighton lad.

By bridges that Thames runs under,
In London, the town built ill,
‘Tis sure small matter for wonder
If sorrow is with one still.

And if as a lad grows older
The troubles he bears are more,
He carries his griefs on a shoulder
That handselled them long before.

Where shall one halt to deliver
This luggage I’d lief set down?
Not Thames, not Teme is the river,
Nor London nor Knighton the town:

‘Tis a long way further than Knighton,
A quieter place than Clun,
Where doomsday may thunder and lighten
And little ‘twill matter to one.

- A. E. Housman
La damoiselle élue

La damoiselle élue by Claude Debussy (1862-1918) is an unusual work in many ways. First, it is a sort of religious cantata, with references to Mary, various saints, and Jesus Christ, however, the text is neither of fire and brimstone, nor of rejoicing in salvation, as is typical of religious cantatas and other religious choral-orchestral works. The text centers on a "chosen maiden" (a "damoselle élue") who has reached the gates of heaven, but is unwilling to enter without her beloved. Instead of rejoicing in salvation, she recalls their love and life together, wishes for their reunion, and weeps as she waits for him.

Second, the introduction of this piece is more like an operatic overture than a standard introduction for a vocal work. The introduction is nearly a work unto itself, lasting between 3-5 minutes, and introducing all of the major melodic themes of the work. Because our performance is an orchestral reduction written by Debussy, the introduction is on the shorter side, but both the introduction and the entire piece are a *tour de force* on the piano. I wish to express my deep gratitude for my collaborative pianist, Mike Langer, for his willingness to embark on this musical journey with me, and his dedication to the cause.

Finally, the vocal forces are somewhat unusual, as they are written entirely for female voices. Both soloists are female, and the chorus is of women's voices only. Debussy seems to have made this choice consciously, to highlight the female perspective of the story and the poetry. I am grateful to Dr. Joann Miller, the women of NDSU’s Madrigal Singers, and Katie Zerbst, who have been enthusiastic collaborators on this project.

As with *On Wenlock Edge*, I find La damoiselle élue to be an interesting commentary on the joy and pain of love. It is true that there is not love without loss, but the reverse is also true – there is no loss without love. If we love nothing and no one, we never experience loss, but this a very uncommon experience. I believe most of us experience both love and loss in this life, and Debussy’s setting of the poetry is a fascinating reflection on both. Although the text ostensibly ends sadly, the postlude brings me a sense of hope and closure. Perhaps musically, if not textually, we are able to hear the return of the damoiselle’s beloved. However the music speaks to you, thank you for joining us tonight.

“La damoiselle élue”

**Chœur (Sopranos et Contraltos)**

La damoiselle élue s’appuyait  
Sur la barrière d’or du Ciel,  
Ses yeux étaient plus profonds que l’abîme  
Des eaux calmes au soir.  
Elle avait trois lys à la main  
Et sept étoiles dans les cheveux.

“La chosen maiden”

**Choir (Sopranos and altos)**

The chosen maiden leaned  
On the golden railing of Heaven,  
Her eyes were deeper than a chasm  
Of calm water at evening.  
She had three lilies in her hand  
And seven stars in her hair.
Une Récitante
Sa robe flottante
N'était point ornée de fleurs brodées,
Mais d'une rose blanche, présent de Marie,
Pour le divin service justement portée;
Ses cheveux qui tombaient le long de ses épaules
Étaient jaunes comme le blé mûr.

Chœur
Autour d'elle des amants
Nouvellement réunis,
Répêtaient pour toujours, entre eux,
leurs nouveaux noms d'extase;
Et les âmes, qui montaient à Dieu,
Passaient près d'elle comme de fines flammes.

Une Récitante
Alors, elle s'inclina de nouveau et se pencha
En dehors du charme encerclant,
Jusqu'à ce que son sein eut échauffé
La barrière sur laquelle elle s'appuya
Et que les lys gisent comme endormis
Le long de son bras courbé.

Chœur
Le soleil avait disparu, la lune annelée
Était comme une petite plume
Flottant au loin dans l'espace; et voilà
Qu'elle parla à travers l'air calme,
Sa voix était pareille à celle des étoiles
Lorsqu'elles chantent en chœur.

La Damoiselle Éluë
Je voudrais qu'il fût déjà près de moi,
Car il viendra.
N'ai-je pas prié dans le ciel? Sur terre,
Seigneur, Seigneur, n'a-t-il pas prié,
Deux prières ne sont-elles pas une force parfaite?
Et pourquoi m'effraierais-je?

Lorsqu'autour de sa tête s'attacherà l'auréole,
Et qu'il aura revêtu sa robe blanche,
Je le prendrai par la main et j'irai avec lui
Aux sources de lumière,

A narrator
Her billowing dress
Was not adorned with embroidered flowers,
But with a white rose, a gift from Mary,
For the divine service, rightly worn;
Her hair fell along her shoulders
As yellow as ripened wheat.

Choir
Around her the lovers,
Newly reunited,
Repeated endlessly, among themselves,
Their new euphoric names;
And their souls, who went up to God,
Passed close by her as if they were exquisite flames.

A narrator
Then she leaned over again,
Outside of the charming circle,
Until her breast had warmed
The railing on which she leaned,
And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along the curve of her arm.

Choir
The sun had faded away, the moon was
Ringed as with a small feather
Billowing far into space; and it was there
That she spoke into the calm air,
Her voice was that of the stars
When they sing in chorus.

The Chosen Maiden
I wish that he were here, close to me,
For he will come.
Didn't I pray in heaven? On earth,
My Lord, my Lord, didn't he pray,
Are not two prayers a perfect force?
And why should I worry?

When the halo encircles his head,
And he is arrayed in his white robe,
I will take him by the hand and I will go with him
Nous y entrerons comme dans un courant,
Et nous y baignerons à la face de Dieu.

Nous nous reposerons tous deux à l’ombre
De ce vivant et mystique arbre,
Dans le feuillage secret duquel on sent parfois
La présence de la colombe,
Pendant que chaque feuille, touchée par ses
plumes,
Dit son nom distinctement.

Tous deux nous chercherons les bosquets
Où trône Dame Marie
Avec ses cinq servantes, dont les noms
Sont cinq douces symphonies:
Cécile, Blanchelys, Madeleine,
Marguerite et Roselys.

Il craindra peut-être, et restera muet,
Alors, je poserai ma joue
Contre la sienne; et lui parlerai de notre
amour,
Sans confusion ni faiblesse,
Et la chère Mère approuvera
Mon orgueil, et me laissera parler.

Elle-même nous amènera la main dans la main
À Celui autour duquel toutes les âmes
S’agenouillent, les innombrables têtes clair
rangées
Inclinées, avec leurs auréoles.
Et les anges venus à notre rencontre
chanteront,
S’accompagnant de leurs guitares et de leurs
citoles.

Alors, je demanderai au Christ Notre Seigneur,
Cette grande faveur, pour lui et moi,
Seulement de vivre comme autrefois sur terre
Dans l’amour, et d’être pour toujours,
Comme alors pour un temps,
Ensemble, moi et lui.

**Chœur**
Elle regarda, prêta l’oreille et dit,
D’une voix moins triste que douce:

To the fountains of light,
We will enter them as a stream,
And we will immerse ourselves in the presence
of God.

And we will rest ourselves in the shade
Of this living and mystical tree,
In the secret verdure in which we sometimes
feel
The presence of the dove,
While each leaf, touched by its feathers,
Speaks its name clearly.

We will both search among the groves
Where Lady Mary sits
With her five servants, whose names
Are five sweet symphonies:
Cécile, Blanchelys, Madeleine,
Marguerite and Roselys.

He will perhaps be afraid, and will remain
silent,
Then, I will press my cheek
Against his: and he will speak of our love,
With neither confusion nor weakness,
And the dear Mother will approve
My pride, and will allow me to speak.

She herself will bring us hand in hand
To the One around whom all the souls
Kneel, the countless shining heads in rows
Bowed, with their halos.
And the angels will come to our reunion
singing,
Accompanied by their guitars and their citoles.

Then I will ask of Christ Our Lord,
This great favor, for him and me,
Only to live as before on the earth
In love, and to be forever,
As then for a time,
Together, me and him.

**Choir**
She looked out, listened, and said,
In a voice more sad than sweet:
La Damoiselle Élue
Tout ceci sera quand il viendra.

Chœur
Elle se tut.
La lumière tressaillit de son côté, remplie
D'un fort vol d'anges horizontal.
Ses yeux prièrent, elle sourit;
Mais bientôt leur sentier
Devint vague dans les sphères distantes.

Une Récitante
Alors, elle jeta ses bras le long
Des barrières d'or.
Et posant son visage entre ses mains,
Pleura.

Chœur
Ah, ah.

Choir
She fell silent.
The light shivered from her side, it replenished
A great flight of angels on the horizon.
Her eyes offered prayers, she smiled;
But soon their way
Became hazy in the distant spheres.

A narrator
Then, she stretched her arms along
The golden railing.
And putting her face in her hands,
Wept.

Choir
Ah, ah.

- Gabriel Sarrazin (1853-1935)
Based on the poem “The Blessed Damozel” by
Dante Gabriel Rosetti (1828-1882)

- Translation by Kelsey K. Rogers