

# **Composition Portfolio Commentary**

'Vocal composition from a singer's point of view'

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## **Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	p. 2
<b>Introduction, Summary and Context</b> .....	p. 3
<b>List of Musical Examples and Charts</b> .....	p. 5
<b>Chapter 1: Style and influences</b> .....	p. 10
<b>Chapter 2: The Voice and Vocal Writing from a technical point of view</b> .....	p. 15
<b>Chapter 3: Subject matter, text and choice of authors</b> .....	p. 40
<b>Chapter 4: Art Song</b>	
• Text setting and narrative.....	p. 46
• Motivic material.....	p. 54
• Voice and Accompaniment.....	p. 66
<b>Chapter 5: Unaccompanied Vocal Music</b> .....	p. 76
<b>Chapter 6: Musical drama</b> .....	p. 91
<b>Evaluation</b> .....	p. 110
<b>Appendix 1: The International Phonetic Alphabet Chart</b> .....	p. 114
<b>Appendix 2: List of compositions in the portfolio</b> .....	p. 115
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	p. 117
<b>Referenced scores</b> .....	p. 120

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This work is dedicated to the memory of my Grandad, Peter Bray, who always loved to learn.

## Introduction

This portfolio of vocal composition explores my approach to writing from a performer's point of view. I am a professional singer and I am aware how much my knowledge of vocal production and technique both affects and enhances the way I write vocal music. It is also true that this vocal awareness influences the treatment of accompaniment for the voice; how and when to support and enhance the voice, and breathe with the voice, as well as my composition approach to writing for the unaccompanied voice.

The purpose of this commentary is to explore, highlight and illustrate my portfolio of vocal music. The knowledge and techniques behind the composition process and construction are discussed, in context, in relation to compositional style, influences and practical issues such as text setting and sound output through the vocal range. Knowledge and understanding of my compositional voice in the current musical climate is also acknowledged.

## Summary

This PhD spans a significant journey of my development as a composer of vocal music, and explores how my approach to vocal writing has evolved. My own technical knowledge of the voice, as a professional singer, and the nature of performance, combined with compositional knowledge, has allowed for a refined quality of vocal composition that works intrinsically for the voice.

The trajectory of this commentary follows three main categories of vocal composition; art song, including the role of the accompaniment and support for the voice; unaccompanied vocal writing; and lastly musical drama. In Chapter 1, I discuss my stylistic approach, influential composers and how my knowledge and background as a singer has moulded my vocal writing. Chapter 2 highlights key factors of vocal writing: vocal mechanics, sound output, voice type, range, *Fach* and tessitura and their affect on vocal colour, weight and resonance.

The focus of Chapter 3 is text in song; discussing subject matter and the authors I have chosen to set. Chapter 4 then explores the topic of art song; beginning with a discussion on text setting and narrative, followed by key concepts of motivic material and the role of accompaniment.

Chapter 5 outlines my approaches towards unaccompanied vocal music and the use of extended vocal techniques. Text fragmentation is also a key feature here in discussing the exploration of phonics as opposed to story narrative.

Lastly, in Chapter 6, I have outlined my approaches to musical drama and the use of the voice in the theatrical setting. Extremes of vocal production and the added element of staging and characterisation heighten the level of physicality that is beyond the standard performance realm of art song, thus necessitating different requirements from the composer.

### **Context**

My aim has been to bridge the gap between the composer and the performer, particularly in respect to the specific requirements of a classical singer. As a performer of new vocal music, I have a great deal of first-hand experience with a number of current composers who are unaware of fundamental elements of vocal tessitura, natural vowel modulation throughout vocal registers and the intricacies of different fachs (the classification within voice types according to range, weight and colour of the individual voice). Unless one is writing generic vocal music that either does not strive to break any boundaries for a particular voice or can be easily transposed up or down without changing the sound, an advanced understanding of how pitches sit in the voice and vary through delivery of text should be essential for a composer. Writing for specific voice types and fachs, versus the general voice, is thus an important consideration for composers when writing vocal music.

## List of Musical Examples and Charts

### Musical Examples

#### Chapter 1

- Ex. 1. 'Fain would I change that note' bars 1-9, *Anon in Love*, Walton  
Ex. 1.1. 'O stay, sweet love' bars 1-8, *Anon in Love*, Walton

#### Chapter 2

- Ex. 2. 'faci ferali' from Giulietta's aria 'Oh! Quante Volte', from *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, Bellini  
Ex. 2.1. Final bars of 'Arrière! Je réchauffe les bons' from *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, Ravel  
Ex.2.2. Swan's aria, bars 1192-1194, from *Swanhunter*, Dove  
Ex. 2.3. Cadenza in 'Les oiseaux dans la charmille', from *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Offenbach  
Ex. 2.4. Cadenza in 'Pale et blonde', Ophélie's mad scene, from *Hamlet*, Thomas  
Ex. 2.5. 'Lady, when I behold the roses sprouting', bars 1-5, from *Anon in Love*, Walton  
Ex. 2.6. 'Lady, when I behold the roses sprouting', bar 8, from *Anon in Love*, Walton  
Ex. 2.7. 'Lady, when I behold the roses sprouting', bar 11, from *Anon in Love*, Walton  
Ex. 2.8. Opening vocal line of *King Harald's Saga*, Act 1, Weir  
Ex. 2.9. 'French Fancy', bars 56-57, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*  
Ex. 2.10. 'Le Feu', bars 21-25, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*  
Ex. 2.11. 'French Fancy', bars 60-65, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*  
Ex. 2.12. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 52-58  
Ex. 2.13. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 65-70  
Ex. 2.14. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 59-65, from *Three Sensual Songs*  
Ex. 2.15. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 83-84, from *Three Sensual Songs*  
Ex. 2.16. 'Come scoglio', bars 40-44, from *Così fan tutte*, Mozart  
Ex. 2.17. 'Song for a Lady', bars 49-52, from *Three Sensual Songs*  
Ex. 2.18. 'Nocturne', bars 42-43, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*  
Ex. 2.19. 'An Engaged Woman', bars 40-42, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*  
Ex. 2.20. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 37-40, soprano  
Ex. 2.21. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 63-65, SATB  
Ex. 2.22. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 104-106, soprano and alto

#### Chapter 4

- Ex. 4. 'Le Retour', bars 7-9, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*  
Ex.4.1. 'Le Retour', bars 37-38, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

- Ex. 4.2. 'Le Retour', bars 17-18, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.3. 'Le Retour', bars 24-25, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.4. 'Le Retour', bars 9-11, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.5. 'Nocturne', bar 8, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.6. 'Nocturne', bar 13, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.7. 'Nocturne', bar 22, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.8. 'Nocturne', bar 11, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.9. 'Nocturne', bar 19, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.10. 'Nocturne', bar 46-49, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.11. 'An engaged woman, bars 3-4, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*
- Ex. 4.12. 'An engaged woman, bars 19-20, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*

Chapter 4a

- Ex. 4.13. *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*, bars 1-4, Tippett
- Ex. 4.14. *In Sultry Sun*, bars 5-13
- Ex. 4.15. *In Sultry Sun*, bars 19-27
- Ex. 4.16. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 22-24 from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.17. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 39-40, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.18. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 60-62, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.19. 'Le Ravin', bars 1-2, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.20. *The Applicant*, bars 18-24
- Ex. 4.21. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 67-72, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.22. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 84-87, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.23. 'Us', bars 67-70, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.24. 'I am the wife of Mao Tse Tung' from *Nixon in China*, bars 914-919, Adams
- Ex. 4.25. 'Lady, when I behold the roses', bars 5-7, from *Anon in Love*, Walton
- Ex. 4.26. 'Lady, when I behold the roses', bars 12-13, from *Anon in Love*, Walton
- Ex. 4.27. 'Lady, when I behold the roses', bars 17-18, from *Anon in Love*
- Ex. 4.28. 'Lady, when I behold the roses', bars 21-22, from *Anon in Love*

- Ex. 4.29 *In Sultry Sun*, bars 13-18
- Ex. 4.30. *In Sultry Sun*, bars 27-30
- Ex. 4.31. 'Us', bars 22-24, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.32. 'Us', bars 70-74, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.33. 'Us', bars 75-79, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.34. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 6-7
- Ex. 4.35. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 18-21
- Ex. 4.36. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 22-26
- Ex. 4.37. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 46-50
- Ex. 4.38. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 9-13
- Ex. 4.39. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 28-29
- Ex. 4.40. 'Nocturne', bars 40-43, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

Chapter 4b

- Ex. 4.41 *The Applicant*, bars 13-17
- Ex. 4.42. 'Of a Ministry', bars 1-4, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*
- Ex. 4.43. 'Of a Ministry', bars 9-13, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*
- Ex. 4.44. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 21-25, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.45. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 57-62, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.46. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 31-35, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.47. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 67-70, from *Three Sensual Songs*
- Ex. 4.48. 'Nocturne', bars 5-9, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.49. 'Nocturne', bars 16-18, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.50. 'Le Feu', bars 1-4, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.51. 'Le Feu', bars 17-19, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.52. 'Le Feu', bars 23-27, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*



- Ex. 4.53. 'Le Ravin', bars 1-4, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.54. 'Le Ravin', bars 10-12, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*
- Ex. 4.55. 'Le Ravin', bars 24-25, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

## Chapter 5

- Ex. 5 Opening two lines of *King Harald's Saga*, Act 1, Weir
- Ex. 5.1. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 1-5
- Ex. 5.2. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 12-15
- Ex. 5.3. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 14-26, SATB
- Ex. 5.4. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 49-53, SATB
- Ex. 5.5. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 16-26, SATB
- Ex. 5.6. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 86-89
- Ex. 5.7. 'Cupcake', bars 4-7, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*
- Ex. 5.8. 'Battenberg Bourbon', bars 32-36, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*
- Ex. 5.9. 'French Fancy', bars 61-64, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*
- Ex. 5.10. 'Wagon Wheels', bars 108-109, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*
- Ex. 5.11. 'At the Savoy', bar 38, from *Cycle of Senior Moments*
- Ex. 5.12. 'At the Savoy', bar 49, from *Cycle of Senior Moments*
- Ex. 5.13. 'At the Savoy', bars 22-23, from *Cycle of Senior Moments*
- Ex. 5.14. 'Take me to Tony's', bars 31-32, from *Cycle of Senior Moments*

## Chapter 6

- Ex. 6. *Long Lankin*, bars 1-9
- Ex. 6.1. *Long Lankin*, bars 287-290
- Ex. 6.2. *Long Lankin*, bars 148-156
- Ex. 6.3. *Long Lankin*, bars 102-107
- Ex. 6.4. *Long Lankin*, bars 213-214
- Ex. 6.5. *Long Lankin*, bars 108-114
- Ex. 6.6. *Long Lankin*, bars 33-35

- Ex. 6.7. *Long Lankin*, bars 83-85
- Ex. 6.8. *Long Lankin*, bars 278-280
- Ex. 6.9. *Long Lankin*, bars 13-15
- Ex. 6.10. *Long Lankin*, bars 179-181
- Ex. 6.11. *Long Lankin*, bars 114-118
- Ex. 6.12. *Long Lankin*, bars 208-209
- Ex. 6.13. *Long Lankin*, bars 74-76
- Ex. 6.14. *Long Lankin*, bars 174-178
- Ex. 6.15. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 9-10
- Ex. 6.16. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 346-347
- Ex. 6.17. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 202-207
- Ex. 6.18. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 232-235
- Ex. 6.19. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 251-256
- Ex. 6.20. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 195-99
- Ex. 6.21. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 272-274

## Charts

- Chapter 2 Fig.1. Voice ranges and registers, The Schiller Institute  
 Fig 2. List of *Fach* types in order of range
- Chapter 3 Fig. 3. Chosen texts and subject matter for the vocal compositions in my portfolio
- Chapter 6 Fig. 4. 'Asking music' in *A Bed for the Night*  
 Fig. 5. 'Character responses' rejecting the travellers

## Chapter 1: Style and Influences

### Style

My compositional goal is to achieve a simple yet sophisticated language, which is written for the technically-trained classical singer. I consider this approach to be similar to that used by a number of British composers, including Benjamin Britten, William Walton and Jonathan Dove, who show a clear understanding of vocal tessitura and how to write sympathetically for the voice.

As a singer, I identify with an important space in the contemporary music world for vocal music that is primarily tonal and 'singable'. New vocal music which features excessive pointillism can pose practical issues in performance, and even though there is room for fragmented texturing, in vocal music I generally use this as a passing effect rather than a general style.

I also recognise that vocal music with a sense of linear shaping appeals to my ear and musicality. Particularly in terms of art song and musical drama, I find that composers who have a lyrical style of writing allow the vocal mechanism to work to its optimum, which is satisfying to sing from a technical perspective.

I use a consistent methodology when composing art songs and musical drama, beginning with the vocal line and using the narrative to steer the setting of the text. This allows me to explore the shaping of the line through vocal colour and placement of the text in the voice.

In my unaccompanied vocal writing, the text is very often fragmented. The sense of freedom that I find with the unaccompanied voice encourages a playful style in my writing, and the phonics extracted from the texts are largely explored through extended techniques.

### Influences

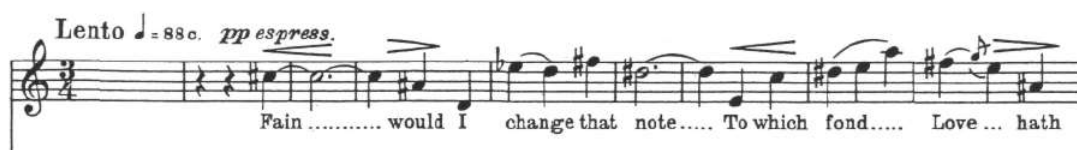
Through the course of my PhD studies, I have become more aware of the influences on my

work and the approaches I have taken. I have analysed how certain composers' vocal writing is innately sympathetic to the voice, and used this understanding in my own writing.

Sir William Walton (1902-1983) produced a set of cycles and individual pieces that he collectively titled *A Song Album*<sup>1</sup>, a compilation that intrinsically represented his vocal writing. As a singer, I have performed many of Walton's songs and have found these to demonstrate sympathetic vocal writing through an understanding of vocal mechanics, a considerate approach to vocal register and a strong grasp of how breath and tessitura affect sound production.

Walton's idiomatically sensitive approach to the voice strongly influences my vocal writing. His song cycle *Anon in Love* (1960), is a prime example of his text setting, accompaniment writing and vocal journey<sup>2</sup>, which speaks highly to me as a singer. *Anon in Love*, originally set to guitar accompaniment, was later adapted for voice and piano, which I will discuss later in the commentary. Walton's vocal lines are particularly effective in terms of voice colour, navigation of tessitura and manipulation of pacing.

The one anomaly to this effective vocal writing is the first song in *Anon in Love* 'Fain would I change that note', a play on words where the singer must undertake a series of difficult vocal leaps.



Ex. 1. 'Fain would I change that note' bars 1-9, *Anon in Love*, Walton

Compare this leaping vocal line to the opening of the next song in the cycle 'O stay, sweet love'; Walton's more characteristically smoother vocal journey, in a largely stepwise motion, allows for a more seamless flow for the singer:

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<sup>1</sup> *A Song Album* includes cycles *A Song for the Lord Mayor's Table*, *Three Songs*, *Anon in Love*, and individual songs, Oxford University Press, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Vocal journey refers to not only the pacing of singing through a piece but also how each phrase leads into the next.



Ex. 1.1. 'O stay, sweet love' bars 1-8, *Anon in Love*, Walton

Another composer I have long admired is Sir Michael Tippett (1905-1998), whose orchestral works are amongst my favourite music. Both Tippett and Walton's use of thematic transformation and harmonic language greatly appeal to me. I find, however, Tippett's approach to vocal writing to be very instrumental, especially where the voice is required to move through large intervals that feel much less organic to sing than Walton's writing. Stylistic preference does not always equate to technical discernment where vocal composition is concerned and, in terms of melody, 'Tippett perhaps lacks a melodic gift of Puccinian proportions'<sup>3</sup>, as William Schoell asserts.

It is important to note here that effective vocal writing does not necessarily rely on a clear and lyrical vocal line. Vocal writing with a less traditionally melodic approach is achieved by a number of other twentieth century composers.

The extended vocal techniques used by Luciano Berio (1925-2003) and Georges Aperghis' (b.1945) unaccompanied vocal repertoire tend to sit more naturally in the voice than Tippett. These composers, and the work of specialist singers such as Jane Manning (1938-2021) in pushing vocal boundaries have been of great influence to my unaccompanied vocal writing, in finding an expanse and freedom that an accompaniment often limits.

Although the focus of my discussion is contemporary composers, I have been deeply

<sup>3</sup> William Schoell, *The Opera of the Twentieth Century: A Passionate Art in Transition* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2006), p. 243.

influenced by Handel, Mozart and composers of the *bel canto*<sup>4</sup> style, who provide singers of every level with core repertoire to this day. The vocal writing in the operatic repertoire of Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) has steered my own appreciation for phrase shaping and vocal delicacy.

In the same manner as the visual arts, *bel canto* singing is intended to be thought-provoking, sensual and emotionally heightened. I admire the Italian sculpture Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) who stirs energy and passion through his figures, while painters Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) and Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) work skilfully with vivid colour and depict the female form and visage with great delicacy. Sensuality, particularly female sensuality, is a strong subject matter in my portfolio, principally in relation to the vocal compositions *Three Sensual Songs* and *Come slowly, Eden*.

In addition to female subject matter in art, I have been largely influenced by a number of female poets. Jane Austen (1775-1817), Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Anne Sexton (1928-1974) all possess an eloquent, yet varied, writing style. Choice of text is equally as important as delivery of that text, the expression of which supports artistic intention and my identity as a female composer and singer.

I have also been inspired by the idea of childlike worlds in my two chamber operas. Of particular influence have been Maurice Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* and Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* which have shaped my approach toward narrative choice.

I believe that an important aspect of vocal writing is an inside knowledge of the instrument – vocal production is, after all, based on sensation. As a result of my research, and my experience as a singer, my understanding of different voice types has become more integrated, particularly in terms of vocal sweet spots and sound production.

With this information, one can write in the most effective way for any given voice type. For

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<sup>4</sup> *Bel canto* – 'the Italian vocal technique of the 18th century, with its emphasis on beauty of sound and brilliancy of performance rather than dramatic expression or romantic emotion.' (Harvard Dictionary of Music – Will Apel)

example, a light coloratura voice is able to move swiftly through the lines with particular versatility in the top register and a sympathetic accompaniment in the lower register, where this voice type is less strong. Specifying voice type in song versus unspecified 'solo voice' is a topic I shall discuss further in the commentary in relation to transposition of songs.

### Conclusion

I believe that my vocal compositions show an innate understanding of not just the ranges and weights of the voices, but the internal workings of the varying vocal types. I also believe that a simple but sophisticated and individual style will achieve the best results in promoting the intrinsic colour and sound of the human voice.

William Walton has been the leading influence in my approach to vocal composition, particularly in text setting, melodic contouring and the relationship between the voice and the accompaniment. Walton's appreciation of registrational colours and a *bel canto* style vocal beauty is paramount in his delivery of vocal expressivity and communication; a culmination that I have endeavoured to aim for.

As a female composer I have sought to give musical life to the words of female authors in a bid to expand the expressive prerogative of female creatives. My featured female authors (Jane Austen, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton) are all powerful communicators in their own right and my aim within the composition portfolio has been to enhance the expressive identity of each of these authors individually.

## Chapter 2: The Voice and Vocal writing from a technical point of view

### The Voice as an instrument: communication through singing

‘Of all performance arts, the art of singing is the most complex. Its preparation and its practices are fraught with controversy. Tonal ideas vary. Techniques for producing those ideals abound. A survey of viewpoints found within the vocal pedagogy literature bewilders.’<sup>1</sup> John Potter asserts that ‘no man-made instrument can touch the complexity of the human voice.’<sup>2</sup> It is the specific medium of the classical voice on which my composition and research focuses. As a professional singer I have both the pedagogical background and the compositional experience for translating this information into my writing. Moreover, as Barker and Huesca point out:

Composing for singers emphasizes [a] paradox, as the instrument seems to be largely invisible; a technical discussion of laryngeal function may easily disguise the reality that the entire body is involved in singing; that same physical body has no independence from its intellectual and emotional life.<sup>3</sup>

A highly developed awareness and practical understanding is thus required on all levels to fully appreciate and consider all aspects of vocal writing, which clearly should involve philosophical, emotional, sociological, artistic and spiritual considerations alongside anatomy, physiology and technology.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Miller, *On the Art of Singing*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Performers sing contemporary classical music with a ‘classical voice’ which dissociated from the music of the ‘Classical era’, is the result of historical processes over many hundreds of year. See John Potter, *Vocal Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Barker and Maria Huesca, *Composing for Voice: Exploring Voice, Language and Music*, (New York: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2018) pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 1.



## Vocal mechanics and sound production

About vocal mechanics, John Potter states:

As an instrument, the voice consists of three elements: a power supply (the lungs), an oscillator (the chords, or vocal folds as they are sometimes called) and a resonator (the vocal tract, consisting of the mouth and throat cavities). The airstream from the lungs passes through the folds, which vibrate, producing the raw material for speaking or singing. This raw sound is a complex one consisting of a fundamental frequency determined by the cordal vibration, and a large number of overtones or partials... this relationship also determines the colour of vowels, a hugely complex process of continually shifting frequencies involving also the lips, jaw and tongue.<sup>5</sup>

These principles work throughout the vocal range which is 'naturally divided into three different registers of chest, middle, and head. The training of a voice, to a large extent, is the attempt to create the same strength and smoothness of tone throughout these registers.'<sup>6</sup> When composing, I have always considered the varying technical requirements that are needed at different registers.

Many singers talk of the *pasaggio* or 'break' in their voice where the 'chest' voice becomes the 'head' voice. The head voice, the higher register, has a soaring spacious sound to it, created by a yawning effect which raises the soft palette and allows a greater internal resonance space, particularly in the 'mask'.<sup>7</sup> The chest voice, at the bottom of the register, is a strong, rich, muscular sound where a strong vibration is felt in the chest area. Potter, a trained classical singer himself, asserts that 'the human voice is a marker of individual

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<sup>5</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Barker, *Composing for Voice: A Guide for Composers, Singers and Teachers* (London: Routledge, 2004) p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> The mask is a standard term for the efficient resonance that occurs on the face below the eyes and over the bridge of the nose (the upper resonators).

personality: no two voices sound the same'<sup>8</sup>.

James Stark writes in *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*: 'The chief distinguishing characteristic in classical singing is, of course, the quality of the voice, with its special powers of expression. Even the casual or non-expert listener can tell in an instant if a voice sounds 'classically trained' by the tone alone [...] this quality and manner of singing is that which classical singers such as myself employ, 'characterised by chiaroscuro, register equalisation, appoggio, and vibrato.'<sup>9</sup> 'Pitches, intensity levels, voice colours, and vowels can all be changed without discreet breaks in the tone, due to the elastic properties of the singing muscles... the singer can minimise this disruption by maintaining a stable low larynx and uniform breath pressure.'<sup>10</sup> These are all elements which I very consciously observe when writing for the voice and it is fascinating how the placement of the voice on the musical stave, and the manner in which we allow it to journey, affects the sound production.

### **Voice Types and *Fachs***

In the classical singing world, the standard division of the female voice is soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto; and in the male voice tenor, baritone and bass. A soprano may well be able to reach isolated pitches lower than an alto, and vice versa, however the tessitura<sup>11</sup> element is important for a composer to understand. A singer should not sit in an uncomfortable register for any length of time as to avoid vocal strain.

According to the Schiller Institute<sup>12</sup>, the discovery of the existence of vocal registers can be dated back to the fifteenth century whereby Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) likened the

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<sup>8</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> Tessitura - [ testura] (It.: 'texture' ) A term used to describe the part of a vocal (or less often instrumental) compass in which a piece of music lies – whether high or low, etc. The tessitura of a piece is not decided by the extremes of its range, but rather by which part of the range is most used (Oxford Music Online)

<sup>12</sup> Schiller Institute (research centre for politics, economics, the arts), report on 'The Tradition Florentine Bel Canto' [http://schillerinstitute.org/music/rev\\_chart.html](http://schillerinstitute.org/music/rev_chart.html)

colours of the voice to those of the changing colours in a painting. The vocal registers, head voice, middle voice and chest voice, are also sometimes referred to as first register, second register and third register, but all work largely on the same principles of division as shown in the table below, as produced by the Schiller Institute:

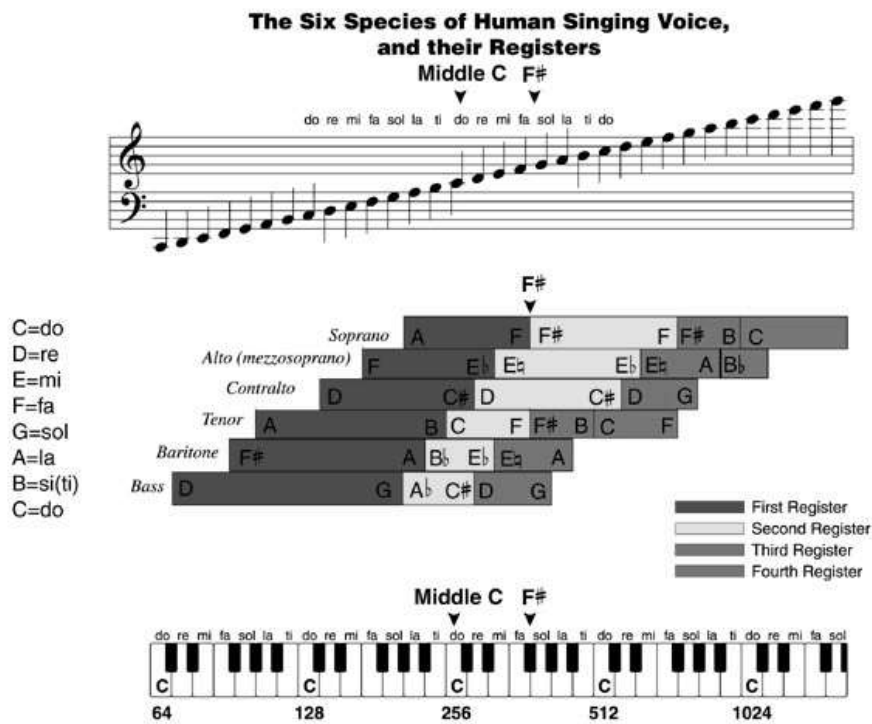


Fig.1. Table of voice ranges and registers, The Schiller Institute

Within standard voice classification there is a more detailed division to determine exactly the sort of voice size and colour within each voice type. Used as a standard term in Europe—*Fach* literally means ‘compartment’ in German and was devised as a singing term by Rudolph Kloiber (1899-1973). McGinnis describes *Fach* as ‘the system used to cast operas. It also refers to a voice type or vocal category [...] what “kind” of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass... Twenty-Five *Fach* categories are considered standard.’<sup>13</sup> Thus, ‘by extension, one’s *Fach* also dictates which operatic roles one would sing.’<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Pearl Yeadon McGinnis, *The Opera Singer’s Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010) p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Hoch, *A Dictionary for the Modern Singer* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014) p. 63.

As mentioned, *Fach* 'relies heavily on the characteristics of the vocal apparatus, which are directly related to the physiology of the individual. An extremely petite soprano seldom has a huge dramatic voice, nor does a tall, statuesque, large-boned soprano usually have a bright, high, flexible coloratura voice'<sup>15</sup>.

Pearl McGinnis discusses how 'opera roles were developed to correspond to this connection between physical build and vocal sound. Fairies, imps, and elves are sung by children or lyric, light voices. The young characters in an opera, a son or daughter, are sung by younger, lighter voices.'<sup>16</sup> Just as within vocal type, there will always be physiological discrepancies within a vocal *Fach*; Dame Joan Sutherland (1926-2010) is a classic example<sup>17</sup>.

Further discussion of the *Fach* system can be found in the internationally standardised reference book *Handbuch der Oper*<sup>18</sup> by Rudolf Kloiber, the founder of the categorisation, and *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System*<sup>19</sup> by McGinnis. An amalgamation of their versions, illustrating the *Fach* name, weight and range, is nevertheless outlined below:

**Soprano Fachs:**

**Lyric coloratura** – medium to light in weight with very fast acrobatic ability (C4-F6)

**Dramatic coloratura** – richer in tone than lyric and heavier in weight (C4-F6)

**Soubrette coloratura** – lighter than a lyric coloratura (C4-C6)

**Character soubrette** – a sweet and young sound (C4-C6)

**Lyric soprano** – capable of line and expansive legato passages (B3-C6)

**Lyric dramatic soprano** (spinto) – heavier than the lyric soprano (A3-C6)

**Dramatic soprano** – rich quality with a powerful sound (A3-C6)

**High dramatic soprano** – ability to sustain higher tessitura (F3-C6)

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<sup>15</sup> Pearl Yeadon McGinnis, *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010) pp. 3-4. See also William Vennard, *Singing: the Mechanism and the Technic* (New York: Carl Fischer Publishing, 1967)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Dame Joan Sutherland had an unusual physique for her *Fach* type (although the latter evolved with her career), in that she was a very tall woman with a robust stature, yet she was a soprano at ease with singing delicate high fast-moving music.

<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Kloiber, *Handbuch der Oper* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978, revised 2004)

<sup>19</sup> Pearl Yeadon McGinnis, *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010)

**Mezzo soprano Fachs:**

**Coloratura mezzo soprano** – agile with the ability to secure top notes (G3-B5)

**Lyric mezzo soprano** - capable of line and expansive legato passages (G3-B5)

**Dramatic mezzo soprano** - rich quality with a powerful sound (G3-B5)

**Contralto Fachs:**

**Contralto** – lower than the mezzo soprano with a fuller chest voice (F3-G5)

**Dramatic contralto** – richer and darker tone than a contralto (F3-G5)

**Low contralto** – at ease with depth in the voice and the lower tessitura (E3-E5)

**Tenor Fachs:**

**Comic tenor** – light tenor particularly suited buffo roles (C3-B4)

**Character tenor** – light tenor often with a less rounded tone (B3-C5)

**Lyric tenor** - capable of line and expansive legato passages (C3-c5)

**Lyric dramatic tenor** - heavier than the lyric tenor (C3-C5)

**Heldentenor** – heavy sound with full power at the top of the range (B2-C5)

**Baritone Fachs:**

**Light baritone** – light in tone but lacking darkness or depth in the bass

**Lyric baritone** - capable of line and expansive legato passages (B2-Ab4)

**Cavalier baritone** – Good stature for powerful roles, mixed colours (A2-G#4)

**Verdi baritone** – Richness and stamina in the voice, tenor-type squillo (A2-G4)

**Dramatic baritone** – darker and more driven than the lyric (G2-F#4)

**Lyric bass-baritone** – lower version of the lyric baritone (E2-F4)

**Dramatic bass-baritone** – darker and richer version of the bass baritone (G2-F#4)

**Bass Fachs:**

**Comic bass** – less richness than the dramatic bass, and lighter in tone (E2-F4)

**Dramatic comic bass** – slighter larger sound than the comic bass (C2-F4)

**Low bass** – lower tessitura, slower vibrato and a solid sound (C2-F4)

**Dramatic low bass** – more powerful version of the low bass (C2-F4)

Fig 2. List of *Fach* types in order of range

This insight into voice categories is key for a composer of vocal music. The vocal writing in my chamber opera *Long Lankin* was guided by my knowledge of vocal capability. Understanding the changes in vocal colour and weight through the range, as well as tessitura and flexibility, allowed me to write advantageously for the two voices and their dramatic characters. *Long Lankin* is explored further in Chapter 6 and, while the significance of voice type has largely been associated with opera in this discussion, it is important to recognise that its function is not limited to musical drama. The understanding of voice types and their specifications are also significant in the composing of art song - the composer has the choice whether to specify voice type or not.

My song 'The Applicant' is written for unspecified voice and piano. Due to the clef and tessitura of the score, a soprano (or tenor) would naturally suit this version. However, a transposed version for mezzo-soprano or baritone would be welcome, and I maintain that the integrity and character of the song would remain, with the strong head voice highlighting the punchy, syncopated rhythms. The cycle *Three Sensual Songs*, on the other hand, is specified for soprano and piano. These songs, along with their narrative, are very specific in vocal colour throughout. The higher partials on the soprano resonance are key to the character of the songs and would lose a sense of delicacy and femininity being sung by another voice-type.

### **Brief history of vocal technique in the classical context and now**

The classical singing style as we know it today was developed through the nineteenth-century when 'new singing was underpinned both technically and ideologically by a pedagogy increasingly based on scientific principles.'<sup>20</sup> It appears that previous to the nineteenth-century, there was little in the way of fixed technical teaching and once scientific understanding of the voice developed, guidance on singing technique was more widely written down in manuals for student singers to follow. It is this awareness and understanding of the workings of the voice that is so significant for my own approach to vocal writing and the intrinsic workings of how the sound moves through the range.

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<sup>20</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing style and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 49.

In terms of the operatic genre, which saw orchestral and venue size become more sizeable, the requirement for greater vocal power necessitated stronger sound production and Potter confirms that 'we know from [Manuel] Garcia's treatise of 1841 that the lowered larynx position (the *voix sombre*) was a novelty in the 1830s and was not known earlier'<sup>21</sup>. This confirms that the 'classical' style of singing was developed around this time and that the technical ability of the singer had become a point of focus in vocal writing.

*Bel canto* is thus the celebration of the virtuoso singer, combining beautiful and expressive singing with vocal dexterity and control. From the nineteenth-century onwards, not only was the vocal range increasingly extended and admired but technical expertise was now at the fore - the sustained high *pianissimo*, for example, being the epitome of virtuosic display. This can be found in two soprano arias that I have performed: 'Il dolce suono' Lucia's mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Gaetano Donizetti and Giulietta's 'Oh! Quante volte' from *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* by Vincenzo Bellini. In Giulietta's aria in particular there are several moments of unaccompanied coloratura that ascend to a sustained high note in the voice. The pause in accompaniment enables the singer to take time over the phrase, demonstrating technical precision and control.

In the recitative preceding Giulietta's aria, the soprano sings 'siate per me faci ferali' (you are for me flames fateful)<sup>22</sup>, ascending to a sustained, delicate high B flat mid-phrase before descending through the registers to the lower head voice. Descending through the voice melodramatically is, in itself, a technical accomplishment as the singer must adapt the 'ah' vowel to sound seamless to the listener, even though the vocal mechanics will require modification of the vowel at the top of the voice to allow pharyngeal space:



Ex. 2. 'faci ferali' from Giulietta's aria 'Oh! Quante Volte', *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, Bellini

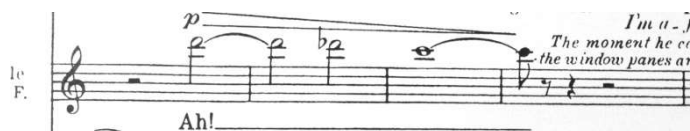
<sup>21</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing style and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Nico Castel, *Italian Bel canto Opera Libretti, volume I., I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (New York: Leyerle Publications, 2000)

The setting with a high pianissimo in the voice is dependent on the locality within the phrase. The singer requires a steady airflow and also a sensitive build-up to the pinnacle. Here Bellini uses the melismatic arpeggio writing to increase momentum in the voice, similarly to an athlete jumping a high jump with a run-up.

In contrast, the stratospheric pianissimo without any lead-in, as found in diverse repertoires from Ravel's 'Le Feu' (The Fire) from *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (1925) and Jonathan Dove's Swan aria from *Swanhunter* (2009), as illustrated below, is achievable but highly specialised to this fact. The vocal mechanism and breath must be prepared physiologically by the singer before the note is sounded.

Ravel's aria 'Arrière! Je réchauffe les bons' is the only appearance of the fire character in the opera. It is a coloratura display of vocal agility and technical skill within just two and a half minutes. Following sustained high notes, fast arpeggios and rapid scales, the soprano ends the scene on a pianissimo diminuendo in the highest register of the voice, accompanied by soft woodwind and strings:



Ex. 2.1. Final bars of 'Arrière! Je réchauffe les bons', *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, Ravel

In Jonathan Dove's opera *Swanhunter*, the soprano (Swan) begins the main theme at the very top of the voice, *mezzo piano*, with no leading pitch to act as a springboard to the extreme height:



Twice as slow ♩ = 72

Sw. 1192 Ah

Sw. 1193

Sw. 1194

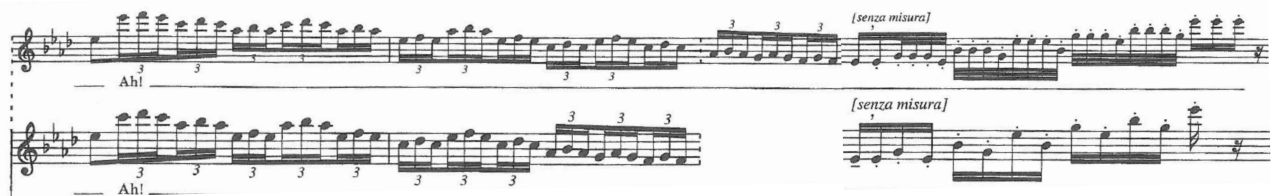
Ex. 2.2. Swan's aria, bars 1192-1194, *Swanhunter*, Dove

The long sustained phrase sits over a rippling accompaniment and gradually descends. It is Dove's understanding of the soprano's breath control and air pressure that allows him to create such an exquisite vocal effect. Having sung this aria, I understand the physical demands of the singing mechanism: a very small amount of airflow through the vocal cords as they will be tight at that pitch. The smaller airflow through the cords in turn lessens the outflow of air from the lungs, thus the singer must be totally in control of the diaphragm to enable maximum support from the body.

The composer must be aware, when writing for the extremes of any voice type, that not only is location within a phrase important, but also how that will translate in terms of breathing and text underlay. In the Swan's aria, Dove sets the entirety of the challenging phrase to the 'ah' vowel. This allows the singer the most open and relaxed vowel position and avoids any unnecessary tightening on the larynx. The melismatic effect adds to the seamless legato of the phrasing while the lack of consonants avoids any obstruction to the sound.

In *bel canto* writing, vocal agility and range are equally as important. Lyric coloratura soprano repertoire by Offenbach, Meyerbeer and Thomas features athletic vocal writing, referred to in the industry as 'vocal fireworks'.

In terms of vocal journey, two French coloratura arias illustrate the momentum of energy necessary as the voice approaches the climactic phrases: The Doll Song, ‘Les oiseaux dans la charmille’ from Act 1 *Les contes d’Hoffmann* (1881) by Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880) and Ophélie’s aria, ‘Pâle et blonde’, from Act IV *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896):



Ex. 2.3. Cadenza in ‘Les oiseaux dans la charmille’, *Les contes d’Hoffmann*, Offenbach

This excerpt shows Offenbach’s original line on the lower staff with a higher option in the ossia line above, a standard alternative for performance these days. This illustrates Offenbach’s understanding of coloratura requiring momentum through the voice. The line here is unaccompanied therefore allowing the singer as much time as needed to ‘show off’ the voice.



Ex. 2.4. Cadenza in ‘Pâle et blonde’, Ophélie’s mad scene, *Hamlet*, Thomas

In example 2.4. Thomas writes an ascending scale of almost two octaves through the vocal range. The momentum of the chromatic passage requires steady air flow and increased support in the top register in order to ensure a seamless ascent. Thomas also helps the singer by elongating the starting note and pitching it low in the head voice rather than the chest voice, which would require a noticeable registral change.

Extremes of the voice have been a focus of exploration in a number of my unaccompanied extended vocal techniques pieces where I take the singer outside of the commonly accepted ranges with an instruction to sing as high or low as physically possible. The extremes of pitch will naturally differ from singer to singer. Examples of the extended range can be

found in my vocal sets *Alliterated Sugar Rush*, *Theme Park*, *A Cycle of Senior Moments* and the song *Who is Geoffrey?*

### **Vocal Technique in the classical context from a singer's point of view**

I have already referred to the lower larynx position as a widely accepted technique of classical voice production. Along with this, the classical singer requires an excellent level of breath control and support. My own vocal training was based on the *bel canto* technique, one of the most widely-used approaches to classical singing.

Such singing requires a highly refined use of the laryngeal, respiratory, and articulatory muscles in order to produce special qualities of timbre, evenness of scale and register, breath control, flexibility, tremulousness, and expressiveness.<sup>23</sup>

My own studies with *bel canto* vocal technicians such as Dennis O'Neill (b.1948) have allowed my knowledge in the performer-composer relationship to flourish. I have found the *bel canto* technique and its understanding of the vocal mechanism to facilitate the most advantageous sound output within the registers, thus providing a powerful knowledge base for vocal composition. This translates into my writing in the understanding of breath control, registrational changes, tessitura, text output (vowel and consonant changes) and a flexible view on vocal ranges.

Walton's vocal writing demonstrates the majority of these elements, as mentioned in Chapter 1, and one song in particular moves through the voice with a prevailing ease and a real understanding of vocal sensation.

In 'Lady, When I Behold The Roses' from the third song in the cycle *Anon in Love*, Walton provides a beautiful arch-shape structure for the voice to grow from beginning to end. Once the peak of the song is reached, the voice falls away on the downward curve of the arch. Here Walton illustrates his innate understanding of the singing voice by naturally building energy, increasing the sound production that the higher register naturally requires.

Walton cleverly sets out landmark pitches for each milestone in the song. The voice begins

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<sup>23</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing style and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. Xxi.

in the lower tessitura, gradually reaching its first peak in the climb at bar 4 on the word ‘sprouting’:

The musical score shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the first five bars of the piece. The tempo is marked 'Lento sostenuto' with a metronome marking of quarter note = c.96. The dynamics are 'p molto sost.' for the voice and 'pp e dolcissimo, sempre ben legato' for the piano. The piano part includes the instruction 'con 2 Ped.'.

Ex. 2.5. ‘Lady, when I behold the roses sprouting’ bars 1-5, *Anon in Love*, Walton

The larynx is in a relaxed state here with breath flowing freely and there is little pressure on the body. The legato lyricism makes little demand on the physical apparatus, so the sound output is naturally calm.

Through subtle rising internal decoration within the vocal line and some interplay with time signatures, the next peak in this climb is on the word ‘arbours’ in bar 8.

The musical score shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for bar 8 of the piece. The tempo is marked 'Lento sostenuto' with a metronome marking of quarter note = c.96. The dynamics are 'p molto sost.' for the voice and 'pp e dolcissimo, sempre ben legato' for the piano. The piano part includes the instruction 'con 2 Ped.'.

Ex. 2.6. ‘Lady, when I behold the roses sprouting’ bar 8, *Anon in Love*, Walton

The slight rise in register and increased demand on the vocal mechanism and breath adds to the heightened intensity in the song, which is increased again at the next peak at bar 11 on the word 'harbours'.



Ex. 2.7. 'Lady, when I behold the roses sprouting', bar 11, *Anon in Love*, Walton

The climax of the arch shape is in bar 21, around four-fifths of the way through the piece. The voice builds, aided by the undulating accompaniment. Yet, the melodic peak is not matched by a rise in dynamics. Instead, Walton marks a soft dynamic level at this point - almost a *subito piano*. The combination of dynamic and vocal register demands increased support from the diaphragm and a great deal of breath control. As soon as the voice has reached its top A, it leaves it with a downward arch that proceeds to the conclusion of the song.

### Theorising vocal writing: elements to consider when translating technical requirements in vocal composition

1. **BREATH AND AIR PRESSURE:** Air capacity and flow, breath control and resistance

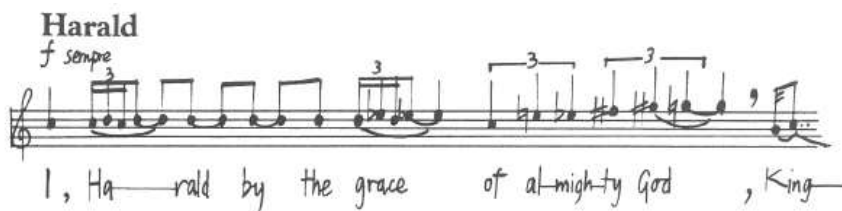
Phrasing in comfortable breaths with an awareness through the different registers. Understanding the knock-on effects of the airflow and resistance to phrase length and shape.

2. **REGISTRAL COLOURS:** Using the different registers of the voice for full colouristic advantage. Awareness of tessitura.

3. **TEXT EFFECTS:** The carrying power of vowels and disruption of sound through consonants

### 1. BREATH AND AIR PRESSURE

Composers of vocal music should have an awareness of breath capacity and the adjustments through the vocal range according to air pressure, airflow and dynamic. These factors translate into the vocal writing not only in allowing points for intake of breath for the singer but an awareness of phrase lengths and tessitura. Points of breathing can naturally be marked by the text underlay, where a comma or full stop occurs. This is predominantly a natural allowance for breath points that I observe in my own writing. However, when a sentence is either particularly lengthy or set as long continuous passages, the composer must give clear indication of breathing, as illustrated in Weir's *King Harald's Saga* - the small comma above the staff signalling the breath point:



Ex. 2.8. Opening vocal line of *King Harald's Saga*, Act 1, Weir

This is a particularly useful compositional tool when the underlying text contains no punctuation marks to dictate a natural breath or if the composer desires particular breath points that work against the natural breaks in the text.

In my song 'French Fancy' from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*, I have used the breath mark to exactly this effect; the rolled 'r' of the sustained note is detached from the vowel:

♩=90 With gaiety

56 *fp*

Voice

Frrr e e e e e e e e

Ex. 2.9. 'French Fancy', bars 56-57, *Alliterated Sugar Rush*

The effect is a distortion of the text to work against the natural flow of sound. Not only does this breath mark allow an intake of air directly after it is largely spent on the rolled 'r' but it also creates a glottal stop.

Awareness of air capacity, air flow and sub-glottal pressure is an important factor in vocal writing and allows the composer greater options in phrasing length. The following passage from my own composition 'Le Feu' from *Dans Les Ombres de la Guerre* illustrates the mezzo-soprano voice in the lower head register where the entire phrase can be sung in a single breath. A soprano, however, would likely struggle without a breath at this tessitura.

in one breath

fair cra- quer les branches sèches, et les fair s'a-ffai-ser a-vec un bruit soy- eux. de jupe

Ex. 2.10. 'Le Feu', bars 21-25, *Dans Les Ombres de la Guerre*

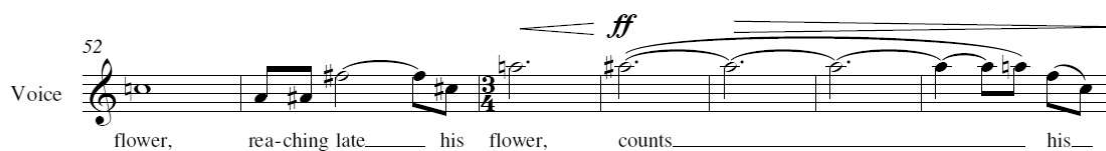
A soprano presented with the following phrase is able to perform the entire line in a single breath:



Ex. 2.11. 'French Fancy', bars 60-65, *Alliterated Sugar Rush*

In bars 62 to 65 the fast detached material allows the singer to bounce the sound off the support; very little air is expelled and the considerable length of the phrase is not problematic for the singer. This effect is maximised due to the repeated glottal of the 'e' vowel which again inhibits the dispersal of air.

Registral changes in the voice affect strength in production of sound. In my unaccompanied song *Come slowly, Eden* the voice soars to a sustained *fortissimo* high A sharp on the word 'counts'. The open 'ah' vowel that a trained singer will produce on this particular vowel, at this pitch,<sup>24</sup> allows for the voice to spin in a relaxed position, with little air output, thereby enabling the voice to comfortably sustain the note for a far longer than in the lower registers.



Ex. 2.12. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 52-58

Likewise, the final phrase of the song has a lower dynamic and a diminuendo to nothing. This lesser volume than in the previous example allows the singer to sustain continuous airflow for longer in this register without expelling all of the air.

<sup>24</sup> For further reading on vowel modification see: Richard Miller, *On the Art of Singing* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 11-16.



Voice *-mp* *a niente*  
 lost in balms.

Ex. 2.13. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 65-70

## 2. REGISTRAL COLOURS

Understanding the registers of the voice allows a composer to take advantage of the colour effects possible within the different registers. In the song 'When Man Enters Woman' from *Three Sensual Songs*, the *mezzo piano* voice in bar 64 sits in a head-chest mix.

59 *mp* *mf*  
 the wo - man o - pens her mouth with plea -  
*pp* *p* *mf*

Ex. 2.14. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 59-65, *Three Sensual Songs*

The singer will be aware that the depth of this phrase will be used physically as preparation in momentum for the fuller volume and higher register coming up in the following bars (pivoting on the word 'pleasure'). The piano in bar 64 is sympathetic to the lower register, doubling with single pitches.

In the same song, in bar 83, the soprano is required to move rapidly from head voice into chest voice and back into head voice again:

Ex. 2.15. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 83-84, *Three Sensual Songs*

Whereas in the previous example, the voice was sitting low in the range already, here the voice is required to jump out of the strong head voice momentarily. Allowing the singer the freedom of space by not accompanying the vocal line under the two notes in chest voice means that there is no rush in producing these tones and the soprano may comfortably fall into the chest register and adjust back into the head register again with ease. The writing here translates into a natural choice for the singer to use chest voice at this point. A combination of pace of the line and the swiftness with which the singer is required to switch between high head voice and chest voice here is far more natural, and stronger, than using a head-chest mix within the melodic line. If head voice were specifically required in this situation, a composer should specifically mark in a softer dynamic for the low B flat and C natural on 'pleasure'. Furthermore, the explosive nature of the 'p' on 'pleasure' provides a kick for the voice and the ease of producing this starting consonant rapidly allows for elongating of the vowel to carry the sound in that register.

A light lyric voice with a beautiful spinning quality is most suited to these songs to add to the sensual quality. A voice with too much weight would not allow for the brightness at the top which these songs are intended to achieve. The chest tone in the light lyric soprano voice, however, provides enough depth of resonance for the colour required in the register shifts.

This shift between head voice and chest voice was a technique effectively used by Mozart in his aria 'Come Scoglio', for the soprano character Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte* (1790):

The image shows a page of a musical score for the aria 'Come scoglio' from Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte*, specifically bars 40-44. The score is arranged in a system with the following parts from top to bottom: Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in B-flat (Clar.in B), Bassoon (Fag.), Trumpet in B-flat (Tr.in B), Violin I (Viol. I), Violin II (Viol. II), Viola, Flute (Fl.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The woodwinds and strings play a rhythmic accompaniment with various dynamics like *f* (forte) and *p* (piano). The vocal line (Soprano) is written in the Flute part, with lyrics in German and French: 'Herz be - wegt, was ein treu - es, was ein t / fet - to il - cor, far che can - gi, far che'. The score includes performance markings such as *a 2* (second ending), *f*, and *p*.

Ex. 2.16. 'Come scoglio' bars 40-44, *Così fan tutte*, Mozart

Several times in this aria the soprano is required to dip into the low register of the voice. At bar 43, the soprano descends from a D natural in the upper head voice to a low B flat in the chest register. The vocal line is unaccompanied during the pitch descent and the soprano is given time in which to recalibrate and begin the next phrase. Mozart deals with these register shifts in various different ways throughout this aria.

My own writing thus aspires to Mozart's sympathetic approach to these registral shifts which allow the singer comfortable execution of these passages without necessitating extra pressure on the voice.

A soprano may opt to use a *voix mixte*<sup>25</sup> technique to lighten the sound and create a more blended colour in the chest register. The composer's construction of the approach to and from the register shift, including dynamic requirements, will dictate to the singer which technique is required.

<sup>25</sup> *Voix mixte*: A singing technique of blending the middle head voice into the chest register as the singer descends in pitch, creating a seamless tone through the passaggio.

In bar 51 in 'Song for a Lady' from *Three Sensual Songs*, the voice descends into the lower register with a soft dynamic, which first and foremost informs the singer to employ the *voix mixte* technique. As the phrase is unaccompanied and the low B is a sustained note, the singer will blend in as much head voice as possible to achieve a beautiful, soft colour.

Even when the piano does enter in the following bar, it is a soft, high single melodic line which still allows the low pitch in the voice to project. The text here plays a vital part in the sound output; the 'r' of rose is a soft consonant, there is no explosive sound to add energy to the sound production.

The image shows a musical score for 'Song for a Lady', bars 49-52. It consists of two systems of staves. The top system is the vocal line, and the bottom system is the piano accompaniment. The vocal line starts with the lyrics 'rose, my rose' and ends with 'my rose.' The piano part features triplets and a soft dynamic (p). The score is in 4/4 time and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Ex. 2.17. 'Song for a Lady', bars 49-52, from *Three Sensual Songs*

The chest register is even more effective in the mezzo-soprano and alto voice because of the greater strength and richness in the lower voice. In bar 43 of 'Nocturne', from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre* for mezzo-soprano and piano, the voice delivers two distinct G natural accented quavers in the chest register. The explosive 'sp' of 'spectres' helps to propel the vowel and further highlight the richness of the timbre. In the piano part only a single pitch in the bass is held over from the previous bar which allows the voice the space and freedom to stretch the two notes, as the singer sees fit, to take maximum advantage of this rich registral colour.

42 **poco rit.**  
de longs spec-tres sur -  
**poco rit.**  
(8).....

Ex. 2.18. 'Nocturne', bars 42-43, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

At the other end of the scale, upper register of the head voice is also a colour that can be effectively used by a composer; particularly in the soprano's ability to jump out of the line. In 'An Engaged Woman', from *Incomprehensible to a Man*, the soprano is presented with an octave leap in the voice in bar 41, from the D natural in the upper middle head register to the top D natural.

40 **f** **p**  
Voice Ar - gu-ment in fa - vour.  
**f** **p** **pp**  
Pno. **f** **p** **pp**

Ex. 2.19. 'An Engaged Woman', bars 40-42, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*

The writing here is sympathetic to the voice in a number of ways: firstly, the 'v' consonant aids the propelling energy of the following vowel sound, secondly the open 'ah' vowel sung on the 'vour' syllable allows for the voice to be in its most relaxed position. The natural spin

on this vowel, at this pitch, will thus sit very comfortably in the high soprano voice. The piano subtly supports the vocal line here with just a single high trill to create a very light, sympathetic underscore.

### 3. TEXT EFFECTS

Vocal sound is carried through the vowels and classical singers are trained to elongate vowels in order to project the voice. While consonants, particularly at the start and finish of a word, should be enunciated as much as possible, it is always the vowel which will colour the sound output. Consonants are either voiced or unvoiced; the former rely on supporting sound from the vocal cords and the latter rely on natural articulation from the physical mechanism.

As classical singers are trained to modify vowels through the range in order to produce as seamless a sound as possible, it is important for composers to remember that a true vowel will not be produced in the extremes of the voice unless specified. In my unaccompanied vocal quartet *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, the soprano has a specific indication in bar 39, stipulating a true vowel, i.e. no modification. The resulting effect is a very thin timbre on the 'ee' vowel:

4

(aspirated)

low soft palette, to enable true 'ee' vowel,  
mouse-like sound

37

reen, tu - reen, tu- reen, tu - reen,

Ex. 2.20. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 37-40, soprano

It is important to note that a true 'ee' vowel any higher in the voice will increasingly become impossible to sing as the voice becomes tighter and tighter.

In regard to the propelling ability of explosive consonants, a composer of ensemble vocal music must also be aware of the textural effect of such consonants in the different voice parts. Whereas a vowel sound from each voice can amalgamate into one homogenous

sound, the appearance of four explosive consonants from four different voice parts, for example, will draw attention to the individual lines. In *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, the four parts invariably highlight their individual lines through entries such as in bar 63 (below) where the 's' of soup highlights each voice entry. At bar 65, however, I omitted the starting consonant from the vowel in the soprano line so that the overall effect of the parts blending on the chord is less busy:

8      Gliss. through whole  
of note value

The image shows a musical score for SATB, bars 63-65. It consists of four staves. The first staff is the Soprano line, the second is the Alto line, the third is the Tenor line, and the fourth is the Bass line. The music is in 4/4 time. The lyrics are 'ssoup, oop.' for the Soprano and 'ssoup.' for the other three parts. The score includes dynamic markings of *ff* and glissando markings (*gliss.*) over the notes. A note number '8' is written above the first staff, and a bar number '63' is written above the first staff. A text annotation 'Gliss. through whole of note value' is written above the first staff.

Ex. 2.21. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 63-65, SATB

Another effect gained by playing with consonants is extending the sound of the voiced consonants. In bar 104 to 105 of *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, the two upper voice parts transition from the 'n' of green to the hum. This voiced extension of the consonant should result in a seamless shift via the lips meeting and the tongue lowering off the front of the roof of the mouth. The effect is minimal but allows for a slightly larger space for the humming resonance.

104 *p* *pp* (cue from Bass)

green. .... mm ...ss soup *gliss.*

*p* *pp* (cue from Bass)

green. .... mm ...ss soup *gliss.*

Ex. 2.22. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 104-106, soprano and alto

### Conclusion

With an understanding of the vocal cord muscle function, breath and resonators of the vocal mechanism, one can aim for the most effective vocal writing. To encourage optimal vocal production, contouring of melodic line and registral changes, in relation to text, are important considerations in my work.



### Chapter 3: Subject Matter, Text and Choice of Authors

<b>Author Gender</b>	<b>Author Name</b>	<b>Composition</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Format</b>
<b>Female Authors</b>	Jane Austen	<i>Incomprehensible to a Man</i>	SOCIETY/GENDER	voice & piano
	Sylvia Plath	<i>The Applicant</i>	SOCIETY/GENDER	voice & piano
		<i>I Think I Made You Up</i>	EMPATHY/PAIN	voice & piano
	Anne Sexton	<i>Three Sensual Songs</i>	SENSUALITY	voice & piano
	Emily Dickinson	<i>Come slowly, Eden*</i>	SENSUALITY	solo voice
	Joan Aiken	<i>A Bed for the Night</i>	WIT/HUMOUR	voices and inst. ensemble
<b>Male Authors</b>	Lewis Carroll	<i>Ode to The Mock Turtle*</i>	WIT/HUMOUR	vocal ensemble
		<i>Ode to The Jabberwocky*</i>	WIT/HUMOUR	vocal ensemble
	Albert-Paul Granier	<i>Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre</i>	EMPATHY/PAIN	voice & piano
	Walt Whitman	<i>As if a Phantom Caress'd Me</i>	FOLK TALE	voice and inst. ensemble
<b>Own text adaptation</b>		<i>Long Lankin</i>	FOLK TALE	voice and inst. ensemble
		<i>Alliterated Sugar Rush*</i>	WIT/HUMOUR	solo voice
		<i>Cycle of Senior Moments*</i>	WIT/HUMOUR/EMPATHY	solo voice
		<i>Who is Geoffrey?*</i>	WIT/HUMOUR/EMPATHY	solo voice
		<i>Theme Park*</i>	WIT/HUMOUR	solo voice
		<i>In Sultry Sun / Festival Benavites</i>	IMAGERY (SUN/HEAT)	voice & classical guitar

*\*Unaccompanied vocal works*

Fig. 3. Table of chosen texts in my portfolio

#### Thematic Subject Matter and Text in Song

In my songs I explore a range of different texts and subject matter. Within the texts, the exploration of sensuality in art is of particular interest to me and I have looked to portray my own sensuality in my work. Humour has also played an important role in my vocal pieces, particularly with my unaccompanied compositions. Furthermore, the ever-changing social dynamic of gender in modern cultural discourse, both in politics and art has influenced my choice of text on a number

of occasions. Finally, I have explored classic folk tales and archaic fables in both song and operatic forms.

When setting text, I either use the meaning of words to supply the compositional impetus, or I completely disregard the meaning of words in favour of the phonics. The latter has been a key element of my compositions which use extended vocal techniques.

## 1. Thematic Subject Matter

Although there is variety in the subject matter of my portfolio, there are underlying thematic strands of thought linking certain pieces. I shall outline below the themes which have influenced my thinking and compositional work.

### **Women's role in society and the arts**

The social dynamic of gender is evident in *The Applicant*, as well as the song cycle *Incomprehensible to a Man*. The depiction of women's place in society is still frequently debated and portrayed in the performing arts. Even in 2018 there have been big successes in the operatic and musical theatre realms focusing on the struggle of the suffragettes, including *Rhondda Rips it Up!*<sup>1</sup> at Welsh National Opera and *Silvia*<sup>2</sup> at the Old Vic Theatre. Theatre unions such as Equity<sup>3</sup> have recently been at the forefront of promoting gender equality in the arts. The National Theatre<sup>4</sup>, not only launched a diversity pledge in 2018, but plans to employ a creative workforce where 50% of writers and directors and 50% of all casting will be female by 2021.<sup>5</sup> This is a huge step forward in terms of equality in the theatre industry. From the social media campaign #MeToo to gender-equal pay, the discussion of women's role in society is clearly a vast and complex topic of discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rhondda Rips it Up!* was commissioned by WNO and was based on the life of Welsh suffragette Viscountess Rhondda, who fought for equal rights for women. The premiere was on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2018 at the Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff: <https://www.wno.org.uk/archive/2018-2019/rhondda-rips-it-up>

<sup>2</sup> *Silvia* was commissioned by the Old Vic Theatre and based on the life of suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst. Previews began 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2018: <https://www.oldvictheatre.com/news/2018/09/sylvia-at-the-old-vic>

<sup>3</sup> Equity is a UK based union devoted to performers and creative practitioners who 'are united in the fight for fair terms and conditions in the workplace' (founded 1930) <https://www.equity.org.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> The National Theatre was founded in 1963 and has been in its current location on the Southbank since 1976.

<sup>5</sup> NT staff diversity pledge: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/diversity/in-our-staff> and NT casting diversity pledge: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/diversity/on-our-stages>

**Elements of sensuality** appear in many of the texts that interest me. Intimate writing appeals to me because it celebrates love without turning towards the lewd or vulgar, as it is so often portrayed in modern media. Expressing the female voice in this way is illustrated in *Three Sensual Songs* and *Come slowly, Eden*.

**Humour** is a vital component of human character and experience. In my writing I have tended towards the absurdist side of comedy. The influence of absurdist humour is perhaps manifested most clearly in the Lewis Carroll pieces *Ode to The Mock Turtle* and *Ode to The Jabberwocky*, the cycles *Alliterated Sugar Rush* and *Theme Park* and the song *Who is Geoffrey?* .

**The art of telling stories**, particularly folk tales, has become another important musical impetus. The majority of the popular Brothers Grimm stories, as well as countless nursery rhymes, illustrate simple tales in a dark and sinister manner. *Long Lankin* is a dark folk tale, however *A Bed for the Night* aims to be more light-hearted. In both pieces, the music is used to establish, highlight and explore characters within a narrative.

## **2. Choices of authors and text**

### **Female Authors**

A particular interest in female poets has materialised over the course of my studies. I have used texts by Jane Austen (1775-1817), Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Anne Sexton (1928-1974) in my song writing. I shall outline how my choice of author and text has been dependent on both the subject matter and the writing style of the author.

#### **Jane Austen**

In my four songs on texts by Jane Austen, extracts are from her poetry, letters or novels. The texts in two out of the four songs from the cycle *Incomprehensible to a Man* convey a strong message of female inferiority in society, suggesting that a woman is assuredly better off financially and socially if she is married.

In terms of gender roles, nineteenth-century England was a strictly hierarchical society. In today's

social climate this appears less marked as women gain more power in business and have career opportunities, providing increased financial freedom and the ability to be self-sufficient.

Austen's work, however, remains of contemporary relevance and still carries an important message, which can be used very powerfully by a composer. Austen's eloquent word-choice and narrative voice is highly satisfying to set to music with its emphatic statements and rhythm of text, highlighting to an even greater extent her witty commentary on social etiquette and expected behaviour.

### Sylvia Plath

Plath is an author I have long admired. The pain in her writing is very raw at times. Her often depressive nature led her to write deeply moving, expressive poetry that prompts a philosophical questioning of life. *The Applicant*, one of the earlier songs in my PhD portfolio, is a text which I felt compelled to set to music. The lines, like Austen's writing, have an emphatic lyricism to them. I did not need the whole poem to convey the message through music and extracted a relevant section of text. It is a brutal piece of writing with short lines and constant questioning, both humorous and emotionally complex, portraying the spouse as a commodity, similar to sentiments expressed by Austen. From Plath's journals it is apparent that she had concerns about how the domestic expectations of her as a wife would impede her writing and creative output.

### Anne Sexton

The moment I read Sexton's work I knew I had encountered a poet for whom I wanted to create a soundworld. I also wanted to explore sensuality from a female perspective. Her writing is inherently descriptive. Her text *When Man Enters Woman* makes great use of active verbs: 'biting', 'opens', 'swallows', 'unleash' - all very physical words. In her portrayal of the realities of life, she draws upon environmental imagery to intensify that which she depicts ('when man enters woman like the surf biting the shore'). My music is simply an extension of this approach. I interpret this poem as passionately sexual and have endeavoured to translate this into the music by following the natural progression of the couple surging towards climax. A further discussion of this will follow in the subsequent section of commentary. *Song for a Lady* is a lighter piece but again very visual. Here the peaceful, gentle description is of two bodies lying, conceivably naked, in the rain. It is

written with a calm pacing which I have intended to replicate in this song setting. The third text *Us* is the only piece written in the first person; a woman describes being slowly undressed by another person, layer by layer, which leads to coitus. There is also a great deal of word-play with various images in the scene being described in terms of shape and movement.

### **Male Authors**

The male authors I have chosen are Lewis Carroll (1832-1898), Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Albert-Paul Granier (1888-1917), selected for their writing style and subject matter.

#### **Lewis Carroll**

Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the sequel *Through the Looking-Glass* are classics of English literature. Carroll's odd and eccentric style of humour particularly appeals to me and led me to write *Ode to The Mock Turtle* and *Ode to The Jabberwocky*.

#### **Walt Whitman**

American poet Whitman's work has been set extensively by composers. The imagery that he creates through his words brings the narrative to life. His poetry that is written from a first person perspective also allows for an internal monologue that can be organically adapted to solo vocal works, as in *As if a Phantom Caress'd Me*.

#### **Albert-Paul Granier**

Granier is perhaps the least well-known of the authors I have chosen to represent. I came across his work by chance when searching for French texts from the First World War, a topic requested by the mezzo-soprano who commissioned the cycle *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*. Granier's collection of poems was published in the book *Les Coqs et Les Vautours* in 1917, while he was fighting on the Western Front. The wording is direct, efficient and palpably descriptive. In sombre tone and carefully considered detail, yet without self-pity, he conveys the deep pain and regret at the damage of war. The emotion is clear from the text, which will naturally colour the tone of the voice. This is helpful to the singer when communicating a scenario of great gravitas. How the text is set, where it is placed in the voice and the mood conveyed through the phrasing are all essential compositional considerations to guide the singer in their interpretation.

## Conclusion

The role of women in society, sensuality, humour and the art of story-telling constitute the main themes and subject matter of this portfolio. The avenues of text-setting that I have explored, that of conventional narrative journey and phonetic fragmentation, encourage varying emotional responses and, apart from one song, *Come slowly, Eden*, I have set all of my unaccompanied vocal works with an emphasis on humour throughout, incorporating extended techniques.

## Chapter 4: Art Song

In this chapter, I will explore how I deal with text-setting and narrative in regards to my choice of texts, themes and subject matter in composition.

### Text setting and Narrative

I am largely conventional in my approach to text setting in art song. I enjoy the development of a scene, the exploration of a story, the painting of the image with words. I aim for clarity in communicating the meaning of text in a song. By contrast, in my unaccompanied vocal works, I often fragment texts and explore their phonic potential. This discussion I shall continue later in my chapter dedicated to unaccompanied vocal works, but for now I shall discuss two of my song cycles *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre* and *Incomprehensible to a Man* in relation to conventional text setting.

### **Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre** (text by Albert-Paul Granier)

‘Le Retour’ (‘The Return’ or ‘Back to Base’) from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre* follows the journey of the heavy guns being laboriously rolled back to their World War I base in the dark of the night. A rumbling in the accompaniment sets the scene and the voice enters in the depths of mezzo-soprano richness. The dark vocal colour creates an instant mood; the tone is full, thick and sincere, reflecting the text.

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is for the voice (A.), the middle for the piano (Pno.), and the bottom for the piano (Pno.). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The score starts at bar 7. The vocal line begins with a mezzo-soprano range, marked *mp* (mezzo-piano) and then *mf* (mezzo-forte). The lyrics are: "Les can-ons noirs, dans la nuit brune, s'en vont, très lourds,". The piano accompaniment features a rumbling bass line with accented chords, marked *mf* (mezzo-forte).

Ex. 4. ‘Le Retour’, bars 7-9, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

The voice remains here for a considerable time and only breaks free when it starts to describe the hissing of the wheels like angry snakes.

37 *mf*  
 A. comme des ser-pents en co lère, des ser-pents en co -lère,  
 Pno. *mf*

Ex. 4.1. 'Le Retour', bars 37-38, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

Granier uses short phrases without over-elaboration. My setting intentionally mirrors this, honouring Granier's text without fragmenting it. The only use of text extension is the humming motif in the low register that emphasises the rich colour of the mezzo-soprano voice. First the hummed 'n' of 'lune' is extended, followed by 'aire' from 'repaire' and lastly a return of the subtle hummed 'n' of 'demain'.

17 *hauntingly*  
*pp*  
 ...n...

Ex. 4.2. 'Le Retour', bars 17-18, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

*hauntingly*  
*pp*  
 ...e - aire...  
 (as in repaire)

Ex. 4.3. 'Le Retour', bars 24-25, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*



Granier also creates greater emphasis by repeating the adverb 'très' (very) which is a useful dental consonant for the singer to reiterate.

Ex. 4.4. 'Le Retour' bars 9-11, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

In bars 9 to 11 each repetition of the word 'très' is given the same pitch, reinforcing the adverb's purpose here; the guns are rolled *very* slowly, *very* heavily, *very* wearily. By using the same pitch and note value, with the single adjectives in between each time, this repeated word increases its value and becomes memorable. From the singer's perspective this is vocally satisfying, the repetitions act as an anchor point. This is a compositional technique that I will discuss later.

The poem *Nocturne* from the same cycle also features single repeated words. 'Dans' (in) is repeated several times, each time at the beginning of the phrase: 'in the night, in the forest, in the distance', which I have highlighted by setting the same triplet motif each time:

Ex. 4.5. 'Nocturne', bar 8

Ex.4.6. 'Nocturne', bar 13

Ex. 4.7. 'Nocturne', bar 22

(All from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*)

This motivic setting of repeated text provides a sense of familiarity. The first statement is unaccompanied; the piano then supports the second statement to enhance the soundworld that has been established.

In Granier’s setting there is a beautiful atmospheric quality to the mysterious night air. I set certain phrases as whispers because the phonal quality of the words inherently lends itself to depict the mystery of the night: ‘de mystères’ (with mysteries), ‘farouches et silencieuses’ (fierce and silent), and ‘Et s’y promènent, lents et flous’ (and walk, slowly and blurrily). The elegance of the poetry provokes a mysterious soundworld, particularly through the long vowels.

11 **pronounced whisper**

de mys-tères

Ex. 4.8. ‘Nocturne’, bar 11, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

19 **pronounced whisper**

fa-rouches et si-len-cieuses.

Ex 4.9. ‘Nocturne’, bar 19, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

46 **pronounced whisper**

et s'y prom-ènent, lents et flous; lents, lents...

Ex. 4.10. ‘Nocturne’, bars 46-49, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

This *sotto voce* quality allows a very contrasting colour to that of the fully sung text, creating a haunting effect and drawing the listener in. This complements the varying spatial images alluded to: the density of the forest, the expanse of the sky, the clearing in the woodland.

This song cycle was written for a specific mezzo-soprano with a powerful drive to the voice and a strong chest resonance. This cycle is certainly suited more to the dramatic mezzo with a steely colour. Unlike the *Three Sensual Songs* which focus on a sensual beauty, this cycle provides a drama of suspense and moments of force and aggression which are heightened by weight and drive in the vocal colour.

### **Incomprehensible to a Man** (text by Jane Austen)

I have very much taken into account Austen's own voice as a strong female figure and her direct manner of speech, as well as the bold statements she makes in response to the social politics of her time. Each piece is set with an individual character which reflects its own text:

#### **1. 'It is a Truth'**

'It is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage.' (*Emma*, chapter 8, 1816)<sup>1</sup>

'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' (*Pride and Prejudice*, chapter 1, 1813)<sup>2</sup>

Austen eloquently captures the division between the sexes and expected behaviour in society here. The first quotation outlines the assuredness of nineteenth century man, given his role in society as the barometer of both social and financial success. The second quotation highlights the fact that a man with money was expected to find a wife. These expectations of society were well documented by Austen and it is this blunt and yet eloquent use of text that appeals so greatly. In my setting, pitch and rhythm are limited and, after being presented in the opening phrase, are not expanded upon further. This

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1999) p. 3.

seeks to represent women's enforced conformity and limitation in society. In a recitative-like setting, the voice only has three pitches, to mirror the societal limitations. The phrase is not intended to be beautiful or overly expressive but statement-like, informed by the meaning of the text. The pace is steady and considered, the rhythm speech-like and the setting is through-composed without repeated text. There is little freedom in this piece although the wide vocal range reflects the voice (or woman) trying to escape convention but always being reined in again.

## 2. 'An engaged woman'

'An engaged woman is always more agreeable than a disengaged.' – *Mansfield Park*, chapter 5 (1814)<sup>3</sup>

'Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony.' – Jane Austen letter (1817)<sup>4</sup>

In today's Western culture the idea of a woman being frowned upon for her lack of marital status is seen as degrading, as is the belief that she is better off being financially supported by a man. In Austen's time, without a private income a woman had no possibility of working if she wanted to retain social respectability. My setting is intended to combine rhythmic significance with derision at the idea of female subservience. The song starts with a strong announcement: 'An engaged woman is', before moving instantly into a lower, punchy rhythmic section 'always more agreeable than a disengaged', simply alternating between pairs of notes. There is much motivic material that is used in a focussed way to highlight the straight-talking 'rules and regulations' nature of the text.

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2000) p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> A private letter written by Jane Austen to a Miss Fanny Knight, of Godmersham Park, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1817.

Voice *p*  
 al-ways more a-gree-a-ble than a dis-en-gaged.

Piano *p*

Ex 4.11 'An engaged woman', bars 3-4, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*

Voice  
 al-ways more a-gree-a-ble than a dis-en-

Pno. *p*

Ex 4.12 'An engaged woman', bars 19-20, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*

### 3. 'Of a Ministry'

'Of a Ministry pitiful, angry, mean,  
 A gallant commander the victim is seen.'

'Of a Ministry' is an extract from a longer poem by Austen, expressing her disapproval of the male dominated Clergy at the time, which focussed on social status and networking, and a desire for power and control.

From the start, this song has a rolling pulse and a sense of forward motion, almost lecture-like in presentation. The musical setting here takes particular rhythmic advantage of

the five syllables that form the beginning text, 'of a Ministry'. The natural speech rhythm is short and sharp. The singer immediately joins the rhythmic momentum by mirroring the triplet staccato pattern from the single bar of piano introduction. The vocal line imitates the rhythmic and melodic pattern of the piano's motive at a higher pitch, although relatively low in the voice. The low setting here allows a sense of seriousness in the vocal colour to complement the text. The song only rises in register for the voice when the text refers to 'the victim'.

#### 4. 'This Little Bag'

'This little bag I hope will prove  
To be not vainly made--  
For, if you should a needle want  
It will afford you aid.  
And as we are about to part  
'Twill serve another end,  
For when you look upon the bag  
You'll recollect your friend.'

This short poem, written by Austen in 1792, was placed inside a handmade bag that she gave as a gift to her friend.<sup>5</sup> A gift of kindness, woman to woman, free of the underlying sexism in the other songs, allows for a less strict setting. The phrase 'little bag' is repeated in the same motivic setting each time, an internally decorated melismatic line on the 'i' vowel with pitch to pitch glissando. The song sits in the middle of the voice and the text is simple. The comforting, gentle motif allows familiarity, in reference to the final line of the poem; a notable representation of the comfort of female friendship.

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<sup>5</sup> David Nokes, *Jane Austen: A Life* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998) p. 128.

## **Chapter 4a: Art Song:- Motivic material**

Over my years of PhD study, I have increasingly refined how I work with motivic structures by building individual character into pieces and creating clarity of structure, which, from the singer's point of view, achieves both a precision of style and aids physical recall.

The motive is a compositional device that I only really understood the full benefit of as I developed my deeper understanding of vocal composition during the doctorate. Alternating pitch patterns and internal decorations within the vocal line, for example, impact the internal physicality of voice production. Even individual intervals such as the rising perfect 5<sup>th</sup>s in a vocal line I have found to benefit the mechanism and integrity of how the voice can work to its advantage.

As my writing has progressed, I have become far more concerned with developing motivic material that generates a more coherent musical structure. A mixture of sweeping lyricism and rhythmic playfulness, my writing naturally possesses a singing quality. Occasional triadic sonorities with extensions, scalar patterns and arching lines feature alongside short, clearly defined motivic units so that a sense of connection is formed.

Tight-knit motivic technique has become increasingly important as a structural and developmental tool in my work. In vocal composition, of course, the text can dictate the motivic material. Repetition of a particular word or phrase may be enhanced by the composer, highlighting a particular emotion. To a singer, the physical memory of the body and larynx is beneficial and so I place much importance on familiarity and strength of connection that motivic writing brings to a vocal work. This is particularly significant to aid the singer's process in getting the music 'in the body'<sup>1</sup>.

As well as discussing general observations about commonly-used motivic units in my work, and frequently-used intervals or identifiable patterns, I will discuss how I have chosen to deal with material in the compositional process of a piece.

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<sup>1</sup> 'In the body' refers to the singer's experience of 'muscle memory' following a period of practice.

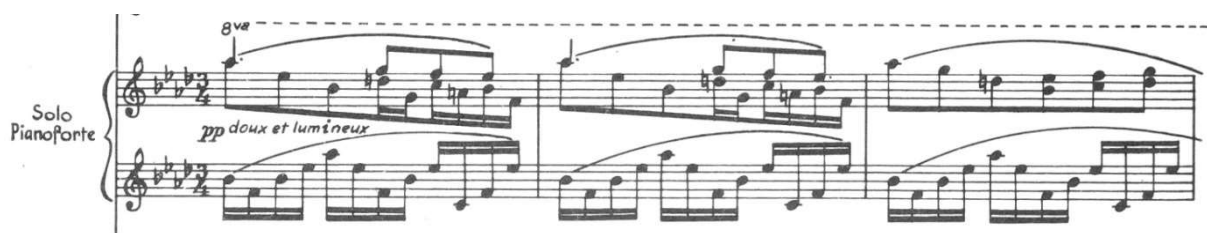
## Technical and motivic Influences

Observations in my own work show aesthetic influence by Tippett in regards to his favoured use of the perfect 4<sup>th</sup> as a melodic and harmonic feature. In the song *The Applicant*, where the interviewee for the 'job' of marriage is being vigorously interrogated, stacked fourths are used in a Tippett-like style. Also in Tippett's writing, the pattern of repeatedly returning to the same starting pitch in a theme is a musical technique that I have used in my writing as a practical device for the voice.

Melodically, I have found that the ascending perfect 5<sup>th</sup> is an interval that, particularly at the start of a theme, gives an energetic impetus. There is both technical and aesthetic significance to this feature. Alternating pitch patterns are another common compositional device in my vocal writing, as well as use of internal decoration in melodic lines, largely influenced by my own singing and study of Walton art songs.

## Melodic pitch centres

In my song *In Sultry Sun*, the melody regularly returns to the same note, creating a focal pitch that allows the voice a homing sensation for the muscle memory. As an aesthetic feature, this device is used by Tippett in his *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* where the same A flat repeatedly opens the theme.



The image shows a musical score for Solo Pianoforte, consisting of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The music is marked 'pp doux et lumineux'. The melody in the top staff starts on a note marked 'g<sup>ve</sup>' (G-flat) and features a recurring melodic motif that returns to this focal pitch. The bottom staff provides harmonic accompaniment with a similar rhythmic pattern.

Ex. 4.13. *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, bars 1-3, Tippett



For a singer, this compositional device is particularly helpful, allowing the vocal cords a familiarity of resonance for the focal pitch.

Ex. 4.14. *In Sultry Sun*, bars 5-13

Ex. 4.15. *In Sultry Sun*, bars 19-27

### Rising perfect 5<sup>th</sup>

The rising perfect 5<sup>th</sup> is a uniquely satisfying launch in the voice, similar to the natural physical lift that a springboard provides. The song 'When Man Enters Woman', from the cycle *Three Sensual Songs*, is characterised by the singer leading the line with this interval (ex. 4.16, 4.17 and 4.18). In each of these instances the material sits on the same pitches, reinforcing the melody.

Ex. 4.16. *When Man Enters Woman* b.23-25

Ex. 4.17. *When Man Enters Woman* b.39-40

Ex 4.18. *When Man Enters Woman* b. 60-62

'Le Ravin' from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre* also features the ascending perfect 5<sup>th</sup> in the opening phrase.

Ex. 4.19. 'Le Ravin', bars 1-2, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

### Alternating Pitch Pattern

In this composition portfolio, alternating pitch pattern is particularly important in the higher register of the voice, where the greater resonance allows for more of a dramatic impact.

In the song *The Applicant*, the voice alternates syllabically throughout the piece, for example from bars 18 to 24:

Ex. 4.20 *The Applicant*, bars 18-24

A syncopated setting of this repeating pattern is set to the words 'How can we give you a thing?', three times in succession. This repetition strongly reinforces the narrative,

emphasising the importance of the question. The third time, the vocal line is stretched over the pulse of the piano, creating a marked offbeat reinforcement of the question posed in the text. This is a strong area in the soprano voice which allows a more powerful intensity to the vocal colour.

Another example of a syncopated alternating pitch pattern is in bars 68-73 in the song 'When Man Enters Woman' from the Anne Sexton song cycle *Three Sensual Songs*. Again, I have set this alternating motivic pitch pattern in a strong vocal tessitura. In the phrase 'the woman opens her mouth with pleasure and swallows its stem', the word 'pleasure' is highlighted through repetition and alternating pitches, which adds pulse, swift pace and a musical representation of the repeated erogenous action.

68  
 plea - sure, plea - sure, o pens plea - sure, plea - sure, and and  
 mp mf p

Ex. 4.21. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 68-73, from *Three Sensual Songs*

This same motivic feature occurs also towards the end, on the sexual interpretation of the word 'rivers', connecting musically to the 'pleasure' motive.

85  
 ri - vers, ri - vers, ri - vers, pleas - ure ri - vers...  
 poco accel. f  
 poco accel.

Ex. 4.22. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 84-87, from *Three Sensual Songs*:

Another song in the same set reveals this same motivic idea of pivoting pitches. In 'Us', the voice alternates to the text of 'the buttons', using as the pinnacle pitch the same high G natural in *The Applicant* where the sweet spot of the voice lies.

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Us' from 'Three Sensual Songs'. It consists of two staves: Voice and Piano (Pno.). The voice part is in treble clef and features a melodic line with a staccato rhythm. The lyrics are: 'tons, the but- tons, un-did the, clothes but- tons, the but- tons, the but- tons and we'. The piano part is in bass clef and features a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes. The score is marked with a dynamic of *mp* (mezzo-piano) and includes a measure number of 67 at the beginning.

Ex. 4.23. 'Us' bars 67-70, *Three Sensual Songs*

Not only does the alternating staccato movement highlight the passage within the text when the buttons of the clothes are being undone, it also allows for a great musical and dramatic preparation to the next moment in time when the clothes are gone. It is a moment for the singer to enjoy playing with these pitches and gives the song a sense of build-up.

This alternating pitch idea, a regular feature in my work, is also used extensively by American composer John Adams (b.1947), in his opera, *Nixon in China* (1987)<sup>2</sup>. In the soprano aria 'I am the wife of Mao Tse Tung', sung by the character Chang Ch'ing, the voice alternates between two pitches on the word 'book' while the orchestra pulses in syncopation underneath:

<sup>2</sup> John Adams, *Nixon in China* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1987)

Ex.4.24. 'I am the wife of Mao Tse Tung', *Nixon in China*, bars 912-919, Adams

The soprano alternates between two pitches, while singing 'I speak according to the book', with repeating phrases, each becoming faster and adding to the power and insistence of the character's instruction. Adams recollects:

rather than set up small engines of motivic materials and let them run free in a kind of random play of counterpoint, I used the fabric of continually repeating cells to forge large architectonic shapes, creating a web of activity that, even within the course of a single movement, was more detailed, more varied, and knew both light and dark, serenity and turbulence.<sup>3</sup>

This repeating and alternating of two pitches is something I find very useful as a tool to create a succinct and memorable vocal line. The tritone in the example above enhances the severity of the music.

This alternating pitch pattern method is explored further in my unaccompanied vocal writing discussion in Chapter 5.

### Internal decoration

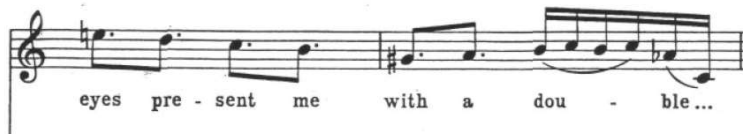
Finally, melismatic internal decoration within melodic lines is a component that plays an important part in the construction of much of my music. In Walton's song repertoire, the

<sup>3</sup> Adams, J. *John Adams on Harmonium* [<https://www.earbox.com/harmonium/>] [date accessed: 11/10/2018].

internally decorated melodic line is a regular feature. In his cycle, *Anon in Love*, the third song 'Lady, when I behold the roses' possesses beautiful internal decoration. The natural arching and ebb and flow of the vocal line creates a graceful beauty, as in the following examples:



Ex. 4.25. 'Lady, when I behold the roses', bars 5-7, from *Anon in Love*, Walton



Ex. 4.26. 'Lady, when I behold the roses', bars 12-13, from *Anon in Love*, Walton



Ex. 4.27. 'Lady, when I behold the roses', bars 17-18, from *Anon in Love*



Ex. 4.28. 'Lady, when I behold the roses', bars 21-22, from *Anon in Love*

In my own song *In Sultry Sun*, for voice and guitar, the vocal line features a long arching melismatic internal decoration on the words 'distance' and 'brilliance':

13 *mf* rall.  
 di - - - - - stance.  
*mf*

Ex. 4.29. *In Sultry Sun*, bars 13-18

27 *mf* *mp*  
 bril - - - - - liance.\_\_\_\_  
*mf* *mp*

Ex. 4.30. *In Sultry Sun*, bars 27-30

In the song 'Us' from the *Three Sensual Songs* Anne Sexton cycle, the voice soars up to the sweet spot of the soprano voice. This sustained pitch, combined with the 'ah' vowel allows the voice and pharynx to open to the most relaxed position. The melismatic decoration after the climax gently decorates the line with a weaving movement, not dissimilar to that in *In Sultry Sun*. Like the previous song example the descent of the line creates a very similar shape.

22 *f* *mp*  
 Voice light and\_\_\_\_  
 Pno. *f* *mp*

Ex. 4.31. 'Us', bars 22-24, from *Three Sensual Songs*

This melismatic descending line of internal decoration in the voice occurs again on the words 'rose' and 'gold':

Ex. 4.32. 'Us, bars 70-74, from *Three Sensual Songs*

Ex. 4.33. 'Us, bars 75-79, from *Three Sensual Songs*

In my unaccompanied repertoire the internal decoration on a melisma is used with a similar aim as with my accompanied repertoire: to embellish the thematic line and to give the voice an opportunity to flourish. This is in keeping with my admiration for the legato line that is required in *bel canto* singing.

In *Come Slowly, Eden* the text is used sparingly so that the voice can enjoy the soaring and plunging of the line. In bar 6, the melisma decorates the word 'lips' in a weaving ascent of the line, which is later repeated and extended:



Voice *mf*

Lips un-used to,

Ex. 4.34. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 6-7

Voice *mf*

Lips.

Ex. 4.35. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 18-21

Voice *f* *mf* *mp*

lips un-used to thee.

Ex. 4.36. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 22-26

Voice *f* *A tempo*

lips un-used to thee.

Ex. 4.37. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 46-50

Similarly to *Three Sensual Songs*, the repeating of such a pattern here allows the singer familiarity with the line and helps to clarify the musical structure.

In terms of the intervallic contour, the phrase that descends off the peak of the line in *Come Slowly, Eden* at bars 11 to 12 (Ex. 4.38) is similar in contour to bars 15 to 16 in *In Sultry Sun* (Ex. 4.29).

Voice *f* *mp*

thee lips un-used to thee. Come

Ex. 4.38. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 9-13

This is sympathetic to the mechanics of vocal phrasing as the descending legato line allows for the vocal chords to manage the change in air pressure as the pitch descends.

Elsewhere in my song repertoire, smaller moments of internal decoration appear, for example in bar 28 where the word ‘Jessamines’ is elaborated with triplet grace notes:

Voice

sip\_ thy\_ Je-ssa - mines,

Ex. 4.39. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 27-28

In the song ‘Nocturne’ from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*, my song cycle for mezzo-soprano, the melisma on the word ‘longs’ creates a sense of elongation in the word while enhancing the shape of the line.

40 *mp* *poco rit.*

Dans les loin - tains\_ du ciel, de longs\_ spec-tres sur-

*pp* as poss. *poco rit.*

8<sup>vb</sup>

Ex. 4.40. ‘Nocturne’, bars 40-43, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

## Chapter 4b: Art Song:- Voice and Accompaniment

### The role of accompaniment in art song

Trevor Hold suggests the following requirements for a successful art song:

- (1) The realisation of an apposite musical form which will illuminate and encompass the shape of the original text;
- (2) Fidelity to the interpretation of the text and to its declamation;
- (3) An imaginative (and therefore memorable) and well-shaped vocal line;
- (4) An accompaniment which is both idiosyncratic and illuminating to the text.<sup>1</sup>

Hold maintains that 'in art-song, the relationship between vocal line and accompaniment is crucial. The singer's role, because it is the conveyor of the words, must always be *prima inter pares* and the accompaniment should partner but never dominate the vocal line'.<sup>2</sup>

Hold's comments are true in the traditional sense of the art form; however constantly evolving approaches toward vocal writing have enabled contemporary song as a genre to explore the abstract, instrumental nature of the voice, without narrative text as an added communicator.<sup>3</sup> This will be discussed further in Chapter 5, in reference to my unaccompanied vocal music.

When considering accompaniment to the voice the composer has a number of choices to make: whether to support the sentiment of the text and the vocal line or whether to provide a different emotion altogether; whether to set the accompaniment as a subservient line, or one of equal importance. While colours and timbres of the voice are continually changing, text of any value alters the vocal tone. To define the role of the accompaniment, a composer must therefore choose whether the voice is to be highlighted, complemented or counter-narrated.

The majority of my songs are set for voice and piano, however additional settings in this

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor Hold, Parry to Finzi: Twenty English Song-composers, (Boydell Press, Suffolk, 2005) p.8

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> For further reading see Carol Kimball, *Art Song: Linking Poetry and Music*, chapter 1, (Hal Leonard Corporation, 2013)

portfolio are for soprano and classical guitar; and mezzo-soprano, clarinet and harp. My song accompaniments endeavour to complement the voice and act as a support and enhancement of the vocal colour and communication of text. Of course, doubling the vocal line, or using anchor points as pitch references provides the singer with solid support and metrical security. The harmonic underlay of a song will also change the colours of the voice by brightening or darkening the resonances. By contrast, the accompaniment can deliver the energetic impulse and activity of the piece, with the voice taking a less prominent role. An accompaniment has the ability to entirely change the perception of the vocal line.

### **The accompaniment as support for the voice**

In *The Applicant* the majority of the vocal line is doubled in pitch and rhythm, both strengthening and uniting the piano and voice with a single message: questioning the interviewee's fitness for the 'job' of marriage.

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'The Applicant', specifically bars 13 through 17. It consists of two staves: a vocal line on top and a piano accompaniment on the bottom. The vocal line is marked 'Forcefully mp' and contains the lyrics: 'Do you wear a glass eye, false teeth, or a crutch, a brace or a hook,'. The piano accompaniment is marked 'p' and 'mp' and features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords that supports the vocal line. The score includes bar numbers 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17.

Ex.4.41. *The Applicant*, bars 13-17

Likewise, in 'Of a Ministry' from the cycle *Incomprehensible to a Man*, the piano doubles the vocal line at pitch. Reflecting the natural syntax of the text, the rising and falling triplets are reinforced to add melodic and rhythmic strength to the punchy vocal line:

Voice:  $\text{♩} = 120$  Punched *mf* *f* *mp*  
 Of a Min-i-stry pit-i-ful, ang-ry, mean. Of a Min-i-stry

Piano:  $\text{♩} = 120$  *mp* *mf* *f* *mp*  
 Accompaniment with triplets and dynamic markings.

Ex. 4.42. 'Of a Ministry', bars 1-4, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*

Voice: *mp* *mf*  
 Of a Min-i-stry, of a Min-i-stry pit-i-ful, ang-ry, mean. Of a, of a Min-i-stry, of a, of a,

Pno.: *mp* *mf*  
 Accompaniment with triplets and dynamic markings.

Ex. 4.43. 'Of a Ministry', bars 9-13, from *Incomprehensible to a Man*

The title words 'Of a Ministry' are constantly repeated, and the effect of both parts working as one provides a great deal of clarity and unity between the two forces.

'When Man Enters Woman' from *Three Sensual Songs* balances directly-supported accompaniment with pitch anchors and moments of independence, rather than both the

voice and piano working in rhythmic unison. Before the voice enters, a clear and sparse pitch anchor is provided by the piano. This same idea is repeated in the bass clef in bars 57 to 62.

Ex. 4.44. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 21-25, from *Three Sensual Songs*

Ex. 4.45. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 57-62, from *Three Sensual Songs*

Much of the vocal line is supported by the accompaniment with octave doubling, as illustrated in bars 31 to 35:

Ex. 4.46. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 31-35, from *Three Sensual Songs*

On occasion, the voice is supported by a single, staccato piano chord at the start of the bar, as in bars 67 and 68:

Ex. 4.47. 'When Man Enters Woman', bars 67-70, from *Three Sensual Songs*

Pitch support is helpful for a singer not only in terms of providing security but also creating strong relationships between the voice and piano.

In 'Nocturne' from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre* the voice's entry note is harmonically prepared in a layered, sustained chord before the singer begins. Again, this is helpful for the singer in terms of pitching. From performance experience with harmonically 'unhelpful' introductions, I know how beneficial pitch preparation is for any singer who isn't fortunate enough to have perfect pitch.

5 *p legato*

Dans la nuit fourbe et four-mill -

*p*

Ped.

Ex. 4.48. 'Nocturne', bars 5-9, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

Supporting the voice through a preparatory chord occurs elsewhere in this song; at bar 16 the piano provides the singer's starting note of the phrase but despite the density of the harmony, the placement of the singer's note at the top of the chord makes it more audible:

16

d'in-nom-brables et vagues pre-sences s'a-verent -

*p*

8<sup>vb</sup>

Ped.

Ex. 4.49. 'Nocturne', bars 16-18, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

Elsewhere in the song the piano provides pitch support for the voice where needed, particularly before entries. Of course, accompaniments can be successful despite being unsupportive of the vocal line, but I write from a singer's perspective. In terms of unsupportive accompaniment writing that distances the relationship between vocal and secondary lines, the composer must consider the practical aspects of performance: whether



the singer has perfect pitch, how generous the rehearsal schedule is and so on.

### The accompaniment as background support

The piano introduction to 'Le Feu' opens up a glistening harmonic soundworld and although the opening pitch of the voice is not necessarily highlighted, it does allow for the pitch to be obtained from the busy imagery of the harmony. Here the voice calmly sits under the high atmospheric scalic accompaniment.

Ex. 4.50. 'Le Feu', bars 1-4, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

This idea is later repeated:

Ex. 4.51. 'Le Feu', bars 17-19, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

Compared to my English songs, there is very little doubling of the voice by the piano in this

cycle, particularly in ‘Le Feu’. Influence of French *mélodie*, particularly that of Debussy<sup>4</sup>, is evident here and my experience of singing this repertoire has undoubtedly affected my setting of these texts. The more impressionist influence here – a soundworld of linear shaping and elongating pulse, harmonic expansion and a greater sense of space and freedom – is something not explored until this point in the doctorate where I felt the confidence to do so.

A single moment of voice doubling occurs in this song in bars 23 to 24 where the text describes the smoke of the dry burning branches fading ‘with a silky sound’. The piano, an octave above, provides a higher resonance to the line. Doubling this graceful arching phrase just once in the song accentuates the mirroring feature in a unifying moment:

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Le Feu'. It consists of two staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef and the piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The score is marked with dynamics: *mf*, *mp*, *p*, *mp*, *mf*, and *p*. The text is: 'et les fait s'a-ffai-ser a-vec un bruit soy eux de jupe que l'on friosse ou de pas dans la neige.' There is a 'Rec.' (ritardando) marking at the end of the piano part.

Ex. 4.52. ‘Le Feu’, bars 23-27, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

Similar to the introduction in ‘Le Feu’, ‘Le Ravin’ from the same song cycle begins with a piano introduction of a repeated scalic movement under which the voice enters. The piano’s sextuplet pattern ascends each time from the octave above the singer’s starting note.

<sup>4</sup> Debussy *mélodie* examples here include the song cycle *Ariettes oubliées* (1887) and *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* (1898)



24 *poco rit.*  $\text{♩} = 54$   
*pronounced whisper*  
 comme des fous, se sont en-fuis par-mi les é-bou-lis de roches,  
*poco rit.*  $\text{♩} = 54$   
*ff*  
*p* *mf* *f* *mp*

Ex. 4.55. 'Le Ravin', bars 24-25, from *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*

## Conclusion

In my collection of art songs, the texts I have chosen to set have each carried a significant narrative; with the intention of defining each song's character. The art songs in this portfolio display tight motivic material, featuring alternating pitch patterns, internal decoration and pitch centres. By using these tools, I have written vocal music that aims to be both engaging and technically satisfying to sing.

My accompanimental writing is largely text-led, and aims to support the voice in pitching, pulse and rhythm. Pieces that have a strongly rhythmic melodic line in the voice, such as *The Applicant* and 'Of a Ministry' are largely reinforced through doubling to accentuate the pulse and energy. A song such as 'Le Feu' from the mezzo-soprano cycle *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*, in its rather more impressionistic style, requires only a harmonic reference to guide the vocal line in its own languid soundworld. With no tight pulse or snappy rhythm to reinforce, the voice is given freedom to ride the waves of piano undercurrent. This in turn affects the sound production – the vocal colour in *The Applicant* and *Of a Ministry* will be more immediate and concentrated, and the text naturally delivered in a more abrupt manner because of the powerful support in the piano. The choice of accompaniment thus shapes the singer's delivery of text and energy of sound.

## Chapter 5: Unaccompanied Vocal Music: exploring text and drama

### Solo unaccompanied vocal music

#### **Pitching**

Composing for unaccompanied voice requires particular consideration and care. As mentioned previously, singers need to find each pitch in context unless they have perfect pitch. In Judith Weir's acclaimed unaccompanied vocal work *King Harald's Saga* (1979), the voice is provided with certain pitch references and motives which act as harmonic anchor points. In this ten-minute opera in three acts, the solo soprano performs eight different roles, with Weir's score providing a clearly structured musical map. *King Harald's Saga* was commissioned by renowned vocalist Jane Manning, who wrote *New Vocal Repertory*<sup>1</sup> and its sequel, cataloguing an extensive collection of modern English song repertoire. Manning also premiered a number of my own unaccompanied vocal pieces at the Tête-à-Tête Opera Festival in London, including 'Rollercoaster', 'Ghost Train' and *Who is Geoffrey?*, all of which demonstrate extended vocal techniques.

When writing one of my later unaccompanied vocal works in the portfolio, *Come Slowly, Eden*, I found Weir's score to be very instructive for my own musical mapping in terms of how integral pitch centres are to the line and structure of the work. This allows singers to locate themselves within the vocal registers.

As in *King Harald's Saga*, my work is constructed from a sequence of linear phrases that possess a strong structural relationship. Discussing this work, Weir explains:

The larger scale organisation of those tonal centres is what I was thinking of and the sort of structure that it had... it could be harmonised in all sorts of ways. But for me, the significant thing is the kind of tone to which most of the phrases return and I think in many places in the piece that is very clear.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Manning, *New Vocal Repertory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> Judith Weir tape interview by Kelly Lynch, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2006 – sourced from [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=gradschool\\_majorpapers](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=gradschool_majorpapers) (p31)

The first act begins with a declamatory text, starting on a C5. The line climbs and returns to the same C natural on the word 'of'. The next few phrases also start from, and return to, that same C natural. In fact, the vocal line regularly returns to C natural throughout the act.

**King Harald's Saga, Act 1 (phrase 1, 2 and 3)**

Phrase 1: I, Harald by the grace of almighty God

Phrase 2: King of all the northern lands

Phrase 3: mightiest warrior that ever...

*f sempre*  
I, Ha—rald by the grace of al—migh—ty God , King—  
of all the north—ern lands, migh—tiest wa—rrior that e—ver

Ex. 5. Opening two lines of *King Harald's Saga*, Act 1, Weir

Similarly, my unaccompanied vocal work *Come slowly, Eden*, uses the technique of returning repeatedly to the same pitch through organically shaped lines; the A natural upbeat beginning the phrase each time and the G sharp downbeat concluding the phrase:

*p*  
♩=48 seductively  
Voice  
Come slow - ly, E - den. Come slow - ly, E - den.

Ex. 5.1. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 1-5

12 *mp*  $\text{♩} = 48$

thee. Come slow - ly, E - den. Come

Ex. 5.2. *Come slowly, Eden*, bars 12-15

### Humour as a central element to unaccompanied music

Humour is particularly present in my unaccompanied vocal pieces where extended techniques are utilised. *Theme Park* represents vocal interpretations of the physicality of different theme park rides, and *Alliterated Sugar Rush*, which vocalises my response to shapes of biscuits, are both intended as humorous cycles. ‘Rollercoaster’ in the former set, for example, is a direct realisation of the changing pacing and ascents and descents on an imagined rollercoaster ride. Even visually on the page, the music is clear in its objective; the fragments of sounds through the range explore vowel changes and colours through the voice. Onomatopoeic sounds rather than words, such as ‘ug a dog a ug a dog’ and ‘tucka tucka’ (to represent the mechanical sounds of the ride equipment) are light-hearted while being true to the creative soundworld.

The unaccompanied vocal piece *Who is Geoffrey?* on the other hand is a different kind of humour. The scene description reads thus: ‘An elderly lady, somewhat lacking in marbles, sits looking out of her window over the farm that once was. In her mind she still sees the animals but can’t find Geoffrey, her favourite. *Who is Geoffrey?*’ The piece follows a series of animal noises, confusion, chuckles, eating sounds, all with varied pacing. The sounds are deliberately deployed to create a sense of endearment and love for the woman existing in a time warp. When the cuckoo clock finally rings, she finds her Geoffrey.

Writing humorously comes more naturally to me in vocal music than instrumental, likely because of the wealth of facial expression, vocal colour and drama that a singer can add, on top of text. In my doctorate output, I have noticed a tendency to utilise humour in the

unaccompanied vocal setting, due to the freedom of expression that a singer can explore when not driven by an accompaniment or second instrument.

### Unaccompanied ensemble vocal music

#### Ode to the Mock Turtle

*Ode to the Mock Turtle*, extracted from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, is a beautiful example of Carroll's wit and childlike writing style. The humour he creates is incredibly engaging and possesses an enticing lunacy.

My setting of Carroll's text is intended to be humorous, which begins with a calm and elegant Monteverdian plainchant style of melisma. The word 'beautiful' is set over long arching legato phrases and as the polyphony builds a sudden homophonic chord is presented on the word 'soup'. This rather unexpected appearance of the word 'soup' adds light humour after the unassuming opening.

The image shows a musical score for SATB voices, starting at bar 14. The score is written in G major and 4/4 time. It features four staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are: "Beau-ti-ful. Beau-ti-ful. Sss soup, so". The music is characterized by long, arching legato phrases for the word "beautiful" and a sudden homophonic chord for the word "soup". Dynamics are marked as *p* (piano), *mf* (mezzo-forte), and *p* (piano) throughout the piece.

Ex. 5.3. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 14-26, SATB





colour in the top of the voice on ‘ee’ where the sound becomes thinner due to the smaller space for vocal production as already discussed. The effect is most pleasing and almost comedic with the mouse-like sound produced. Here is an example of purposefully less sympathetic writing for the voice to achieve a particular comic effect. In addition to the comedic value of the poem, Carroll uses some wonderful sound extensions to the vowels; his specific lengthening of vowels in the poem indicates how he wanted the pronunciation to be enhanced: ‘Beau—ootiful’, ‘Soo-oop’ and ‘e--e—evening’. As a matter of artistic licence, I added to this intention in my setting, with ‘beauww-tiful’ and ‘sssoupp’. The first example highlights to the singer to close the lips for overpronunciation of the ‘w’ sound in the word ‘beautiful’, also written as ‘u:’ in the International Phonetic Alphabet.

68

*overly expressive*

*mf* *gliss* *mp* *poco rall.*

Beauww - ti-ful soup! Beauww ti - ful

Beauww - ti-ful soup! Beauww-ti - ful

Beau -hoo ti-ful ss sou - pp! Beauww - ti-ful ssoup!

*overly expressive*

Beau -hoo ti-ful ss sou - pp!

Ex. 5.5. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 68-73, SATB

In terms of motivic connection between my art song writing and unaccompanied vocal pieces, a notable example in *Ode to the Mock Turtle* is a pattern of alternating pitches, akin to the style used in *The Applicant* and in the set *Three Sensual Songs*. In *Ode to the Mock Turtle* the alternating pitch pattern includes the repetition of not just two pitches but a

third, which sees an alternating semitone feature as a melodic addition to the soprano line. On the words 'cares' and 'fish', the soprano and alto alternate between an F sharp and F natural:

Ex. 5.6. *Ode to the Mock Turtle*, bars 86-89

### Unaccompanied solo songs and cycles

#### Sounds versus meaning: Exploring the phonetic sounds of the text

Ezra Pound (1885-1972), the American poet and critic, wrote three axioms on the setting of text in song:

First, that the words of a song sung should be intelligible.

Second, that words should not be unreasonably distorted.

Third, that the rhythm of poetry should not be unreasonably ruined by the musician setting it to music.<sup>3</sup>

While many follow Pound's axioms, composers at times approach texts more freely. Berio's

<sup>3</sup> Ezra Pound, in 1912, quoted in: Trevor Hold, *Parry to Finzi*, (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2005) p. 10.

*Sequenza III* challenges the relationship of the music and words by distorting text to a barely comprehensible quality. *Sequenza III* was famously written for the singer Cathy Berberian (1925-1983) with text by Markus Kutter<sup>4</sup>:

‘Give me a few words for a woman  
to sing a truth allowing us  
to build a house without worrying before night comes’<sup>5</sup>

Based on three core elements: text, gesture and expression, *Sequenza III* not only challenges the limits of sound production for the singer but also requires an uninhibited performance style.

In discussing Berio’s *Sequenza III*, John Potter describes it as ‘one of the milestones of twentieth-century ‘classical’ vocal writing’<sup>6</sup> while Janet K. Halfyard labels it as ‘probably the most written-about of any piece of contemporary vocal music.’<sup>7</sup> The work is in fact regarded as ‘a catalogue of what have become known as extended vocal techniques’<sup>8</sup> Another significant work in the repertoire for solo unaccompanied voice, which fragments the text, is *Récitations* by Georges Aperghis (b. 1945). ‘It is hard to imagine that it [*Récitations*] would have been written at all had her [Berberian’s] repertoire not been created by composers such as Berio’<sup>9</sup>. Janet K. Halfyard reminds us that *Sequenza III* was ‘written in the 1960s, a period that saw some extremely physical and provocative theatrical experimentation in the work of practitioners such as Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski’<sup>10</sup>, who challenged the concept of the fourth wall<sup>11</sup> in theatre.

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<sup>4</sup> Markus Kutter (1925-2005), Swiss writer and historian.

<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the text setting, see: Janet K. Halfyard, *Berio’s Sequenzas: Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis*, part 2 (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2007)

<sup>6</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Janet K. Halfyard, *Berio’s Sequenzas: Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2007) p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Janet K. Halfyard, *Berio’s Sequenzas: Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2007) p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Janet K. Halfyard, *Berio’s Sequenzas: Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2007) p. 111. Peter Brook (born 1925), author of renowned theatre book *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), Polish theatre director and theorist. Publications include *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Introduction by Peter Brook)(New York: Routledge, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> Fourth wall: the imaginary wall between the performers on stage and the audience

Such exploration appears in my compositions, as segments of text are disrupted and words are mutated beyond their original contextual meaning. In *A Cycle of Senior Moments*, *Alliterated Sugar Rush* and *Who is Geoffrey?*, the text has been fragmented in a bid to explore the sounds within the words. Fragmenting and distorting text allows the composer to achieve a deeper, more visceral level of meaning behind the text through using the voice and text more imaginatively.

Pound's third axiom - for a composer to follow the rhythm of the poetry – is often ignored by composers. By working against the natural rhythm of the text and inflection of the word, the modern composer can, find colour in their song that may not be present in the unset poem.

### **Theme Park**

In addressing the extended techniques in the sets *Theme Park* and *Alliterated Sugar Rush*, I took a slightly different approach. The use of vowels and consonants in 'Rollercoaster' are all literal phonations of my own interpretation of a rollercoaster ride. The sounds are onomatopoeic, expressing non-textual emotional responses. Every sound is used purely for its timbral effect rather than for its semantic meaning. Here it is particularly exciting to be able to have first-hand knowledge of specific colours within vowel sounds when used in certain placements within the vocal range. An 'ee' sound that is used at the top of the voice, as in this piece, changes as it descends through the voice. The 'ee' will be a small sound right at the top of the range - almost mouse-like if the singer sings a pure 'ee'. As the pitch descends on an 'ee', the vocal cords become less tight and the sound becomes fuller. Through such understanding, the vocal colour range is used to its full advantage.

### **Alliterated Sugar Rush**

A key element of *Alliterated Sugar Rush* is the alliteration of consonants. 'Cupçake', 'Buttunurg! Burrubon!', 'French Fancy' and 'Wugon Wuheel' are all very pleasing to enunciate, and my knowledge of vocal production allowed me to direct the movement of

the voice through the registers with great flexibility.

In the first piece ‘Cupcake’ the singer has several unvoiced explosive ‘k’ sounds – unvoiced consonants of course cannot be explored in the same way as voiced consonants as, without a vowel to give pitching, it will have no sound variation through the vocal range.

Ex. 5.7. ‘Cupcake’, bars 4-7, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*

Much of the phrase structure in this song is quite rhythmically regular to represent the neatness of a cupcake’s physical form.

‘Battenberg! Bourbon!’ particularly allows for the singer to enjoy the repeated ‘B’ consonant. The opening passage very clearly illustrates the extremes of range used in this piece: the upward arrow denoting notes to be sung as high as possible, the downward arrow vice versa. With every singer this will, of course, produce a different pitch but the idea of it being as high as possible relative to each individual singer’s voice is amusing in itself because pronouncing the text at the extremes of the voice is a significant challenge: it is very difficult to keep pure, unmodified vowels at the extremes of the voice. The effect is striking, particularly in the height of the voice where the vocal cords are under greater air pressure so that a very specific sound quality is produced. The line shaping here is angular to hint at the cuboid shapes of the respective cake and biscuit.

Ex. 5.8. ‘Battenberg Bourbon’, bars 32-36, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*

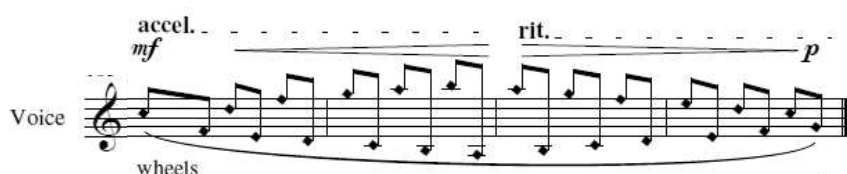
In contrast, 'French Fancy' largely explores vowel usage. A long phrase of staccato semi quavers on the 'e' vowel results in quick phonation and a playfulness in the sound. A number of *glissandos* also explore the sound modifying through the range. In bar 61, for example, a high descending *glissando* follows a natural vowel transition; this 'ee' will gather warmth as the pitch descends, adding interest in the vocal timbre.



Ex. 5.9. 'French Fancy', bars 61-64, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*

As mentioned, in relation to breath control, the rapid detached movement in this song allows the singer to 'bounce' the voice. This re-engaging of the diaphragm, the support mechanism, is aided by the glottal stop that allows the production of each vowel to be clear and consistent. The passage requires a lighter approach, which colours the flexible movement.

In the final song, 'Wagon Wheels', the voice will naturally glide through the contrary motion passages and the vowel will naturally modify through the outer peaks of pitch in bars 108 to 109. The continual shift in vocal register complements the widening melodic shape in the middle of the phrase.



Ex. 5.10. 'Wagon Wheels' bars 108-109, from *Alliterated Sugar Rush*

The word setting and text fragmentation in this set allows for natural distortion (as opposed to enforced modification<sup>12</sup> of a vowel) and changing vocal colour. Ideally, this set should be performed by a lighter voice with a less heavy vibrato to allow for a cleaner sound production. A voice of this type will provide clarity in the melismatic passages where a vowel is explored through several alternating pitches.

### ***Cycle of Senior Moments***

This cycle comprises three songs that illustrate how dementia can affect the mind. The texts are all based on true stories told by an elderly gentleman. These songs are not representative of seniority in its downfall, rather it represents the beauty of the imagination, the creative mind and the idea of the familiar. In the first song 'At the Savoy', the gentleman is in his own sitting room yet he is convinced he is at the Savoy Hotel and he is amazed that around the room he can see items familiar to him. The second song 'What is that Woman?' details the gentleman's shock reaction to his cleaner's presence in his flat. He does not recognise her and believes her to be a total stranger. She has, in fact, been attending on him for decades. In the final song 'Take me to Tony's', the elderly man hails a taxi and demands to be taken to 'Tony's' for a haircut. As the song progresses we discover that his hairdresser is near Tony Blair's house and he presumes that by yelling 'Take me to Tony's', the taxi driver will know where to go. Of course, the driver is as much in the dark as the audience and it takes the journey of the piece to find out where exactly this chap needs to go.

The three songs in this cycle contain a minimal amount of text, which is extensively repeated, explored and decorated, giving an insight into this elderly gentleman's mind. Each piece follows an account in the first person, as if it is happening in the present tense. This perspective allows for a much more active delivery of the narrative while the singer is living and breathing the drama in front of us, unravelling the series of thoughts as they happen. These three pieces could almost be referred to as small theatrical *scenas*, existing in the realms of my portfolio between art song and chamber opera.

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<sup>12</sup> Vowel modification is the opening up of certain vowels to allow the singer more comfort and giving a rounder, more pleasing tone. See appendix 1. For further reading of vowel production, see the *International Phonetic Alphabet* at [https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/sites/default/files/IPA\\_Kiel\\_2015.pdf](https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/sites/default/files/IPA_Kiel_2015.pdf).



In this set there is much play of the voice throughout the range with note-heads denoting pitch as high or low as possible. The first song 'At The Savoy' highlights the word 'greeted' by placing it high in the voice, repeating it with differing dynamics and allowing the 'ee' [i] vowel to colour the line. Termed as a 'close front unrounded vowel'<sup>13</sup> because of where it sits in the sound production mechanism, it gives a very different colour to rounded vowels in the back of the throat. This 'ee' vowel is singled out and repeated which requires an almost glottal stop to block the sound each time and allow for a restart of the same vowel. The fast working of the internal sound mechanism here adds an energised quality that heightens the moment dramatically.

When repeated again, the word is set melismatically at first so that the vowel is continued rather than being constantly reinforced. Then the 'ee' vowel is turned into 'hee' to add an extra explosive aspect into the sound. The next focus word for exploration is 'incredible' which is set to an internally falling and rising line through the range; the open 'e' vowel of course allowing for a sense of space in the voice.

The text in all three songs of *Cycle of Senior Moments* denotes the structure. 'At the Savoy' begins with the captivating sequence 'No, stop, listen' which later returns following a faster-paced, angular middle section. The listener is led on an arch-like journey, musically and dramatically, and as the story again becomes familiar, the setting becomes slower-paced and calmer.

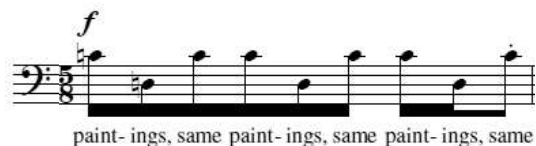
Here, a brief moment to remark on one of the motivic features in this song, draws comparison to both the art song discussion on alternating pitch patterns and the example earlier in this same chapter from *Ode to the Mock Turtle*. The following examples illustrate two moments in 'At the Savoy' where repeated text follows the alternating of the voice between two pitches:

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<sup>13</sup> The 'ee' sound is phonetically written as the symbol [i]. See [IPA Chart with Sounds | International Phonetic Alphabet Sounds](http://www.internationalphoneticalphabet.org/ipa-sounds/ipa-chart-with-sounds/) [www.internationalphoneticalphabet.org/ipa-sounds/ipa-chart-with-sounds/]



Ex. 5.11 'At the Savoy', bars 38



Ex. 5.12. 'At the Savoy', bar 49

The alternating pitch pattern motive also occurs in the same piece, in a melismatic setting:



Ex. 5.13. 'At the Savoy' bars 22-23, *Cycle of Senior Moments*

In both examples in this song cycle, the character emphasises the statement in the story and the alternating of the same pitches draws attention to the otherwise suddenly stationary moment in time of the drama.

The second song 'What is that Woman?' enjoys a similar arch-like journey; the beginning and end featuring the title text. The central section in this song explores a slightly more contemplative moment rather than the angry and frustrated outburst of the start: also in this middle line, the linguistic workings of the brain are explored, as the character explosively reverts to his Czech mother tongue.

The third and final song of the set, 'Take Me To Tony's', has, like the first song, a slower and more spaciouly paced start which is mirrored at the end with a similar arch-like structure. The middle section, where the elderly gentleman begins to panic about his hair needing to be cut, is far more rhythmically adventurous. Taking advantage of the verbs 'needs' and 'trim' the fast altering text combination allows for the singer to use quick enunciation between the bottom and top of the voice.

Again, an alternating pitch pattern motive is used in the form of a repeated pivoting figure to the repeated phrase 'Tony's to Tony's, near Tony's':

31 *f*

To-ny's to To-ny's, near To-ny's to To-ny's, To-ny's, To - ny's, To-ny's, To-ny's, trim,

Ex. 5.14. 'Take me to Tony's', bars 31-32, from *Cycle of Senior Moments*

### Conclusion

When writing for unaccompanied voice, various factors need to be considered. First and foremost is whether specific pitches or approximate pitches are being scored. If the former, the composer should evaluate how to guide the singer through the piece as perfect pitch is never guaranteed.

Extended techniques and text fragmenting have been a major focus in my unaccompanied vocal pieces, and humour has played an important part in the majority of these settings. Whilst I have explored both solo and ensemble vocal composition in the unaccompanied field, I have also endeavoured to bridge the gap with the music theatre works by adding the theatrical element into a number of my unaccompanied vocal scores. The piece *Who is Geoffrey?* and the cycles *Theme Park* and *Cycle of Senior Moments* encompass a staged element where the narrative is performed in the first person. This added level of acting allows an immediacy of each scenario and in *Who is Geoffrey?* and *Cycle of Senior Moments* in particular, the singer is able to embody the character with the added acting component.

## **Chapter 6: Musical drama**

### *Long Lankin and A Bed for the Night*

#### **Long Lankin**

*Long Lankin* was the first chamber opera I completed for this portfolio. The commission came from Tête-à-Tête Opera Festival in London<sup>1</sup> with a specification for a piece of musical drama of circa ten minutes and adaptable for any performance space (indoor or outdoor). The performing forces were two singers (lyric soprano and high, light baritone), accordion and cello. Rehearsals were held in public and the performers learned the music during these working sessions. All performances were conducted, fully staged and increasingly costumed. The production was assembled under the supervision of the festival director, Bill Bankes-Jones, who also stipulated that the score would be most effective for these purposes without fixed stage directions.

I chose the folklore-based subject matter because the composition brief detailed the need for accessibility to both adults and children. The piece was also intended to appeal to members of the wider public, who would see the story being rehearsed and performed in different outside areas. The term 'audience' is here flexibly defined because, largely, individuals would not be intending to attend a performance, but would be drawn to the spectacle. As a professional singer I have experience of performing in public, non-venue-specific spaces and I understand the satisfaction of capturing people's attention. Thus, the brief informed my compositional process and methodologies.

The tale in original form is poetic verse dating from 1775.<sup>2</sup> Various later adaptations exist but it is from the 1968 version by Martin Carthy that my libretto is most closely

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<sup>1</sup> Tête-à-Tête Opera Festival was founded in 1997 by Artistic Director Bill Bankes-Jones as a platform to commission new works. <https://www.tete-a-tete.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> The first written version of the tale to be published was in Percy Papers, within an anthology collated by Bishop Thomas Percy of Dromore, County Down, Ireland.

constructed<sup>3</sup>. Various folksong versions of this tale can also be found in the 1976 anthology *The Singing Tradition of Child's Popular Ballads*<sup>4</sup>.

Long Lankin is a stonemason who has worked tirelessly on Lord Wearie's house without the payment in return that he was promised. Penniless and angry, Long Lankin seeks revenge, and with the aid of the False Nurse (wet-nurse) violently murders the daughter and grandchild of Lord Wearie. The False Nurse escapes, ridden with guilt and remorse, however Lankin flees without repentance.

In the various versions of the tale, two endings to the story exist: 1.) Lankin is said to have been chased by soldiers and strung up from a tree in the forest and 2.) Lankin is overridden with guilt and hangs himself from a tree. It is the latter version that the ending of my adaptation implies. The plot can be carried by the two main characters alone, negating the need for additional cast numbers. I also decided that the piece would begin at the dramatic highpoint of the story, just as the killings have occurred.

The first text of the piece, 'blood', is high and loud in the strong head register of the soprano voice, giving a dramatic opening impact and immediately setting the scene.

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<sup>3</sup> *Long Lankin* variations: <https://mainlynorfolk.info/lloyd/songs/longlankin.html>

<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Harris Bronson, *The Singing Tradition of Child's Popular Ballads* (Princeton University Press, 1976) p. 240.

Musical score for "Long Lankin" bars 1-9. The score includes parts for Soprano (False Nurse and Child Ghost), Baritone (Long Lankin), Accordion, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked "♩=132 Vigorously". The Soprano part features lyrics: "Bloo(d)! Blood! Blood! Blood! Blood!" with dynamic markings *ff* Panicked, *fp*, *f*, and *p*. The Baritone part features lyrics: "I have sought my re-venge on LordWear-ies, Lord Wear-ies" with dynamic marking *f* defiantly. The Violoncello part includes markings like *arco*, *snap pizz.*, and *arco*.

Ex. 6. Long Lankin, bars 1-9

I made a conscious decision to avoid extended techniques in this piece in order for the text setting to complement the archaic quality of the story. The opening word 'blood' is repeated numerous times, changing dynamics and switching through the vocal registers, capturing the audience's attention. The open vowel here allows full-bodied sound to project the voice and the phonation of the vowel (essentially an 'ah') resembles a yell. The vowel is important here when combined with register and dynamic level which is used to convey the appropriate emotion. As the text progresses, a conversational style develops

between the two voices, supported by a largely antiphonal texture between the accordion and cello, which mirrors much of the stylistic material of the two vocal characters.

I had been advised that the baritone felt very comfortable singing at the top of his range which allowed me greater freedom of musical expression in that register, particularly in the final few bars where the music is largely above the staff. At fortissimo dynamic, with a slight vowel modification by the singer to elongate the naturally wider vowels such as ‘stand’ and ‘in’, the dramatic impact is at the fore because of the higher frequencies in the voice at this pitch.

Long Lankin gives the impression that his next action is to hang himself from a nearby tree. We do not see the hanging take place.  
 accel. . . . .

287

Sop. *ff*

Bar. *ff*

Accord. *f*

Vc. *fff*

I stand in a hell of my own ma - king. There is no life for me with this haunt-ing guilt.

accel. . . . .

Ex. 6.1. *Long Lankin*, bars 287-290

Dramatic effect can be gained not just by setting text loudly or at the top of the voice but in pacing and shaping. When the soprano embodies the murdered child and sings ‘beware Long Lankin that lives in the moss, beware Long Lankin that lives in the hay’ (bb 91-102 and repeated at bb 149-157) there is a sudden 3/4 crotchet pacing, supported by the ethereal background pianissimo of the cello. This is then paired with the accordion at the repeat, playing a slow version of the nursery rhyme ‘This Old Man’ with the cello shimmering

underneath.

148 *p* Again, comatosed expression

Sop. Be-ware Long Lan-kin that lives in the moss. Be-ware Long Lan-kin that lives in the

Bar. *ff*

Accord. *p* *ff* *pp*

Vc. *p* arco molto sul pont.

Ex. 6.2. *Long Lan-kin*, bars 148-156

The vocal line of these two phrases ascends slowly, calmly and quietly up through the middle register of the voice to the top which allows the phrase to naturally open out as the voice ascends. Directing the voice to sing in a slightly comatosed state withdraws any unnecessary vibrato from the sound and creates a ghostly vocal effect. The accordion and cello are working together to provide alternate melodic material from the voice. Allowing the accordion the higher melody line of the nursery rhyme with a second line rising in the bass, the voice provides an almost background presence, synonymous with the ghostly character.

From bar 105 the accordion also displays the triplet motive that was first presented by the soprano at bar 7, in addition to the nursery rhyme tune. This triplet movement is a constant reference to the image of the bloody stains of murder.



102

Sop.

Bar. *pp* Nervously, half spoken  
Who's there?

Accord. *f* *ff* *p*

Vc. *f* ord. *pp* sul tasto

Ex. 6.3. *Long Lankin*, bars 102-107

The baritone adopts this triplet motive upon the realisation of his crime, when he finally realises the severity of his actions:

213  $\downarrow$  132 With drive

Sop.

Bar. *f*  
Mur-dered two in - no - cents, two in - no - cents, Mur-dered two in - no - cents,

Accord. *f*

Vc.  $\downarrow$  132 With drive  
*f* col legno batt.

Ex. 6.4. *Long Lankin*, bars 213-214

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the dark and sinister side to folklore and nursery rhyme has a strong appeal and here I was able to detail the score with a disturbing undercurrent in the

child ghost scenes. In the following example, the F major harmony of the nursery rhyme in the accordion upper line is partnered with a disconcerting waltzing triplet accompaniment in second inversion C sharp minor. The ominous affect provokes a haunting image comparable to an old abandoned circus or the ubiquitous filmic horror scene involving the empty room of the child.

108

Sop. *Slightly psychotically* *p Calmly*  
Come down pret-ty la - dy, Come

Bar. *f Angry, nervous*  
Who's there?

Accord. *p* *pp*

Vc. *ord.* *sul pont.* *p*

Ex. 6.5. *Long Lankin*, bars 108-114

In terms of vocal ensemble in this piece, there is very little that unites the two characters; moments of textural antiphony and hocketing are present, where one character may respond to the other or the rhythmic momentum of the music is passed between the voices, but the soprano and baritone are two very strong, individual characters very much with their own identities. In their opening lines, in Ex 6., the False Nurse and Long Lankin are in conversation but rather than directly answering the shocked statement of the Nurse, 'Blood in the kitchen, blood in the hall!', Lankin replies with 'I have sought my revenge on Lord Wearies' as though he in his own world of satisfaction for a job well done. His attitude is self-assured and complacent towards the deaths while the False Nurse is shocked, panicked and terrified. While their responses to the situation are incongruent, Lankin nevertheless adopts the triplet motive of the False Nurse to signify to the listener that he is referring to the same subject matter; the murders.

The dramatic pacing of this piece is brisk; there are essentially no arias that stop the progression of the drama while reflecting the mood – a fundamental principle behind the operatic aria. Much of the vocal lines are recitative-like. The soprano sings the majority of the key melodic lines as the ghost of the child, the simplicity of which represent the purity of the child’s soul. The part of Long Lankin, however, is largely declamatory.

The following examples illustrate the declamatory quality to much of Long Lankin’s role: rather than sweeping lines of lyricism or appealing melodies, his proclamations are delivered largely through repeating pitches or large angular leaps. In bars 33 to 35 the voice is accompanied by a sparse accompaniment:- the low cello *tremolo* alternating in dynamic between *subito piano* and *subito forte*:

33

Sop.

Bar.

Accord.

Vc.

Long Lankin states his case, as though testifying at the murder trial

*mp*

I, the hon'ra-ble stone-ma-son have er-ect-ed his hea-ven-ly home while he's left me un-paid and pen ny-less!

*sub. p* *sub. f* *sub. p* *sub. f* *sub. p* *ff*

snap pizz.

Ex. 6.6. Long Lankin, bars 33-35

This repeated pitching is used less intensively at other points in Lankin’s line, for example in bars 83 to 85, where this idea of the declamatory style continues:

83

Sop. of your days, the rest of your days, your vic-tims.

Bar. **To False Nurse**  
I have no use for you now. You are a hin-\'drance. Leave! **ff**

Accord. *p*

Vc. arco *mp* snap pizz. arco over pressure *fp*

Ex. 6.7. *Long Lankin*, bars 83-85

The intensive repeating of pitches returns in greater realisation again, at bars 278 to 280, almost as though he is reading his rights to himself or confessing his wrongdoings:

278

Sop.

Bar. *mp* *mf*  
I am not wor-thy to build a myr-iad of hou-ses for you. I have sto-len your life-time's trea-sure. *p*

Accord. *p* B.S. gradually to as fast as poss.

Vc. *fp* *fp* *f* *ff*

Ex. 6.8. *Long Lankin*, bars 278-280

In contrast to incessant repeating of pitches, Lankin's vocal writing also displays lines of challenging leaps to enhance the drama of his emotional turmoil, as in bars 13 to 15, and in bars 179 and 181:

Bar. *fp* *f*  
we are e-ven now e-ven, Lord Wear-ies and I\_\_\_\_\_

Ex. 6.9. *Long Lankin*, bars 13-15

Bar. *f*  
Stop this non-sense! Stop this non sense!

Ex. 6.10. *Long Lankin*, bars 179-181

Moments of energy contrast are important in the pacing: the soprano provides the heightened sense of drama right from the start of the piece while she is the False Nurse and switches to a suddenly calm manner when she re-enters the drama embodying the ghost of the murdered child. An instant contrast in manner allows for an arresting scene change. To a direction of 'comatosed expression' the soprano line is without drama, without aggression, without volume and without fast pacing. The stillness creates an ethereal, unworldly quality. The haunting, ascending melody line of the Child Ghost delivers the first sense of simple tune. As Long Lankin becomes aware of the ghost's advancing presence, his outwardly voiced expressions are minimal; he is entranced with fear. The ghost sings a plaintive tune, 'Come down pretty lady':- this time rather than a haunting voice from the ethers, the soprano is directed to sing 'slightly psychotically' with text that bewilders, as though the child is still alive:

Ex. 6.11. *Long Lankin*, bars 114-118

In comparing my approach towards this piece of musical drama to the song repertoire I have produced over the past few years, I have noticed certain similarities in my vocal writing and accompaniment. The motivic idea of pivoting between two notes, mentioned earlier in chapter four, occurs in similar design in this short opera. The following example exhibits the word ‘what’ being repeated, from bar 208 to 209:

Ex. 6.12. *Long Lankin*, bars 208-209

At each occurrence, this singular text is set to pairs of ascending pitches. Once more, the text is reinforced by the singer and the idea of using the same pitch pattern allows a focus on the text and drama which here concentrates on Long Lankin questioning his own actions.

Like a number of the song settings, there is nominal line doubling and pitch references are only placed where necessary. Those moments in the piece, where the vocal line is doubled, is typically in a bid to reinforce the vocal account. Significant instances that illustrate this

doubling, and motivic repeat, include bar 74, to the text ‘pricked and poked him’ and later at bars 174 to 178 for ‘pricked and poked me’:

Ex. 6.13. *Long Lankin*, bars 74-76

Ex. 6.14. *Long Lankin*, bars 174-178

At the top of the soprano’s strong head register, the alliteration of the ‘p’ consonant each time increases the distress of the character, and unifies the message of the False Nurse and Child singing ‘pricked and poked him/me’.

### *A Bed for the Night*

In my children's chamber opera *A Bed for the Night* I have been influenced by specific works in the orchestral/operatic genre, particularly *Peter and the Wolf* (Op. 67) by Serge Prokofiev (1891-1953), with the idea of musically representing different characters through certain instrumentation and thematic material. I have also been influenced by the fragmented use of scenes that swiftly pass from character to character in Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*. I have sung in a number of children-appropriate operas, such as *Hansel and Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck, but the most influential to me personally, has been *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Will Todd which premiered in 2013 at Opera Holland Park and transferred to the Royal Opera House Linbury Studio in 2015. It is Todd's simplicity of writing and individual musical style associated to each character that gives this clarity and contrast between the characters. The Caterpillar, for example, sings a low bluesy number with a swung rhythm while the singing Drink-Me bottle displays high coloratura. All individual moments are short and the entire orchestra and cast and audience physically move from one scene to the next, aided by 'travelling music' from the accordion. Not only does this keep the younger audience members attentive but adds to the feeling that the audience really are going on this journey with the characters. Indeed, renowned Russian theatre practitioner Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) once stated that 'the creative person remains a big child to the end of his days, and if he loses his ability to communicate directly with universal feelings then he is no longer an artist'.<sup>5</sup> This is an ideal I aspire to. Prokofiev certainly had an affinity with his 'inner-child' and he had a clear idea of how he wanted to differentiate the animals in *Peter and the Wolf* using his instrumental colours:

It must all arise from the concrete, from opposites and from impressions:  
wolf – bird, bad – good, big – small. Sharply contrasting characters must  
have correspondingly contrasting sound-colours, and every role must have  
its leitmotiv.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sergei Prokofiev. *Dokumente, Briefe, Erinnerungen*, ed. S. I. Schlifstein, p. 485

<sup>6</sup> Wie das Märchen "Peter und der Wolf" entstand, in Sergei Prokofiev, *ibid.*, p. 480



Although Prokofiev's piece is interspersed with moments of narration, a foreword in the score instructs each of the instruments to play their character theme before the performance begins so that the children in the audience are able to identify each of them individually. The bird is characterised by the high decorated flute theme, the cat the low detached clarinet, Peter the sprightly violin melody with underlying strings, and so on. Each character in the story is unmistakably identifiable through its own personalised musical representation.

In my own work, *A Bed for the Night*, I have taken inspiration from Prokofiev's approach to differentiating between the characters. The Crane is represented by high woodwind: flute and clarinet in B flat, working as a unit. The Bear is supported by low cello and accordion and the Old Man by clarinet, accordion and cello. Rather than the very literal approach that Prokofiev takes with direct instrumental representation, my method is to allow the instrumental ensemble to combine sonorities in order to enhance the musical character under the voice. While Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* contains no staging element, I am able to represent the characters visually as well as audibly with singers directed in the roles. Thus, individual representation of a character through a sole instrument is not a method here that I needed to employ.

*A Bed for the Night*, based on the short story by English author Joan Aiken (1924-2004), is an imaginative account of four travellers searching for somewhere to stay for the night. On their quest, the travellers climb a hill and meet four characters at different points along the way: the Crane, the Bear, the Old Man and the Kind Lady who sends them on their quest to find the egg. Once they reach the top of the hill and have their quest given to them, the travellers descend and pass the same characters, in reverse order, on the way down. This reverse order is, again, reflected in the music through the representative instrumentation in reverse order.

In my opera I have endeavoured to create an identity for each scene while allowing an overall stylistic unity. Each character has its own melodic material, rhythm and energy.

In turn, each character is asked whether they have any room for the night and each request and response is musically coloured to the relevant character. Structurally, I have labelled

this the 'asking music' which is sung by the travellers and the 'character response' which is sung by the mezzo-soprano.




Character	Score Excerpt	Bar Numbers
1. The Crane		Bars 17-18
2. The Bear		Bars 55-56
3. The Old Man		Bars 88-91
4. Kind Lady		Bars 163-166

Fig. 4. Table of 'asking music', *A Bed for the Night*




Character	Text	Score Excerpt	Motivic Feature
1. The Crane	'ka' 'be off with you' (hiss)		Alternating Major 3rds
2. The Bear	'grr' 'get out of here' (hurumph)		Pairs of descending semitones in ascending line
3. The Old Man	'away I say' (yawn)		Descending tritones

Fig. 5. Table of 'character response(s)' rejecting the travellers, *A Bed for the Night*

Between each scene is also a short episode of travelling music which represents the movement of the travellers from one location to the next. This motivic music is upbeat, with

a strong pulse and predominantly accordion-led with acoustic guitar joining on the staccato off-beats. The travelling music also represents energy-level and mood:- the higher the travellers climb, the higher in register the music becomes, referencing altitude, and the slower the tempo becomes, the lower the energy of the travellers. The basic format of the travelling music is illustrated in bars 9 to 10:

Ex. 6.15. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 9-10

The following example represents the travellers briskly heading back up the hill having rescued the lady's egg from the Crane's nest.

Ex. 6.16. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 346-347

The structure of *A Bed for the Night* resembles an arch, the music representing the journey of the travellers, with a palindromic element.

Much like Ravel's opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, this little chamber opera adopts the idea of each character taking the lead in a series of short scenes which move swiftly from one to

the over. Unlike much verismo or late nineteenth-century Italian opera, there is no dwelling on emotion of the moment for lengthy periods of time; the music propels the story onwards with swift action.

The centre of the arch-like form is the single aria that takes place in the piece. This is essentially a 'quest' aria where the Kind Lady (mezzo-soprano) instructs the four travellers to find the missing egg. The writing here is full in the instrumental accompaniment and adds weight to the sincerity of the moment. The repetition of the key phrase 'find it' in this aria highlights the importance of the task in the narrative. The phrase consistently starts from the same high F sharp throughout the first (bars 202 to 207) and second sequence (bars 232 to 235). In the third sequence, at bar 251-256, the pitches are lower and sustained for longer, now that the travellers are contemplating the plan:

M.S. *ff*  
 find\_ it! find it! find it! find it! and

Ex. 6.17. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 202-207

M.S. *f*  
 find\_ it! find it! find\_ it! find\_ it!

Ex. 6.18. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 232-235

M.S. *pp*  
 find\_ it! find\_ it! find it!

Ex. 6.19. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 251-256

As the Lady begins describing the shape and colour of the mislaid egg, the vocal line sits in strong head register which allows the mezzo-soprano to achieve a full sound that resonates through the melismas. Once the travellers reunite the Lady with her egg, their music draws

much motivic material from previous moments of narrative importance; their repeat of the phrase ‘stolen it’, at bars 272 to 274, for example is a reference to the Old Man’s theft of the egg, as referred to by the Lady initially:

M.S. 195  
 some-one has sto-len it, some-one, sto-len it, some-one has sto-len it, sto-len it, sto-len,

Ex. 6.20. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 195-99

T. sto-len! sto-len! sto-len! sto-len!  
 T. sto-len! sto-len! sto-len!  
 Bar. sto-len it! sto-len it! sto-len it! sto-len, sto-len, sto-len  
 Bar. sto-len it, sto-len it! sto-len it! sto-len it! sto-len, sto-len, sto-len

Ex. 6.21. *A Bed for the Night*, bars 272-274

As the four travellers descend back down the hill they pass the Old Man, the Bear and the Crane, in reverse order to previously. Again, each character is individually referenced through a variation on their musical material at (fig. 5).

Once the travellers have rescued the egg and presented it to the Lady at the top of the hill, they perform her ‘asking music’ to reference her character once again (fig. 4). They proceed

to reveal their success in completing the task, and repeat the word 'egg' multiple times in succession, in homophony, in order to convey the importance of the subject matter. As the egg begins to grow, the travellers repeat the word 'look' in a repeated setting, similar to the use of alternating pitches in 'stolen it', ex. 6.21. The piece concludes with the gifting of the fluffy chicken house to the travellers and their celebration is a musical combination of various snapshots of motivic material throughout the piece, including the Crane's 'asking music' in the flute, the 'stolen it' material in the cello and a variation to the travelling music in the accordion, which together build towards crescendo trills in the woodwind and accordion towards a joyful finish.

### Conclusion

*Long Lankin* is a through-composed chamber opera, presenting a relationship between two voices and two accompanying instruments. The style of writing completely shifts for the soprano voice, illustrating my interpretation of the changing characters within the piece. The pacing of the music denotes the energy of the action and the heightening of dramatic interest, which gives the piece a continual momentum. *A Bed for the Night*, on the other hand, is humorous in tone and lighter in subject matter than *Long Lankin*, which is reflected in the music through the harmonic journey and the interaction between characters. *A Bed for the Night* explores textures of ensemble vocal writing and is tightly structured into a series of short scenes. The music represents repeated actions (such as walking up hill) and portrays various characters using motivic material and instrumental sonorities.

These operas embody the knowledge I have acquired as an opera singer: understanding dramatic pacing and the requirements of voice expression in a dramatic context, particularly in relation to other musical and theatrical elements. Visual and audible communication of narrative requires an educated understanding of theatre, not only of music as an abstract concept. With my theatrical experience, I am better able to empathise with the dramatic needs of each character and to establish the most effective method of realising each component of the entire work, in order to create the optimal union of music and drama.

## Evaluation

The vocal compositions in my portfolio range from unaccompanied solo works and cycles, to accompanied art songs and song cycles, to small ensembles and chamber operas. The collection of unaccompanied songs illustrate my fervour for extended vocal techniques and a sense of theatre that can be achieved by the individual performer. Prior to my PhD and my expansion into writing extended vocal techniques, I very rarely challenged the ranges and agility of the voice to the level of these pieces. *Who is Geoffrey?* and *Cycle of Senior Moments*, in particular, have allowed me to find my own voice as a composer of theatrical pieces where the one performer is solely responsible for realising a theatrical narrative from the score. My onward journey looks to expand on this idea, creating larger unaccompanied vocal *scenas* with elaborate narratives on a grander scale, pushing the capabilities of the voice.

My writing as a composer has vastly developed during my PhD study. A tighter and more effective use of motivic material has enabled me to create pieces with far more structural clarity and unity. Pieces are now clearly identifiable in themselves and each has a strong individual character. The same cannot be said looking back at my composition output pre-doctoral research.

Already an experienced performer when I began this portfolio, I was more than aware of the significance of composition techniques in vocal writing however the narrative in my own writing had not, up to that point, found a clear voice or identity. Through extensive study of admired song repertoire, new and old, and placing myself as the singer behind my compositional voice, I began to realise a tightness of structure and character for each piece that previously was not identifiable in my writing. The construction and framework upon which the music is built adds a practical aspect to the singer's performance. In unaccompanied vocal pieces, a tighter framework provides a learning structure, a map with which to guide the physical memory of the performer.

Looking back at my Masters portfolio and other work that pre-dates the doctorate, I find that much of the songs are lacking in a musical journey. I would frequently set the vocal line

to follow the syntax of the words but without any deeper thought regarding the ‘character’ of each song, or any link from the start of the piece to the end. One could quite easily have extracted a few bars from one song and placed them into another without much cause and effect. The knock-on effect for the performer here is then having to find an individual personality and character in each song that should already have been dictated by myself as the composer. The songs back then did not have the same memorable intensity or identification where any snapshot of the music would be recognisable as that piece. The works through the doctorate provide these strong characters and identifiable moments and I have certainly enjoyed creating thematic earworms in certain pieces. I am confident with any writing now that a singer is able to instantly interpret what each song is trying to say and what it is trying to achieve, whether through strong thematic material or idiosyncratic rhythmic patterns, motivic identity, repeated treatment of text and so on.

Another notable development over the course of my portfolio has been my confidence in assigning songs to general voice labelling i.e. ‘solo voice’ versus specific voice types. The issues of transposition for me as a singer are quite clear. A transposition that changes the colours and character of a piece is, in effect, changing the perception or intention of that music. A song that depends on certain vocal colours and intensity, for example, may not achieve the same result in a voice of a different type. The mezzo-soprano cycle *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre* would not reach the same level of intensity or richness of resonance if transposed up for soprano and, likewise, the *Three Sensual Songs* would not achieve the lightness and delicacy of the soprano voice if transposed down for mezzo-soprano. *Theme Park*, *Alliterated Sugar Rush* and *Who is Geoffrey?*, on the other hand, are purposefully labelled without voice specification. Each of these pieces explore sounds and effects that are more synonymous throughout the voice types due to laryngeal and resonator effects, rather than vocal colours within specific voice types.

I am confident that my song writing in particular has found a ‘voice’ of its own. No longer do I find myself following narrative to dictate the melodic line, but find that pushing the malleability of text allows the music to dictate the shaping of the composition. My approach to accompaniment has evolved considerably and where I used to consider the



voice as the dominant element of expression, I have found a freedom that has allowed the accompaniment to become a communicator in its own right, as in the song cycle *Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*. Rather than the basic treatment of the accompaniment; doubling the vocal line, echoing the vocal line or underpinning it with a simple harmony that neither detracts from or enhances the voice, the sound world created in 'Le Feu' for example adds a whole new layer of mysticism and atmosphere for the voice to sit in. I now realise, as a singer, how greatly the accompanimental writing effects the performance of the vocal line. Limiting the accompaniment to voice doubling and basic harmonic support is far more limiting from the singer's point of view and, I imagine, far less interesting and creative for the accompanist's interpretation and presentation. A singer whose line is not directly replicated in the accompaniment has a greater sense of freedom in the line. As a singer I know how much this can allow for greater expression and enjoyment; that feeling of space in performance.

This links into my discussion on unaccompanied vocal writing where the feeling of freedom and space is easily obtained. Less so, perhaps, when one is following a strictly timed score in the unaccompanied vocal field, but I haven't included any pieces in this format for submission. Unaccompanied vocal writing, particularly with extended techniques, can represent for many singers the pinnacle of vocal freedom, and I have certainly realised a natural exploration of humour and absurdity in this field; from wild and wacky theme park rides, to vocalisations on biscuit shapes, to confused senile repetitions, to animal noise impersonations to hallucinations. My choice of subject matter and text in unaccompanied work is certainly contrasted to the texts used for my art song selection, which explore the more intimate moments of sensuality, the apprehension and empathy in fear and social expectations on gender.

My research into vocal function and voice types, combined with my experience in the field of classical singing, has enabled my continually increasing knowledge of the classical voice to shape my writing. As a regular singer of new music, I am constantly working to raise awareness on the significance of registral changes and how vowel production modulates through the range and affects the output of text. Through the latter stages of my PhD I have

also come to realise that there is minimal reference reading material that can inform composers in the different approaches that benefit different fach types. With this in mind, as a specialist in vocal composition, I intend to compile a composition guide that illustrates the vocal qualities and changing elements of the different vocal fachs in existence and how that affects vocal writing. Not dissimilar to the idea of Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*<sup>1</sup>, I intend to produce a large-scale composition that stands as an instruction manual for the classical voice to allow composers to not only write in a fully informed manner for each fach type, but also increase awareness of the extremities and possibilities of all voices.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Britten, *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, op.34 (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1946)



## Portfolio of Compositions

1.     **2011**            ***As If A Phantom Caress'd Me*** for mezzo-soprano, clarinet and harp
2.     **2012**            ***Ode to The Mock Turtle*** for SATB soli
3.     **2012**            ***I Think I Made You Up*** for soprano and piano
  1. Dear Daddy, From Sylvia
  2. Mad Girl's Love Song
  3. Who
4.     **2012**            ***Incomprehensible to a Man*** for soprano and piano
  1. It Is A Truth
  2. An Engaged Woman
  3. Of A Ministry
  4. Little Bag
5.     **2012**            ***The Applicant*** for voice and piano
6.     **2013**            ***Ode to The Jabberwocky*** for SATB soli
7.     **2013**            ***Long Lankin*** for soprano, baritone, free bass accordion, cello
8.     **2013-14**        ***Theme Park*** for unaccompanied solo voice
  1. Rollercoaster
  2. Ghost Train
  3. Hall of Mirrors
  4. Tower Drop Ride
9.     **2015**            ***Alliterated Sugar Rush*** for unaccompanied solo voice
  1. Cupcake
  2. Battenberg Bourbon
  3. French Fancy
  4. Wagon Wheels
10.    **2015**            ***Who is Geoffrey?*** for unaccompanied solo voice
11.    **2016**            ***Dans Les Ombres de La Guerre*** for mezzo-soprano and piano
  1. Le Ravin
  2. Le Feu
  3. Le Retour
  4. Nocturne

12. 2016-2017 *Three Sensual Songs* for soprano and piano
1. Song for a Lady
  2. When Man Enters Woman
  3. Us
13. 2018 *Come Slowly, Eden* for unaccompanied solo voice
14. 2018 *In Sultry Sun* and *Fiesta Benavites* for soprano and classical guitar
15. 2018 *Cycle of Senior Moments* for unaccompanied solo voice
- 1.) At The Savoy
  - 2.) What Is That Woman?
  - 3.) Take Me To Tony's
16. 2018 *A Bed for the Night* for five voices and mixed ensemble

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