THE CATULLUS SONGS

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF MUSIC

BY

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MUNCIE, INDIANA

July 2013
The Catullus Songs

The Catullus Songs comprise a song cycle of four movements for digital audio and soprano. The text is taken from the surviving poems of the short-lived Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus (ca. 84 BC – ca. 54 BC). Catullus predated Ovid, Horace, and Virgil, and lived at a time when lyric poetry was more popular than larger, more epic poems. Over one hundred of his short lyrics survive and contain not only the typical love and loss, but oftentimes silly and coarsely sexual material. It includes frequent references to a lover named Lesbia, an episode with her pet bird, and intimate threats to a male friend who flirted with the wrong boy. However, the more bawdy selections from Catullus are omitted from the text of these songs but for, perhaps, the third movement subtitled May she be happy with her 300 lovers. Still, there is nothing uncomfortably explicit in the translation. Catullus texts have previously been set by John Stafford Smith and Carl Orff, among other composers.

This text was chosen partly because Latin was my preferred language. One of the objects of the work was to include what amounted to an electronic drone accompanying a chant, featured in the second and fourth movements, and Latin is a well-known chanted language. The dead language was also used as a means to draw attention to the audio rather than the singer's meaning, and, in a way, to make a roundabout connection to cosmopolitanism, since the language is similarly foreign to all listeners, more or less. I chose a classic Roman poet considered very modern at his time for this work that I hope
is sufficiently, musically new. Another concept for these songs was to borrow the tenor and pacing of a Romantic symphonic poem while using electronic virtual instruments, a consequent difficulty of which is to prevent the audio from becoming too repetitive or artificial.

None of *The Catullus Songs* contain a rigid tempo or a definite meter except the third song, which is more rhythmic and driving. The relationship between voice and accompaniment is temporally loose, giving a significant amount of latitude to the vocalist in terms of expression. The harmonic language used is one typical of a late-Romantic symphonic work, plus some harmonies that would not translate well at all to a symphony but are able to stand with differences in timbre and reverb.

Performance of *The Catullus Songs* is meant for a dark performance hall with one to three pairs of loudspeakers, a substantial subwoofer, and the vocalist at the center of the stage. The digital audio is entirely pre-processed and pre-recorded, and ought to be unprocessed but for live-mixing considerations such as reverb, EQ, and a gentle compression on the vocals, which should be amplified using a microphone. It should be performed deliberately and loudly with the mix favoring an imposing accompaniment with an intelligible voice mixed at a modest level.

The electronic accompaniment was engineered using MOTU's *Digital Performer* (*DP*). The virtual instruments used include *Symphonic Instrument, MX4, Proton, nanosampler* by MOTU, and *Kontakt* by Native Instruments, with some editing done in Bias' *Peak* and *DP* as well.

The aesthetic aim of *The Catullus Songs* was to create a series of electronic songs
with a woman's voice and engineered sounds; the electronic accompaniment sides with natural sounds vs. blatant electronic noises in a conscious attempt to ease the aesthetic combination of traditional art songs with contemporary electroacoustic audio. Also, to a lesser degree, an aesthetic aim was the use of a harmonic chromaticism balanced between the dissonant harmonies of 20th-century serialism/modernism, as can be found in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* for example, and the milquetoast harmonies of popular songs, *Eleanor Rigby* for example.

Influences include the *Four Last Songs* of Richard Strauss, Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*, and certain solo movements of Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. These works are all harmonically bold, have similar pacing, and use mostly traditional voice-leading. *Songs and Dances of Death* might have its moments, but in general one would not expect in these selections to hear a disjunct voice jumping from pitch to pitch capriciously. *Terma* (2003) by Craig Walsh is a comparable and popular electroacoustic work with soprano—a work I did not care for at first, thinking the more random and artificial sections subtracted from the very excellent but subtle sections. The more tonal of these resemble *Catullus*. I have since changed my estimation of the work. Sung in Greek, *Terma* still features the kind of blunt gestures of many electroacoustic works I wanted to avoid, however: very present and dry soundbites, square gain structures, declarative and non-tonal vocals. The music of *The Catullus Songs* is an attempt to borrow the breadth of a song by Strauss yet using electronic music; it aims for digital signal processing free of any artificial techno-staccato or bathtub-sampling, the vocal line with well-rounded voice-leading and a semblance of the diatonic scale, and the virtual
instruments never fraction-of-a-second throwaway samples but typically part of larger melodic lines.

Note: The poems of Catullus are referred to as Catullus 11, Catullus 92, etc.

**Song #1: Amo et odi – I love and I hate**

**The Text** - The first line comes from Catullus 85. *Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris,* translates to roughly, “I hate and I love. Why is it so, you ask?” For certain incidences of the opening words, I have switched *Odi et Amo* for *Amo et Odi*, preferring first to recognize love, I suppose, but also because I found *amo* to be a lovelier word than *odi*, and the switch does not diminish the poetic meaning. The remainder of the text, with the exception of repetitions of that line, comes from Catullus 8, which begins, “Wretched Catullus, stop playing the fool.” Note that any reference to the name of the poet is altered or omitted in some way. For example, the Latin *Miser Catulle* I changed to simply *Miser*, or “wretched one.” The subject of Catullus 8 is heartbreak, a lament for better days passed when the sun shone on the poet, but he reminds himself that his lover, presumably Lesbia, no longer favors his company, and that he should be stoically resolved to the situation.

**The Music** – Sound sources for the first song include convolutions on diatonic collections, manipulated flutes, *tutti* orchestras, synthesized sub-bass tones, pulsating and equalized white-noise generators, and even a tall chord from a children’s choir.

The pacing of the music was important here; this first song has no discernible meter, only a rough tempo of 65 bpm and a score representation in 4/4. The pace at which
new sounds are introduced is about three seconds or less, including some shift in either harmony, timbre, stereo position, voice texture, “wet” (reverberant) vs. “dry,” or realistic vs. electronic. These parameters are freely varied in each movement, but a pace between the slower second and fourth movements, and the excited third, seemed the desirable course.

Percussion is used ornamentally, usually involving a timpani cluster or electronic sound, including several sub-booms at the beginning and end. Tubular bells can also be heard, and much of the sonic shape is owed to pulsating virtual instruments heavy with white noise, these belonging in the area between tonal and percussive audio.

Wanting to draw a parallel with orchestral songs, orchestral instruments and orchestral samples were a natural choice for sound material. The main sections of this first song sound much like a manipulated symphonic orchestra altered by processes and bordered by electronic ornaments. The exception to this is the climax, written for the accompaniment, which is very atonal and percussive. This climax resembles a series of wailing voices and pulsating noises that resolve into a tall, major harmony, in this way transitioning back into the familiar pitched material from the first verse.

**Song #2: Da mi basia mille – Give me a thousand kisses**

*The Text* – The emotional spirit of Catullus 5 is more joyous and begins, “Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love.” It is a celebration of their frequent affections. Again, references to any particular individual, in this case Lesbia, are omitted for the song setting. Selections from this poem include the first six lines, which beseech Lesbia into
love because their “short light” is followed by a “perpetual night.” The lines, “Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, / then another thousand, then a second hundred, / then immediately a thousand then a hundred,” mark the first incidence of an extended section that is clearly metrical in the Songs.

**The Music** – The electronics for *Da Mi Basia Mille* feature more pentatonic harmonies with an emphasis on minor tonalities. Two verses of chants are used in the voice, the first with an F#5 harmony and the second with a bed of D6/5. When these end, a strange orchestra begins the first metrical section of *The Catullus Songs* with a slow-paced 6/8. To balance the general sound of distorted voices, the virtual instruments are more frequently melodic, including rising melodic fifths at the beginning, called a “flashlight” in the score, and the classic lament bass.

Concerning electronic ornaments to the harmonies, an interesting “swamp” audio-subtext developed over the course of composition; the ambiance of a swamp can be heard during the more quiet parts, and transitions include sweeping insects and a bullfrog in the stereo distance. This was entirely unplanned, but I suppose that this second song, being about lovemaking, would be aurally congruent with the sounds of nature.

**Song #3: Cum suis vivat valeatque moechis** –

*May she be happy with her 300 lovers*

**The Text** – *Cum Suis Vivat* is an openly rancorous selection from Catullus 11, where the poet begs two friends, Furius and Aurelius, to embark on an epic quest to deliver his message: may she be happy with her adulterers, her 300 lovers. In short, it is
hyperbolic hate-mail. The lengths to which he orders his friends to go are comically exaggerated, and so are the insults. Cum Suis borrows text from these insults involving his lover's promiscuity.

**The Music** – The third song is the first and only to feature a consistent meter, and this makes its appearance with a collection of sounds labeled “Juggernaut” on the score: a driving, percussive series of sounds that might remind the listener of *aulos* marching alongside siege weapons. This war machine with a fast tempo flanks the center material, which features the soprano, a bouncy, complex time for two verses, and a verse with dreamy electronic music. The sound sources are timpani, marimbas, a menacing, deep bass voice called “the godhammer,” a plump electronic sub-bass, and an extremely time-stretched sample of an old-fashioned internet modem, which provided much more harmonic and melodic material than planned.

**Song #4: Si tu oblitus es, di meminerunt –**

*If you forget, the gods remember*

**The Text** – The theme of Catullus 30 and the text of the fourth song is a betrayal. Specifically, Catullus 30 mentions the poet's friend Alfenus, but with this name omitted, the subject matter is more universal and open to interpretation as to the sex of the addressee and the set of circumstances behind the words. Also, this would allow one to believe that all four *Catullus Songs* are addressed to the same person.

The poem is full of accusations that the poet has been left wretched, faithless, and cheated, and includes admonition that the recipient of the poem has displeased the gods,
represented in the accompaniment by a soaring voice.

The Music – The music of *Si Tu Oblitus* begins with a morose chant with a lone drone. A very slow and defeated feeling permeates the first three verses. Preceding the line “Nec facta impia,” or the accusation of impiety and the evocation of the Gods, there is a blunt shift between the drone and a bright, F#-major harmony that flutters into the audio field while the drone flutters out. This phrase is completed with a fading, soaring voice at the mention of the gods, and the faded silence is interrupted with a down-to-earth E-flat minor harmony. Next there is a section of the audio labeled “Floating tones” in the score. This is a section of very strange durations and strange harmonies floating in the stereo field, leading to a bemoaning solo for the voice followed by a short electronic coda that uses similar harmonies to the first movement's opening and a sample from the third.

Conclusion

In many ways, the decision to use an electronic accompaniment was a successful one. Having already settled on writing a song cycle, electronic music allowed me control over the final performance. The decision was an economical one, not only for using a smaller number of live musicians, which is always useful in getting an electroacoustic work performed, but also because a performance is easily adapted to any size room depending on the number of stereo speaker pairs. Aesthetically, the electronic accompaniment turned out well: a large dynamic range, and a mix of fast and slow, resembling contemporary electronic songs, though it hopefully appeals to those who might prefer a chamber work of Brahms or a symphonic poem of Richard Strauss.
Younger audiences will not mind the inclusion of speakers, but those expecting a symphony may accept *The Catullus Songs* as they do the combination of live performers, dialogue, and sound effects they experience regularly watching films at home or at the cinema.

Pairing a soprano with digital audio was also a successful choice. There is no irony in a work sung by a woman toward a feminine subject. Catullus, after all, wrote erotic poetry inclusive of men and women. Even Sappho, five centuries earlier, wrote poetry for men and women simply because both gender-subjects were fashionable in poetry at the time. Also, since the works of Catullus come from a culture in which female characters were not exclusively but often played by men, I find no problem with a woman representing a male personality on stage for these songs. The poet, a young and Roman aristocrat with a reputation for liberalism and an affection for Sappho amongst other poets, would almost certainly have no complaint.

The lack of a strong sense of meter for much of the song cycle created both unexpected benefits and difficulties. Incorporating chant was one object of the songs, and providing melodic material for the voice inside a temporal space between sonic milestones was relatively easy, but while this affords the soprano rhythmic freedom, rhythmic variation in the compositional process can only be expressed in a sort of “note density” between cues in the score. In fact, as a vocalist takes increasing advantage of the *tempo rubato ad libitum* instruction, the less effectual are my notated rhythms. Ironically, the notated melody, meant only as a guide for the time element of the melody, was difficult to match with the notation of the accompaniment, since the accompaniment is a
metered translation of the endlessly shifting tones of the electroacoustic music. In most portions of *The Catullus Songs*, a quarter note could be extended to a whole note and vice-versa in many places with no detriment to the intended effect. The more apparent cues in the score could even conceivably be ignored to a point, expanding the possibilities during performance even further. Despite these complications, a song cycle such as this with no clear meter, *tempo rubato*, and Romantic-era harmonies allows the composer to combine the malleability of old chant and new electronic music with an attitude of classicalism absent from many modern-day “tape and instrument” works.
Featured Poetry with Translation

Names of specific persons, including the poet, his lovers, and other members of his circle of friends, are omitted from the music. The extant poems of Catullus have no titles and are referred to as Catullus 1, Catullus 2, etc.

Poems of the First Song

Catullus 85 (excerpt):
Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?
I hate and love. Why is it so, perhaps you’ll ask?

Catullus 8 (excerpt):
Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire,
et quod vides perisse perditum ducas.
Fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,
cum ventitabas quo puella ducebat
amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla.
Ibi illa multa cum iocosa siebant,
quae tu volebas nec puella nolebat,
fulserve vere candidi tibi soles.
Nunc iam illa non vult: tu quoque impotens noli,
nec quae fugit sectare, nec miser vive,
sed obstinata mente perfer, obdura.
Vale puella.
Quem basiabis? Cui labella mordebis?
At tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura.

Sad one Catullus, stop playing the fool,
and let what you know leads you to ruin, end.
Once, bright days shone for you,
when you came often drawn to the girl
loved as no other will be loved by you.
Then there were many pleasures with her,
that you wished, and the girl not unwilling,
truly the bright days shone for you.
And now she no longer wants you: and you
weak man, be unwilling to chase what flees,
or live in misery: be strong-minded, stand firm.
Goodbye girl.
Who will you kiss? Whose lips will you bite?
But you, Catullus, be resolved to be firm.
The Second Song

Catullus 5:
Vivamus mea Lesbia, atque amemus,
rumoresque senum severiorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis!
Soles occidere et redire possunt:
nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
Da mi basia mille, deinde centum,
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,
deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.
Dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,
conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,
aut ne quis malus inuidere possit,
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.

Let us live, my Lesbia, let us love,
and all the words of the old, and so moral,
may they be worth less than nothing to us!
Suns may set, and suns may rise again:
buts when our brief light has set,
night is one long everlasting sleep.
Give me a thousand kisses, a hundred more,
another thousand, and another hundred,
and, when we've counted up the many thousands,
confuse them so as not to know them all,
so that no enemy may cast an evil eye,
by knowing that there were so many kisses.
The Third Song

**Catullus 11** (excerpt):
Cum suis vivat valeatque moechis,
quos simul complexa tenet trecentos,
nullum amans vere, sed identidem omnium
ilia rumpens;
nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,
qui illius culpa cecidit uelut prati
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam […]

Let her live and be happy with her adulterers,
whom having embraced 300 simultaneously, she owns and keeps them,
truly loving none of them, but repeatedly expending
all their loins;
nor let her look back for my love as before,
which by her fault, has fallen,
just like the farthest flower of the field after a passing […]

The Fourth Song

**Catullus 30** (excerpt):
Alfene immemor atque unanimis false sodalibus,
iam te nil miseret, dure, tui dulcis amiculi?
iam me prodere, iam non dubitas fallere, perfide?
Nec facta impia fallacum hominum caelicolis placent.
quae tu neglegis ac me miserum deseris in malis.
Eheu quid faciant, dic, homines cuiue habeant fidem?
certe tute iubebas animam tradere, inique, me
inducens in amorem.
Si tu oblitus es, at di meminerunt, meminit Fides.

Alfenus, negligent, false to like-minded friends,
have you no sympathy now with your gentle friend?
The impious deeds of deceitful men don’t please the gods.
You neglect me and abandon me to miserable illness.
Ah, say, what should men do, in whom should they trust?
Surely you, unjustly, commanded my trust, seduced
me to love.
If you forget, the gods will remember, Faith remembers.