

Music with and for the People

A Masters Voice recital | Spencer Domer, Tenor

Stacey Edwards, Piano

Reed Ulery, Horn | Korn Roongonchai, Violin | Nina Vivo, Violin

Grace Buchanan, Viola | Patricia Burton, Cello

Introduction

The concept of a "solo" voice recital has long been a source of chagrin for me. Yes, the idea of supporting the art of a colleague, friend, student, or professional singer as they express themselves through song is inspiring in thought, but I have often found it to be rather egocentric in execution. There is no situation – other than a recital of plain chant – wherein a voice recital would truly be "solo," rather it is a program of repertoire presented by one soloist, joined by an accompanying musician. Even that, an "accompanying" musician seems rather diminishing to the hard work, talents, and abilities it takes for one to be able to collaborate with a singer or soloist from their instrument, whether it be piano, organ, or another. Stacey Edwards (the collaborative pianist on this program) is a stellar musician, colleague, and musical collaborator – I have had the utmost honor making music with her in my time at Ball State.

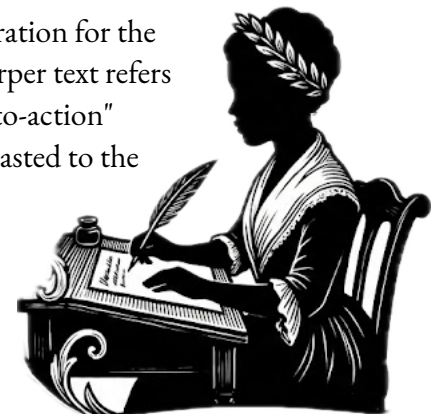
Music is a gift, and the ability to collaborate through musical expression makes performance much more enjoyable for the performer(s) and audience members. This program is oriented fully around the prioritization and favor of collaboration through music, featuring repertoire spanning from the English countryside to modern-day America.

I. *Miss Wheatley's Garden*, Rosephanye Powell (b. 1962)

Powell's prowess as a contemporary choral composer made her art song a clear choice in my repertoire selection for this recital; as I am completing my graduate degree in Choral Conducting this May, I am familiar with her choral repertoire. Though I had known her choral music, her art song repertoire has always evaded me. After much study, I am so glad I can offer *Miss Wheatley's Garden* to you this afternoon. This cycle is a wonderfully complex set of three pieces, all unique in their own respects.

The cycle's title is an homage to America's first African American poet, Phillis Wheatley. Her recognition as not only the first African American poet but also as a female literature icon carries influence on the texts that Powell set. All the poetry in this cycle is written by African American female poets Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Angelina Weld Grimké.

The first piece in *Miss Wheatley's Garden*, "Songs for the People," is the inspiration for the title of this program, "Music with and for the People." The Frances Ellen Watkins Harper text refers to music as a medium to call people to actions of love, hope, and triumph. This "call-to-action" through the act of music is such an uplifting perspective to turn to music when contrasted to the rather drear socio-political climate we find ourselves in. Though there are numerous issues we'd like to see resolved, the gift of song is still a form of expression we all hold. Though Harper was writing this text in the late 19th-century, the sentiment of music being a gift to soothe and express still reigns true in today's America.



The second piece, "I Want to Die While You Love Me," is rather different in all regards when compared to the first and third selections in this cycle. The movement is tenderly dedicated to Powell's husband, William. The song is incredibly intimate, portraying the appreciation for a relationship as nothing short of cherished. Song of America – a database for American art song repertoire – writes "The Georgia Douglas Johnson poem describes the passion between one individual and their beloved. The two lovers wish to not see the end of the day, as the individual wishes to carry the love experienced on this day to her death." This idealization of taking the memory of a life with a beloved partner to your death is such a beautiful expression of appreciation for one's partner.

In a stark contrast, the third and final song, "A Winter Twilight," is dark and brooding in its beginning. As the story from Angelina Weld Grimké's poem unfolds, it tells the story of a poet who is haunted by the memories of a lost love. While in sleep, she is suddenly awoken by his spirit, beckoning her. Although this rather dark subject matter lends itself well to Powell's brooding setting, there are also moments of levity. Though the piece has a forward momentum that is further propelled by the repetitive piano interludes, there is a serene recalling of the lost relationship. The text, "One path that knows where the cornflowers were," is set to a very similar melodic contour to the motif seen in the first movement. One could perhaps see this as an effort to harken back to the emotional state of the "Songs for the People," finding a sense of appreciation and triumph.

This is now one of my cherished cycles of American art song. I have been incredibly fortunate to not only study it, but to collaborate with Stacey in the performance of this repertoire.

II. **Auf dem Strom** Franz Schubert (1791-1828)

I was fortunate to join hornist Reed Ulery in our first performance of Schubert's "**Auf dem Strom**" on his Masters recital in February in collaboration with Professor LeeArron Klosterman. I was excited to write a program note for this wonderful piece, but Reed seemingly beat me to it. With his consent, below are selected sections from Mr. Ulery's program note from his Masters recital.

From notes by the Schubert Song Texts Project:

Schubert's setting of Ludwig Rellstab's poem was first performed at a public concert on 26th March 1828, the first anniversary of the death of Beethoven. Since Schubert's song quotes the Eroica Symphony there can be no doubt that the composer read the text as referring to Beethoven's own farewell to life and his journey off to the ocean of death. It is less certain that this was Rellstab's explicit intention when he wrote the text, despite the apparent references to a distant beloved ('An die ferne Geliebte') and the line 'Kann kein Lied vom Ufer dringen' (No songs can reach me from the river-bank), which seems to hint at Beethoven's deafness. It is known that Rellstab gave Beethoven a number of poems with the intention of him setting them to music. According to Anton Schindler, Beethoven died before doing so and Schindler therefore handed them over to Schubert, who proceeded to set them as part of 'Schwanengesang'. It will never be known whether 'Auf dem Strom' was one of these texts that Beethoven had looked at, or whether Rellstab intended the dying composer to recognise himself as its subject.

The poem begins with the speaker saying a reluctant farewell to someone who has come to see him off, someone who is ready to turn and walk away once the boat is out on the river. We never learn who is being addressed here. All that we know is that it is someone close, who is addressed as 'du'. It may well be that there is no such person outside of the hopes and fantasies of the speaker. It is certainly the case that in the second strophe the beloved is referred to in the third person. He is now leaving 'her' and the happy homeland where he met 'her'. We are given the impression that that was at a time long ago. It is very unlikely that 'she' is the same person as 'you'. Initially it appears that the speaker has boarded the famous ferry that will take him *across* the River Styx towards the underworld, but then we are told more about the speed at which the boat is travelling and the strong waves that are propelling it. Although the speaker feels a strong pull back to the shore, to the location of happy memories, the pull of the river is greater as it takes the boat out onto the open ocean,

the 'world sea'. All previous attachments are now broken. No tears can offer comfort any more. No music can be heard in those grey wastes. Beyond sight of land, all that is left for the isolated traveller is to look up to the distant stars. Since the same stars were shining when he met the beloved there is a chance that he will encounter her gaze looking back at him from there. However, this is all qualified by 'perhaps' (vielleicht). There is no 'certain hope', no false promise here. On the awful bleak expanse of the merciless ocean, as it heaves up in the storm, has the departing traveller fully escaped the horror that he says gripped him when he first beheld his destination?

- Malcolm Wren

I am honored to share in the performance of this work by one of my best friends and colleagues, Reed Ulery. Reed and I have grown as musicians, scholars, and friends during our time together at Ball State, and Schubert's beautiful setting of Rellstab's stirring text with romantic horn and piano is a perfect choice to share in making music together.



III. On Wenlock Edge Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Ralph Vaughan Williams's repertoire has always held a special place in my heart. Vaughan Williams's art song repertoire is led by his historic cycle, *Songs of Travel*. I was very fortunate to perform the *Songs of Travel* with fellow Ball State student, Jiaqi Jin, on one of her Doctoral recitals last year. I was also very fortunate to join oboist Madeline Flight in a performance of selections from Vaughan Williams's *Ten Blake Songs* with the Ball State oboe studio in 2025. Upon recognizing how Vaughan Williams's art song repertoire has always remained an influence through my time at Ball State, it was clear to program his "herculean" cycle for tenor, *On Wenlock Edge*

Written following Vaughan Williams's study with Maurice Ravel, *On Wenlock Edge* features some of Vaughan Williams's most modal music. Vaughan Williams's experience as an enlistee in the first World War is also a vital factor in his writing of *On Wenlock Edge*. Set to selected poetry from *A Shropshire Lad* by A.E. Housman, there is no through-line plot to the cycle, rather a general emotional feeling portrayed by the protagonist. Housman's collection of poetry was widely used in World War 1 literature and art, though it was written decades prior. The poetry collection saw a rise in recognition during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), but has been adopted as literature reflecting upon British conflict in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, with the notable important conflict being World War I.

The song cycle follows a young soldier, recognizing and considering many monumental moments in life. The first movement, "On Wenlock Edge," portrays his realization that though the beautiful, serene landscape he is now observing seems new and tranquil to him, it has been the site of much bloodshed, conflict, and loss of previous life. As a soldier, it is a very sobering moment for our protagonist; although our world may see indescribable violent and acts of war, it will continue to grow past it to promote beauty and stillness.

"From far, from Eve and Morning" seems to be a fairly "face-value" art song when first heard. The beautiful arpeggiated piano chords welcome you into a mood of serenity, but the poetry tells a contrasting story. Our protagonist has now realized his life, actions, and death carry no guaranteed impact on the future, so he begins to accept his own decay. When he proclaims, "Speak now, how shall I help you?," it is a plea for how his action can leave him feeling satisfied. One may project the young Vaughan Williams into our protagonist's position in this movement. Imagine a young Vaughan Williams – following his enlistment in the Royal Army Medical Corps – tending to the care of an afflicted soldier. Upon seeing how fleeting life can be in war, our protagonist realizes how cherished he must treat his life.

The poem "Is My Team Ploughing?" has been set numerous times, but most famously by Vaughan-Williams and George Butterworth (1885-1916). This poem is haunting and stunning; it portrays our protagonist in service, away at war. The poem follows a back-and-forth conversation of letters between our protagonist and his "good friend" back home. Through the piece, the letters have gone from innocent questions of how his land is being tended and football being played to the realization his friend is seducing his wife and is eventually going to assume the life he once had. Through the letters, the 'friend' admits his wife "lies easy," and "she cheers a dead man's sweetheart," implying our protagonist has been killed in combat.

In composition, the fourth movement, "Oh, when I was in love with you," seems to be the most out of place due to the drastic cheerful and textural change when compared to the rest of the cycle. This seemingly harmless piece is a jovial and youthful recount of our protagonist's past love. The music further promotes the young man as a chipper and lighthearted man, looking forward to the life he will share with his love; he speaks on how he will keep himself cleanly shaven and brave.

I will confidently propose that "Bredon Hill" is not only one of the most incredible works in this cycle, but perhaps in all of Vaughan Williams's vocal literature. This eight-minute composition is a masterclass of a composer's ability to truly tell a holistic story through one piece, going from fond recollection, to conflict, to anger in such a clear way. Vaughan Williams's setting of Housman's text in this movement is superb. There are two interpretations of the poetry being sung, and I would ask of you: what story do you feel is being portrayed? The first follows our protagonist remembering the summer days with his wife, watching church commence and hearing the birds chirp and bells chime.



Upon Winter's arrival, it is apparent something has changed. Our protagonist recognizes that his wife rising to church alone, implying he has died. He observes her collecting herself and begins off to church alone to attend the protagonist's own funeral. At the climax of the piece the protagonist exclaims: "Oh noisy bells be dumb, I hear you, I will come!". This is our protagonist finally surrendering to his death, and his final goodbye to the hills of Bredon and the steeples far and near. The other interpretation of the poem starts the same but upon the bitterness of winter, the wife dies. The rest of the piece then follows a mourning widower as he tries to return to the land he once cherished without his best friend at his side.

The sixth and final movement of *On Wenlock Edge*, "Clun," has always been unique to me. Upon my first many listens of the cycle, it seems "Bredon Hill" would be a perfect ending, but upon my study, "Clun" truly concludes our protagonist's story. The poetry reflects on the quiet, unchanging nature of the English countryside, using the river Clun as a metaphor of constant human relentlessness amidst the trials of conflict and morality. It returns the protagonist and audience to the place where we began the cycle, admiring the English landscape and contemplating the importance of life, both past and present.

IV. Settings of American Hymn Tunes

I often tell people that I have no musical journey without my journey of faith and church music. My experience as cantor, choral singer, worship leader, director, substitute musician, and many more made the decision to include a set of American hymn tunes on this recital very easy. In this set, I have selected three traditional American hymn song settings from three of the more prominent American hymn traditions.

The first selection of this set, "Wayfaring Stranger," comes from the shape note hymn tradition. I have been incredibly fortunate to sing shape note repertoire with some of the most notable shape note singers in the country, and it is a repertoire that I am impassioned to study and perform. Shape note

is a very literal name for the compositional style. As seen in the image to the right, each note head corresponds to its own solfege scale degree of a four-note scale (Fa-Sol-La-Mi). In short, the triangle is Fa, circle is Sol, square is La, and the rhombus is Mi. The compositional style came to prevalence in Colonial America when church musicians recognized the music in American churches was more rustic than righteous. This form of writing allowed for a barrier of music literacy to be lifted. By having your congregation join in simpler, triadic music with more accessible notation, the worship offered was more unified. William Billings is the most notable composer from this repertoire, being a key figure in its composition, education, and advocacy in its early days. Shape note is still alive and well in America. Often singers will attend "singings," which are events where dozens or hundreds of shape note singers will convene to share in song and a meal. I attend shape note "singings" across the Midwest and am very fortunate to be a member of this cherished community.

The next selection in this set, "Steal Away," is from the African American Spiritual tradition. The text calls for one to "Steal Away to Jesus," and answer to his calling. This met with the gorgeous, triadic melodic contour makes it one my favorite hymn tunes that have come from this tradition. H. T. Burleigh (1866-1949) was a stalwart composer and ambassador for Spiritual repertoire, having set the folk melodies in a more "classical" format. This brought a new sense of pride in the repertoire as a genre and has solidified it as a crucial genre in the American folk landscape.

The final selection on this program is perhaps my favorite tune featured in this set. "Shall We Gather By The River," or "Shall We Gather" has always been one of my most cherished hymn tunes. With text draws upon imagery of envisioning a gathering of followers by the "beautiful, beautiful river" that flows from the throne of God. Its gently lilting melody and repetitive refrain invite communal singing, reinforcing themes of hope, reunion, and eternal rest.

To learn more about the artists heard on this program, visit the QR-Code below!

