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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,
vévodo české země,
kněže náš,
pros za ny boha,
svatého ducha!
Kyrieleison!

Nebeskéť jest dvorstvo krásné,
blazě tomu, ktož tam pójde:
v život věčný,
oheň jasný
svatého ducha!
Kyrieleison!

Pomoci tvé žádámy,
smiluj se nad námi,
utěš smutné,
otžeň 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.

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 můj milý,
milujeť mě z své všie síly,
a já jeho,
zmilelého,
proňžť netbám nic na jiného.
Můj milý mně biel, červen, krásen,
jako leteční den jasen.
To div z díva,
žeť sem živa,
proňžť se mé srdečko znímá.
Vstanúć i pójdu toho dle,
poptám sobě, proňžť mé srdečko mdlé
řkúc: Batičku,
zmilelíčku,
zjev mi svú tvář, sokolíčku.
Jehožť má duše miluje,
viděli ste, zda kde tu je?
Milost silná,
žádost pilná,
k němužť má mysl nemylná.
Když diech právě o puolnoci,
stržeť mě jeden z jeho moci
tak neznámě
vzezřev na mě
vecet’: Přenes mě v svém prámě.
Tehdy já naň vzezřech nice,
domněch se svého panice.
Řiech: Kam koho?
A on: Toho,
jehož ty hledáš přemnoho.

“A Bundle of Myrrh”
translated by Alfred French
As myrrh is my dear love to me,
he loveth me distractedly;
and I love him,
my heart’s desire:
his spirit rules my heart entire.
His skin is pale, his color bright;
as radiant he as summer light.
The miracle
my life became,
has set my longing heart aflame.
I will arise and go apart,
to search for him with fainting heart;
and say: ‘Dear Lord,
my precious love.
Reveal to me your face, my dove!’
O tell me if ye saw him here,
the one my spirit loveth dear!
My love is firm;
my thoughts abide,
for ever, ever, by his side.
I, wandering at the midnight hour
met one whose face recalled his power:
so strange did he
look down on me:
‘Convey me in thy custody!’
I gazed into the face above me,
thinking I glimpsed the eyes that love me.
I said: ‘Where? Whom?’
‘That one’; said he,
‘for whom you search so passionately.’

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 recitative in opera. For the rest of that stanza, the music becomes more uplifting, moving to a I 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.

"Ostrovská Píseň" is about the world's Christian history from Eve's sin through the birth and death of Christ. The poet reads:

"Ostrovská Píseň"
anon. Czech poet (12th-13th century)

Slovo do světa stvoření
v božství schováno,
jež pro Evino zhrěšení
na svět posláno.

Dievcě dřeve porozenie
jest zvěstováno,
z Davidova pokolenie
božsky vzchováno.

Ot něhože naše křšćenie
jménem nazváno,
pro drahé naše spasenie
židóm prodáno.

I pro naše vykúpenie
na smrt prodáno,
jehož nám slavné vzkřiešenie
vesele dáno.

"Song of Ostrov"
Translated by Mac Hammond

The Logos at world's creation
In God's head was kept,
At Eve's sinful transgression
To the world was sent.

To the Virgin the gestation
Is soon announced,
From David's long generation
God's Son descended.

The same holy appellation
For christ'ning was used,
For our eternal salvation
To the Jews was sold.

For the sake of our redemption
He to death was sold,
To us his high resurrection
With joy is given.

This piece 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.

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

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

Hospodine, pomiluj ny!
Jezukriste, pomiluj ny!
Ty, spase všeho mira,
spasiž ny i uslyšiž,
hospodine, hlasy našě!
Daj nám všěm, hospodine,
žizn a mír v zemi!
Krlěš! Krlěš! Krlěš!

“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.

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.

Svatý Václave

Haley Beverburg

Soprano

Piano

Soprano

Piano

Sva - tý Vá - cla - ve, vé - vo - do - ča - slá - ze - má,

Soprano

Piano

ri e le i son!

Soprano

Piano

Ne - bes - ká - jest d'vor - svo - krá - sné,

Soprano

Piano

bla - zé - lo - mu, ká - ž tam p'j - de: v ži - vot vě - č - ný,

Soprano

Piano

kně - že nás, pros za ny

Soprano

Piano

bo - ha, sva té ho du cha!

Soprano

Piano

Ky

Soprano

Piano

oh - et jas - ný sva té ho

Soprano

Piano

du cha!

Soprano

Piano

Ky ri e le i son!

S 30 *mf*
ni den ja - sen. To div z div - a.

Pno. *mf*

S 44 *f*
Vsta - núc i pój - du to - ho die. pop - tům so - bě. prořz mé ardeč - ko

Pno.

S 34
zeř sem - ti - va. prořz se mé ardeč - ko zni - má.

Pno.

S 48 *ff*
mlé - kú: Ba - ti - ku zmi - le - tič - ku zjev mi svú

Pno. *ff*

S 39

Pno. *cresc.*

S 54 *mf*
tvář so - ko - lič - ku

Pno. *mf*

S 59 *p*
Je - hoř má du - še mi - tu - je. vi - dě - li ste

Pno. *p*

S 75

Pno.

S 64 *cresc.*
zda kde tu je? Mi - lost sii - ná.

Pno.

S 79 *mf*
Když - di - ech přá - vě o pu - cí

Pno. *mf*

S 70
žá - dost pil - ná. k ně - muž? má - my - si ne - myl - na

Pno.

S 83
no - cí, stržeť mé je - den z je - ho - mo - cí tak nez -

Pno.

101

S

své - ho pa - ni - ce. — ří - ech: Kam — ko - ho? —

Pno.

dim. *p*

107

S

ná - mé vzez - tev — na mé ve - cer: Pte - nes mě v svém prá -

Pno.

106

S

A — on: To - ho, je — hož ty — hle - dás

Pno.

f

107

S

mě.

Pno.

111

S

přem - no - ho.

Pno.

p

108

S

Teh - dy já nař - vzez - tev — ni - ce, dom - něch se

Pno.

f

115

S

Pno.

Ostrovská Píseň

Haley Beverburg

Soprano

mf Sto - vo do

Piano

mf

5

S

své - ta stvo - ře - ni - e — v bož - ství — scho - vá

Pno.

5

S
no _____ jež _____ pro E - vi - no z hřé - le - ni - e _____

Pno.

S
Di - ev - cté - ve po - ro - ze - ni -

Pno.

S
na _____ svět _____ pos - lá - no _____

Pno.

S
e _____ jest _____ zvě - sto - vá - no _____

Pno.

S
z Da - vid - o - va po - ko - le - ni - e _____ bož - - - sky

Pno.

S
e _____ jmé - - - nem naz - vá - - - no _____

Pno.

S
vzcho - vá - no _____

Pno.

S
pro - dra - hé - ná - že spe - se - ni - e _____ ži - - - dóm _____

Pno.

S
Ot - ně - ho - že ná - že křt - ě - ni -

Pno.

S
pro - dá - no _____

Pno.

Hospodine, Pomiluj Ny

Haley Beverburg

S 46 *♩ = 85*
p I pro ná - še vy - kú - pe - ni - e... na smrt pro - dá - no...
Pno. *p*

S 51 *♩ = 110*
mf je - hož nám stav - né vz - kř - e -
Pno. *mf*

S 54
mf še - ni - e *mp* ve - se - le dá - no.
Pno. *mf* *mp*

S 9
Pno. *f*

S 12
f Ty, spa - se vše - ho mi - ra, spa - siť ny i
Pno. *f*

S 16
us - ty - biť. *ff* Hos - po - di - ne, hie - sy
Pno. *ff*

Soprano *♩ = 66*
p Hos - po - di - ne, po - mi - luj ny!
Piano *p*

S 5
mf Je - zu - kri - ste, Po - mi - luj ny!
Pno. *mp*

S 20
na - ší! *f* Daj nám všem, hos - po - di - ne, *mf* žizn a
Pno. *f* *mp*

S 24
mir v_ze - mi! *p* Kr - leť! Kr - leť! *pp* Kr -
Pno. *p*

S 29
leť!
Pno. *pp*