



Gorgeous Oxymora

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2 Songs for Voice, Viola and Piano, Op. 91

Gestillte Sehnsucht
Geistliches Wiegenlied

Johannes Brahms (1833—1897)

Space, in Chains, a song cycle for soprano (or mezzo) and viola

Space, in Chains
Rain
O Elegant Giant

Jessica Meyer (b. 1974)

Sonata for Viola da Gamba and harpsichord in G major, BWV 1027

Adagio
Allegro ma non tanto
Andante
Allegro moderato

J.S. Bach (1685—1750)

3 Songs for medium voice, viola obbligato and piano

Far, Far from Each Other
Where Is It That Our Soul Doth Go?
Music When Soft Voices Die

Frank Bridge (1879—1941)

The junction of Summer and Fall always feels peculiar to me. The world that awakened with such difficulty in Spring, and entered into full bloom by July, is now slowly, unwillingly, being pulled back down into the slumber of Winter. When exactly do we turn this corner? When do these contradictory forces change their balance?

We might never know the answers, but after a Summer particularly ripe with incongruities we decided to put together a program that basks in all sorts of contradictions! Some are peculiar; others, unsettling; and most of them are downright gorgeous.

When writing the lullaby of *Geistliches Wiegenlied* for the wedding of his friend Joseph Joachim, Brahms had no idea that 20 years later he'd be frantically writing a second song to complete the mini-cycle and, more importantly, help repair the by-now troubled marriage. Despite being written two decades apart, the second song, nevertheless, now opens the cycle. The instrumentation of contralto voice, viola, and piano is highly unusual and was specifically written to be performed by the outstanding musicians it is dedicated to.

Where Brahms was looking to unite the sonority of voice and viola, Jessica Meyer chose a radically different path altogether in *Space, in Chains*. Throughout the quirky and highly inventive little triptych, the viola never seems to want to become vocal. Instead the instrument is busy depicting all sorts of minute mood swings implied in the text, and word-painting with incredible inventiveness, whether it's rain droplets or "antisocial behavior". Good thing the text, by acclaimed poet Laura Kasischke, is ripe with stunning passages ready for such unpacking.

Bach's Sonata for Viola Da Gamba and Harpsichord in G-major is one of a few such works that we know with certainty he authored. Good thing too, since this sunny and energetic piece is certainly among our favorites! If by this time in the program you started developing any associations between the music and the Seasons, the warm and uplifting G-major of this music is almost certain to recall a Summer day. The shockingly gorgeous reverie of the Andante movement is a departure from its upbeat neighbors. It is even more enigmatic when you realize that its sublime effect is achieved without resorting to a single melody.

The winter of 1906-07 must have been especially cold and miserable to prompt the 27 year old Frank Bridge into writing three songs that mostly deal with separation and passing. "Far, far from each other our spirits have flown," opens the cycle with what today sounds like an eerie premonition. To embark on such a subject is no small task, and Bridge certainly rises to the occasion. To begin with, all three texts are by outstanding poets—Arnold, Heine, and Shelley no less! The music, set to the Brahmsian ensemble of low voice, viola, and piano, is nothing short of breathtaking throughout. Viola and voice trade broad swaths of melody over the rich luster of piano passagework. This much French Romantic influence in a British lad certainly raises an eyebrow, but you won't find us complaining about this particular oxymoron.

~ *Alexander Vavilov*

Texts and Translations

2 Songs for Voice, Viola and Piano, Op. 91

Johannes Brahms (1833—1897)

Gestillte Sehnsucht

Friedrich Rückert

In goldnen Abendschein getaucht,
Wie feierlich die Wälder stehn!
In leise Stimmen der Vöglein hauchet
Des Abendwindes leises Wehn.
Was lispeln die Winde, die Vögelein?
Sie lispeln die Welt in Schlummer ein.

Ihr Wünsche, die ihr stets euch reget
Im Herzen sonder Rast und Ruh!
Du Sehnen, das die Brust beweget,
Wann ruhest du, wann schlummerst du?
Beim Lispeln der Winde, der Vögelein,
Ihr sehrenden Wünsche, wann schlaft ihr ein?

Ach, wenn nicht mehr in goldne Fernen
Mein Geist auf Traumgefieder eilt,
Nicht mehr an ewig fernen Sternen
Mit sehndem Blick mein Auge weilt;
Dann lispeln die Winde, die Vögelein
Mit meinem Sehnen mein Leben ein.

Geistliches Wiegenlied

Emanuel Geibel

Die ihr schwebet
Um diese Palmen
In Nacht und Wind,
Ihr heil'gen Engel,
Stillet die Wipfel!
Es schlummert mein Kind.

Ihr Palmen von Bethlehem
Im Windesbrausen,
Wie mögt ihr heute
So zornig sausen!
O rauscht nicht also!
Schweiget, neiget
Euch leis' und lind;
Stillet die Wipfel!
Es schlummert mein Kind.

Der Himmelsknabe
Duldet Beschwerde,
Ach, wie so müd' er ward
Vom Leid der Erde.
Ach nun im Schlaf ihm
Leise gesänftigt
Die Qual zerrinnt,
Stillet die Wipfel!
Es schlummert mein Kind.

Assuaged longing

English Translation © Richard Stokes

Bathed in golden evening light,
How solemnly the forests stand!
The evening winds mingle softly
With the soft voices of the birds.
What do the winds, the birds whisper?
They whisper the world to sleep.

But you, my desires, ever stirring
In my heart without respite!
You, my longing, that agitates my breast –
When will you rest, when will you sleep?
The winds and the birds whisper,
But when will you, yearning desires, slumber?

Ah! when my spirit no longer hastens
On wings of dreams into golden distances,
When my eyes no longer dwell yearningly
On eternally remote stars;
Then shall the winds, the birds whisper
My life – and my longing – to sleep.

A sacred cradle-song

English Translation © Richard Stokes

You who hover
Around these palms
In night and wind,
You holy angels,
Silence the tree-tops!
My child is sleeping.

You palms of Bethlehem
In the raging wind,
Why do you bluster
So angrily today!
O roar not so!
Be still, lean
Calmly and gently over us;
Silence the tree-tops!
My child is sleeping.

The heavenly babe
Suffers distress,
Oh, how weary He has grown
With the sorrows of this world.
Ah, now that in sleep
His pains
Are gently eased,
Silence the treetops!
My child is sleeping.

Grimmige Kälte
Sauset hernieder,
Womit nur deck' ich
Des Kindleins Glieder!
O all ihr Engel,
Die ihr geflügelt
Wandelt im Wind,
Stillet die Wipfel!
Es schlummert mein kind.

Fierce cold
Blows down on us,
With what shall I cover
My little child's limbs?
O all you angels,
Who wing your way
On the winds,
Silence the tree-tops!
My child is sleeping

Space, in Chains, a song cycle for soprano (or mezzo) and viola

Jessica Meyer (b. 1974)

Space, in Chains

Laura Kasichske

Things that are beautiful, and die.
Things that fall asleep in the afternoon, in sun.
Things that laugh, then cover their mouths, ashamed of their teeth.
A strong man pouring coffee into a cup. His hands shake, it spills.
His wife falls to her knees when the telephone rings. Hello? Goddammit, hello?
Where is their child?
Hamster, tulips, love, gigantic squid.
To live.
I'm not endorsing it.
Any single, transcriptional event.
The chromosomes of the roses.
Flagella, cilia, all the filaments of touching, of feeling, of running your little hand hopelessly along the bricks.
Sky, stamped into flesh, bending over the sink to drink the tour de force of water.
It's all space, in chains—the chaos of birdsong after a rainstorm, the steam rising off the asphalt, a small boy in boots opening the back door, stepping out, and someone calling him from the kitchen,
Sweetie, don't be gone too long

Rain

Laura Kasichske

The sun, made of water, like all the secrets made of tongues—
it falls all night,

and in the morning
the flames have been put out
and the stones,
bewitched, can see:
The lost hours,
and into the past.
The memories of infants, of cats, of other stones—that they have souls. That they are souls.
And the terror of foxes.
And the children's hospital.
And the hangman's alarm clock. And the official on the doorstep.
And all the embezzled
cents and dollars
of the last time I saw you.

O Elegant Giant

Laura Kasichske

These difficult matters of grace and scale:

The way music, our savior, is the marriage of math and antisocial behavior.

Like this woman with a bucket in the morning gathering gorgeous oxymora on the shore...

And my wildly troubled love for you, which labored gently in the garden all through June, then tore the flowers up with its fists in July.

Which set a place for you next to mine—the fork beside the spoon beside the knife (the linen napkin, and the centerpiece: a blue beheaded blossom floating in a bowl)—and even the red weight of my best efforts poured into your glass as a dark wine before I tossed the table onto its side.

Just another perfect night. Beyond destruction, and utterly unlikely, how someone might have managed, blindly, to stumble on such a love in the middle of her life.

O elegant giant.

While, outside, the woods are silent.

And overhead, not a single intelligent star in the sky.

3 Songs for medium voice, viola obbligato and piano

Frank Bridge (1879—1941)

Far, far from each other

Matthew Arnold

Far, far from each other

Our spirits have flown

And what heart knows another?

Ah! who knows his own?

Blow, ye winds! lift me with you

I come to the wild.

Fold closely, O Nature!

Thine arms round thy child.

Ah, calm me! restore me

And dry up my tears

On thy high mountain platforms,

Where Morn first appears.

Where is it that our soul doth go?

Kate Freiligrath Kroeker, based on a text by Heinrich Heine

One thing I'd know,

When we have perished,

Where is it that our soul doth go?

Where, where is the fire, that is extinguished?

Where is the wind?

Where is the wind but now did blow?

Where is it? Where is it?

Where is it that our soul doth go?

When we have perished.

Music, when soft voices die

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Music, when soft voices die,

Vibrates in the memory;

Odours, when sweet violets sicken,

Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,

Are heaped for the belovèd's bed;

And so my thoughts, when thou art gone,

Love itself shall slumber on.