

## PROGRAM NOTES

### **The First Flight**

*The First Flight* is a collection of six expanded art songs. The phrase “expanded art song” is somewhat confusing though, and it requires elaboration from the composer. First, what are art songs? To me, they are the marriage of poetry and music, and each one embodies the composer’s interpretation of the poem at hand. Second, what is being expanded? In this case, the expansion lies in the instrumentation, the number of vocalists, and the use of extended techniques.

The instrumentation of the traditional art song is formulaic; there is one singer who is accompanied by the piano. I find this limiting—there are many ways to set poetry to music, and I believe that all of those ways deserve the “art song” designation. In this recital, you will hear not only the piano and voice but also the violin, cello, flute, and even some electronics. I also think that involving several vocalists enhances the art song. In this way, composers can more clearly paint the different characters or themes of a single poem. Lastly, extended techniques are used as a means of text-painting. Though text painting can be achieved by ordinary techniques alone, extended techniques allow key words to be even more accentuated. On another note, extended techniques also allow both the composer and the performer to grow in their musicality and delve into new music.

Art songs transcend time: they combine works from past poets, current composers, and future students of music. Because of this, art songs spark dialogue between people who would otherwise be inaccessible to each other. Art songs are also able to tell elaborate stories. In my case, I have composed and ordered my pieces to evoke my story of becoming the pursuer of music that I am today. Each poem represents a different part of my yet young life, and the subsequent notes elaborate on what I hope each piece achieves. With that, I thank you for your attendance and interest in *The First Flight*.

### **On the Beach at Night Alone**

The recital starts with a piece that bridges versions of myself that are four years apart. When I was a high school junior, my English class required students to write a research paper on a prominent literary figure. After perusing the works of many poets, I selected Walt Whitman (1819–1892). He drew me in with his gentle imagery and his assertion of the soul. *On the Beach at Night Alone* in particular piqued my interest with an idea I like to call “everythingness”—that every aspect of the world, no matter how contrasting in nature, is ultimately similar just by existing in the same time and space.

To illustrate this dichotomy, I chose to integrate 12-tone techniques into the music. The word that occurs most often in the poem is “all,” and using 12-tone techniques requires me to include all the pitch classes available on the piano. I chose to compose with a row used by Webern in his *Variations for piano, op.27*. This choice has three reasons: 1) the body of the poem is similar to the structure of theme and variations, 2) Webern is the first composer I encountered in my 12-tone studies, and 3) this row is one of four that is all-combinatorial, further emphasizing the poem’s tone of “everythingness.”

Lastly, you may hear a familiar motive throughout the piece. These notes are an allusion to Chopin’s Nocturne op. 9 no. 3 in E b major, which I chose for the similarities between Chopin and Whitman. Both of their works use the night as a prominent symbol. Also, both of them took great inspiration from French culture despite not having French ancestry themselves. The allusions to Chopin accomplish an overarching goal for my honors project, that of

connecting the past, present, and future. They connect the original motive of the past composer, the sounding of it by musicians in the present, and the ever-applicable insight that Whitman has of the future.

### ***Mayakovsky***

In the spring semester of 2019, the first assignment of my music composition seminar was to write a proposal of a piece to create throughout the semester. One of the goals I listed in this proposal was to experiment with different instrumentations. Up until then, the vocal pieces I wrote were exclusively for solo voice. *Mayakovsky*, which uses poetry by Frank O'Hara, is my first expansion to several vocalists. It was a necessary step for me to gain the confidence to write for bigger vocal ensembles in the future.

The instrumentation consists of a cello, piano, and SATB quartet. In certain passages, some instruments inhabit a character or theme of the poem. We can observe this in the first movement, which starts with a prelude played by the piano and cello. Though the initial sound is quite consonant, the two instruments soon fall into an "argument" between using a major scale and using a Lydian one. This represents the identity conflict that is conveyed by the speaker in the first section of the poem. By having the cello and piano lean toward different qualities of the fourth scale degree, the music illustrates the speaker's cry for help: "Mother, mother who am I?"

Furthermore, *Mayakovsky* represents my own identity conflict, which started towards the end of my junior year of high school. Being a part of the LGBTQ+ community does not come easy for me; it can be a source of inner turmoil, which the poem so well portrays. However, queerness can also be a catalyst for hope. The poem portrays this equally well, for in its fourth section, the speaker comes to terms with the good and the bad, and he even acknowledges a future of being self-sufficient. Ultimately, this piece aims to do justice by O'Hara and his poem, which, at its core, is a depiction of persecution based on love.

### ***Harlem***

Art songs are the name of the game in this recital, and "Harlem" was my first composition to use a text that I had not written myself. What inspired my choosing of this Langston Hughes poem was the class, Black Music. The professor gave an overview of the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic movement which to me epitomized perseverance. During this era, black composers were tasked with proving their mastery of Western music before being taken seriously in their own musical. This theme of perseverance is apparent in the poem as well, which is why it is a source of creative inspiration for me.

"Harlem" made me see the joy of composing art songs, particularly at Emory. This was the first time that I consulted with the performer during the creation of the piece! It was a much more holistic experience than only giving them the finished product. Working in this way allows performers to tell me what works well for them and what needs tweaking. It is invaluable to have their opinion in the earlier stages of composing the piece.

Though I am a budding musician, text painting has already found a permanent place in my composing style. I use this technique in *Harlem* with varying degrees of subtlety. One obvious instance of text painting happens when the alto sings, "Maybe it just sags like a heavy load." The vocal part has a wide melodic descent across these two lines, with the lowest notes sounding on the words "heavy load." On the other hand, some of the text-painting is subtle, as with the lines "Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?"

Here, I paint the contrasting sensations with clashing sonorities. Whereas the melody of “rotten meat” contains minor thirds, the melody of “crust and sugar” switches to major thirds. The semitone difference is small yet effective since it evokes the bigger parallel major/minor keys.

This piece gave me many first experiences and holds a special place in my heart.

### ***On a Pink Moon***

Finding ways to expand the art song genre was a difficult endeavor, but I found inspiration in two of my classes helped me do just that. The first class that gave rise to this piece was an introduction to poetry. In this class, I did a presentation on Ada Limón’s poetry collection, *The Carrying*, which contains *On a Pink Moon*. Incorporating the poetry of a Mexican-American woman like Limón in this recital expands not only the art song but also the world of music, for this world, like many others, is largely occupied by white men. The second class that gave rise to this piece was an introduction to MIDI Composition. This class helped me expand the art song because it gave me tools to dive into electronic music, specifically *musique concrète* (recorded sound) and synthesizers.

This is the only piece on the recital that does not call for singers, for the vocals are not sung but instead spoken, mostly in the stereo electronics. This drastic difference in instrumentation as compared to all the previous pieces is a transition that parallels the theme of the poem. The text of “On a Pink Moon” talks about finally taking accountability for one’s anger and the growth that comes afterward—a transition into maturity.

I have two majors: music composition and mathematics. I think that the two subjects intertwine quite a bit, so I composed this piece in a very numerical way. For example, the piece is 10 minutes long because the poem appears on page 10 of the collection. Also, I write the flute part so that it starts off using a wide range of the available pitches. Once the poem starts talking about the three seeds, however, I limit the flute to three pitches. This limitation highlights not only the numbers in the text but also the sense of control that the speaker gains.

### ***Still***

This piece hits close to home, literally. Of the five poets besides myself featured in this recital, Jordyn King is the only one who I personally know. I met them while they were studying creative writing at Emory, and they continue to perform their poetry in greater Atlanta today.

*Still* is symbolism-heavy, especially in regard to the flute and violin, which play during the electronic prelude. Their parts introduce several motifs that reappear in the piano melodies in the interlude. This symbolizes the repetitive nature of the poem, which contains five uses of the word “still.” Another example of symbolism lies in the fact that the flute and violin parts are partially improvised. The poem was similarly made on the spot: though the main ideas were created ahead of time, the words only took 15 minutes to put on paper. Most importantly, the flute and violin symbolize King’s diagnosis of mania, which gives rise to the theme of the poem. King describes their mania as an overstimulating force that makes them desire for everything to stop moving. The flute and violin parts refuse to do that and instead play alongside an already complex prelude. If you feel like there is “too much going on,” the prelude is successful.

Though the prelude includes King’s recitation of the poem, the vocals there can be considered part of the overstimulation. Contrastingly, the interlude separates the vocals from the overstimulation, which now resides exclusively in the piano. If you listen carefully, you may notice that the vocal part is almost never rhythmically faster than the piano. In other words, the

vocal part is almost always more still than its accompaniment, just as the speaker of the poem yearns for more stillness than their environment provides.

The electronic postlude finally reflects the stillness that has been alluded throughout the piece. It is analogous to the conclusion paragraph of an essay, for it reiterates motifs not only from the recent prelude and interlude but also from all of the previous pieces. The instrumentation here is exclusively electronic, which gives a nice contrast to and increases the effectiveness of the forthcoming *epilogue*.

### ***epilogue***

The recital closes with a piece based on a sonnet I wrote. In the same class for which I did a project on Ada Limón, I wrote the first draft of this poem. It was very different from what it is today, with each line containing a complete clause or sentence. The current version breaks up these sentences into several lines, undermining the pauses that usually come after each line and emphasizing those at the punctuation marks. Both types of pauses translate into the music. For example, there is a full measure rest after the first sentence finishes with the word, “forward.” In contrast, the pauses after the two preceding lines come in the form of elongations of the last words, “go” and “clock.”

Another translation of the poem into the music comes at the *volta*, or the turn of thought that is characteristic of sonnets. In my sonnet, this happens at the start of the ninth line. What happens in the music is a reiteration of the melody of the first line, this time in a different key. This highlights the fact that the speaker goes through a transformation in the poem but is still the same individual.

With “epilogue,” I hope to create a propensity to keep going, even with everything else that is happening. Though the text is inspired by the transition I am making as I finish my time at Emory, it is general enough to apply to all of the transitions that life offers. Transitions can make one feel lonely, but, as the larger number of singers in this piece represents, we are not alone. If you are going through a transition in your life, I hope that this piece resonates with you. Push on!

## TEXTS

### ***On the Beach at Night Alone***

Walt Whitman

On the beach at night alone,  
As the old mother sways her to and fro singing her husky song,  
As I watch the bright stars shining, I think a thought of the clef of the universes and of the future.

A vast similitude interlocks all,  
All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets,  
All distances of place however wide,  
All distances of time, all inanimate forms,  
All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different, or in different worlds,  
All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the brutes,  
All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,  
All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe, or any globe,  
All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future,  
This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann'd,  
And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them.

***On a Pink Moon***

Ada Limón

I take out my anger  
And lay its shadow

On the stone I rolled  
Over what broke me.

I plant three seeds  
As a spell. One

For what will grow  
Like air around us.

One for what will  
Nourish and feed.

One for what will  
Cling and remind me—

We are the weeds.

From *The Carrying* by Ada Limón. (Copyright 2018 Ada Limón). Used with permission from Milkweed Editions.

***Still***

Jordyn King

I long for the day when all is in silence,  
When the birds open their beaks to sing  
and nothing comes out at all.

I want to witness the day when everything  
is finally still.

There is still, i think, beauty  
in stillness; in non-motion; in the end.

It is morbid beauty but it's special because of it:  
supposedly beauty is marked by its fragility and brevity,  
all things are beautiful that easily fade.

But when all is still and when all is quiet,  
I think, then, we will know that things  
can be still

beautiful

because some things can last forever

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***epilogue***

dom refuerzo

here is the farthest i let myself go  
and travels advised me to set the clock

forward. Thousands gather and learn to walk  
throughout this place wherein the passion grows.  
i enter blank slated. they do not know  
me. i do not know them. and then we talk  
of hopes in common, of whimsical shock—  
the sole prerequisite: the first hello.  
but soon i will exit with all the hues  
i gained by existing here. recent years  
challenge the aggregate of what i knew.  
the thought of home is now a bit unclear.  
the parting reproval and gratitude  
alike are unfading. i hold them dear.

### **THANKS**

dom refuerzo would like to thank Professors John Ammerman, Emily Banks, Dustin Cicero, Bradley Howard, and Drs. Dwight Andrews and Adam Mirza for their tutelage and guidance which directly influenced this recital; poets Langston Hughes, Jordyn King, Ada Limón, Frank O'Hara, and Walt Whitman for their eloquence and grace; performers Aliyah Auerbach, Sophia Bereaud, Sara Grace Carmical, Connor Cochran, Chris Fenger, Jess Ferguson, Samuel Hulsey, Joseph Kim, Erika Tazawa, Fred Thompson, Marie Thompson, Ben Wang, and Hyerin Yoon for their collaboration and talent; friends Naomi Keusch Baker, Harrison Bloom, Tulasi Kadiyala, Bex Kihara, Creighton King, Jordyn King, Debra Leach, Ada Limón, Adam McKeehan, Drew Mindell, Kaia Valentine, and Lydia Valentine for their hospitality in making recordings for the electronic sections of the music; Matthew Chau for his kindness in providing accompaniment at weekly rehearsals; the Emory College Center for Creativity & Arts, Emory Friends of Music, and Leah and Lydia Smith for their generosity in providing financial support for this recital; and all of their loved ones for their continued support and warmth.