

"Retrograde Soul"

A Song Cycle

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Abstract

The song cycle is a classical music genre originating from the German Lieder tradition with roots in the early romantic period. Its versatility as a compositional form has ensured its popularity from its 19th century origins on, and accounts for the diversity of works within the genre. This thesis is a creative project involving the composition of a song cycle for female voice, accompanied by a string quartet and containing an original poetic text. The purpose of the project was to allow acquired knowledge of music theory, history, and technique to inform the creative process of generating an original work. The overall theme of the piece is conveyed through the integration of words and music, necessitating careful attention to the inherent nature of the text and the relationship between music and poetry.

"Retrograde Soul"

A Song Cycle

A song cycle is a group of songs written by a single composer, performed in succession, and united by a common theme. The genre is wide in scope and encompasses a variety of musical works reaching back to the early Romantic era. Its development is linked to the tradition of German art song, or *Lied*, which placed an emphasis on simplicity and expressivity in composition and performance,¹ while also reflecting newly emerging Romantic ideals of subjective emotional experiences and personal expression. Definitive examples include Beethoven's proto-cyclic *An die ferne Geliebte* (1816), Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* (1823) and *Winterreise* (1828), and Schumann's *Dichterliebe* (1840). Other cycles worthy of note include Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (1904), a cycle with orchestral accompaniment, and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), an early 20th century atonal work remarkable for its avant-garde aspects.²

This thesis is centered on the process of composing a song cycle. It addresses specifically the processes and elements involved in the composition of "Retrograde Soul," an original work for female voice accompanied by string quartet and featuring an original text. A general overview of considerations including theme, style, and poetic content will be followed by an in-depth look at each song in the cycle.

Though the body of musical works bearing the song cycle label is diverse, the common thread in all cycles is, aside from an emphasis on poetry and literature, the

1. Laura Tunbridge, *The Song Cycle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2-4.

2. *Ibid.*, xvii-xxiii.

notion of a central theme.³ For this reason, development of a theme is arguably the most important part of composing a song cycle as such; it was the first decision made in the composition of "Retrograde Soul" and informed all other aspects of the creative process. The theme, exploring events in a female person's life, formed the basis for selection of a female soloist, and guided the composition of poetry.⁴

In contrast with many famous cycles which are set to a pre-existing text "Retrograde Soul" is set to a text expressly intended for this composition. This allows for close unity of text and music and prevents a disparity between the intent of the poet and the composer. Richard Wagner propagated the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "integrated artwork" and accomplished this in his Music Dramas by personally handling all aspects of opera production—from poetry and music to stage action, scenery and costuming.⁵ "Retrograde Soul" is not an opera; nevertheless, the element of storytelling plays an important role in the work. The ultimate intent is that the writing of text and music by the same artist provides for greater freedom of expression while maintaining unity among elements.

The choice of string quartet as accompaniment must also be briefly addressed.

Although piano accompaniment is common for song cycle composition, the use of strings allows for techniques and tone color subtleties not possible on the piano. The string

3. "*Liederkreis, Liedercyclus*. A coherent complex of various lyric poems. Each is closed in itself, and can be outwardly distinguished from the others in terms of prosody, but all have an inner relationship to one another, because *one and the same basic idea runs through all of them*. The individual poems present different expressions of this idea, depicting it in manifold and often contrasting images and from various perspectives, so that the basic feeling is presented comprehensively." (*Musikalisches Lexicon auf Grundlage des Lexicon's von H.Ch. Koch*, ed. Arrey von Dömer, 2nd ed. of *H.Ch. Koch's musikalisches Lexicon* (Heidelberg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1964), 513-14. Emphasis added.)

4. Poetry: Tools and Techniques by John C. Goodman discusses the importance of developing and working with a poetic so as to convey a unique point of view. (Pender Island, B.C.: Gneiss Press, 2011), 4.

5. J. Peter Burkholder et. al., *A History of Western Music, 8th ed.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 692.

quartet as an ensemble is extremely versatile, making possible a variety of idiomatic effects, utilized in the composition of "Retrograde Soul" to complement the mood of each song and the nuances of the text.

Another important element of the compositional process is style consideration. "Retrograde Soul" showcases elements of contemporary styles including jazz and pop, showing awareness of a modern popular music culture within the context of traditional instrumentation and genre. The integration of other styles and musical techniques adds interest to the work and makes it more accessible to a modern listening audience. A contextual investigation of the role of these styles in the work will be addressed later in the analysis of the individual songs.

The Romantic Movement in literature saw the increasing prevalence of the "lyric-I," in which the first person perspective becomes the vehicle to narrative delivery. Its use promoted an increased focus on expression of personal feelings and emotion, elevating the subjective experience of the individual over the objective perspective of collective humanity.⁶ In Romantic music, too, the emphasis was given to the emotive quality of the composition, both in the writing and in performance. In the song cycle, where literature and music seem to merge, the notion of self-expression by the singer is central as the performer becomes the character from whose perspective the story is told.⁷

"Retrograde Soul" is told from the perspective of a female at several stages in her life; her journey is thus the central theme of the composition. The text of each song seeks to convey the unique perspective of life at her varied ages. While this theme is by no

6. M. H. Abrams et. al., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: Norton, 1987), 1370-71.

7. Tunbridge, *The Song Cycle*, 5.

means groundbreaking, the freshness of its presentation is ensured by the form through which it is conveyed: the narrative progresses in retrograde, moving backwards chronologically. In addition to adding interest to the composition, this reversed progression also facilitates the development of a sub-theme. From beginning to end "Retrograde Soul" presents the story of a woman's life from end to beginning. It simultaneously tells the story of the journey of a soul, from jaded melancholia, disappointment and resignation, to love, hope, youthful exuberance, and childlike faith. Essentially, it is a salvation story. In this way, the "faintest, farthest light" hinted at in the first song is realized at the conclusion of the fifth, with the young narrator imagining the future that is before her—a story the listener has already heard, but which is now colored with notes of hope.

Each individual song in the cycle, while conveying a story unto itself, contributes to this overarching theme, with the music assisting and heightening the effect of its delivery.⁸ At the beginning of the first song, we learn that the narrator is an old woman, tired and worn out from the many trials of life. The languidness of the music and liberal use of chromaticism assist in conveying the melancholic mood. A sense of droopiness is created by the frequently downward-moving melodic line, complemented by sighing vocal figures. The tessitura of this song is particularly low, emulating the gravelly sound of an old woman's voice. Multiple instances of jazz chords and nonstandard harmonies result in a grating tension, culminating in the use of an open fifth at the conclusion to hint at a major mode and thereby underline the sense of hope presented in the final stanzas.

The second song, while dwelling on similar themes, is given a more traditional musical treatment, with a melodic vocal line and rather more Schubertian accompaniment

8. Please see Appendix I for individual song texts.

figures in the key of G minor. Close attention to word-painting is observed in this song, with lyrics such as "downward-leading lines" and "stolid weight" set by corresponding musical figures in the melodic line. A transition to a quasi-recitative section in the middle of the song presents the text in a speech-like way, alluding to similar techniques used in operatic literature. This setting emphasizes the transparency with which the narrator is telling her story, and the sparse accompaniment allows the words to be clearly understood. The intelligibility of the lyrics is especially crucial here, as this section refers to an event which forms the narrative's turning point: the death of the woman's husband.

By contrast, the focus in the middle song is placed instead on the raw emotion felt by the singer. Completely overcome, the narrator cannot articulate anything other than to tell us that "there are no words" to describe what she is experiencing, so the singer's part consists largely of crying vocal figures and sighs. Though there is virtually no progression of the narrative, the singer's expressions of grief bring to life the experience of the narrator and make her pain feel more immediate to listeners. Another element conveying the theme of the song is an allusion to the *Dies irae*: a chant sequence from the Mass for the Dead traditionally utilized as a musical symbol for death.⁹

In the opposite direction thematically, the fourth song tells the story of youthful love, set to a lush jazz melody and accompaniment. Contrasting with the mood of the previous three songs, a sense of contented bliss pervades the fourth; the sheer pleasure depicted in the text is accentuated by the music. At the same time, a sense of irony is created especially in the last section, due to the listener's knowledge of the fate of the

9. J. Peter Burkholder et. al., *A History of Western Music, 8th ed.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 642.

narrator and her beloved. Nonetheless, this new hopeful mood betokens a significant step in the deeper soul journey.

The fifth and final song in the set builds upon the happy mood already established. It is tirelessly upbeat, with changing time signatures reflecting the spirit and capriciousness of childhood. Set in C major and largely diatonic, the song has a youthful flavor, complemented by the use of pop-style chords and rhythmic figures.¹⁰ The poetic voice in this song is that of a young girl, as yet unburdened by the trials of life and imagining things yet to come. While musical and textual allusions to marriage hint at later events in her life, reference to "the kingdom" points to an event beyond even the experience of the old woman of song one: final salvation. Thus, the story of a woman's soul journey is concluded, after a mere twelve and-a-half minutes.

10. An audio recording of this song, taken from a live performance of the cycle on April 8, 2014, is included with the binding of this thesis.

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Appendix I: "Retrograde Soul" Song Texts

I: 85

I have seen many years
An old, worn and feeble thing
Chastened by disappointment
Treated with bitter ointment
As an angel with an injured wing
A violin wound with a broken string

Those sanguine days
That sickly sweet yesteryear
Those ruddy cheeks too quickly disappeared
Since replaced by cold, choleric night
By agéd, rheumy, heavy-laden sight

But in this haze
Amid the goblin grey
I find I have a reason to pray

The faintest, farthest light I see at last
A hope that finally lies within my grasp

II: 55

My reflection tells me all about the nature of this life
As if revealing on the face my psyche's stolid weight
These downward-leading lines bespeak too well my heart's estate
Their cause I could not have foreseen while I was still a wife

When promises of happiness had thoroughly deceived me
The man that I had loved so well then suddenly did leave me
As he descended to the earth below me
Not a soul remained who could console me
And smoldering memories still yet control me

But hard though it may be to douse the pain
I sense the coming of a cleansing rain
And though correction goes against the grain
Somehow this final loss becomes my gain

III: 35

There are no words.

IV: 25

You dawned like the sun at the end of my night
The glow of the day came in subtle and slight
A rosy light colored all within view
So even the familiar has a startling new hue

Everything is natural
And thrilling
And marvelous
Oh, my young heart is singing
It's wonderful, it's full

You whispered to me on that first fateful day
Those soft-spoken words: "Pleased to meet you, soul mate."
But darling what caught me the most by surprise
Was the perfect recognition in your eyes

What makes me
The most happy
Is looking forward to knowing you
Every day
For the rest of my life
Till death do us part

V: 5

I believe in dreams
miracles
and anything my daddy says

My dad told me I'd always be his princess
but one day I'll be grown
and I'll leave this house where I've lived so long
I'll be like a queen
all dressed in white
going to the kingdom
happily ever after

But that time is still so far away
So many things I still don't understand
I want a friend to come and hold my hand
So I won't get lost along the way
What do you want to do today?

Retrograde Soul

A Song Cycle for Female Voice

Words and music by
VICTORIA BOUTON

I: 85

Languid (♩ = 60)

The musical score is arranged in three systems, each with four staves. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked 'Languid' with a quarter note equal to 60 beats per minute. The dynamics are marked *mf* (mezzo-forte). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and fingerings (6 and 3). The first system shows the initial entries for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The second system continues the development of these parts, with the Violin I part featuring triplets. The third system concludes the piece with a change in time signature to 3/4.

13

I have seen man - y years, An old, worn and fee - ble

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mp *f* *p* *mp*

mp *f* *p* *mp*

mp *f* *p* *mp*

mp

20

thing Chas - tened by dis - ap - point - ment Treat - ed with bit - ter oint - ment As an

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mp *f* *p* *mp*

23

an - gel with an in - jured wing A vi - o - lin wound with a bro - ken string

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mp *f* *p* *mp*

26

Those san-guine days, That sick-ly sweet yes-ter-year — Those rud-dy cheeks too quick-ly dis-ap-peared; Since re-placed by

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

30

cold, chol-er-ic night, By a-géd, rheum-y, heav-y-lad-en sight

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

36

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

40

But in this haze A - mid the gob - lin grey I find I have a rea - son _ to

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mp

45

pray _ The faint - est, far - thest light I see at last _ A hope that fi - nally lies with - in my grasp.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mp

II: 55

50 $\text{♩} = 72$

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

55

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

61

My re - flec - tion tells me all a - bout the na - ture of this

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

66

life As if re - veal - ing on the face my psy - che's stol - id weight

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

71

These down - ward - lead - ing lines be - speak too well my heart's es -

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

75

tate Their cause I could not have fore - seen while I was still a

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

79 *quasi recitativo*

wife When

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

82

prom - is - es of hap - pi - ness had thor - ough - ly de - ceived me The

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

84

man that I had loved so well then sud - den - ly did leave me As

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

86

he de - scend - ed to the earth be - low me Not a soul re - mained who could con - sole me And

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

88

smol - dering mem - o - ries still yet con - trol me

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

a tempo

92

But hard though it may be to douse the pain I sense the com - ing of a cleans - ing rain And

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

poco più mosso

99

though cor - rec - tion goes a - gainst the grain Some - how this fi - nal loss be - comes my gain

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

99

16

16

16

16

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score for the piece 'Retrograde Soul', page 9. It features a vocal line and four string staves (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello). The vocal line begins at measure 99 and ends at measure 16. The lyrics are: 'though cor - rec - tion goes a - gainst the grain Some - how this fi - nal loss be - comes my gain'. The string parts are marked with a 'V' and also span from measure 99 to 16. The score is in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The vocal line is in treble clef, while the string staves are in their respective clefs (treble for Vln. I and II, bass for Vla. and Vc.). The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign at the end of measure 16.

III: 35

105 $\text{♩} = 96$

Ah

Violin I *p* *p* *sim.*

Violin II *p* *p* *sim.*

Viola *p* *p* *sim.*

Cello *p* *p* *sim.*

109

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

113

Ah Ah Ah

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

119 *with great emotion* *ad libitum*

There are no words. There are no words. Ah Ah

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

128 Ah Ah

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

IV: 25

138 $\text{♩} = 72$

mp con sordino

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

(♩=♩)

162

sing - ing It's won - der-ful, it's ___ full

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

170

You

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

172

whis - pered to me ___ on that first ___ fate - ful day Those soft - spo - ken words: ___ "Pleased to

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

175

meet you, — soul — mate." But dar - ling what caught — me the most — by sur - prise — Was the

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

178

per - fect rec - og - ni - tion in your eyes —

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

(R.=R)

181

What makes me The most hap - py — Is look - ing for - ward to

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

183 $(\text{♩}=\text{♩})$

know - ing you _____ Ev - e - ry day _____ For the

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

185

rest of my life Till death _____ do _____ us _____ part ____

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

188

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mp

mp

mp

mp

V: 5

193 $\text{♩} = 180$

Violin I

Violin II
senza sordino

Viola
senza sordino

Cello
senza sordino

198

I be-lieve in dreams, — mir-a-cles, —

dolce

Vln. I
senza sordino

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

204

— and an - y - thing — my dad - dy says.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

209

My dad told me I'd al - ways be his prin - cess,

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

211

but one day I'll be grown, and I'll leave this house, where I've lived so long.

Vln. I

Vln. II *sul G*

Vla.

Vc.

215

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

220

I'll be like a queen, all dressed in white, go-ing to the king-dom,

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

226 *first time only*

hap-pi-ly ev-er af - ter.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

236

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

247 *scat*

Buh-duh-bah, buh-duh-bah, buh-duh-bah-dah, Buh-duh-bah, buh-duh-bah, buh-duh-bah-dah

Vln. I *sim.*

Vln. II *sim.*

Vla. *sim.*

Vc. *sim.*

253

Buh-duh-bah, buh-duh-bah, buh-duh-bah - dah, Buh-duh-bah, buh-duh-bah, buh-duh-bah - dah

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

257

— But that time is still so far a-way So man - y things I still don't un - der-stand I want a friend to come and hold my hand

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

263

So I won't get lost a - long the way What do you want to do to - day?

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

268

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

272

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

pizz.

let ring