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A GRADUATE RECITAL IN VOICE

An Abstract of a Thesis

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Master of Music

JoAnna V. Geffert

University of Northern Iowa

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This Study by: JoAnna V. Geffert

Entitled: "A Graduate Recital in Voice"

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Music

Date

Dr. Jean McDonald, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date

Dr. Korey Barrett, Thesis Committee Member

Date

Dr. Mitra Sadeghpour, Thesis Committee Member

Date

Dr. April Chatham-Carpenter, Interim Dean, Graduate College

This Recital Performance by: JoAnna V. Geffert

Entitled: "A Graduate Recital in Voice"

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Dr. Jean McDonald, Chair, Recital Committee

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ABSTRACT

On February 27, 2015, mezzo-soprano JoAnna V. Geffert and pianist Dr. Robin Guy presented a recital of song literature in Davis Hall at the University of Northern Iowa. The program opened with Gioachino Rossini's *La regata veneziana*, a three-song cycle for mezzo-soprano. The 1858 composition was originally included in volume one of Rossini's *Péchés de vieillesse* (Sins of Old Age), a thirteen volume work containing art songs, dances, choruses, and piano pieces.¹ *La regata veneziana* tells the story of Anzoleta, a young girl observing a gondola race in which her boyfriend, Momolo, is participating. The text, written by nineteenth-century librettist Francesco Maria Piave, begins with “Anzoleta avanti la regata” (Anzoleta before the boat race). Anzoleta nervously worries that Momolo will become lost in thought during the race, and therefore fail to capture the prizewinning red flag. The strophic work shifts back and forth between major and minor tonalities, depending upon what Anzoleta is telling her lover. The piece draws to a close on a resolute A-flat major chord, as Anzoleta urges Momolo to fly past the other contenders and win the boat race. The turbulent waters of the Venetian canal and the furious rowing of the racing gondoliers open the second song of the cycle, “Anzoleta co passa la regata” (Anzoleta during the boat race). As she frantically searches for Momolo, Anzoleta's breathlessness can be heard in the brief but effective passage of eighth rests followed by eighth notes in repetition. The continuous key changes and frequent dynamic shifts in the piece make Momolo's fate seem uncertain to the listener.

¹ . Emanuele Senici, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 249.

In the third and final song, “Anzoleta dopo la regata” (Anzoleta after the boat race), Anzoleta is beaming with pride for her newly crowned gondolier. After showering him with kisses, Anzoleta almost giggles her victor's name through varying descending and ascending sixteenth note passages on the text “Momolo.” The shorter B section takes the listener through Anzoleta's experience watching the exhausted Momolo pull ahead to victory. The dynamic levels shift throughout Anzoleta's recounting of the draining tale: from a calm piano at the beginning of the race, to a proud forte as she watches Momolo capture the winning red flag. A gradual crescendo occurs, ending in fortissimo as Momolo is finally declared the winner of the race. A consistent accelerando through the return of the A section then builds to the final trill before the final note, as Anzoleta declares Momolo the best boatman in all of Venice. Rossini's beautiful cycle comes to a close on a resounding, fortissimo F major chord.

French composer Francis Poulenc's five song collection from 1940, *Banalités*, was never meant to be considered a unified cycle. Pierre Bernac, a colleague of Poulenc's who premiered the work, stated that the songs were, “...not in any sense a cycle...in fact the poems have no connection with each other, neither does the music. If Poulenc united these songs under a single title, it is because they form a well constructed group to be performed in this order.”² The poetry chosen for these *mélodies* was written by Guillaume Apollinaire, a surrealist poet whose work Poulenc utilized in over thirty of his own compositions. *Banalités* opens with “Chanson d'Orkenise” (Song of Orkenise), a brisk *mélodie* reminiscent of a French folk song. The poem describes the story of guards

2 . Pierre Bernac, *Francis Poulenc: The Man and His Songs*, trans. Winifred Radford (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 69-70.

at the gates of Orkenise who question a homeless man and a carter (farmer) as they attempt to leave and enter the city. Frequent shifts in character throughout the piece are indicated by clear dynamic and expressive markings. The declarative statements made by the homeless man and the carter are often marked piano, indicating that the men are uncertain in the decisions that they are making. The statements made by the guards, on the other hand, are marked mezzo-forte or forte, indicating confidence in their actions. The second song, “Hôtel” (Hotel) is, as Bernac says, “the laziest song ever written!”³ Set inside a room in Montparnasse, the speaker lounges, effortlessly watching the smoke rings from a cigarette fill the air, and bemoaning the fact that he does not want to work, but only to smoke. The overall feeling of apathy in the piece is achieved through the languorous tempo marking (quarter note equals 50), and in the weighted chordal accompaniment. “Fagnes de Wallonie” (Walloon Uplands) is next in the set. The song takes place in a forest in the Belgian Ardennes, a location that the poet Apollinaire had once vacationed. Poulenc's third *mélodie* is similar to a continuous gust of wind from beginning to end: the wind enters with the piano, then captures the singer, whose voice often joins with the piano's rhythmic line, and then disappears over the treetops as the stark final chord sounds. The fourth song, “Voyage à Paris” (Trip to Paris) can be likened to a waltz with its $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, upbeat tempo, and score markings like “avec charme” (with charm). Poulenc stated that, “Anything that concerns Paris I approach with tears in my eyes and my head full of music...like...the deliciously stupid lines of 'Voyage à Paris'.”⁴

The piece is an effervescent reminiscence of the wonders of Paris, and on returning to the

3 . Bernac, 72.

4 . Francis Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs*, trans. Winifred Radford (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1985), 67.

marvelous city of light from less enjoyable locales. Poulenc chose to include a number of slurs in the vocal line, on which the singer can glissando. This is an effective way in which one can portray the easy-going attitude of the work. The fifth and final song of the collection, “Sanglots” (Sobs) is decidedly the heaviest and most profound piece in the entire work. Poulenc used a combination of two of Apollinaire's poems in this one song, which adds a complexity that can make the meaning of the piece hard to interpret for both singer and listener alike. The work is a turbulent one, with vacillating tonalities reminiscent of the overall human condition. The singer must strive to bring meaning to this piece by following the clearly marked expressive changes and dynamic shifts that separate one poem from the other. This allows for a greater sense of clarity in the structure of the work and the deep textual meaning.

Catalan composer Xavier Montsalvatge's first venture into the world of vocal music came in 1945, when friend and soprano Mercédes Plantada asked him to compose a new piece for her upcoming vocal recital. Montsalvatge decided to explore his ongoing interest in Afro-Cuban musical influences in this commissioned song, setting Latin American poetic texts to his music.⁵ The composer chose the text of Uruguayan poet Ildefonso Pereda Valdés's lullaby, “Canción de cuna para dormir a un negrito” (Lullaby for a Little Black Boy) which eventually became the fourth song in his popular cycle, *Cinco Canciones Negras*. The May 1945 premiere of his first vocal work at Plantada's recital made Montsalvatge an overnight sensation. By June 1945, Montsalvatge had written an additional four songs to be included with the lullaby, and Plantada

5 . Alice Henderson, “Identity in *Cinco Canciones Negras* (1945) by Xavier Montsalvatge” (electronic master's thesis, The Florida State University, 2013), 20.

subsequently premiered the newly unified set now known to the world as *Cinco Canciones Negras*.

In its entirety, the cycle employs text by four poets who hailed from Spain and Spanish America. Montsalvatge's choice of uniting this diverse poetry in one cycle was seen by many as a "deliberate statement about how he [Montsalvatge] wanted to represent Spain, Spanish America, and questions of identity that had been further emphasized by the [Spanish] Civil War."⁶ The first song in the cycle, "Cuba dentro de un piano" (Cuba in a Piano), refers to the cultural changes that took place in Cuba after the Spanish-American War in the late nineteenth century. The singer recounts her memories as a child growing up in Cuba before the war, when life was pleasant and her heritage strong. By the end of the song she has grown bitter and angry, because her culture has been lost to another country, America. Montsalvatge aptly sets the reflective scene through the use of ongoing habanera rhythms. The second song, "Punto de habanera" (Habenera Rhythm) is set in a "tempo de Guajiras" or, in a more rural style than other compositions in the set. This highly sexual poem by poet Néstor Luján portrays a young, virginal Creole girl, who is enticing to a group of onlooking sailors. Though some interpreters categorize this song as being on the verge of indecent harassment, the stepwise motion of the vocal line and upbeat rhythm makes the work seemingly more innocent. The song ends happily as the singer hums a light-hearted a cappella melody and the piano plays a dreamlike finale. Montsalvatge deftly captures the dangerous, heated feeling of Nicolás Guillén's poem, "Chévere" (The Bully) in the third song of the cycle.

6 . Henderson, 21.

The singer speaks of a bully who relentlessly stabs at everything around him: the moon, a song, a shadow, and finally, the flesh of a black woman. The act of stabbing can be taken literally by the song's interpreter, or, as a symbol for a sexual act. The brief piece continuously builds through the repetition of a melodic pattern that is heard at the very beginning in the vocal line. As the piece draws to a close, the rhythmic habanera passage presented by the piano in the introduction sounds one final time. As was mentioned earlier, song four, "Canción de cuna para dormir a un negrito" (Lullaby for a Little Black Boy), was the first song Montsalvatge composed in the set. The word "ninghe," which opens the work, is a Congolese term used to put children to sleep (similar to the English word "lullaby").⁷ In contrast to the other more upbeat and anxious songs of the cycle, "Canción" is a soothing piece meant to put a child to sleep: one can hear the repetitive rocking motive in the left hand of the piano accompaniment. This lullaby is the crowning jewel of the song cycle, and is often excerpted from the rest of the work in performance. The last song of the cycle "Canto Negro" (Negro Song) is a playful finale for the entire work. The poetry of Nicolás Guillén is used again, and tells the story of a black man who sings, dances, drinks heavily, and eventually takes a tumble in his drunken stupor. Montsalvatge chose to set both the narrative text and the percussive onomatopoeic words of the poem, which represent traditional Congolese instruments. The song brings an enjoyable close to what is a compelling, historically driven cycle.

Contemporary composers Libby Larsen is a master at setting prose texts in a personal and meaningful manner. Her unbelievable attention to detail can be seen in her

7 . Henderson, 57.

1989 work *Songs from Letters*, a five song cycle based on letters written by the legendary nineteenth-century Wild West figure, Calamity Jane. Larsen recounted in a 2003 interview that she was contacted by her friend, pianist Benton Hess, who was at that time working with soprano Mary Elizabeth Poore. Poore was scheduled to give a recital in Weill Recital Hall in New York City's Carnegie Hall in early April 1989, and she was interested in performing a new series of songs on the program.⁸ Soon after this conversation, Larsen stumbled upon copies of a series of Calamity Jane's letters to her daughter, Janey. When asked about why she ultimately decided to set these texts, Larsen stated that she was, "... interested in that rough-toughness and in Calamity Jane's struggle to explain herself honestly to her daughter, Janey."⁹ The life of Calamity Jane was one filled with confusion and conflict. Though legend tells many stories about this brazen, hard-drinking woman, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction. In her diary, Calamity Jane declares that her daughter, Janey, was the result of her marriage with famed frontiersman Wild Bill Hickock..¹⁰ Though there is not definitive proof that the two were actually married and produced a child, Larsen chose to take the texts from Calamity Jane's letters as fact and sets portions of Calamity's own texts to music in this cycle.

It should be noted that Larsen chose not to use any key signatures throughout the entirety of the cycle. She frequently utilizes the augmented fourth, or tri-tone, in each of the songs, which signals emotional change, while also using recurring motives

8 . Andrea J. Mitternacht, "An Original Work: "Brothers and Sisters" and *Songs From Letters* by Libby Larsen: An Analysis" (doctoral dissertation, The Louisiana State University, 2004), 75-76.

9 . Glenda Denise Secrest, "Songs from Letters" and "Cowboy Songs" by Libby Larsen: Two Different Approaches to Western Mythology and Western Mythological Figures," *Journal of Singing - the Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 64, no. 1 (09, 2007): 21-30. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1402173?accountid=14691>.

10 . Mitternacht, 82.

throughout the work to unify the cycle. The song “So Like Your Father's” opens the cycle with an unaccompanied recitative-like vocal line. The first motive of the piece is then sounded in the piano, beginning with an open octave on B that then transitions into half notes in contrary motion. The second motive is then heard in the accompaniment. It is a bell-like ringing in the left hand of the piano, which then continues on through the end of the piece as the singer reminisces about a picture of Janey that closely resembles her father. This bell motive will return at the close of the entire cycle in song five. The second song entitled “He Never Misses” is much more up-tempo than the previous piece. The opening ostinato line in the piano resembles that of a horse galloping, which is fitting, considering the singer (Calamity) is recounting the tale of how she first met Janey's father while he was trying to escape a group of outlaws. Larsen, however, had a different idea, stating that the opening ostinato, “...conveys a makeshift, ramshackle attempt to make a life in the West using tar paper, the only piano in town, and maybe one mahogany beam that somebody brought, you know, in their covered wagon, putting it together and that becomes the music hall.”¹¹ Larsen chooses to repeat a number of different phrases in this work (“I crawled through the brush to warn him”, “Bill killed them all”, and “blood running down his face”). Each time the text is restated, it sounds at a different, often higher, pitch level, for dramatic emphasis. This textual repetition happens again in the third song, “A Man Can Love Two Women,” on the text “I lost everything I loved.” As was heard in the previous song, Larsen sets the repeated texts at higher pitch levels and greater dynamics for obvious dramatic emphasis. Scholar Glenda

11 . Mitternacht, 107.

Denise Secrest specifically mentions the constant meter change in this piece (though it occurs throughout the entire cycle): “Using different meters to represent emotions, Larsen employs 3 / 4 when Calamity Jane is calm and 4 / 4 when she is upset.”¹² The fourth song, “A Working Woman”, opens with unaccompanied recitative, much like the first song, and continues into a repetition of the first motive initially heard in the first piece. This is, without a doubt, the busiest song of the cycle. Calamity Jane explains to her daughter the many different jobs that she has held over the years, and how she was treated throughout that time (usually poorly). The broad range of emotions expressed in the work are shown through varying dynamics, powerful accompaniment, and even a total lack of accompaniment at times. Once again, Larsen employs the use of a repeated phrase (“damn their souls to hell”) at ascending pitch levels for dramatic effect. In an interview with Glenda Denise Secrest, Larsen said she utilizes repeated phrasing because “when we want to make a point in advertising classes or if you take classes in emphasis, people will say 'three times'. It is a cultural phenomenon, so I consciously use the repetition of three, with a variation in each one, as a cultural tool.”¹³ The final and most contemplative song in the set, “All I Have” is heartbreaking. What is most striking about this piece, besides the devastating text, is the reworking of the first two motives from previous songs. The familiar motives (the open octave and half note series, and the bell motive) are prominent and could be considered bookends for the work as a whole. The same could be said for the texts chosen for the first and fifth songs: the work opens with Calamity Jane studying a picture of her daughter, Janey. Larsen finishes the work by

12 . Secrest, 24.

13 . Secrest, 25.

stating that all she has left are pictures of Janey to remember her by (as she, Calamity, is going blind). The song and cycle close as Calamity Jane bids her daughter goodnight, and asks God to “keep her [Janey] from harm.” The bell motive sounds slowly three more times and the cycle is complete.

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JoAnna V. Geffert, Mezzo-Soprano
with Dr. Robin Guy, Piano
February 27, 2015 6:00 PM
Davis Hall, GBPAC

PROGRAM

La regata veneziana.....Giachino Rossini
Anzoleta avanti la regata (1792-1868)
Anzoleta co passa la regata
Anzoleta dopo la regata

Banalités.....Francis Poulenc
Chanson d'Orkenise (1899-1963)
Hôtel
Fagnes de Wallonie
Voyage à Paris
Sanglots

INTERMISSION

Cinco Canciones NegrasXavier Montsalvatge
Cuba dentro de un piano (1912-2002)
Punto de Habanera
Chévere
Canción de cuna para dormir a un negrito
Canto negro

Songs From Letters.....Libby Larsen
So Like Your Father's (b. 1950)
He Never Misses
A Man Can Love Two Women
A Working Woman
All I Have

*This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the Master of Music degree in Vocal
Performance*

From the studio of Dr. Jean McDonald
