Song Cycle-- Medieval Czech Poetry

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SONG CYCLE – MEDIEVAL CZECH POETRY

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Editor's Note:

You may listen to the four songs by going to the Inquiry website, http://advancement.uark.edu/pubs/inquiry/

Song Cycle:

The Czech Republic is one of the most beautiful places I have ever visited. My first time to visit was with the Springdale High School choir in 2000. Both Melody Jenkins, the singer for whom I wrote these pieces, and I were on that trip. I have since visited there twice, once on the European Studies Tour in 2002 and again independently in 2003. Since I learned a miniscule amount of Czech while I was there and can pronounce many of the complicated consonant clusters, I decided to write a song cycle in the language. A big challenge was writing rhythms that fit the long and short vowels while allowing the consonants to be clearly enunciated. Long vowels in Czech are pronounced exactly as the short vowels, only they are held for a longer amount of time. Therefore, the rhythms for the vocal melody had to precisely follow the long and short vowel patterns of the text, or the meanings of the words could be altered. The Czech language is also infamous for consonant clusters of as many as five in a row. Therefore, I had to leave sufficient time between certain words to allow the singer to pronounce these clusters.

The first song, “Svatý Václave,” is about Saint Wenceslas, the patron saint of Bohemia in the Czech Republic. The text and translation of the poetry are as follows:

“Svatý Václave”
anonymous Czech poet (ca. 12th century)

Svatý Václave,
věvodo české země,
kněže nás,
pros za nás,
svatého ducha!
Kyrieleison!

Nebeské jest dvorstvo krásné,
blazé tomu, ktož tam pójde:
v život večný,
ohej jasný
svatého ducha!
Kyrieleison!

Pomoci tvé žádám,
smiluj sė nad námi,
uteš smutné,
oţeţ vše zlé,
svatý Václave!
Kyrieleison!

“Saint Wenceslas”
translated by Alfred French

Saint Wenceslas,
Bohemia’s noble lord,
our prince!
O pray for us to God
unto the holy ghost,
Kyrie eleison!

Glorious is the realm of heaven,
and blessed he that enters there,
to reach eternal life;
the sacred flame
of the holy ghost,
Kyrie eleison!

On thee we call for aid,
have mercy on us, lord!
raise up the poor in heart,
from all despite deliver us,
Saint Wenceslas,
Kyrie eleison!
This piece (Song 1) features a Gregorian chant-like section on the words “Kyrie eleison” because of the medieval roots of the poem and the liturgical use of these words. The melodies of the rest of the text contain many perfect fifths, and the accompaniment also is filled with perfect fourths and fifths, as well as open chords. There are two reasons for this consistent dominance of perfect intervals. First, sacred medieval music in the Catholic Church allowed for no other intervals besides fourths, fifths, and octaves—the “perfect” intervals. All other intervals were viewed as impure and not for use in God’s house. Second, because this song pays homage to the patron saint of the Bohemians, their hero, I wanted the music to sound heroic. Fifths are traditionally used in heroic music because of the ease with which trumpets, a “heroic” instrument, can play them.

I set the first two stanzas of the poem strophically, using the same basic melody and accompaniment. The music is bold and optimistic, and both verses end with the chant-like “Kyrie eleison.” The third stanza, which turns from praising Saint Wenceslas and thinking of the glory of heaven to pleading with Saint Wenceslas to pray to God on the people’s behalf, is much less optimistic. The melody begins soft and low in pitch, and gradually and slowly ascends to the highest note in the piece on Saint Wenceslas’ name. Meanwhile, the accompaniment has become at once flowing and melancholy, and the pitches rise along with the singer’s melody. Finally, the piano calms the mood before the entrance of the “Kyrie eleison” chant that ends the piece.

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The next song, “Otep Myrrhy”, is a love song that was written, like the Wedding Hymn of Solomon, as an allegory of the yearning of the Christian soul for the love of Christ. The text reads:

"Otep Myrrhy"
anonymous Czech poet (ca. 14th century)
Otep myrrhy mněť mój mily,
milujeť mé z své všiše stily,
a já jeho,
zmilelého,
proňť netbám nic na jiného.
Mój mily mně biel, červen, krásen,
jako letečen den jasen.
To div z diva,
žef sem živa,
proňť se mé srdceko znimá.
Vstanúc i pójdu toho dle,
poptám sobě, proňť mé srdceko mlíše
řkúc: Batičku,
zmilečku,
zjev mi svá tvář, sokolčku.
Jehoňť má duše miluje,
viděli ste, zda ku te ju?
Múst silná,
žadost pilná,
k némúňť má mysł nemylňňa.
Když diech právě o poulnoci,
strčeť mé jeden z jeho moci
tak neznámě
vzeřěz na mé
večer:
Přenes mé v svém pramě,
Tehdy já naň vzeřečnice,
domněcě se svého panice.
Řkč: Kam kohó?
A on: Toho,
jejhoť ty hledáš přemnho.
The opening passage in the piano, full of grace notes and flourishes, serves as a ritornello, a phrase or section that appears several times in a work of music, throughout the piece. The style of this ritornello is meant to sound Eastern, because the subject of myrrh is reminiscent of the three wise men from the East in the story of Christ’s birth.

The melody of the first two verses, the same musical material, is smooth, lyrical, and bittersweet. The accompaniment is calm and full of rich chords. This is when the poet is speaking of her love. The third verse, when she begins to search for him, becomes more urgent and less lyrical. The bass note in the piano is a pedal point on G, with chords above it in G Phrygian mode. Then, the bass note jumps up to E, and the chords are in E Aeolian mode. When she asks if anyone has seen her love, the accompaniment becomes sparse and the vocals become more speech-like. This resembles recitativo in opera. For the rest of that stanza, the music becomes more uplifting, moving to a bass note pedal with chords taken from the D major scale. The penultimate stanza returns to a slightly varied version of the music from the opening two stanzas. The final stanza is set to a more firm, bold melody and accompaniment, because she has found the thing for which she was searching.

“Ostrovska Piseň” is about the world’s Christian history from Eve’s sin through the birth and death of Christ. The poem reads:

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This piece is has much rhythmic vitality and is harmonically complex. The opening stanza, which mentions the sin of Eve, sounds determined. The second stanza uses the same music, which sounds more anxious when set to the text about Christ’s birth. The third stanza uses an embellished version of the music from the first two stanzas, which heightens the suspense of awaiting the events of the final stanza. The lines about Christ’s death are more subdued, and the vocal melody is very low for the soprano voice and is in recitative style, which is more speech-like. Once Christ is resurrected, the music regains the rhythmic vitality of the beginning, and the harmonies sound more uplifting.

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“Hospodine, Pomiluj Ny” is a song pleading for God’s mercy. The words are as follows:

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“Hospodine, pomiluj ny”
from prayers of Jan Milic (14th century)

Hospodine, pomiluj ny!
Jezukriste, pomiluj ny!
Ty, spase vseho mira,
spasiz ny i uslyshiz,
hospodine, hlasny nashe!
Daj nam vsem, hospodine,
zen a mir v zemi!
Kreles! Kreles! Kreles!
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“Lord Have Mercy Upon Us”
translated by Alfred French

Lord, have mercy upon us
Christ, have mercy upon us
Saviour of all the world
O save us, and lend ears
Lord, unto our prayers.
Grant to us all, O Lord,
Harvest and peace through the land,
Kyrie eleison.
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I used heavy, dissonant chords in the piano and dramatic, chromatic melody lines to convey the sense of urgency in this plea for mercy. Since there is only one stanza, the style is freely composed, with no repeated musical ideas. The first two lines are set to similar music before a dramatic transition in the piano from B major to B minor. The next two lines of text are building up to the fifth line, which is the climax of the piece. At this point, the melody reaches the B an octave and seven notes above middle C, which is the highest note in the entire song cycle. I think this line of text is the most pleading one in this poem, “O save us, and lend ears Lord, unto our prayers.” Finally, when harvest and peace are asked for, the music returns to B major and is placid and calm. The end is a simple B major chord with the soprano singing in her lower register.

Although the Czech text was difficult, I found this song cycle rewarding to compose, and I had the privilege of hearing Melody Jenkins sing three of these pieces in my Senior Honors Composition Recital in March. I tried, to the best of my ability, to capture the moods of these pieces while incorporating medieval elements into these songs, such as perfect intervals and modal harmonies.

Faculty comment:

Ms. Beverburg’s mentor, Professor of Music Composition James Greeson had the following to say about his student’s work:

I am very pleased to offer my support for Haley Beverburg’s submission of her Czech Song Cycle for consideration for inclusion in “Inquiry.” Haley composed these songs, as well as other compositions within the past year, as an important component of her Senior Honors Composition Recital on March 3, 2005. I have had the pleasure of serving as Haley’s composition teacher during her years at the University of Arkansas. Despite her self-deprecating manner she is an extremely intelligent and musically talented young woman. She is majoring in both Music Composition and Physics, and has received exceedingly high grades in all of the classes she has taken. Musically, she has perfect pitch and a very quick mind — two important components of a superior musician.

Her compositions over the years have been somewhat conservative in style as opposed to exploring avant-garde compositional trends as some students are inclined to do. I believe that her compositional approach, which is redolent of music of Samuel Barber and other mid-20th century American composers, is quite appropriate for the medieval poems she set to music. She is the sort of student composer who resists composing music in an idiom that is imposed from outside. I perceive this as a good thing. I feel that these Czech song settings represent some of her best work as a student here and do indeed set the words very appropriately. Much of this is due to her choice of harmonic intervals, being limited to those associated with medieval music, yet combined in decidedly 20th century combinations. She also has a natural affinity to writing music for voice, as she has sung most of her life in various choirs.
Svaty Václave

Beverburg: Song Cycle-- Medieval Czech Poetry

Published by ScholarWorks@UARK, 2005
MUSIC COMPOSITION: Haley Beverburg. Song Cycle--Medieval Czech Poetry

Otep Myrrth

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Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal, Vol. 6 [2005], Art. 6

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Ostrovská Píseň

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