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*“The Avalanche”*: A Cantata for Mezzo-soprano, Flute, Viola, and Harp

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*An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science in University Honors and Music and Mathematics*

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*2015*

“The Avalanche” by James Laughlin was originally written in two poems, “The Avalanche” and “The Shape of Love,” but published as one in 1945. It unfolds the turmoil one faces with a new love and a looming past. I set the poem to music in four movements with an instrumental prelude for mezzo-soprano, flute, viola, and harp, thus making my piece a cantata, which is typically defined as a work for one or more voices and orchestral accompaniment in multiple movements that divide a single text. Although seemingly counterintuitive, the decision to have the text delivered by a mezzo-soprano was intentionally unfaithful to the source of the poem. My intent, quite contradictory to common practice in Western classical music tradition, was to displace the poem from its heterosexual origin. My personal favorite example of this technique is folk-pop artist Marissa Nadler’s musical adaptation of the first three stanzas of Poe’s “Annabel Lee” in which she hardly modifies the text, creating a tale of love between herself and the character Annabel Lee.

Such treatment of text can also be seen in the song cycle *The Voice of Desire* by the contemporary composer Judith Weir, which utilizes four poems written by men towards birds. While the poems can be easily interpreted as a gendered dialogue, the cycle is written for soprano, “cancelling out the archetypal assumptions about speaker and gender...” and making Weir’s setting of Keats’ “I Had a Dove,” a meditation on romantic ownership, particularly challenging (May, 210). In many of his folk song arrangements, Benjamin Britten wrote for high voice or low voice rather than specifying a gendered voice part, allowing for gender-transgressive treatment of the text to occur depending on who chose to perform his works. David Del Tredici’s “Dove Song” from the song cycle *Four Songs on Poems of James Joyce* is another example in contemporary classical music. Del Tredici set the text “My dove, my beautiful one”

by James Joyce for a soprano to sing in spite of it being written by a man and reveling in “the imminent consummation of love” (Fagnoli and Gillsepie, 26).

Goldin-Perschbacher discusses four particular gender transgressors active in pop music, one of them being Jeff Buckley, who sang songs made famous by a number of well-known female soul singers such as Nina Simone, Edith Piaf, and Billie Holiday, in the female performers’ vocal ranges. He preserved the gendered pronouns in his covers as well, singing “The Man that Got Away”. Another such popular figure Goldin-Perschbacher discusses is Antony Hegarty, a transgender female singer. One of my favorite songs performed by Antony is a cover of Beyonce’s 2003 single “Crazy in Love,” which includes the following lyrics:

When I talk to my friends so quietly  
 Who he think he is?  
 Look at what you did to me  
 Tennis shoes, don’t even need to buy a new dress,  
 If you ain’t there ain’t nobody else to impress

This is a particularly interesting case because the well-known heteronormative lyrics originally sung by a cisgender female in the context of popular music are re-cast into an orchestral soundscape written by Nico Muhly, a young gay composer, and sung by a transgender female in pseudo-bel canto style.

Stopp says that the secular cantata from year 1850 to 1919 “not only reflected its era, but also served it” (391). This attitude seems to be continuing on in American secular cantatas, two examples being William Grant Still’s cantata *And They Lynched Him From a Tree* (1940) and David Lang’s *Little Match Girl Passion* (2007). I think reassigning texts from one gender perspective or one sexuality to another is thought provoking, captures the zeitgeist of contemporary conceptions of sexuality, and is thusly fit for American secular cantata content.

While listening to my cantata, one will often hear the instruments repeating melodies given by the voice elsewhere, usually first. I wrote such instances with the intent of implying a repetition of the text given by the voice with those melodies. This is a technique I learned while rehearsing and performing Samuel Barber's *The Lovers*, which is rife with small reoccurring motives linked to specific lines of text. The most notable example, in my opinion, is the 7-note melody corresponding to the line "Oh farther than ev'rything." The figure first appears in the prelude (Figure 2) and is sprinkled throughout the entire work, but the listener doesn't discover the textual meaning until the ninth movement (Figure 1). Thus the lost love in Barber's setting of Neruda's text is foreshadowed, coloring the text of prior movements.

The image displays a musical score for four choral parts: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The score is set in a key with two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a common time signature. The lyrics are: "Oh far - ther than ev' - rything!". The Soprano part begins with a rest, followed by a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) marked with a *p* dynamic. The Alto part starts with the lyrics "ev' - rything!" and then repeats the triplet melody. The Tenor part also repeats the triplet melody. The Bass part repeats the triplet melody. The score is divided into three measures, with the triplet melody appearing in the second and third measures of each part.

Figure 1: Barber, pp. 118-119. Choral parts only.

The musical score is for the top of a page from Barber's work, page 3. It features the following parts and markings:

- Ob. 1:** 1. solo, *p*
- E. H.:** *pp*, *mp*, *pp*
- Cl. 1 & 2:** *pp*
- B. Cl.:** *pp*
- Hn. 4:** *p*
- Harp:** *p*
- Vn. I:** con sord., *mp appassionato*
- Vc.:** arco, con sord., *mp appassionato*
- Cb.:** *mp appassionato*

Figure 2: Barber, p. 3. Top score.

In my setting of “The Avalanche” given on the following page, I included the most important instances of this technique by putting the implied text in parenthesis.

## I. Prelude

## II. Gradual Petrification

If you can explain the secret of the avalanche  
 Why after years of quiet  
 Through winters of great snowfall and springs  
 Of the hot sun melting  
 Why suddenly, without reason or warning,  
 It breaks itself free  
 From the peak, pours to the valley  
 With force below  
 That nothing of wood or stone  
 Can hinder

Then I can tell you why I,  
 After so many years of gradual petrification

Why suddenly, without reason or warning,  
 Revive in your brightness  
 The memory of lost motion  
 And plunge down the mountain,  
 Uprooting and breaking  
 Till on the valley floor

(Then I can tell you why)  
 (Then I can tell you why I,  
 After so many years of gradual petrification)

## III. A Monument

The flood subsides, the flood subsides  
 And leaves 'till spring  
 An icy monument to destruction  
 (And leaves 'till spring) x3  
 And leaves 'till spring

## IV. You Brought A Girl

You that so long a time have wandered from me,  
 Most curious beast whose shape we never see  
 Love, most destroying and beloved visitor  
 You that so long a time from me have wandered

Love, you are come again

Love, you are come again  
 You have returned to me

Love, when you came before,  
 You brought a girl, you brought a girl  
 Whose hand was broken glass  
 You brought a girl, you brought a girl  
 Whose mouth was full of cinders, cinders,  
 cinders  
 You brought a girl whose head time ate away

Love, you are come again  
 Love, you are come again  
 To bring another  
 And now you bring a girl  
 Whose brightness floods my blood  
 You drive me old and slow and cold, (And now  
 you bring a girl)  
 Eager, yet afraid  
 You drive me old and slow and cold  
 Into this light

(Now you bring a girl)  
 (Old and slow and cold)  
 (Now you bring a girl)  
 (Into this light) x2

## V. Beast of Play

Love, do you do this for your pleasure?  
 Are you a beast of play?  
 Love, do you do this for your pleasure?  
 Am I your sport?  
 Or is the shape we never see the measure  
 Of that mysterious form:  
 The mortal and immortal heart?  
 The mortal and immortal heart?  
 The mortal and immortal heart?  
 The mortal and immortal heart?

At the end of the second movement, I wrote a reiteration of “Then I can tell you why I/ After so many years of gradual petrification” (mm. 114-124) in order to leave the movement still wanting an answer. Furthermore, I intended to remind the audience that the text is more concerned with a timeline of many years than it is with a brief period following an avalanche.

In the third movement, I wanted to portray a revelling in the time of tumult, so the flute reiterates “And leaves ‘till spring” in different octaves without definitive agreement from the viola. Finally, the voice again delivers the text, met with the piece’s first cadential major chord and the viola’s resolution (mm. 165-168) to indicate satisfaction with the break from petrification.

The fourth movement contains my favorite parts of Laughlin’s original poem – the description of girls that love brought before. Writing the cantata for a mezzo-soprano afforded me the opportunity to make the section of the text reflexive also. I set “You brought a girl” twice before “Whose hand was broken glass” and twice before “Whose mouth was full of cinders” in hopes of saying that both the protagonist herself and her previous partners had those attributes. I also depicted the protagonist’s examination of herself at this juncture by having the harp and viola imply “Now you bring a girl, old and slow and cold, into this light” during the instrumental outro of the movement (mm. 266-277).

Other text alterations in the mezzo-soprano part were made primarily for the purpose of creating rhythmic or structural consistency better suited for accessible melodies, which were a high priority during my compositional process. Of course, what makes for an accessible melody is a subjective matter, but I personally think of them as strophic (stanzas of text are set to the same music), syllabic (each syllable is set to one note), largely diatonic (primarily composed of notes in the prevailing key signature), and generated by small intervallic movements.



Furthermore, I believe melodies that place the most important syllables of phrases on downbeats tend to sound more speechlike, making the line more intuitive to English speakers.

I divided Laughlin's poem based on who I believe the protagonist is addressing and the intent. The text of the second and third movement seems to be directed to the reader (or listener, in this case) – the former seeking an explanation and the latter stating a fact. The fourth and fifth movements contain text that seems to be addressing love personified with the fifth movement clearly differentiating itself by the sudden onslaught of questions. Keeping the ending of the text in mind, I didn't write any standard harmonic cadences in the piece, for that would give too much stability. Instead, I aimed to create relatively cadential moments via the tonicization of non-tonic harmonies and harmonic movements with half-step and whole-step relations that function similarly to standard cadences. Planing chords, a device well-suited for the harp, and working within various modes also provided the feeling of a dominant-free tonic that I sought.

The first movement, for example, begins in C Locrian (C - Db- Eb- F - Gb- Ab- Bb), Locrian being the most unstable of all the modes. The prelude is necessary to introduce an uneasy, uncertain temperament while providing a stable enough ending to begin the accessible melody of the second movement. The first movement's material in C Locrian (mm. 12-13) also reappears in "Beast of Play" in G and E tonal centers (mm. 282-283, 289-290) to suggest that the protagonist has found little security throughout the piece. The reason I chose C Locrian is that the harp sounds richer with every additional flat, but five flats doesn't allow the low end to be muddied as six or seven flats can. The only other conscious decision I made about key signatures was the change to E Locrian at measure 289, which sets up the vocalist to sustain F5 and G5, pitches that are fairly dramatic for mezzo-sopranos with low risk of shrillness. Otherwise, the

changing of keys happened intuitively, and the end of each movement prompted the key signature of the following movement.

The mezzo-soprano part generally stays in a comfortable medium to low range, which is due to my timbral preferences and performance preferences as a mezzo-soprano myself. Similarly, I don't like the timbre of the harp's high range at higher dynamics, so I avoided that except for at brief dramatic moments. Otherwise, the harp is covering almost all of its range. I wrote the piece with the intent of it being fairly easy technically. Consequently, the flute is usually kept out of its high range to avoid balance issues, and directions are given to switch to piccolo at measure 266 when the high range of the flute is absolutely necessary at a low volume. Moreover, I prefer the warmer timbre of the flute in its low range, especially when working in tandem with the voice. Again, the viola principally stays in its medium to low range to avoid difficulty with pitch, and I often used it to add a sustaining voice to the medium-low end of the piece, since the harp immediately decays.

I wrote the cantata for mezzo-soprano, flute, viola, and harp primarily for practical reasons. Firstly, being a harpist and vocalist myself, I was and still am most equipped to write for those instruments. Secondly, the trio of flute, viola, and harp is a standard one, thus making my composition more likely to be performed. Thirdly, while I was not as experienced in writing for flute and viola going into the compositional process, adding those instruments obviously allowed for more variety in texture than just harp and voice would have. In general, the harp provides the vertical structure of my composition, and the voice carries linear, textual structure, while the flute and viola are supporting one of those two forces.

The above discussion of my compositional choices – melodic, harmonic, and orchestral – is meant to inform the listeners of my cantata. Moreover, Goldin-Perschbacher stated,

“Genderqueer singer-songwriters not only blur the boundary of public and private, but also create intimate relationships with fans that extend beyond the normative heterosexual, monogamous, couple relationships expected of individuals in today's still conservative culture.”

(11) I aimed to create this same sort of intimacy in my composition. Although a few examples of composers who undermined the gendered perspective of a text were given above, I had difficulty finding other examples, so I hope that readers and listeners will find my approach to setting Laughlin's “The Avalanche” a valuable contribution to contemporary classical music.

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