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Santa Barbara

Transformation and Connection through Art Song
and Jake Heggie's *The Starry Night*

A supporting document submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts
in Music

by

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December 2014

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December 2014

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and Jake Heggie's *The Starry Night*

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by

Sarah Elizabeth Broomell

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I honor my great aunt Bernice McNiel (1920-2014) for her comprehensive support throughout my education. She participated in my research by sending me articles on this topic. I knew she was interested and comprehended my desire to know. I am especially grateful for her enthusiasm regarding this accomplishment and her belief that I would do it.

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ABSTRACT

Transformation and Connection through Art Song

and Jake Heggie's *The Starry Night*

by

Sarah Elizabeth Broomell

Entertainment has changed dramatically in recent decades. The frequency of live music making and live performances of all genres has significantly declined. These changes reach deep into the heart of classical vocal music. This study examines present concerns in art song performance as its enthusiasts recognize the necessity to employ innovative approaches in order to continually share their art form. All people involved in performing or in educating others to perform this genre are reexamining its relevance in society. Some have reached a new conviction that art song is important. Those who have observed evidence of its decline seek ways to rejuvenate audiences for this beloved and transformative art form. Establishing an authentic connection with the audience, utilizing art song as true theatrical entertainment, and removing lenses that would alienate audiences are each essential.

Jake Heggie is a composer who offers a relevant artistic contribution to society and reinvigorated hope for contemporary opera and art song. His significant collaborations speak of his ability to work successfully in theatrical productions and his enthusiasm to educate students about this rewarding vocation.

Desire for and expertise with connecting with the audience is a priority in professional performance but was not the priority in student venues while perfecting technical skill. However, the transition to professional status requires a performer's deep understanding and expressive capability. Performing in such a way that this happens in a mutually satisfying manner for performer and audience is the definition of artistic success. Heggie's song cycle inspires a deep reflection on the vocation, the problems and potential solutions in a song artist's journey.

The genesis of Heggie's *The Starry Night*, a song cycle for mezzo-soprano and piano on texts of Vincent Van Gogh, Anne Sexton and Emily Dickinson, was inspired by a personal event in Heggie's life. While each of the authors of the texts have contributed significantly to art and poetry, their personal lives give inspiration to others who share similar types of suffering. Each analysis of the songs explores the text and the composer's musical treatment. The author and soprano Elizabeth Croy coached the cycle with Jake Heggie and his personal interpretations of the texts and music, as described on February 23, 2010, are recorded in this document.

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Introduction

As art song performers consider the future of their art form, more and more attention is being given to the role the audience plays in a concert. Most North Americans are not familiar with the art song recital or its repertoire unless they associate with the culture of musical academia. Art song reformers advocate song performances presented in innovative, accessible and relevant formats to today's audiences.

What are these new approaches to art song performance? Are they passing fads? Do the concerns deserve early consideration applicable to the young student of art song? What do art song institutions such as the New York Festival of Song (NYFOS), the Vancouver International Song Institute (VISI) and SongFest advocate? Questions regarding the song artist's vocation, training, and motivation as discovered while preparing to perform Jake Heggie's song cycle *The Starry Night* established the impetus for the present study.

Jake Heggie is one of the principal opera and song composers of the twenty-first century, most prestigiously known for his operas *Moby Dick* and *Dead Man Walking*. He has collaborated repeatedly with some of the most highly regarded librettists and performers. He is a regular guest faculty artist at SongFest and VISI and in much demand for master classes. When asked in a 2011 interview, "Jake, as a composer, how do you affect an audience?" he responded with humble conviction: "I think you look for something authentic and true and transformative. You set a challenge up and then you find a transformative way through music and action and words to find the core of joy that was missing."¹ What can we learn from Heggie's priority? He is concerned with what will penetrate the hearts of audiences as

¹ BeachBlanketBabylon. Nov 7, 2011. "BEACH NUTS! Part Two: Life in Babylon with Curt and Jake." [Video] Accessed May 4, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xbr8H4bS-M>.

a professional theater composer, not only because his livelihood depends on it, but also because he desires to create human connection. He has made a 'lasting contribution' to the opera and art song repertoire because of these intentions.

Voice professor and international Wagnerian mezzo-soprano Jacalyn Kreitzer stated in 2011 that her purpose as a performing classical musician is to help people.² When artists believe their art is inherently beneficial to humanity and receive appreciation for their work there is artistic satisfaction. Without these elements disenchantment is likely.

Vincent van Gogh held that humanitarian philosophy of life and suffered to bring it into reality. He perpetually wished to bring encouragement and consolation to his fellow man by conveying honest and fervent emotion through his painting. In the same way, Jake Heggie presents to an audience an authentic transformation through music and words in *The Starry Night*, drawn from Van Gogh's letters and poetry of Anne Sexton and Emily Dickinson.

The texts of *The Starry Night* are challenging in subject matter and unique as they are drawn from three different authors. While exploring the lives of Jake Heggie, Vincent van Gogh, Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton, unexpected philosophical discoveries may be made.

Van Gogh's letters provide a marvelous insight into his inner experience. Great treasures lie within the letters available to the one who would choose to know the painter more intimately. The Massachusetts poets Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton claimed that writing poetry saved their lives in the 1860s and 1960s. Sexton wrote to save her mental health. Her poems speak of ongoing struggles with which readers could identify. Dickinson's words stress knowing the inner self, another universally relatable concept.

² Kreitzer, Jacalyn. 2011. "Voice Lesson, Sarah Broomell." Los Osos, CA, October 2011.

Since they began serious poetry writing later in life their careers were infused with great intensity as they navigated steep learning curves.

With similar vigor and commitment to his personal voice, but with considerably more mental health, Jake Heggie composes art songs and operas from a deeply felt position that draws in audiences. Even though he began composing as a youth, his career as a composer began later in life, as well. Heggie was in his mid-thirties when he won the Schirmer competition that brought him attention and commissions from top tier singers and ensembles.³

In this document, Chapter One deals with the transforming approaches to art song performance. Chapter Two presents biographical information on Jake Heggie and the unique contribution he makes to art song performers' education. Chapter Three provides biographical information about each of the authors of the texts Heggie sets in *The Starry Night*. Chapters Four through Ten presents analyses of the texts and music of the seven songs in the cycle. Chapter Eleven draws conclusions informed by choices the cycle's authors and composer made and by those who would promote its performance.

³ Keenan, Alanna. "A Performer's Guide to Jake Heggie's the Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love." DMA diss, Louisiana State University, 2009.

I. Present concerns in art song performance

Importance

Art song has been and is an important repertoire for classical singers and pianists. Required by all vocal and collaborative piano programs, art songs form the basic nourishment for study in these disciplines. While taken for granted that young musicians will study many Italian, German, French and English art songs, those same musicians may not often present recital programs after academic study. For those who do seek to perform professionally, there is relatively little viable chance that art songs presented in the traditional format will fill a house. The opera singer's life is consumed by auditions, roles, and travel leaving little or no time to continue her relationship with the art song repertoire. However, continually performing it keeps a singer engaged with her own artistry in a way that opera doesn't allow.

Mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe addressed this dilemma in a video preceding her 2013 Carnegie Hall song recital debut with Warren Jones and stated:

“Art song has been the most important thing in my life.

“I think that sometimes art song is given short shrift because students who want to become professional singers know that in the industry today, it is nearly impossible to have a career that is based solely in recital. Opera really does take precedence. It's where most of the work is and where most of the money is. But I believe, as do many of my colleagues, that art song informs you as an opera singer. It's made me a better opera singer. Because I'm able to look at something that is solely mine. I'm able to diagram it. I'm able to take it apart and put it back together, and it's very personal.”⁴

⁴ Blythe, Stephanie. "Stephanie Blythe on the Importance of Art Song." Carnegie Hall, <http://www.carnegiehall.org/Calendar/2013/3/11/0800/PM/Stephanie-Blythe-Warren-Jones/>

Evidence of Decline and Rejuvenation

The future of the song recital is of primary concern to several organizations across North America. The existence of these entities and their mission statements convey sincere commitment to preserve art song appreciation and interest. These institutions prove that the forecasted demise of art song is not necessarily inevitable.

Steven Blier and Michael Barrett incorporated the New York Festival of Song (NYFOS) in 1989. “NYFOS was founded partly because Mr. Blier and Mr. Barrett feared for the heritage of the song recital.”⁵ Rena Sharon created the Vancouver International Song Institute (VISI) in 2007 following “fifteen years of my personal observation of the art song’s erosion as a performance modality.” Sharon notes, “Many concert presenters across North America assert that programming vocal recitals results in low audience turnout; some have even predicted the disappearance of the art song recital from the concert stage within the next twenty years.”

VISI operates on the premise that views of art song need to be altered and that its place in the world is in question. VISI’s challenges participants to “transform your views of art song and its contemporary relevance in the world.”⁶

A third institution sharing these concerns is SongFest founded and directed by Rosemary Hyler Ritter in 1996 “To ensure the future of art song.” Graham Johnson has instructed students at SongFest for many years. He said in 2012, “This repertoire they would tell us is elitist, marginal, uninteresting, done-with, 19th century, kaput.”⁷

⁵ NYFOS. 2014. "New York Festival of Song." Accessed July 28. <http://www.nyfos.org/story.html>.

⁶ VISI. 2014. "Vancouver International Institute of Song." Accessed July 28. <http://www.songinstitute.ca/>.

⁷ SongFest. 2014. "SongFest." Accessed August 14. <http://www.songfest.us/>.

Serious singers and pianists devote years to studying and perfecting their art song performance and understanding. Upon departure from the student environment and the captive audiences of the academic culture, young professionals notice a difference in performance motivation. Concert presenters observe that art song recitals are decreasing. Art song is largely unfamiliar, thus uninteresting to people outside academic walls. Who performs art song after graduation since opera is where the jobs are other than music faculty? Is the university vocal program curriculum the main entity that sustains art song's existence?

Since a high percentage of its performances occur within academic institutions, how is art song culturally relevant? When invited to respond to these questions, Martin Katz commented, "Your questions are very appropriate and relevant to the state of things today."⁸ Artists and concert presenters are addressing this question and making changes in programming, format, language choice and venues. As long as the priority lies with engaging the hearts and minds of the audience, continued change will produce effective results – the preservation and drawing in of an interested audience.

Innovations in presentation are making this art form accessible and relevant to refresh audiences. Art song specialists in the professional sector, summer festivals and academic settings are making concerted efforts to reinvigorate and to reimagine the song recital. Students who have wondered, "How is this expertise actually helpful and relevant to the world?" can be assured that others are seeking answers to similar questions.

SongFest's mission statement:

"SongFest strives to ensure the future of art song by providing young singers and pianists with training and performance opportunities with the most

⁸ Katz, Martin. Email message to author, August 4, 2014.

distinguished artists in their field – in a supportive, challenging, and rewarding musical environment. SongFest also aims to increase the understanding and appreciation of song among audiences by presenting classes and concerts in interesting formats.”

Extremely seasoned experts, coaches and contemporary composers serve this mission.

Longstanding faculty include pianists Margo Garrett, Graham Johnson and Martin

Katz and composers John Harbsion, Jake Heggie, Libby Larsen and John Musto.

Song expert Graham Johnson’s address to the 2012 SongFest students was hopeful.

“I have been very, very privileged and pleased to be here these past times. I find myself enormously encouraged to see this type of devotion and presence... You show us that as long as the human heart understands the conjunction of word and tone as amongst the most beautiful and extraordinary things that can exist in the world, as long as you are alive in this room, teaching, handing on to people younger than you, continuing to be, that this form will never die. I’ve given you a few pointers to try and keep it slightly more alive, but they are unimportant in comparison to your continuing love and commitment.”⁹

VISI can also stand for “Visionary Innovation in Song Interpretation.” The VISI project is described:

“Our diverse programs for young artists, emerging professionals, and career development offer integrated and highly innovative studies in song interpretation, performance practice, composition, scholarship, research, and multi-media creation.”¹⁰

Schubert and Wolf scholar Susan Youens, Deborah Stein, co-author of *Poetry into Song: Performance and Analysis of Lieder* (2010), Martin Katz, and Jake Heggie are among recent guest faculty.

By far the oldest organization committed to bringing life and longevity to the song recital is the New York Festival of Song. Steven Blier and Michael Barrett founded

⁹ SongFest. "Testimonials: Established Artists." <http://www.songfest.us/testimonials/>.

¹⁰ VISI. 2014. "Vancouver International Institute of Song." Accessed July 28. <http://www.songinstitute.ca/>.

NYFOS in 1989 with the cultural vision that “everyone has a primal need to be sung to” which motivates them to share the dynamic possibilities of song performance with their audiences.

Michael Barrett prefers to present recitals featuring multiple performers.

“The whole idea of having a minimum of two singers and sometimes 3, 4, 5 singers really gives you the ingredients to have a potentially magical concert. Nothing wrong with a solo recital. But with two people there’s already drama. And there’s chemistry and there’s all kinds of role playing going on and I’ve found that to really take me to the heights of entertainment and the depths of a profound experience in music.”¹¹

Intimate venues like restaurants or homes include an attractive social element but there is always a need to keep a relationship with an established concert venue, as well. The NYFOS “After Hours” series employs this idea, one that may be less familiar to student performers of this genre. Offering intimate concerts in small settings such as 10PM shows at a restaurant makes song performance fun. The NYFOS concert series has been presenting concerts since 1989 and has grown to require larger venues. Its present home is the Merkin Concert Hall where Heggie’s *The Starry Night* was premiered in 2001.

When concert presenters seek to grant a learning experience to audiences and singers, there is a win for both parties. Acknowledging the audience’s familiarity level with the songs is extremely important and is certainly one reason NYFOS has been successful. NYFOS programs are known for their “exquisitely crafted and carefully researched programs, charming and informal on-stage narration, and extensive program notes.” Developing a mental thread for the audience to join is a skill in itself. Commitment to

¹¹ Estabrooks, Jonathan. "Where We Come From: A NYFOS Documentary." 2010.

that requires extensive research and a desire to connect intellectually with the audience. It does not rest on the adage to “let the music speak for itself.” Joe Nocera of the New York Times wrote in 2013:

Most of all, though, a Nyfos concert has a theme — not some made-up excuse for stringing songs together, but something that makes deep musical or historical sense. Blier told me earlier this week that the main quality he seeks — in a song, a concert, or a performer — is “truthfulness.”¹²

Seeking audiences for new works gives a fresh sense of cultural relevance to song recitals. These works require a place to be presented and SongFest and NYFOS have both commissioned new American works and premiered them in their concert series. “A program called NYFOS Next offers free concerts of a new generation of song composers and interpreters performing new songs in an intimate setting.”¹³

NYFOS is educating upcoming professionals to render performances with these same priorities. If one seeks to perform art song professionally, this is an important model to emulate.

Connection

The Audience Matters

Initially, the singer and pianist must connect with the song via the text and the music. Secondly, they must connect with each other. Lastly, they must connect with the audience. Steven Blier, artistic director of the New York Festival of Song, speaks about the first two steps of that process.

¹² Nocera, Joe. "The Man at the Piano " The New York Times, 2013.

¹³ NYFOS. "New York Festival of Song." <http://www.nyfos.org/story.html>.

“There’s something we do with a song to try to bring it to life. The event of that song: who are you, what are you saying? To talk about it in such a way that it kind of cracks open honestly about the imagination. I think that is the hallmark of our work. It’s very imagination based. I’m trying to make that soul-to-soul connection, a way of hooking on, hooking our energies together and melding them together. It’s what I call getting on Air Steve.”¹⁴

In Stephanie Blythe’s discussion of the importance of art song she stresses how essential the connection with the audience is. Their decision to return to a future concert depends on it.

“It is incumbent upon you in the recital to paint a world that is very accessible to your audience. And I’ve taught young singers over the years that the most important thing I learned is that when you are singing a song, it is not important for you to have great feeling about what you’re singing. What’s important is for *the audience* to have great feeling about what you’re singing. The audience does not know why you are crying. The audience does not know your back-story. They do not know why this piece moves you. But if they hear something beautifully presented and that opens a story up to them. If the audience can connect and remember a moment in their lives that is very poignant. If they hear a poem sung and set well and the *audience* says, “Hey, I know what that’s like. I’ve been there. I’ve had my heart broken. I’ve been young and carefree. I’ve been with a family member who’s dying. All of these wide experiences that all of us have are reflected in art and in poetry and in music. And as an artist, if we can wake up those memories in the audiences, *that’s* what’s gonna make them come back. *That’s* what’s gonna make them come back. *That’s* what’s going to make the audiences of tomorrow because they are going to want to be there, to be in that place again. And we’re the ones who are going to help them access it.”¹⁵

Jake Heggie talks of his humanitarian goal to facilitate connection with people through musical performance. He notices that collaborating with others requires his best and makes him a better person. “I find I can explore stories of social injustice and inequity very clearly. It can take me to places in my heart that I don’t know that were necessarily awake before and I find that very moving and enlightening. I figure if that’s

¹⁴ Estabrooks.

¹⁵ Blythe, Stephanie. "Stephanie Blythe on the Importance of Art Song." Carnegie Hall, <http://www.carnegiehall.org/Calendar/2013/3/11/0800/PM/Stephanie-Blythe-Warren-Jones/>

waking up for the first time in my heart then there's probably someone else out there who hasn't had that awake moment.”¹⁶

Art Song as Theater

Jake Heggie continually refreshes and reappropriates art song as a theatrical expression for singers. His priorities include the journey, storytelling, and transformation, visualizing the scene, and giving the audience a theatrical experience. “The theater of it is more important to me than almost anything. That the audience feels something and comes away with something that you give them a dramatic experience and an emotional ride: that’s the most important thing.”¹⁷

Blier finds unfamiliar songs and makes his audiences want to hear them through his engaging discourse. Conversely, he programs familiar songs and ties them into the theme of the evening. “They know how to program familiar repertory in contexts that make us hear it freshly.”

“How many concerts have the narrative power of exciting theater? How many concerts offer such a rich sense of discovering new and vital music? This is what we want all concerts to be, though we know it rarely happens. An evening of discovery and enchantment, a reminder of how illuminating a journey a great song can be....NYFOS....is helping to renew the audience for song, with all its power to express the variety of human experience and emotion.”¹⁸

When a singer and pianist create a recital, the participants include not only the performers but also quite significantly, the audience members. While a student, the musician’s primary thought is to perform according to the teaching of their professor,

¹⁶ KERA. "State of the Arts: Composer Jake Heggie, Photojournalist Kael Alford. Part 3: Passions into Careers." 2012.

¹⁷ Jake Heggie, Elizabeth Croy, and Sarah Broomell. Coaching ‘The Starry Night’ with Jake Heggie,. Calgary, AB, 2010.

¹⁸ NYFOS.

not to engage with the audience. Becoming a professional will naturally lead the artist to consider the audience in new ways that previously may not have seemed important.

An elitist attitude will not win audiences for art song. Important for the young student to remember, the public likely prioritizes different elements of a performance than does the university music department jury panel. Additionally, the public wants to be entertained in a different manner than they did when traditional voice program curriculum guidelines were established. The quality of performance desired has not necessarily decreased, but the desired content has changed.

Removing Lenses – Language, Text and Programs

A performer has a more natural rapport with an audience when she sings in its native language. Stephanie Blythe explains why she prefers to sing in English in America.

“I’ve really discovered over the last several years, that I prefer to sing my recitals in English when I’m singing for an American audience. And the reason is, I have completely gotten over seeing the tops of people’s heads because they’re so busy reading the program and following the poetry and the translations that they don’t actually hear the recital. They don’t take part in the recital.”¹⁹

Text comprehension is a big concern, and historically has been dealt with in unsuccessful ways. Does a printed program effectively communicate the text to the audience? The audience needs to know what they are hearing and who is performing it. However, as concert lighting doesn’t enable the audience to read the program’s printed text, more and more presenters are no longer printing it.

Stephanie Blythe addresses the issue of text in her video “On the importance of audience reaction.” The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center premiered Alan L. Smith’s *Covered Wagon Woman* and was performed by Blythe, and pianist, Warren Jones

¹⁹ Blythe, Stephanie. "Stephanie Blythe on the Importance of Audience Reaction." Carnegie Hall, <http://www.carnegiehall.org/Calendar/2013/3/11/0800/PM/Stephanie-Blythe-Warren-Jones/>

in February of 2008. The composition is on texts taken from the diary of an American pioneer woman who crossed the continent in a covered wagon.²⁰

Asked by the presenters if she would provide the texts for the program, Blythe asked them to include the texts as an insert to be acquired after the recital. She desired to experience the performance in real time with the audience. In this way she could see their facial expressions, the feedback they would offer, and thereby enhance the entire limbic loop created during her performance.

“I am singing this piece for the very first time here in New York for this audience and I want to experience this with the audience. I want it to be an active experience where we’re going on this journey together and I would love to have the information that they give me by their faces because audiences do not recognize in large part what a contribution they make to whatever they’re seeing, whether they are happy about something or sad about something or reflective about something. It shows in their faces. It informs the performer and it changes the way we sing. It changes the way we communicate, and I want to encourage that by singing in languages that the audience has an automatic connection. So that I’m taking down as many lenses between me and the audience as I possibly can.”²¹

When performers do provide the text, reformers are enabling the audience to read it and watch the performer almost simultaneously. Rena Sharon, founder of VISI and collaborative piano professor of the University of British Columbia, intensely advocates projecting the text in easy view of the singer’s face. If performing in a foreign language, English translations along with the original language are projected. Sharon teaches these principles in her song interpretation courses at the University of British Columbia.

²⁰ USC. "Alan L. Smith Biography." USC Thornton School of Music, <http://music.usc.edu/alan-l-smith/>.

²¹ Blythe, Stephanie. 2013. "Stephanie Blythe on the Importance of Audience Reaction." Carnegie Hall. Accessed July 21, 2014. <http://www.carnegiehall.org/Calendar/2013/3/11/0800/PM/Stephanie-Blythe-Warren-Jones/>

Efforts that make the audience feel highly valued are not wasted in any musical performance. Effectively dealing with text, language, program choice and engaging dialogue will serve to preserve and grow audiences' interest in and appreciation of art song. Students admonished to develop these skills as well as expertise in the actual song performance are many steps ahead on the mission of maintaining art song as a relevant art form in our culture.

II. Jake Heggie: Works, Collaborations, Life

Prolific Composer

Jake Heggie is likely the opera and song composer who has in the past decade received more commissions, more performances of his works and is invited to perform or conduct master classes than any other.

His first opera, *Dead Man Walking* has received more than 40 productions with over 150 performances on five continents since its San Francisco Opera premiere in 2000. University opera programs are starting to perform it. The Michigan University Opera Theatre will perform it in November 2014 and Northwestern University is programming it for February 2015.²² Sister Helen Prejean's challenging story of redemption and forgiveness comes to life in an overwhelmingly powerful way through Heggie's music.

Moby-Dick received its 2010 world premiere at The Dallas Opera and has since been performed by the State Opera of South Australia, Calgary Opera, San Diego Opera and San Francisco Opera. The Washington National Opera gave its East Coast premiere at the Kennedy Center in February 2014.²³

The Ravinia Festival recently commissioned new songs for Kiri te Kanawa to sing to celebrate her 70th birthday. In August 2014, Jake was at the piano for their premiere performance of *Newer Every Day*, a cycle on Emily Dickinson texts.²⁴

²² Jake Heggie, "Jake Heggie Official Website," Bent Pen Music Inc. <http://www.jakeheggie.com/> (accessed September 10, 2014).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Collaborations

Librettists, producers and singers choose to work with Heggie repeatedly, evidence that he is devoted to the spirit of theatrical collaboration. Gene Scheer was librettist for *Moby-Dick*, *Three Decembers*, *To Hell and Back*, and *Out of Darkness* and provided the texts for the song cycles *Rise and Fall*, *Statuesque*, and *Friendly Persuasions: Songs in Homage to Poulenc*, and *For a Look or a Touch*

Terrence McNally was librettist for *Dead Man Walking*, *At the Statue of Venus*, and will be librettist for Jake's next opera, *Great Scott*, that will star Joyce DiDonato. It is set for a premiere at the Dallas Opera in Oct 2015, the same house where *Moby-Dick* received its premiere.

Dead Man Walking initiated Heggie's ongoing relationship with Sister Helen Prejean, the book's author. She supplied new texts for *Breaking Waves*, a Carnegie Hall commission for Joyce DiDonato in 2011. *The Deepest Desire*, premiered by Susan Graham in 2002, featured new texts by Prejean written specifically for Heggie. Rebecca Beasley's thoroughly examines Prejean's influence on Heggie in her 2008 document.²⁵

Prominent female singers of opera and art song including Frederica von Stade and Joyce DiDonato continually collaborate with Jake, premiering his works and counting his songs as some of the most singable and moving works that are currently being written for the voice.

While working in public relations for the San Francisco Opera in the mid-nineties, Jake was driving Frederica von Stade to an engagement. He shared that he had written some folk songs and asked if she would take a look at them. She believed in his talent and

²⁵ Rebecca Beasley, "The Influence Of Sister Helen On The Life And Works of Jake Heggie As Seen In The Song Cycle *The Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love*" (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2008).

recorded his setting of Emily Dickinson's poem "If you were coming in the Fall" which won the 1995 G. Schirmer American Art Song Competition.²⁶ The mezzo-soprano has been his number one fan and promoter. Her faith in him as a collaborator was such that he accompanied her at the piano on her farewell recital tour in 2010. The final stage appearance of von Stade's career was made at the Houston Grand Opera in 2011 in the role she had premiered in *Dead Man Walking*, Mrs. DeRocher, the condemned prisoner's mother.

Kiri Te Kanawa performed Heggie's song "Final Monologue from Master Class" (text by McNally) as part of her own farewell recital tour program in 2007.²⁷

In Demand

In spite of his monumental success, Jake puts people at ease, and students are especially grateful to experience this from a musical authority figure. He is in high demand by SongFest, the Vancouver International Song Institute (VISI), and multiple universities to educate and inspire their students. Dr. David Bergeron, VISI Institute Director (2013-14) shared his experience during Jake's residence at VISI 2013.

"VISI had the privilege of Jake Heggie's visit during its 2013 season. Every single one of our participants prepared one of his songs; having the opportunity to sing for a living composer was something that most hadn't experienced yet. On the first master class, we could feel the febrile atmosphere in the Recital Hall. Our participants were dressed up, and so eager to sing for Jake. The first participant was a young tenor who showed up with legs shaking. And of course, we could hear his nerves in his performance. Jake literally jumped on the stage after the song was over and shook the singer's hand. He said "thank you" then addressed the audience and said: "I can see that you are all excited and even a bit nervous today". I am Jake Heggie, composer, but more importantly, I am your friend. Let me tell you why: without you, I am a book on a shelf. Composers rely on you performers to have our voice heard, our music played. I am so

²⁶ Alanna Keenan, "A Performer's Guide to Jake Heggie's *The Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love*" (DMA diss., Louisiana State University, 2009).

²⁷ Jake Heggie Official Website. Accessed September 10, 2014.

grateful that you have all taken the time to learn one of my songs. I will happily hear all of you, but I will do so as a friend. I will give you advice, like a friend would. There is no need to be nervous." From that point on, something magical happened in the hall. The exuberant but nervous energy had been transformed instantly into a positive enthusiastic energy of communion. Jake then took the hand of the singer, walked around the stage with him, and nerves lifted, the young tenor sang with so much more ease. Jake's humanity and his compassion were felt greatly among the audience and the participants."²⁸

²⁸ David Bergeron, e-mail message to author, 13 September 2014.

III. *The Starry Night*: The Song Cycle

Genesis of the Work



Figure 1. Jake Heggie with his father's copy of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*

Commissioned by Evolutions in Song, Jake wrote the cycle for Kristine Jepson's voice following her performance as Sister Helen in the premiere of *Dead Man Walking*. John Churchwell at the piano and Jepson gave the first performance of *The Starry Night* in 2001 at the Merkin Hall in New York City. Wayne Gay's review in the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*:

Anyone who fears that the art song for voice and piano is dead, should listen to Heggie's work for evidence that the form is very much alive. Heggie's "The Starry Night" (2001) presents a neatly devised anthology of texts by Anne Sexton, Emily Dickinson, and Vincent Van Gogh, setting each emotionally packed phrase

with straightforward, accessible effects. The sources may be diverse, but Heggie pulls his broad interests and inspirations into a convincingly unified whole.

Heggie recorded four songs of *The Starry Night* with Mary Phillips on the CD *Flesh and Stone* (2007). In its liner notes he explains, "Van Gogh's painting has always had incredible significance in my life because my father painted a copy of it shortly before his own suicide in 1972, when he was 42 and I was 10. The painting hangs above my piano, and I refer to it often. Knowing this, a close friend suggested I look at van Gogh's letters, and just at that time I found Sexton's astonishing poem inspired by *Starry Night*. That set the entire journey in motion, and I assembled the poems to trace an internal discussion of life and death."²⁹

Gregory Berg reviewed *Flesh and Stone* in the *Journal of Singing*:

We are treated here to four of the seven songs in the cycle, featuring poems by Anne Sexton and Emily Dickinson and excerpts from two of van Gogh's letters. This is some of Heggie's most imaginative writing ... it is Jake Heggie at the piano lending loving and helpful support to his singers. His understanding of and affection for the human voice is fully evident in everything he writes.³⁰

The Starry Night is a cycle of internal conversations about life and death with a surprisingly positive overtone. The authors of the texts shared similar themes in their lives including mental illness, longing for home, severe loneliness and depression. Heggie's selections of their writing relate a non-linear journey like snapshots of one's thoughts. Here he renders tragic subject matter through an ultimately hopeful lens. Touched by the darkness of suicide and loss, Heggie communicates a personal understanding to others touched in the same way. His compassion for those who lacked

²⁹ "Classical Action Teams with Composer Jake Heggie for 'Flesh & Stone.'" EDGE Media Network Accessed October 6, 2014. <http://www.edgeonthenet.com/50209>.

³⁰ Gregory Berg, "The Listener's Gallery: *Flesh and Stone: The Songs of Jake Heggie*," *Journal of Singing* 65, no. 2 (November-December 2008): 260-61.

adequate human connection was made evident by the author's 2010 coaching with him. While discussing van Gogh's dilemma, he said, "To be imbued with that much creative force and power and have basically no one understand or respond to it is horrible."³¹

Jake Heggie's father was a doctor but had wanted to be a jazz saxophonist. In order to comply with his first generation Hungarian immigrant parents' wishes, medicine won. Also an amateur painter, he had copied the *Starry Night* shortly before he took his own life. Jake said, "It's the ultimate blow to your self-esteem."³² That was the point when he began to compose.

The Starry Night is the first work Jake wrote after *Dead Man Walking* and his expanded orchestral palette is evident in the cycle. He pointed out that after his first opera he wrote in a more orchestral manner for the voice and piano than he had in previous songs. The timing of the cycle and its subject matter seem a natural step after his experience with *Dead Man Walking* – a story of redemption and forgiveness. Jake said, "We all have a yearning to connect and be understood. That's what this work is about." In *The Starry Night* he demonstrates an interest to understand those who were tragically misunderstood.³³

When Heggie read Anne Sexton's dramatic poem *The Starry Night* in a bookstore, his idea for the song cycle was birthed. Following a friend's suggestion that he read van Gogh's letters, he selected one that became *Celestial Locomotion*. The painter wonders why we can't get to a star in the same way we travel to a city by train. He compares illness as the fast track and to dying of old age as an unbearably slow journey. *Reflection*

³¹ Jake Heggie, Elizabeth Croy, and Sarah Broomell. 2010. Coaching with Jake Heggie, *The Starry Night*. Calgary, AB.

³² Heggie, Jake. Interview by Sarah Broomell. 2006.

³³ Coaching, 2010.

conveys Van Gogh's passion for color, his euphoric reaction to the colorful night sky, and reveals a moment of doubt in his life calling. *Touch* confesses his imbalance between a willingness to live and a willingness to suffer. His passion for “*everything that makes our lives artificial*” and “*the stroke of the brush*” was a source of healing to him. To round out the song cycle, Heggie turned to Emily Dickinson. He chose a blessing for the respected departed (*Go thy great way!*), a contemplation on what it might feel like to realize one is dying (*The Sun kept setting – still*), and a confession that it would be better to be the observer of painting, music and poetry than to be its creator (*Epilogue: I would not paint – a picture*).

Heggie's musical setting creates an effective and deeply moving song cycle reflecting his understanding of the authors' lives, their texts, his father's experience, and his own artistic mission. The cycle has opened up ongoing conversations about mental health among its performers and audiences. Each contributor to this cycle experienced some severe lack but found respite within his or her art form. Whether it was a sense of home, supportive feedback on their art, or healthy connected human relationships, each found a certain challenge in leading a satisfying life, but each claimed that their art form saved their lives.

Authors of Texts

Anne Sexton (1928-1974)

Anne Sexton was a Massachusetts born poet. She was known for her confessional poetry that dealt with her mental illness, family relationships, religious themes and perspectives on death. She became one of the most honored poets in America winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967 when she was 39.

Possibly the most efficient and effective manner to acquaint oneself with Anne Sexton is to read the sixteen page foreword to *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*, in which Maxine Kumin shares her personal account of Anne's life. Kumin and Sexton were "intimate friends and professional allies" from their first meeting in a poetry workshop in 1957 to the last day of Anne's life in 1974. "No other American poet in our time has cried aloud publicly so many private details." While this honesty attracted many readers, Sexton was also strongly criticized for her confessional mode. "The intimate details divulged in Sexton's poetry enchanted or repelled with equal passion." "Sexton's work rapidly became a point of contention over which opposing factions dueled in print, at literary gatherings, and in the fastnesses of the college classroom."³⁴

She had no college degree, which seems to have worked to her advantage. She was "untrammelled by a traditional education" in the literary canon, so she read and arrived at her own judgments. She was compelled to deal with then-taboo material such as suicide, madness, and abortion. Their poetry workshop leader, John Holmes, counseled Maxine not to befriend Anne because he feared she would be a bad influence on her. They communicated via telephone and worked out their poetry with each other. Early on she worked in strictly traditional forms believing in the "value of their rigor".

She worked at her desk and would play records loudly, which freed her creativity including Respighi's *Pines of Rome*. Anne listened to Chopin's Ballade No. 1 while writing *Your Face on the Dog's Neck*. She passionately expressed the power of the piece's climax and stated, "Music is better than a poem. Music beats us!"³⁵

³⁴ Kumin, Maxine. "How It Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton." In *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981.

³⁵ Sexton, Anne. "The poet Anne Sexton on words and music." YouTube. Accessed May 21, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqes93PxO7g>.

Anne first broke away from rhyming iambic pentameter in “Music Swims Back to Me”. It was published in her first collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* in 1960. It recalls the songs on the radio that reminded her of her first night of sanctuary in the neuropsychiatric hospital. She found relief in that place because she was allowed to be sick.

Accused of exhibitionism, she was determined only to be more flamboyant; however, according to Kumin, the label of a “confessional poet” grieved her. Thanks to Kumin several poems that “occurred” on the page so naturally were fished out of the wastebasket and salvaged. Anne was a reviser and willingly pushed a poem through twenty or more drafts.³⁶ She may have found a comfort in the perfecting process or perhaps grateful for the mechanical task that would translate her natural confessions into a respectable literary format.

Anne’s father successfully manufactured wool but was an alcoholic. Her mother’s had literary aspirations had been frustrated by family life. Anne’s refuge was her great aunt she called “Nana”. Diane Middlebrook, Anne’s biographer, received controversial access to Sexton’s psychiatric tapes by her daughter, Linda Gray Sexton. They indicate sexual abuse by her parents. At the very least, Anne felt that her parents were hostile to her and feared that they might abandon her. Nana’s breakdown and hospitalization also traumatized her.

In her early years of marriage while raising her two daughters she entered therapy and was occasionally institutionalized. Her first breakdown in 1954 was diagnosed as post-partum depression following the birth of her first child. She was hospitalized after her

³⁶ Kumin, xxv.

second daughter was born and attempted suicide on her November birthday in 1956. Her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, gave her objective evidence of her intelligence, and he suggested that she return to her talent in writing poetry. He insisted that she enroll in the Holmes poetry workshop that she began in early 1957.

In 1959, she lost her mother to cancer and her father three months later. She speaks directly about the loss of her parents in the first section of “All My Pretty Ones” (1962) and it is in this section that “The Starry Night” appears. Poetry seemed the only route to stability but her successes threatened her marriage.

In 1973, she asked her husband for a divorce. Her health and mental state declined steadily in that last year of life. After attempting suicide four times in her life, she died by carbon monoxide poisoning in her garage in 1974 at the age of 45.

Sexton was defiantly boastful in her search of God and became highly productive in the last year before her death. Maxine Kumin recounts, “When Anne was writing *The Awful Rowing* at white heat in January and February of 1973, and the poems were coming at the rate of two, three, even four a day, the awesome pace terrified me.” Her final collection, *An Awful Rowing Toward God*, was published after her death. In *Rowing*, she writes that while she grew up, “God was there like an island I had not rowed to.” She talks of her inability to escape her self-hatred in life but a hope that God would relieve her of it in death. An excerpt reads:

“but I am rowing, I am rowing,
though the wind pushes me back
and I know that that island will not be perfect,
it will have the flaws of life,
the absurdities of the dinner table, but there will be a door
and I will open it
and I will get rid of the rat inside of me,
the gnawing pestilential rat.

God will take it with his two hands
and embrace it.”³⁷

“45 Mercy Street”, published after her death, describes a dreamlike search for the home of her youth. Peter Gabriel’s 1986 song “Mercy Street” is dedicated to Anne.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

It is evident from Vincent van Gogh’s letters that he tried very hard to live well. He never had the close relationships he longed for or the satisfaction of knowing that his painting affected people the way he hoped it would. He was not financially independent and relied on his brother to keep him afloat until he could support himself by selling paintings.

Vincent’s father was a Dutch Reformed minister and his mother was trained in art. Exactly a year before his birth the first Vincent Willem was stillborn. Every birthday was also Remembrance Day of the original Vincent. He had 5 younger siblings and at 11 he was sent to boarding school – the beginning of what he felt to be a life of exile.

Albert J. Lubin, psychologist (*Stranger on the Earth*, 1972) builds a strong case, using circumstantial evidence and contemporary psychological theories that Vincent’s problems were caused by his position in the van Gogh family as a replacement for his dead brother.³⁸

At 16 he began work in his uncle’s art business in The Hague. After two failed romantic interests, he became exclusively devoted to Bible reading at 22 in London. He

³⁷ Sexton, Anne. 1981. *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

³⁸ Jordan, Jan Greenberg and Sandra. *Vincent Van Gogh: Portrait of an Artist*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2001, 116.

lost his tolerance for the art business, became rude to customers, challenged their taste, criticized their purchases and was fired.

He studied to be a pastor but the training was too rigorous so he became an evangelist to miners in southern Belgium. Because his identification with the poor was so extreme church leaders declared him unfit to minister. He finally realized his life calling was art and went home to begin training, but it was a difficult arrangement living at his parents' home.

*Dear brother,
There's a similar reluctance about taking me into the house as there would be about having a large, shaggy dog in the house.So the dog recognizes that if they were to keep him it would be too much a question of putting up with him, of tolerating him 'in this house', so he'll see about finding himself a kennel somewhere else.
....The dog may actually have been Pa's son at one time, and Pa himself really left him out in the street rather too much, where he inevitably became rougher, but since Pa himself forgot that years ago and actually never thought profoundly about what a bond between father and son meant, there's nothing to be said.³⁹*

He learned to draw and paint in unorthodox ways preferring to draw laborers and their work places rather than sellable lighter weight subjects.

At 31, he moved in with Theo in Paris and finally experienced the camaraderie of other painters including Toulouse-Lautrec. His relationship with Theo suffered. Theo van Gogh wrote to his sister Willemien on March 14, 1887:

"It is as if he had two persons in him—one marvelously gifted, delicate and tender, and the other egotistical and hardhearted. They present themselves in turn, so that one hears him talk first one way, then in the other....It is a pity that he is his own enemy, for he makes life hard not only for others but for himself."⁴⁰

³⁹ Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letter 413, to Theo Van Gogh. Nuenen, on or About Saturday, 15 December 1883." The Hague: Van Gogh Museum, Huygens ING, 1883.

⁴⁰ Hulsker, Jan. *Vincent and Theo Van Gogh: A Dual Biography*. Ann Arbor: Fuller Publications, 1990, p. 246.

Fed up with petty feuds among artists and city life, he moved to Provence in hopes of setting up an artists' colony and living a calmer life. His Yellow House offered him hope, but Gauguin was the only artist who joined him, and only for two months. 1888 in Arles, France was Vincent's first productive year. That summer he painted *Starry Night Over the Rhone* at night with candles fixed to his hat.

He would paint from morning 'til night striving for what he called "the high yellow note" —vivid color and emotion in perfect harmony. Yellow stood for life and energy.

He wrote to Theo:

*"Everyone will think that I work too fast...If the emotions are sometimes so strong that one works without knowing one works – when sometimes the brushstrokes come in a sequence and in relation one to another like the words in a speech or a letter – then one must remember that it has not always been so, and that in time to come there will be hard days, empty of inspiration."*⁴¹

He was always sensitive to other's suffering and he painted pictures to console himself and others. "I want to say something comforting, as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal."⁴²

"Starry Night" is the view from his room at the St. Remy asylum that he painted many times known as the Wheat Field series. As a painting he thought it a failure. He combined the view, the cypress trees and a Dutch church from his home etched in his memory to create a deeply spiritual mood. When he sent it to Theo, his brother's comment was about the familiar village scene from their youth. Perhaps he was trying to

⁴¹ *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. 3 vols. Vol. 2. Boston: Little, Brown, 1958, p. 598

⁴² Letter 531, *Complete Letters*, vol. 3, p. 25.

comfort himself with thoughts of home, placing it into his dream of what he would have liked the landscape to look like.

He suffered from a form of epilepsy that would intermittently impair his mental function. Shortly before he died, Vincent visited Theo, his wife and baby son who was ill in Paris. He could see that Theo needed to care for his own family and his own needs were too much for his brother. It is widely accepted that he shot himself in the stomach and died two days later with Theo at his side. However, Naifeh and Smith's 2011 biography of Van Gogh includes a potentially different explanation of his death. They include Rene Secretan's testimony that came forth in 1956 after *Lust For Life* was released. He had been on vacation as a young man with his brother in Auvers in July 1890. According to the evidence, there is a possibility that Van Gogh died by an accidental shot fired by Secretan who was a sharpshooter.⁴³

Theo mounted a memorial show of his brother's paintings and died six months later.

Vincent had desired to bring color into other's lives. He painted several still lives of sunflowers to decorate Gauguin's room in the Yellow House. He told Theo it would be a good idea to make cheap prints of the sunflowers to brighten the rooms of working people. A hundred years later "Sunflowers" sold at auction for \$39.7 million. The poster is one of the most popular reproductions in the world thus making Vincent's wish come true that it would brighten the rooms of working people.⁴⁴

⁴³ Smith, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White. "Appendix: A Note on Vincent's Fatal Wounding." In *Van Gogh: The Life*, 869-79. New York: Random House, 2011.

⁴⁴ Jordan, Jan Greenberg and Sandra. "Postscript." In *Vincent Van Gogh: Portrait of an Artist*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2001, pp. 105-06.



Figure 2. Van Gogh, Vincent. *Starry Night*, June 1889, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. MOMA, New York City.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York City has held *Starry Night* since 1941. The gallery label text reads:

““This morning I saw the country from my window a long time before sunrise, with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big,” van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, from France. Rooted in imagination and memory, *The Starry Night* embodies an inner, subjective expression of van Gogh’s response to nature. In thick, sweeping brushstrokes, a flame like cypress unites the churning sky and the quiet village below. The village was partly invented, and the church spire evokes van Gogh's native land, the Netherlands.”

“Van Gogh's night sky is a field of roiling energy. Below the exploding stars, the village is a place of quiet order. Connecting earth and sky is the flamelike cypress, a tree traditionally associated with graveyards and mourning. But death was not ominous for van Gogh. "Looking at the stars always makes me dream," he said, "Why, I ask myself, shouldn't the shining dots of the sky be as accessible as the

black dots on the map of France? Just as we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star.”⁴⁵

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Perhaps America’s most famous female poet, Dickinson wrote nearly 1800 poems. They were found by her sister Lavinia after the poet’s death, only a few hundred she had shared with family and friends and only a few had been published largely without her consent.

Biographer Milton Meltzer questions, “What factors in her upbringing, her schooling, and the culture of that time combined to make words her refuge and her great love? Watching a little bird in her garden, she said, “Wherefore sing, since nobody hears?”⁴⁶ She sang and chose carefully who would hear her poems.

Her father was a politician and lawyer who returned to Amherst after study in Boston according to his father’s wishes. It wasn’t peculiar to Emily to be tied to her home city, but almost a family requirement. Her brother Austin and his wife Susan lived next door and were the source of her adult social circle. Learned writers, politicians and activists were frequent guests in Austin and Susan Dickinson’s home, The Evergreens. She and Austin shared similar temperaments of peculiarity to the world. She wrote to him, “What makes a few of us so different from others? It’s a question I often ask myself.”⁴⁷

Emily’s mother was a talented homemaker but did not show interest in intellectual matters. Although she spent her entire life in her parents’ house, Emily asked her mentor,

⁴⁵ Museum of Modern Art. "Vincent Van Gogh, Starry Night." The Museum of Modern Art, http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79802.

⁴⁶ Meltzer, p. 10.

⁴⁷ "Emily Dickinson: Her Childhood and Youth (1830-1855)." Trustees of Amherst College, https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/childhood_youth.

Higginson: "Could you tell me what home is? I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled." She said, "My Mother does not care for thought—." In late October 1885, she wrote to a friend, "To have had a Mother—how mighty!"⁴⁸

Emily held differing religious and cultural views than her community never joining the First Congregational Church. She was unable to tolerate convention and pretentious behavior, especially among other women making conventional social life intolerable. According to Mabel Loomis Todd, Austin's mistress and the editor of the first volumes of her poems, "she had tried society and the world, and found them lacking. She was not an invalid, and she lived in seclusion from no love-disappointment. Her life was the normal blossoming of a nature introspective to a high degree, whose best thought could not exist in pretence."⁴⁹

Thomas Wentworth Higginson became Emily's mentor in 1862 corresponding until her death in 1886. His 1862 "Letter to a Young Contributor" gave advice to readers who wanted to write for the *Atlantic Monthly*. He stood against child labor, capital punishment, and the unfair law depriving women of civil rights and a famous abolitionist. Writing poems since 1858, Emily collected them in small packets called fascicles. She asked Higginson to tell her if her poems "were alive" and if there was "truth" in them. "Should you think it breathed — and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude —." Through the years, Dickinson sent him about 100 poems. He wrote of her, "But her chief truthfulness, lay in her insistence on discovering the facts of her inner

⁴⁸ "Emily Dickinson: Her Childhood and Youth (1830-1855)." Trustees of Amherst College, https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/childhood_youth.

⁴⁹ Todd, Mabel Loomis. "Preface to Second Series." In *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and T.W. Higginson. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890. Accessed September 14, 2014. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12242/12242-h/12242-h.htm#Series_Two.

experience...describing and distinguishing the states and motions of her soul.” He read some of her poems to the New England Women’s Club of Boston where “their weird and strange power excited much interest...”⁵⁰

She later told him that he had saved her life. She defined poetry in a letter to him. "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?" Austin said that she “reached out eagerly, fervently even, toward anybody who kindled the spark.”⁵¹

The patriarch Edward Dickinson died in 1874 and the following year Emily’s mother had a stroke. Emily and Lavinia cared for her for seven years until her death.

Following the tragic death of her eight-year-old nephew Gib in 1883, she became ill. "The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is all that tires me".⁵² She lived in poor health until she died in 1886 at the age of 55.

Although typically described as a quiet recluse, recent scholarship focuses on her forceful characteristics. Even Higginson wrote in an early edition of her poems,

“Her father, Hon. Edward Dickinson, was the leading lawyer of Amherst, and was treasurer of the well-known college there situated. It was his custom once a year to hold a large reception at his house, attended by all the families connected with the institution and by the leading people of the town. On these occasions his daughter Emily emerged from her wonted retirement and did her part as gracious hostess; nor would any one have known from her manner, I have been told, that this was not a daily occurrence. The annual occasion once past, she withdrew again into her seclusion, and except for a very few friends was as invisible to the world as if she had dwelt in a nunnery. For myself, although I had corresponded with her for many years, I saw her but twice face

⁵⁰ Meltzer, 85.

⁵¹ Meltzer, 62.

⁵² "Emily Dickinson: The Later Years (1865-1886)." Trustees of Amherst College, <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/book/export/html/65>.

to face, and brought away the impression of something as unique and remote as Undine or Mignon or Thekla.”⁵³

Emily’s poems concentrate on individuality in a world that sought to smother it. She was ahead of her time in her views on religion, society, and death. About the contemporary society in which she lived, Malcolm Hossick says its members were “not yet quite ready to stop, take stock, and contemplate the wonderful world in which they lived. Not quite ready to shrug off their tribal inheritance and emerge from the shadows and superstition. That she managed to do this so affectingly, all by herself, is our wonderful gain.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Higginson, T.W. "Preface to First Series." In *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and T.W. Higginson. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890.

⁵⁴ Hossick, Malcolm. *Emily Dickinson, The Famous Authors Series*. West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur, 2005. DVD.

IV. The Starry Night

Poem

The Starry Night

Anne Sexton, *All My Pretty Ones*, 1962

The town does not exist (6)
Except where one black-haired tree slips (8)
Up like a drowned woman into the hot sky. (11)
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars (13)
Oh starry, starry night! This is how (9)
I want to die. (4)

It moves. They are all alive. (7)
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons (12)
To push children, like a god, from its eye. (10)
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars. (11)
Oh starry, starry night! This is how (9)
I want to die: (4)

Into that rushing beast of the night, (9)
Sucked up by that great dragon, to split (9)
From my life with no flag, (6)
No belly, (3)
No cry. (2)

Anne Sexton's poem is a fiercely dramatic narrative of her interpretation of Van Gogh's painting. Comparing stanzas one and two, the syllabic count shows a similar shape with inexact line lengths that conclude in the same way. Sexton's poem uses a song form in this regard by repeating these lines in a chorus-like manner. The poem trails off in diminishing line lengths emphasizing the speaker's wish to leave life unnoticed.

Musical analysis

Harmonic language

Heggie chose a jazz vocabulary for the cycle's main thematic material because van Gogh spent a lot of time in bars.⁵⁵ It seems appropriate in light of his father's preference for jazz music, as well. Jake sets the atmosphere of a jazz bar through a 'blue note motive', the opening F# - A - B - B# - C# with the augmented 4th (the B#) rising to the 5th (the C#). (See Figure 4, mm. 1-2) This is also the first melody sung by the voice and one of a few frequently heard motives throughout multiple songs.

An upward sweeping "starry flourish" featuring two ascending augmented 2nds is a second motive that occurs repeatedly through this song and the cycle. (See Fig. 3, m. 3)

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef, the middle staff is a vocal line in treble clef, and the bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked as 'ca 60 (not rushed)'. The piano part begins with a *p* dynamic and features a 'starry flourish' of two ascending augmented 2nds. The vocal line includes the instruction 'easily' and 'led freely'.

Figure 3. *The Starry Night*, mm. 1-3

⁵⁵ Coaching.

To achieve Heggie's intended jazz effect, the singer must slide from the B# to C# in m. 15 and thoroughly embrace the persona of a jazz singer and Anne Sexton.⁵⁶ The town's silence is experienced in the fermata half rest of m. 18.

The "starry flourish" evolves into a boiling, swirling figure on a B-flat pedal point that appears two more times in this song (mm. 43-47, 59-65) The swirl is also utilized in *Touch*, which could be considered its 'sister' song as it uses so much of the same material. (See Fig. 4)

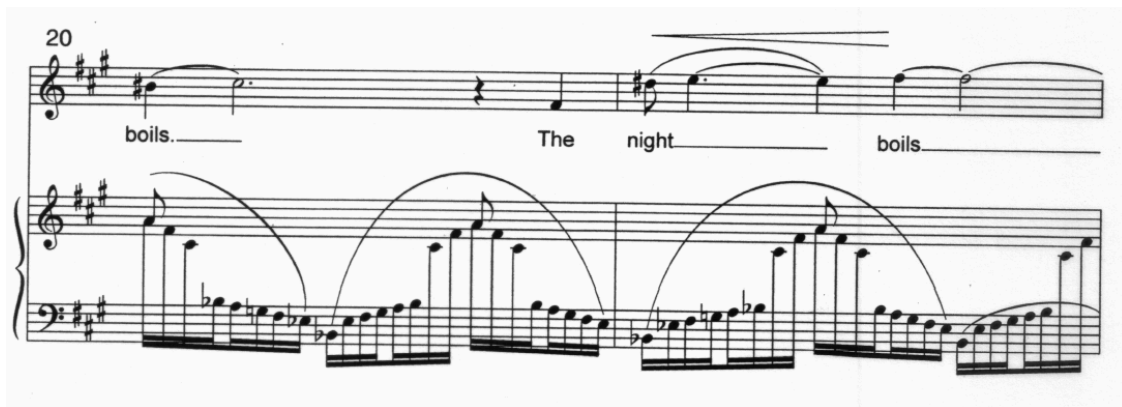
The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef, and the bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line starts at measure 20 with the lyrics "boils." followed by a fermata. The piano accompaniment features a complex, swirling figure with a B-flat pedal point, consisting of a descending augmented second scale (F#-Eb) and C#-Bb, leading to D minor block chords. The lyrics "The night" and "boils" are placed under the vocal line in measures 21 and 22 respectively.

Figure 4. *The Starry Night*, mm. 20-21

A tumbling augmented second scale descends through the F#-Eb and C#-Bb arriving at insistent D minor block chords to close the first stanza. (See Fig. 5) This same scale begins

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the close of the second stanza but at m. 49 arrives on D major.

Figure 5. *The Starry Night*, mm. 23-24

Comparing the rhythm, melody and word stress in two statements of the same text in the “chorus”. The first “I want” descends a m7th from D to Eb in 4/4 meter. (See Fig. 6) The second ascends a M2nd from C# to D# emphasizing the desperate pleading quality of the statement while the statement is elongated by the 3/2 meter. (See Fig. 7)

Figure 6. *The Starry Night*, mm. 27-28

Figure 7. *The Starry Night*, mm. 57-58

The “starry night” motive is the ascending 6th or 7th followed by a descending line. This is found at all points when this text is expressed and additionally in the closing bars of the entire cycle (*Epilogue*, mm. 36) and in mm. 9, 12, 76 and 78 in *Touch*. (See Fig. 8)

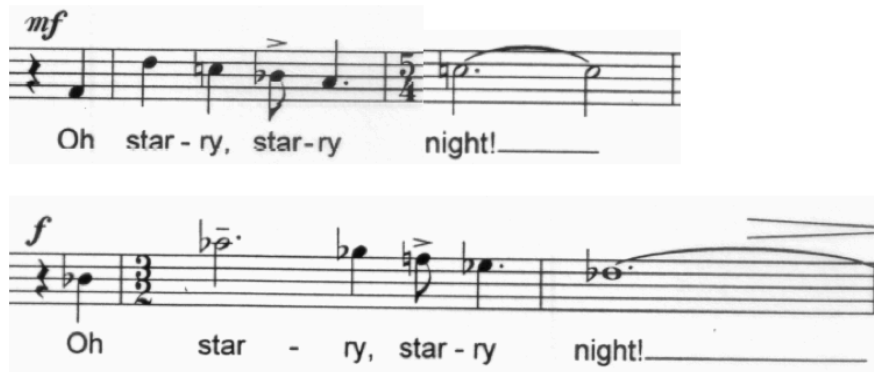


Figure 8. *The Starry Night*, mm. 49-54, Starry night motive

The final growling swirl is abruptly cut off with a piercing minor 7th “to split from my life.” (See Fig. 9)

Figure 9. *The Starry Night*, mm. 66-68

Form

Heggie's song form follows Sexton's poetic form in a clear way. When she uses similar material he uses similar material. The music for lines 1-3 and 7-9 is not similar but it is very similar from the end of line 4 through 6 and the end of line 10 through 12. Heggie reiterates the same music with pivotal changes for each "Stars. Oh starry starry night! This is how I want to die." To intensify the dramatic effect, he repeats "Oh starry starry night!" a second time in mm. 52-55 that is not present in Sexton's poem.

Orchestration

The Starry Night was the first song cycle Heggie composed after *Dead Man Walking*. He noted that he uses the voice and piano in bigger and different ways – more theatrical – than he had previously for songs. He uses the wide ranges of the piano, varying textures and multiple piano voices to achieve a broader orchestral color palette.

V. Celestial Locomotion

Letter

Letter From a letter by Vincent Van Gogh Letter to Theo van Gogh. Written c. 9 July 1888 in Arles.

To look at the stars always makes me dream, as simply as I dream over black dots on a map of towns and villages. Why, I ask myself, why should the shining dots of the sky not be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France?

If we take the train to Tarascon we take death to reach a star. One thing undoubtedly is true.... That while we are alive we cannot get to a star, any more than when we are dead we can take the train.

So it seems to me possible that cholera and cancer are celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats and railways are terrestrial means. To die of old age would be to go there on foot.

This letter is frequently quoted when van Gogh's *Starry Night* painting is discussed and included on its label at the Museum of Modern Art.

Musical Analysis

Harmonic language

Heggie's treatment of this letter creates two distinct destinations – the terrestrial city and the celestial star. The key centers communicate very clearly each of these worlds and the location changes with immediate shifts between tonalities and keyboard ranges. (See Fig. 10)

Destination	City	Star
Means of Transportation	Terrestrial Trains Steamboats	Celestial Death Cholera, Cancer
Lower register keys	C	B, F#, Ab

Figure 10. *Celestial Motion*, Use of keys for subject matter

Form

The opening conveys the sound of a train lurching forward at the beginning of its journey from the station. The ascending B-C-D travels further to the E-flat in the second bar and finally has enough momentum to continue up the scale in the third bar commencing the train trip. (See Figure 11.)

The image shows the first four measures of the piano introduction for 'Celestial Locomotion'. The tempo is marked 'Steadily' with a quarter note equal to approximately 84 beats per minute. The music is in C major. The right hand begins with a melodic line starting on B4, moving to C5, D5, and E5 in the first three measures, then continuing with a more complex ascending line. The left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes, starting on C4 and moving up stepwise. The dynamic is marked 'mf'.

Figure 11. *Celestial Locomotion*, mm. 1-4

The train begins its journey in C and generally travels in this key when in the terrestrial mode. (See Fig. 12)

The image shows measures 10-12 of the vocal and piano accompaniment for 'Celestial Locomotion'. The vocal line is in C major and contains the lyrics 'stars al - ways makes me'. The piano accompaniment is in B major, with the left hand playing a descending eighth-note line in the bass register and the right hand playing a more complex melodic line. The dynamic is marked 'pp'.

Figure 12. *Celestial Locomotion*, mm. 10-12

Arriving at the star, the left hand motion carries the distant key of B to the higher piano register. Descending by whole tones through diminished 4ths the music returns to earth with

a train whistle over C major in m. 51-52. (See Figures 13 and 14)

Figure 13 shows a musical score for measures 46-49. The vocal line (top staff) begins at measure 46 with the lyrics "we take death to reach a star." The dynamic is marked *mf*. The piano accompaniment (middle and bottom staves) features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The piano part is marked *mp* and includes performance instructions: *(legato)* and *(light ped.)*. The music is in C major and 4/4 time.

Figure 13. *Celestial Locomotion*, mm. 46-49

Figure 14 shows a musical score for measures 50-53. The vocal line (top staff) begins at measure 50 with the lyrics "One thing is undoubtedly." The dynamic is marked *mp*. The piano accompaniment (middle and bottom staves) features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The piano part is marked *(staccato)*. The music is in C major and 4/4 time.

Figure 14. *Celestial Locomotion*, mm. 50-53

As van Gogh ponders the potential of illnesses to provide a quick way to the stars, Heggie conveys this through the *Calmer* indication, the upper range and the trance like atmosphere. (See Fig. 15)

Figure 15. *Celestial Locomotion*, mm. 70-74

Heggie said, “It’s very jolly what’s going on in the piano at the beginning, in a funny way. We’re going on a train trip. It’s just, we’re gonna die this time!”⁵⁷ The abrupt return

⁵⁷ Coaching.

to earth's train music at Tempo I reflects an ironically playful attitude. (See Fig. 16)

83

of lo - co - mo - tion, just as

87 Tempo I

steam-boats and rail - ways

Tempo I

(staccato e *pp*)

The image shows a musical score for two systems. The first system, starting at measure 83, features a vocal line with the lyrics "of lo - co - mo - tion, just as" and a piano accompaniment with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The second system, starting at measure 87, is marked "Tempo I" and contains the lyrics "steam-boats and rail - ways". The piano accompaniment in the second system is marked "(staccato e pp)".

Figure 16. *Celestial Locomotion*, mm. 83-90

VI. Go thy great way!

Poem

Go thy great way!

Emily Dickinson

Go thy great way!
The Stars thou meetst
Are even as Thyself –
For what are Stars but Asterisks
To point a human Life?

A quintain, also referred to as a cinquain, is a stanza of five lines that may be rhymed or unrhymed and has a typical stress pattern.

Stars, for Dickinson were the “asterisks” of the sky that represented the just who shine like stars to lead the rest of us.⁵⁸ Emily Dickinson included this brief poem in two separate condolence letters in 1885, the year before her death.⁵⁹

Jake described this as “A eulogy so full of love, so positive - sharing a blessing. Someone’s just taken that train off into the distance, and now, you’re just wishing them well on that journey. That was their journey. We all have a different one.”⁶⁰

Musical Analysis

Harmonic language

Parallel chords of stacked fourths form the entire basis of the piano’s left hand. These descend by half steps, whole steps and major and minor 3rds. Variations on a pattern of

⁵⁸ Vendler, Helen. *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

⁵⁹ Dickinson, Emily. "Letter to Mrs. James S. Cooper [Fragment?], P. 1. Includes Poem Go Thy Great Way," Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Library, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/238598.

⁶⁰ Coaching.

repeated octaves, and consecutive descending thirds comprise the right hand. Each vocal phrase includes an ascending diminished 5th and ends with a descending minor 2nd creating a sighing effect. (See Fig. 17.)

Figure 17. *Go thy great way!* mm. 1-5

In the postlude, the range of the piano becomes ever wider while the departed soul continues traveling further into the great distance. “So here we are going into infinity, but then, here we are back on earth still, so the rest of us go on.”⁶¹ (See Fig. 18)

Orchestration

Here is the expanse and calm of the night sky in sober and consistently repeated rhythm that reflects the daily determination needed by the one left to continue living. Even the visual appearance of the score looks expansive, uncluttered, like pinpoints of light in the sky, nearly independent of each other with minimal harmonic direction.

Form

This five line unrhymed poem is set in the only through composed song of the cycle.

⁶¹ Coaching.

37 *rit. to end*

The image shows a musical score for measures 37-43. It consists of two systems. The first system starts at measure 37, marked 'rit. to end'. The vocal line (top staff) has rests. The piano accompaniment (middle and bottom staves) features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The second system starts at measure 41, also marked 'rit. to end'. The vocal line has a long note with an 8va marking and a dashed line. The piano accompaniment continues with sustained chords and a melodic line in the right hand.

rit. to end

8^{va}-----

41

(8^{va})-----

Figure 18. *Go thy great way!* mm. 37-43

VII. Reflection

Letter

Reflection

From a letter by Vincent van Gogh. To Theo van Gogh. c. 4 June 1888 in Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. And To Theo van Gogh, 3 September 1888 in Arles.

One night I went for a walk by the sea along the empty shore. It was not gay, but neither was it sad – it was – beautiful. The deep blue sky was flecked with clouds of a blue deeper than the fundamental blue of cobalt, and others of a clearer blue, like the blue whiteness of the Milky Way.

In the blue depth the stars were sparkling, greenish, yellow, white, and rose, brighter, flashing more like jewels, than they do in Paris: opals, emeralds, lapis, rubies, sapphires.⁶²

To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance.... is it not something that actually exists?

Reflection is taken from two separate letters. Van Gogh describes his reverie while on an evening walk at the Mediterranean shore and his subsequent euphoria while beholding the stars' jewel-like colors. The final question is drawn from the end of a letter written three months later.

So I am always between two currents of thought, first the material difficulties, turning round and round to make a living; and second, the study of colour. I am always in hope of making a discovery there, to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colours, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. To express the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone against a sombre background.

To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance. Certainly there is nothing in that of trompe d'oeil realism, but isn't it something that actually exists?⁶³

⁶² Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letter 619, 499 Translated by Mrs. Johanna Van Gogh-Bonger, Edited by Robert Harrison".

⁶³ Van Gogh, Vincent. "Letters: Unabridged and Annotated." Edited by Robert Harrison. Accessed November 10, 2014. www.webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/18/531.

Rarely has an artist so articulately expressed his concerns and questions as Van Gogh did in his letters. Jake extracted this question from a later letter, with which he could apparently identify. He said, “The first note of tragedy in this entire set of songs so far to me is that line “To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance.... Is it not something that actually exists?” That’s the only time there’s doubt. And I think tragedy. Because that’s what he’s dedicated his life to is capturing that. And then suddenly you’re wondering, “Does my life mean nothing?”⁶⁴

In the same way that the night sky is darker in rural areas today, Van Gogh likely beheld a darker night sky in *Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer* than in Paris or even Arles. This Milky Way would have appeared much differently than any night sky we have ever seen, even in the darkest deserts. In David Owen’s 2007 *The New Yorker* article on light pollution he notes that people in Galileo’s time were surprised when he discovered that the Milky Way is made up of individual stars.

“It truly resembled a streak of spilled liquid—our word “galaxy” comes from the Greek for milk—and it was so bright that it cast shadows on the ground (as did Jupiter and Venus). Today, by contrast, most Americans are unable to see the Milky Way in the sky above the place where they live, and those who can see it are sometimes baffled by its name.

“The stars have not become dimmer; rather, the Earth has become vastly brighter, so that celestial objects are harder to see.... Today, a person standing on the observation deck of the Empire State Building on a cloudless night would be unable to discern much more than the moon, the brighter planets, and a handful of very bright stars—less than one per cent of what Galileo would have been able to see without a telescope.”⁶⁵

Thus, it is impossible for us to even imagine what Van Gogh saw in the night sky, but Heggie takes on that challenge in the fourth song of the cycle.

⁶⁴ Coaching

⁶⁵ Owen, David. "The Dark Side: Making War on Light Pollution." *The New Yorker*, 2007.

Musical Analysis

Reflection is set in the cycle's starry night key F#. The opening broken chords flash like lights on the water.



The image shows the first four measures of the piece 'Reflection'. The score is written for piano and includes a tempo marking of quarter note = ca 72. The key signature is F# (three sharps) and the time signature is 3/4. The right hand part consists of a single melodic line with a series of broken chords. The left hand part features a steady, syncopated rhythmic pattern of broken chords. Dynamics include *f* (forte) and *pp* (pianissimo). The first measure has a *Red.* (ritardando) marking. The piece is in a 3/4 time signature.

Figure 19. *Reflection*, mm. 1-4

Heggie sets up van Gogh's walk along the seashore with an atmospheric syncopated ostinato on F#. That sense of reverie persists undisturbed by the ripples on the water that propel the steady motion forward across each bar line. Performing this rhythm exactly was a concern for the author, (See Fig. 20) however, Heggie shed a liberating perspective on that concern through his coaching. He advised treating his score as a roadmap and did not insist on its precise realization. He encouraged performers rather to take a more liberal approach to interpreting the piece as it works for the individual pianist. (See Appendix A, *Reflection*)

Figure 20. *Reflection*, mm. 13-17

The “starry night” blues motive at m. 23 penetrates the reverie as soon as attention turns toward the sky. (See Figure 21.) It initiates the steadily progressing intensity toward the angst and euphoria that culminates at “Paris.” Heggie commented on the change that occurs at this point.

“The interesting thing I tried to capture in this. When you start talking about colors, that’s when everything starts changing and begins to come alive. Just for Van Gogh, you know, suddenly the world opened up for him when color came into the picture. You know he really only painted for ten years. He did all those paintings in about ten years, and he only found color very late in that and then went wild with it.”⁶⁶

Figure 21. *Reflection*, mm. 23-26

In *The Starry Night*, the tumbling augmented 2nd scale occurs with both statements of the word “stars” preceding “Oh starry starry night”. The scale appears here descending

⁶⁶ Coaching

twice as slowly under “Paris” as in *The Starry Night*. Heggie recommended the pianist treat the scale as a free improvisation through that eruption and descent and to meet the singer at “opals”. (See Appendix A, *Reflection*)

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Reflection', spanning measures 49 to 54. The score is written for voice and piano. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line begins at measure 49 with the lyrics 'bright - er, flash - ing more like — jewels'. The piano accompaniment features a complex texture with rapid sixteenth-note passages in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand. A dynamic marking of *f* (forte) is present. The score continues to measure 52 with the lyrics '— than they do in Par - is.'. The piano part includes a section with a 3/4 time signature change. The overall style is characterized by intricate rhythmic patterns and a contemplative mood.

Figure 22. *Reflection*, mm. 49-54

The contemplative reverie returns when Van Gogh contemplates the possibility of realistically representing hope and eagerness through his painting. “Trompe d’oeil realism” is a painting technique to deceive the eye. Van Gogh says there is none of that in what he intends to do.

VIII. The sun kept setting – still

Poem

The Sun kept setting — setting — still

Emily Dickinson

The Sun kept setting — setting — still
No Hue of Afternoon —
Upon the Village I perceived
From House to House 'twas Noon —

The Dusk kept dropping — dropping — still
No Dew upon the Grass —
But only on my Forehead stopped —
And wandered in my Face —

My Feet kept drowsing — drowsing — still
My fingers were awake —
Yet why so little sound — Myself
Unto my Seeming — make?

How well I knew the Light before —
I could see it now —
'Tis Dying — I am doing — but
I'm not afraid to know —

Dickinson's poem is in the common meter that alternates lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Line 14 deviates from this pattern, "I could see it now —" has only five syllables and trochaic feet. Here, the scansion would read: / x / x / which intensifies her moment of revelation. Heggie places "I" on the strong beat on the highest pitch of the statement. (See Fig. 25, m. 60) Line 16's iambic stress highlights her absence of fear: x / x / x /.

In this poem time seems to stand still; perhaps a fever takes over, the speaker initially experiences confusion, then terror and finally the relief of figuring it out. Jake said, "The

fear is in the not knowing. So it's terrified at first. You know how sometimes when you're fearful about what's happening and then someone tells you, and you're like 'Oh...OK, I thought it was something else.' Just knowing what it is makes it less scary."⁶⁷

Musical Analysis

Harmonic language

The song opens in a static repetition of a two bar figure which is a second inversion major chord closing with a compound major 2nd. Its shape creates a question. The ascending minor 3rd and descending minor 3rd create a circular melodic shape. The voice's duple against the piano's triple expresses the speaker's frustration in rhythmic juxtaposition. One can possibly hear a sigh of perplexed confusion as the voice complains against the grain of the piano's environment. The speaker expresses a disquiet attitude through the harmonic

⁶⁷ Coaching.

stasis and the small melodic range. (See Fig. 23)

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece. It consists of two systems of music. The first system starts at measure 5 and includes the lyrics: "set-ting — still no Hue of Af-ter-noon up-on the vil-lage —". The second system starts at measure 10 and includes the lyrics: "I per-ceived — From house to house 'twas noon." The score is written for voice and piano. The voice part is in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piano accompaniment is in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature. The piano part features a prominent two-bar rhythmic figure in the right hand, which is repeated throughout the piece. The lyrics are written below the vocal line, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes.

Figure 23. *The Sun kept setting – still*, mm. 5-14

The clock chimes noon on D-flat, a diminished 5th above the G tonic. (See Fig 24, mm. 11-14) The second stanza is presented in C-flat major at m. 16. Finally, the E-flat minor harmony on “grass” offers a moment of relief from the harmonic stagnation, this time after only three repetitions of the two bar figure serving to heighten the frustration. The clock chimes in exactly the same point at the close of this stanza, but a welcome D-flat major scale releases the tedium of the monotonous clock bringing the third stanza to an F major tonality. At m. 29 the two bar figure now in root position gives more strength to the terrified statements. The additional bass line movement in the second bar of the figure creates more direction and a sense of forward motion. (mm. 30, 32, 34, 36) Finally, the piano’s motion in

m. 36 leads to the culmination of frustration at “why so little sound myself unto my seeming make?” and returns to the original G Major while the clock still chimes.

The speaker begins to understand what is happening to her at the transition across the double bar – a pivotal moment. Listening to Heggie so effectively perform this transition made clear that very little *ritard* should be taken. Many different effects can be achieved depending on the voicing and color of the resonance of this chord. It should bring a revelation of knowing into view. A threshold is at least seen, if not crossed. Additionally, although a large reach, the left hand chord must not be broken according to Heggie. The author found that the F-sharp could be redistributed to the higher octave within the right hand chord. (See Fig. 24, m. 47)

The descending third relationship from D to B-flat is inverted in the ascending third motion from D-flat to F corresponding to the melody’s frequent minor 3rd ascension and descension. (See Fig. 25, m. 56, 60-61) The cyclical two bar figure presents itself three times in D Major as the speaker identifies “’Tis dying I am doing”. The final D-flat harmony in m. 65 reaches repose.

44

(rit...)

Very calm (with resignation)

p

How well I knew the light be-fore

(rit...)

p

pp

8th

Figure 24. *The Sun kept setting – still*, mm. 44-49

Heggie places “not” at the release into the D-flat major 7th harmony. “Know” resonates in F Major conveying the relief in the newly found awareness. The final “Ah” finds peace again in D-flat. As the preceding anxious terror of the unknown is completely released, these keys evoke warmth and comfort.

56 *p* *poco rit.* (9)

'Tis dy - ing I am do - ing — but I'm not a - fraid to

61

know —

Figure 25. *The Sun kept setting – still*, mm. 56-63

IX. Touch

Letter

Touch

from a letter by Vincent van Gogh. Letter to Theo van Gogh. Written 7 or 8 September 1889 in Saint-Rémy.

I know well that healing comes from within, through profound resignation to suffering and death, through the surrender of your own will and of your self-love. But that is no use to me, I love to paint, to see people and things and everything that makes our life – artificial – if you like. Yes, real life would be a different thing, but I do not believe that I am one of the souls ready now to live and also ready at any moment to suffer.

What a queer thing touch is, the stroke of the brush...

Touch expresses Van Gogh's internal conflict while suffering from a type of epilepsy where he was literally "out of his mind" and couldn't remember what happened during the episodes.

Musical Analysis

Harmonic language

Heggie achieves formal unity in the song cycle as *Touch* utilizes all the motivic elements of *The Starry Night* and F# key within the opening sections. Again there is the upward sweeping figure, now set within a driving quarter note pulse over strong bass octaves, mm. 1 and 3. Heggie expresses Van Gogh's strong conviction with the step-wise descent to E Major, E-flat Minor and D Major. "Death" arrives at D Major a M3rd from F# recalling the thirds prevalent in *The sun kept setting* at m. 8. The 'starry night' motive expresses the same angst and struggle from *The Starry Night*. (See Fig. 26, m. 9) "There's that whole theme

from the first song: This is how I want to die. I want to die suffering like this.”⁶⁸

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Touch', covering measures 3 through 10. The score is presented in two systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is common time (C).
The first system (measures 3-5) features the vocal line with lyrics: 'comes from with-in, through pro-found re-sig-'. The piano accompaniment includes a five-measure slur in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand.
The second system (measures 6-10) features the vocal line with lyrics: 'na-tion to suf-fer-ing and death Through the sur-'. The piano accompaniment includes a piano (*p*) dynamic marking and a triplet (*mf*) in the right hand, with sustained chords in the left hand.

Figure 26. *Touch*, mm. 3-10

⁶⁸ Coaching.

Heggie’s bigger use of the piano and the voice is clearly conceived with an orchestral concept. “Oh starry starry night” is presently expressed through the piano. (See Fig. 27, mm. 11-13).



Figure 27. *Touch*, mm. 11-13

The B section at m. 18 with its abrupt change in tempo, meter, texture and tonality creates the manic shifts in van Gogh’s moods. Heggie said, “the almost schizophrenic train of thought is also something that I was trying to capture in that with the different mood swings and the different directions of thinking.”⁶⁹ The 5/8, 6/8, and 4/8 meters add to the feeling of frenzy that declare within a jazzy pleasure what is most enjoyable to van Gogh. The “Everything” repetitions are meant to express how incredibly alive van Gogh feels while painting. While he writes about his delight in committing beauty to canvas, one can imagine van Gogh nearly exploding with euphoric satisfaction. “This is how I live...in my

⁶⁹ Coaching.

imagination, in all the artificial things.” (See Fig. 28)



Figure 28. *Touch*, mm. 28-32

The same swirling material of augmented 2nds and F-sharp “eye” and “serpent” music from the opening song provide the atmosphere for the final contemplation of *Touch*: “What a queer thing touch is, the stroke of the brush...” In discussion about this statement, Jake compared feelings he has while composing to the way van Gogh contemplated his own brushstrokes. Heggie said, “I know when I’m composing, and I ask myself, “Now why do I know that goes that way?” I don’t know, I just feel that it does and I’m looking at my hand watching it draw these notes and I wonder, how does it know to do that? It’s doing it. Why is it doing that?”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Heggie coaching.

84 (mysteriously)

queer thing touch is.

pp

Figure 29. *Touch*, mm. 84-86

Back on earth, the variation on the 'blue-note' motive in m. 97 is followed by the dominant C# that concludes the song with an appropriate sense of wonder and mystery. (See Fig. 30)

95

poco rit.

8va

poco rit.

Figure 30. *Touch*, mm. 95-98

X. Epilogue: I would not paint – a picture

Poem

Epilogue: I would not paint – a picture –
Emily Dickinson

I would not paint – a picture-
I'd rather be the One
Its bright impossibility
To dwell – delicious – on –
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare – celestial – stir –
Evokes so sweet a Torment –
Such sumptuous – Despair –

I would not talk, like Cornets –
I'd rather be the One
Raised softly to the Ceilings –
And out, and easy on –
Through Villages of Ether –
Myself endued Balloon
By but a lip of Metal –
The pier to my Pontoon –

Nor would I be a Poet –
It's finer – own the Ear –
Enamored – impotent – content –
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts of Melody!

Emily confesses it would be better to be the observer of painting, music and poetry that to create it. Helen Vendler's criticism notes the poem meditates on the "sister arts" of painting, music and poetry. Dickinson asserts that it is better to be the audience than to be the artist. With respect to painting and poetry, she focuses on the creator of the art: but with respect to music, she focuses not on the composer but on instrumental music. She wonders

how the artist's creative "fingers feel", about music she imitates the transcendental passage of melody through the air; and in the stanza on poetry, the reverence of the audience toward an art that, like Jove's thunderbolts, can stun. The reward and cost to be the Poet, she understands, an incalculable "Dower", a treasure that only she knows the value.⁷¹

Functioning as a true epilogue the singer emerges out of these artists' worlds and becomes the audience.

Musical Analysis

Harmonic language

Bold and confident to match Dickinson's declamatory attitude, Heggie's music contrasts distinctly with anything else in the cycle. Spanning six octaves, the opening figure calls forth a level of sound nearly unmatched anywhere in the preceding cycle. The power of this resonance yields to a contemplative tone in m. 4-6, a gentle atmosphere in which the simple folk-song melody can be "*very freely*" presented. This major seventh harmony ushers in the first and third verses. The voice outlines a simple rising and falling melody that easily rises and falls with the poem's prosody. The introduction consistently punctuates the second beat of the bar that supports the prosodic emphasis of lines 1 and 3 of each quatrain. x / x l x / x
I would not **paint** a picture. The musical material is completely new. It gives the singer plenty of freedom to relish each word.

⁷¹ Vendler, Helen. Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Brightly ♩ = ca. 80

Figure 31. *I would not paint – a picture*, mm. 1-4

5 *mp* very freely

I would not paint – a pic - ture – I'd

Figure 32. *I would not paint – a picture*, mm. 5-7

Heggie freely alters the meter to agree with his reading of the poem, for example mm. 23-24 from 4/4 to 6/4. Heggie reminds the hearer of the starry beyond and tosses off the ascending flourish in the same way as he ends *Celestial Locomotion*. The gesture of the final bar momentarily passes through an F-sharp minor harmony but ultimately the major tonality resonates. Proper pedaling and voicing can highlight this symbolic event. (See Fig. 33)



Figure 33. *I would not paint – a picture*, mm. 37-40

Form

A modified strophic setting of Dickinson’s three-octave poem alternating between F Major and F-sharp Major comprises the cycle’s epilogue. After the turbulence of the preceding songs, Heggie ends the cycle with a simple folksong concept. In the coda, the ‘starry night’ motive, ‘blue note’ motive and the starry flourish sweep, return in F-sharp Major, their well-established key.

How does Heggie’s formal design and musical language vary from author to author? His settings of Emily Dickinson are noticeably void of a jazz atmosphere with no blue note motive or starry night motive or the augmented 2nd scale. These are used in the Sexton, the van Gogh and the concluding bars of the Epilogue.

Major key areas of the Sexton and van Gogh center around F-sharp and F-sharp minor with the more ‘white key’ areas of G minor, G major and F major dominating the Dickinson settings.

The formal design of the songs reflects the poetic structures and the letters’ sentences as shown in Fig 34.

	Poetic Form	Poetic Meter Rhyme scheme	Key Areas	Structural Form
"The Starry Night"	3 stanzas (6 lines, 6 lines, 5 lines)	<i>Unrhymed</i>	F#m, F#	ABCDBD
"Celestial Locomotion"	3 sections (2 statements each)	N/A	C, F#, F, C	ABABC
"Go thy great way!"	1 stanza <u>quintain</u> (5 lines)	<i>Unrhymed</i>	Gm	
"Reflection"	3 sections (2 statements, 1, 1)	N/A	F#m	ABA
"The sun kept setting – still"	4 quatrains 4 stanzas (4 lines each)	Common meter <u>abcb</u>	G	AAAB
"Touch"	1 group (3 sentences, 1 phrase)	N/A	F#, G#, F#	ABA
"I would not paint – a picture"	3 8-line stanzas	Iambic <u>trimeter</u> <u>abcbdefe</u>	F, F#, F	AAA

Figure 34. Form in *The Starry Night*

XI. Conclusions

This study has centered on considerations while becoming a song artist: one's vocation, training, motivation, and potential for connection as discovered through Jake Heggie's *The Starry Night*.

The desire for human connection is the motivating force behind reforms in art song. When performers consider the elements necessary to connect with their audience their concerts will reflect that intent.

That audiences experience connection when his music is performed is a priority reflected throughout Heggie's career. In *The Starry Night*, he conveys an alternative perspective on life, death and those who removed their presence from the earth. He forgives them. He shows their beauty, their struggle, their profound brilliance, and their worth. He delivers a positive yet informed message of blessing and provokes the listener to consider his expanded insight. Through accepting, releasing, and blessing their departure, there is healing.

Heggie inspires us to have a greater sympathy for the unseen struggles that are potentially taking place all around us. Because mental health concerns, art, poetry and music are featured in *The Starry Night*, it is a perfect piece to generate interest across disciplines and potentially engage in dialogue with a broader audience in a meaningful way.

Artists can heal one another when they see themselves in each other. To communicate anything of importance requires one to develop a personal voice. Each contributor to *The Starry Night* did so.

Van Gogh transcended the medium of painting to communicate with humanity.

Sexton met readers through her unabashed self-expression.

Dickinson maintained her individuality and freedom through non-publication.

Heggie connects through transformational, theatrical collaborations.

SongFest, VISI, NYFOS inspire, educate, and challenge students.

Students of this art may succeed as artists if while developing their artistry they simultaneously endeavor to understand sociological truths about potential audiences and seek to develop a transformative relationship with them.

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Appendix A: Coaching *The Starry Night* with Jake Heggie

Jake Heggie coached Sarah Broomell and Elizabeth Croy on the stage of the recital hall at the Calgary Opera on February 23, 2010 following his rehearsal with Frederica von Stade on her farewell recital tour. He gave his time generously.

1. *The Starry Night*

JAKE: **This** is how I want to die

BETH: Should I be stronger, more sudden?

JAKE: This, this, this is how I want to die

BETH: So even though you're kind of calming, I'm still up

JAKE: (playing from m. 59) Rumbly, waves, add lower octave to the low B-flat.

Let pedal clear gradually, gradually, all the way to here (m. 68), if it makes a brassy sound, I like that too. Just as much color and imagination. It has to be so be so filled with imagination. Passion, terror, just 'ugh'. When you're looking at a painting and you go, Oh my God, that's it, that's how I want to die. And Anne Sexton did kill herself and so did Van Gogh. So there's a connection there.

Go too far, cause then it's easy to pull it back. But I don't think you can go too far.

Again...at the opening.

JAKE: Can you exaggerate those even more? Just do more with it.

These are crazy people, mad, schizophrenic, nuts, we have to see and experience this, the paranoia, the theatrical drama.

JAKE: Ok, good, how does that feel?

The more you just go with it... Do you practice just saying the text by itself?

BETH: Yes.

JAKE: You must do that, especially these poems because they are dialogues and conversations. I think practice them and say them over the top melodramatic and then bring that to the song.

I just feel like it still needs to be bigger. Maybe it's just familiarity and comfort, but there could still be more, 'ugghhh', you've really have to plumb the depths for this. It's got to be

operatic. Think of it more as a big scène, a big aria. You're orchestral. It's not just piano. I always think orchestrally with big differences in color.

I don't care if there are wrong notes and rhythms. This is what I can help with.

BETH: That's the good part, that's the interesting part.

JAKE: Good you guys. Now I feel like you're starting to tell me a story. That's really exciting. Keep pushing it in that direction.

Think of yourself as a real jazz and blues singer.

Can you do more portamento in that last 'cry'? It's sort of almost not wanting to let go because once it's gone, (sigh) it's over. Oh, I want to stay in that space, I don't want to go. Elongate... and sort of that feeling all the way through of wanting to hang on to notes, but this passion keeps driving you forward. Hot sky, and then you have to say it again...hot sky. Really explore that feeling. And it's a real dialogue. You're the spoken (Beth), you're the unspoken (Sarah). So everything you can't say (Beth) or vocalize is everything that you (Sarah) are bringing to the fore.

Van Gogh spent a lot of his time in bars. That's where I got the idea for this sort of bluesy, barroom feel for this. That was his world. And there's a hallucination thing going on. If you look at some of his paintings, it's like "whoa, what was he on?" (laughter) So bring all of that to it...van Gogh, Anne Sexton, just that whole feeling. It's great.

Really taste words. Really explore every part of the word, the vowel and the consonant.

(Time to decorate the stage.)

2. Celestial Locomotion

JAKE: Good, that's a very tricky song. I can't believe I wrote it. Those piano parts are hard. Those rhythms are so tough. But it's a really effective piece, I have to say, especially following the first one, because it's almost like someone overheard you talking about how you want to die, and now you need to explain to them your thoughts and feelings about it, and there's a very 'matter-of-factness' to it. Obviously, it's imitating a locomotion, the idea of a train, of going somewhere, but there's a very matter of fact feel about the way Van Gogh discusses this. There is a fantastical element to it, too. These are letters to his brother.

Keep it a real conversation. How does the person singing this song feel about death in this conversation about it? Is it something scary, is it something not to be afraid of?

BETH: I think it's just a matter of explaining, we can just hop on a train here on earth, it's a very similar thing. We just take a different path (JAKE: It's a different kind of trip.) This is the way it happens.

JAKE: So is the person explaining fearful or not fearful?

BETH: I don't perceive fear, it's just matter of fact.

JAKE: I think they are not afraid of death. And if you think about the 19th C when Van Gogh was painting and writing, people died young. They saw it all around them, all the time. When you read Dickinson poems, death was a daily occurrence. And so I think there is a different feeling about it than we have today. So the more you can deliver that almost positive message. It's very jolly what's going on in the piano at the beginning, in a funny way. We're going on a train trip. It's just, we're gonna die this time! (ha ha) It's a really interesting philosophical view, but I think the more we can tell from you whether you feel good or bad about this. I need to know what your opinion is. That's what I wasn't getting. Remember that Van Gogh had a fantastic imagination, so the fact that he ponders this and comes up with these really stunning images, that he manages to put in just a simple letter...he was very poetic. These are real existential thoughts. You have to imagine why are you explaining this to someone. Did they just lose someone? Did they find out they're going to die? Did their parent just die? Are you consoling someone? Who are you talking to? And the more positive you make it, if that's you're feeling of the text.... I do feel it's that way. I feel like the whole cycle is that way. Even though it's tragic in undertone, the overtone of it is extremely positive. It's all meditations about death, but I think in a very positive way and not a fearful way. So the more you can make it that way...you start from this jubilant place in the first song. So continue that positive message. I think it's very important to have an opinion about this. I think if it becomes morose, you'll lose people. And when things get really difficult and dark, we do go to humor, you know, to deal with things. And sometimes the most consoling way is just to say, you know, it's another kind of trip. It's just a trip we don't understand because there isn't an end. That's basically what he's saying. You just get there by this locomotive or that, and if you live long, you're just getting there on foot. And he's saying, "Well, what do I want to take? Do I want to wait

and go on foot or do I want to take the quick route to get to that star? And he did paint a lot of stars. And so he wondered about that. But I think the basic overall feeling of this is, what's your opinion on this is it happy, is it sad, as simple as that, to you personally, so that that will translate.

And I think in the piano part, there's that one basic locomotion, that grinding thing (19:11) It gets interrupted. There are bumps along the way. And then it changes and becomes more ethereal. So just always exaggerate the differences between those two. I think there's a sparkle to the whole thing. (SARAH: Excitement of being on the train.) Yeah, we're on a journey no matter whether you're living or dying. You're on a journey and it's going forward. It's not going backwards. So stay present, enjoy, because we don't know what's going on, but we just know we're on a trip

BETH: Yeah, I like that idea of him almost asking himself, 'how would I like to go?'

JAKE: Well, you've already said how you like to go in the first one, so now you're having a dialogue with someone else, right? It's like you've really meditated on it.

SARAH: Do you see this as one person going through a process?

JAKE: I do because there is one person standing there. I think these are...so ultimately it is going to be one person. I do think, in performing it, you can take different parts of the stage, the different parts of your journey, even if it's just a step to the side or something. Because you go from looking at that painting and thinking this, to being..... It's going from looking at the different poets perspectives, but it's still, it's one thought that unites the whole thing. You're sort of embodying that in the performance.

SARAH: As if one individual is considering these different aspects....

JAKE: Yeah, it can be, anything like that. I'm not going to tell you how to think. I just think it needs to be very clear in your own head, the story you're telling, why you're telling it, and is it a positive or is it a negative message. I am a firm believer that the only way tragedy really works is if we have recognition of what's being lost. That's why humor and comedy and laughter is so important because it shows us what is gonna go away. That's where the tragedy is. Make sure we get that full range of joy and beauty and pain. But I do feel the overall message about death is that it's not to be feared. Why fear it, it's going to happen. As my doctor said to me one time, "You know, none of us is getting out of this

alive.” I had this one infection and I said, “Is that something serious?” and he said, “Jake, you *are* going to die, but it’s not going to be from that.” Can we do it one more time?

JAKE: Yeah, go ahead and smile when you sing. And your eyes sparkle when you smile. You can almost look at some of these things as funny as they are coming to you. It makes it come more alive for the audience. And it will give us a better range of emotion. (25:47)

Don’t be afraid to put a shadow vowel on the ending ‘n’s.

Tempo questions?

JAKE: This is very recitative at “To die of old age”. The train is just fading off into the distance. If you watch a train fading off into the distance, it’s not slowing down, it’s just getting farther away.

SARAH: It’s so cool how the music is on the train, then goes up to the stars, then you’re back on the train again.

JAKE: It’s so nice to hear these. I haven’t heard them in so long. When did I write them, like 8 years ago, or 9? Wow!! God, I’m old! SARAH: You’ve been living. BETH: We’re all on the same journey, the same train. JAKE: God, that’s a lot of notes.

3. Go! Thy Great Way

JAKE: It can move more. Tempo indication is “Not slow.” I don’t like slow. I’m not a big fan of slow for anything. I mean, slow within reason. But you can always tell when something’s too slow. I just want to get up and push. Let’s figure out how this one fits after the first two. You’ve just talked about going to a star, so now what’s happening? I think it’s someone who has died. It’s almost like a eulogy, or it’s someone who knows they are going to die. You just talked about how you’re going to travel to stars. So, go your great way, however you get there. Either someone who is going to die or about to die or is worried about death. Again, I think this is really positive. SARAH: I think I read that Emily wrote this poem after a friend’s death, a eulogy. JAKE: It would make sense.... how we deal with it. And again, it’s so full of love; I think it’s so positive. It’s like sharing a blessing. It’s like someone’s just taken that train off into the distance, and now, you’re just wishing them well on that journey. That was their journey. We all have a different one. Do it again and move it a little more.

....”But what are stars” push..

BETH: “Rest in peace, tranquil”

SARAH: How do these final notes relate in the piano?

JAKE: It’s just expanding and expanding

SARAH: and we’re going further out...I think she’s asking.

JAKE: But that could be the simple thing too, “and that’s it” or as Meryl Streep goes “that’s all.” So here we are going into infinity, but then, here we are back on earth still, so the rest of us go on. When it’s lush and rich and it’s moving, just enjoy it, so much.

I’m so fascinated by it having just spent five years with Melville, that whole existential school of thought, mid-19th century, what they were thinking and what was going on in their heads. Van Gogh, Melville, Dickinson, and Hawthorne.... they all lived at the same time. The things that they were putting into words, Emerson, the things they were pondering in a different way because, I mean, a hundred years before it would have been sacrilegious to say those things. They were looking at it in a much more humanistic way. I think it’s really interesting.

SARAH: I have a note question....G# or natural...

JAKE: It’s supposed to be tied, a G# tied. Typos...typos (laugh)

4. Reflection

SARAH: I’ve tried to realize this opening rhythm very literally

Rhythmic notation question...JAKE: It’s just a trembling; it’s looking at the water and those little trembles that happen every now and then. So don’t...kill yourself, it’s not worth it.

(Comes to the piano and tries it.) Am I doing what’s written? However you want to do it, but it’s... Do your version. That’s just the road map.

That’s the whole thing...I talked about this at the University of Illinois the other day, last week, in a class, saying ...we become...we’re taught as classical artists to become a slave to what’s written on the page, and if you look at jazz musicians, that’s just the starting place.

That’s not what the music is, and we’re taught from the time we’re little that ‘This is it. This is it. You do everything that’s on here, and you don’t add anything or take anything away.’

And that’s a relatively new concept, like a hundred or some years old. I mean, people did

not do that. Look at the improvisation that used to happen so freely around scores. This was just the idea, the basic idea and I...whatever you bring to it in terms of imagination and style, I'm really happy to hear. BETH: Well, we're happy to hear that. JAKE: I talk about the spirit behind it much more than I talk about notes and rhythms. If there's something glaring, I'll bring it up, but it's more about the message that you're conveying. And again, that's where I can help you. I can tell you that I thought of it more on this side of that tempo or that side, but performance is different. You're going to do what's right for you. Just be liberated. There are some composers who only want exactly what's on the page. John Harbison doesn't want you to interpret at all. It has to be exactly what's there. Period. I'm not one of those composers. I'm a theater composer. My God, the theater, things change minute to minute, regardless of how you rehearsed them. The theater of it is more important to me than almost anything. That the audience feels something and comes away with something that you give them a dramatic experience and an emotional ride: that's the most important thing.

Sarah, you can be totally free in that whole thing about the jewels in Paris. You can just let her rip and don't worry about matching the vocal line. When you meet there, just go. She can do whatever. You'll meet up at "opals". You can just think of it as a free improvisation all the way down and just have fun with it, OK?

The interesting thing I tried to capture in this. When you start talking about colors, that when everything starts changing and begins to come alive. Just for Van Gogh, you know, suddenly the world opened up for him when color came into the picture. You know he really only painted for ten years. He did all those paintings in about ten years, and he only found color very late in that and then went wild with it.

I love what you're doing with this. I think it's really beautiful.

The first note of tragedy in this entire set of songs so far to me is that line "To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance... Is it not something that actually exists?" That's the only time there's doubt. And I think tragedy. Because that's what he's dedicated his life to is capturing that. And then suddenly you're wondering, "Is my life mean nothing?" To me that is the first time there's a real tragedy. So to me that just needs to be a little different. Then I think you can finally let a note of tragedy creep in there because there's doubt suddenly. And this ends up here with a question.

You don't have to worry about counting and fitting things together. That should just rush right through.

SARAH: How did you like my pedal?

JAKE: I love it...It's really impressionistic and the thing about impressionism, of course, is that it sounds like it's not rhythmic, but it is incredibly rhythmic. And this needs to be incredibly rhythmic in that same way and sound like this sort of watery wash. That's the only way the song's going to work. And I loved what you brought to it. I do think, get as excited about "Flashing more like jewels than they do in Paris" as you did about "Oh Starry, starry night" at the very beginning getting lost in this sort of rapture and this color and this flash and this... again "This is how I want to die".

Just a little bit of difference in that last phrase; just bring something different to it. The pianist doesn't have to because you have the same music as before. It's entirely up to the singer that this question comes into mind. "Maybe everything I've believed in doesn't exist. Maybe it doesn't really."

5. *The Sun Kept Setting*

This poem is so amazing. Cause, what's going on in this poem? It's actually really simple. It's someone who's dying and finally figures it out. They wonder, "What is going on? Why is nothing as it's supposed to be?" The sun is setting and they're actually seeing it. All these things that are supposed to be passing really quickly, nothing's passing quickly. My feet are falling asleep. So it's not exhilarating, it's just baffling. What is happening to me? Why is all this stuff happening? And it is scary. It's terrifying. "Why so little sound myself unto my seeming make?" It's like "I'm talking, but I can't hear myself. Everything's in my head." And then there's the resignation, "How well I knew the light before – I could see it now, but I'm not afraid to know." So it's terrified at first. You know how sometimes when you're fearful about what's happening and then someone tells you, and you're like "Oh..OK, I thought it was something else." Just knowing what it is makes it less scary. And in Emily's perspective she saw it all around, so she's wondering what's happening. "Why can't I feel my feet, why can't I feel myself? Why can't I move?" Then it's all of the sudden, "Oh, I'm dying." And there's a resolve in that. Again, not fear all of the sudden.

The fear is in the not knowing what it is. Once you know what it is, it's like "Oh...OK."
It's an amazing poem. There's a big build in the poem from terror to...

BETH: So you think she's fearful at the beginning?

JAKE: I think confused at the beginning, and it goes from confused to fearful because she doesn't know what's happening.

JAKE: I think it could be a bigger journey, so that the terror builds even more so that the release of it is even more moving.

"Still no dew upon the grass" singing..."It starts there. You know it's like, there's stuff dripping on your face and like you can't wipe it away and you don't know why and the sun is just setting."

BETH: "Oh interesting, I was thinking of tears, but that makes more sense."

JAKE: It could be perspiration, from a fever or something, maybe from a terrible fever.

(To SARAH) Go ahead and play that chord. Put the F# there without breaking it. It's much more effective if it doesn't break. And it goes right over the bar line.voicing mm46 chord and don't break or take too much time over bar line to show the harmony change."

Jake's demonstration sounds warm and thick.

JAKE: Don't rush her over the bar line

What do think that last "Ah" means?

BETH: The last breath of life? Or maybe she's on the other side?

JAKE: Maybe she's seeing something....

BETH: How well I saw the light before, maybe it's the light again?

JAKE: That's a great idea. I would go with that. Just that it's not (wimpy) "ah", it's "Ah!" (revelatory, transformational) something again, bright and positive. Whatever you go with, just decide. As much imagination as you can bring to it.

6. Touch

JAKE: That's a weird little song.

BETH: It's powerful though.

JAKE: It's very powerful. That line about "and also ready at any moment to suffer" is really heartbreaking. But again when you have the word "everything" repeated, each one

has to mean something different, you know? “To see people and things and everything.” And so you say it, “everything”, and someone question you, “*everything?*” And so you repeat it, “***everything***”. **Everything** that makes our lives artificial, if you like. Now what does that mean?

BETH: Well, I think it means that he only really finds, I think, his existence and meaning in art, in what he creates which is artificial, but that’s what makes him feel alive.

JAKE: Maybe he was accused of being artificial. “Yeah, then what I paint is artificial.”

BETH: Right, not realism, but...

JAKE: “I love to paint, to see people and things and everything, *everything, everything.*”

BETH: Beyond what the naked eye normally sees in the environment.

JAKE: I think it’s really important too in this one, I was trying to explore... You know he was manic depressive, so there’s that manic quality of like an idea hits you and it’s like, “Oh!” and it goes to that and then it goes to this heart breaking sort of human reality and into something else entirely. So the sort of, almost schizophrenic train of thought is also something that I was trying to capture in that with the different mood swings and the different directions of thinking. OK? So, just go with it. Let each one be really distinct. I think that’s really exciting for an audience is watching an idea or something change in front of their eyes. You know? And not necessarily understanding it, but seeing it happen or hearing it happen in the case of a song. That it happens in that moment in you. That’s what makes theater exciting is when you see something change. BETH: Something unexpected. JAKE: Right, and that it takes even you by surprise. That’s why I’m saying, be open to that dramatic, theatrical moment. Don’t be too premeditated. Let it be really free. I mean we’re dealing with crazy people here. (Laughs) Van Gogh, Anne Sexton, Emily Dickinson...these were crazy people. Wonderfully crazy, but probably hard to be friends with, hard to live with, hard to love. But brilliant, amazing people that we’re fascinated by to this day. What he said, “what a queer thing touch is, the stroke of a brush.” His brush strokes still affect us to this day. Now that is a queer thing. That he dabbed this paint and did this and 150 years later, people are paying millions of dollars for them, hundreds of millions and we’re still fascinated by them. We look at them through microscopes for crying out loud, to try to figure out what that means in our lives. And I’m sure, I don’t know if you have those moments when you’re suddenly outside your body,

when you're playing the piano or singing when you look at your hands and go, "How do they know how to do that?" Or your singing and listening to yourself and say, "How do I know how to do that?" Like you become disembodied listening to yourself, then you have to get back in your body so you can do it without becoming self-conscious. There are those moments, I know when I'm composing, and I'm like, "Now why do I know that goes that way?" I don't know, I just feel that it does and I'm looking at my hand watching it draw these notes and I wonder, how does it know to do that? It's doing it. Why is it doing that? So that whole thing, "what a queer thing touch is, the stroke of a brush". A touch to a friend, something that means nothing to you means the world to someone else.

BETH: Things that go unnoticed at the moment.

JAKE: Connections. These connections that we have no idea what the implications of them are. Do you think Emily Dickinson thought that 150 years later her poems would be set and sung all over the world? I doubt it! But she knew what she was doing and she knew that that's how it went, regardless of what anyone thought in her day. So I think there's a little bit of a meditation on that. This is what I do. This is who I am. And I have a problem suffering at any moment. I do this. I love to paint, but I'm not one of those people that can suffer all the time and be happy.

BETH: So it seems to me like the beginning is sort of the real world, right, and it seems very metrical and then we get in that irregular meter section. He's painting.

JAKE: Yeah, that's when the world is alive for him. This is where I live, in all the artificial things. That's when the world is...there is no suffering in that world. It's in the other world that there's a lot of suffering. There's that whole theme from the first song: This is how I want to die. I want to die suffering like this. This is how I want to die. This is how I live...in my imagination, in all the artificial things.

SARAH: What do you think about Van Gogh? What was the tipping point?

JAKE: I think there were many. He was unsuccessful in every relationship he had, even his relationship with his brother, which was the only constant, was very, very difficult. He was never successful in romance. He tried to be very good. I think he was an amazingly intelligent man. If you read his letters, he knew about all the artists of his day. He knew about Wagner and all the composers of his day. He went to concerts. He heard music. He really experienced everything and he processed it, obviously, on a very profound and deep

level because he was a deeply feeling person. I think it was just that life, real life, was very hard for him. To be imbued with that kind of genius and talent and to know that you are. It's the same as Dickinson. Dickinson didn't kill herself, but she lived reclusive because it was so overwhelming, I think. To be imbued with that much creative force and power and have basically no one understand or respond to it is, HORRIBLE. It's what happened to Melville, too. Melville wrote *Moby Dick* over the course of a summer when he was 31 and he thought it was the greatest thing he'd ever done and it was a phenomenal disaster. It was the end of his published career and forty years later, he died unknown. There was one two-line obituary for him. Nobody was reading his books at that point. Yep, he was a customs agent on a New York pier when he died. So, to be imbued with that power, he became a very unpleasant man. He still wrote, but he couldn't get things published. So it sort of him (van Gogh) talking about what it's like to be imbued with all that really deep emotion that comes alive and is real for him in this creative world that everyone else says, "Well, you're crazy then." SARAH: To go unappreciated then, to not find value or acceptance in...JAKE: ...even validation. So, I think that's what that song is about. Let's do the last one.

7. Epilogue: I would not paint – a picture

JAKE: Do you have the one that has the right tempo? Quarter = 80 not Half note = 80. You have to decide if that "Ah!" is going to be one of those 'soft and take you away' or is it big "Ughh!". Is it one of those? Or is it more personal? But that's your choice. Whatever you want it to be. On the recording, Mary did it because she has a huge voice, actually too big for these songs, but she wanted to do something. The placement is different than where Mary puts it.

I liked the way...it should be almost like a folk tune. There was a wonderful simplicity to the actual tune, which is great. Now what is Emily saying in this poem?

BETH: I think that she'd rather be, rather than the person doing it, she'd rather be the one taking in all the beauty herself.

JAKE: ...because she talks about what a cost there is to being the creative artist. She says, "I wouldn't be a poet. I'd rather be the one listening to poetry. And she even says, it's such

an insight into her mind, ‘the license to revere’, so ‘I as the listener am allowed to have awe for this privilege so awful. What would the dower be, what would the cost be had I the art to stun myself with poetry.’ In other words, if I were that creative artist, how terrible would that be to be constantly...to be imbued with all of that? She’s letting the world know that it’s not easy. The same way Van Gogh let us know in the previous statement, right? It’s much easier being the person listening than the person doing sometimes, even though there’s great joy in the doing, you know? That sometimes it easier to just be the listener and just take it in on a different level.

BETH: Yeah, and I think also because she was so unwilling to share her poems unless they were really intimate with her, I think it would be too great a price on her personal well-being to be that vulnerable and to share it.

JAKE: But, it’s good. It’s very bold, very strong at the beginning. And then literally, after all this, and after all Van Gogh says, I don’t want to be that person. That’s the way most people feel, and yet, at the same time... Well, that’s the way a lot of artists feel, and on the other side, people are constantly wondering, “Ooo, I wonder what it must be like to be Sarah sitting at the piano or to be Beth learning all these songs and to be singing them in front of an audience. You’re standing there thinking, “1-2-3-4-5, 1-2-3-4-5.” “You guys, it’s fun but it’s not that fun!” And we as performers and as creative artists, sometimes wonder, why am I so driven to do this? It’s not for the money! There are plenty of other things you could do for money, you know. It’s got to be for something deeper and bigger than that. So it’s a real meditation on all of that.

SARAH: Why do you think it’s so bold at the beginning and then...?

JAKE: Because it is a powerful thing. To me this is looking at the picture. It strikes you. It’s so bold and original and you wonder, what was the person thinking? Don’t you think that sometimes, you look at like a really bold piece of artwork and you go, “What were they thinking?” Or you look at a transformative piece that changed the course of history, and think, “Where did that come from?” And it’s bold strokes, bold strokes that someone just happened to think of. They just happened to be the one who did it.

Appendix B: Facsimiles of van Gogh Letters and Dickinson Poems

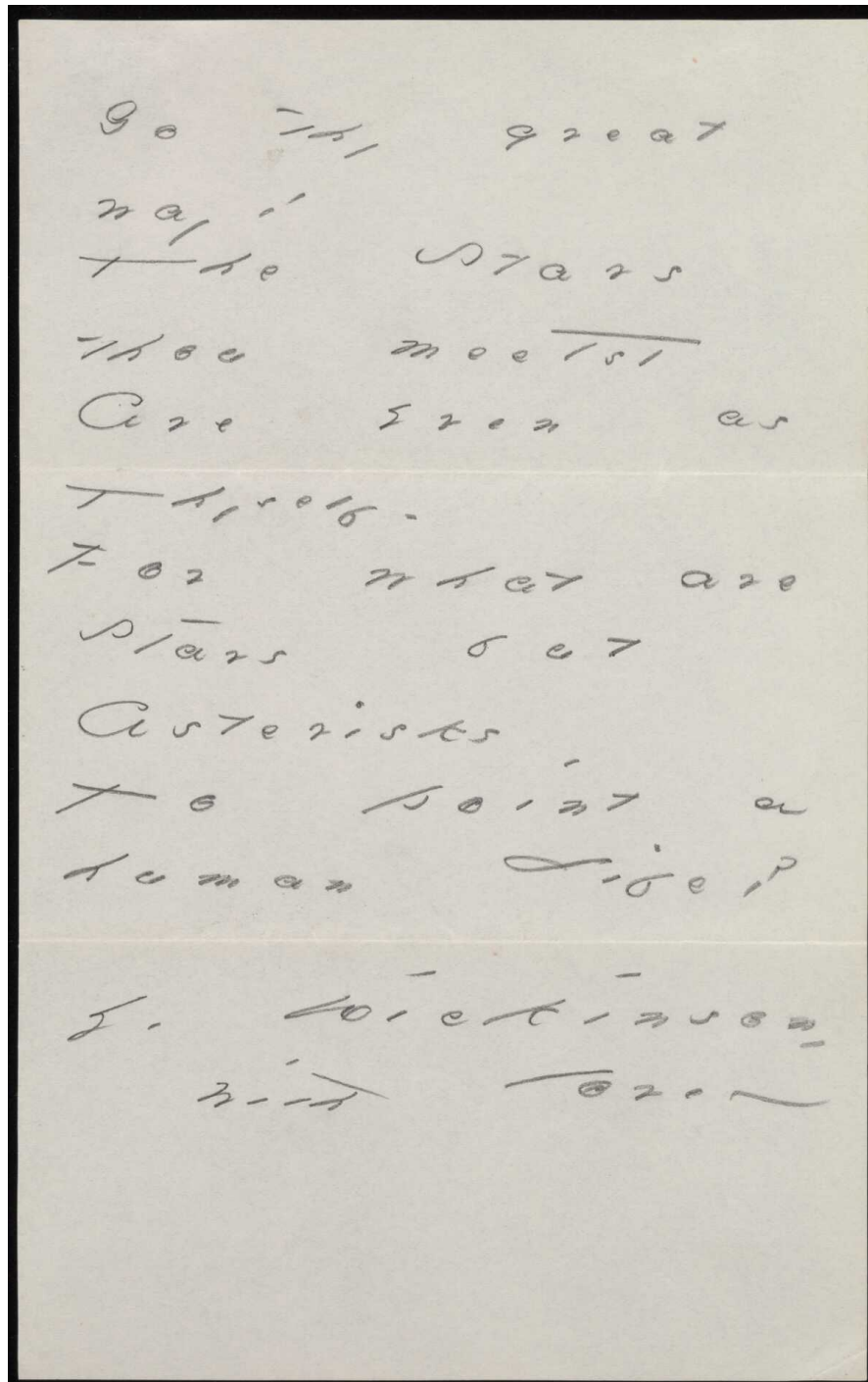


Figure 35. Emily Dickinson, Letter to Mrs. James S. Cooper [fragment?], p. 1. Includes poem Go thy great way, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. <http://www.edickinson.org/>

The Sun kept setting - setting -
still

No Haze of Afternoon -

Upon the Village I perceived -
from House to House 'Twas Noon -

The Dusk kept dropping -
dropping - still

No Glen upon the Grass -

But only on my forehead
stopped -

And wandered in my face -

My Feet kept drumming -
drumming - still

My fingers were Annals -

Let only so little sound -

Myself

Undo my Seeming - make ?

Figure 36. Emily Dickinson, Poems: Packet XXII, Fascicle 35. Includes 25 poems, written in ink, dated ca. 1863. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
<http://www.edickinson.org/>

I would not paint - a picture.
 I'd rather be the One
 It's ⁺ right - impossibility -
 So small, delicious, in -
 And wonder how the fingers feel
 Whose fan - celestial - slip -
⁺ Grooves so sweet - a torment -
 Such sumptuous - Espan -

I would not talk, like Corneils -
 I'd rather be the One
 Raised soft, ⁺ the Ceilings
 And ⁺ out, and has, on -
 Through Villages of Echo -
 Myself ⁺ indured Balloon
 But a lip of metal -
 The pit is my Poison -

Nor would I be a Poet -
 It's finer - On the Ear -
 Enamored - impotent - content -

Figure 37. Emily Dickinson, I would not paint—a picture, Amherst College, Amherst, MA, Amherst Manuscript #fascicle 85

Les peintres - pour ne parler d'eux - étant morts et
 enterrés parlent à une génération suivante ou à
 plusieurs générations suivantes par leurs œuvres.
 Est ce là tout ce qu'a dit - il même encore plus.
 Dans la vie du peintre peut être la mort n'est
 pas ce qu'il y aurait de plus difficile -
 mais je déclare ne pas en savoir, quoi que ce
 soit. mais toujours la vue des étoiles me fait
 rêver aussi simplement que me donnent
 à rêver, les points noirs représentant sur la
 carte géographique villes & villages.
 Pourquoi me dis je les points lumineux
 du firmament nous seraient elles moins
 accessibles que les points noirs sur la
 carte de France.
 Si nous prenons le train pour nous rendre
 à Tarascon ou à Rouen nous prenons
 la mort pour aller dans une étoile.
 Ce qui est certainement vrai dans ce raison-
 nement c'est que étant en vie nous ne
 pouvons pas nous rendre dans une étoile.
^{plus plus qu'étant mort nous pourrions prendre le train}
 Enfin il ne me semble pas impossible
 que le choléra la gravelle la phthisie
 le cancer soient des moyens de locomotion
 céleste comme les bateaux à vapeur
 les omnibus et le chemin de fer en sont
 de terrestres.
 Mourir tranquillement de vieillesse serait
 y aller à pied.
 Pour le moment je vais me coucher
 car il est tard et je te souhaite bonne
 nuit et bonne chance.
 Toi qui ne me manques pas
 à l. Vincent

Figure 38. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, July 9, 1888,
<http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let638/letter.html>. *Celestial Locomotion* source.

What you were saying about that conversation at the Nouvelle Athènes¹⁷ is interesting. You're familiar with Desboutin's little portrait that Portier has.¹⁸ It's certainly a strange phenomenon that all artists, poets, musicians, painters are unfortunate in the material sense — even the happy ones — what you were saying recently about Guy de Maupassant proves it once again. That rakes up the eternal question: is life visible to us in its entirety, or before we die do we know of only one hemisphere?

Painters — to speak only of them — being dead and buried, speak to a following generation or to several following generations through their works. Is that all, or is there more, even? In the life of the painter, death may perhaps not be the most difficult thing.

For myself, I declare I don't know anything about it. But the sight of the stars always makes me dream in as simple a way as the black spots on the map, representing towns and villages, make me dream.

Why, I say to myself, should the spots of light in the firmament be less accessible to us than the black spots on the map of France.

Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star.¹⁹ What's certainly true in this argument is that while alive, we cannot go to a star, any more than once dead we'd be able to take the train. So it seems to me not impossible that cholera, the stone, consumption, cancer are celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, omnibuses and the railway are terrestrial ones.

To die peacefully of old age would be to go there on foot.

For the moment I'm going to go to bed because it's late, and I wish you goodnight and good luck.

Handshake.

Ever yours,

Vincent

J'ai vu sous promont... sur le bord de la mer sur la plage déserte
C'était pas que... mais pas non plus
juste... c'était... beau.
L'océan d'un bleu profond et un reflet
de nuages d'un bleu plus profond
quelque chose fondamentalement d'une sobriété
et d'autres d'un bleu plus clair -
comme la blancheur ^{blanc} de vos lactées
dans le fond bleu les étoiles scintillantes
autres ^{autres} - plus claires plus diamantées
semblant comme les pierres précieuses
que chez nous - même à Paris - ^{autres bien}
Lamentablement les yeux s'éteignent
La mer d'un autre monde ^{très} profond -
La plage d'un bleu vertacien ^{très} et
me a semblé - avec des bouffées
sur la dune (de 5 mètres de haut) des
bouffées bleu de prusse - j'ai un devoir
de dessus d'observer un grand effort
pendant du dernier
à l'instant j'espère pour que de
monir. Tout Vincent.

Figure 39. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, June 4, 1888.
<http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let619/letter.html>. Reflection source.

I took a walk along the seashore one night, on the deserted beach. It wasn't cheerful, but not sad either, it was — beautiful.

The sky, a deep blue, was flecked with clouds of a deeper blue than primary blue, an intense cobalt, and with others that were a lighter blue — like the blue whiteness of milky ways. Against the blue background stars twinkled, bright, greenish, white, light pink — brighter, more glittering, more like precious stones than at home — even in Paris. So it seems fair to talk about opals, emeralds, lapis, rubies, sapphires. The sea a very deep ultramarine — the beach a mauvish and pale reddish shade, it seemed to me — with bushes. In addition to half-sheet drawings I have a large drawing, the pendant of the last one.

More soon, I hope. Handshake.

Ever yours,

Vincent

J'ai fait le portrait du surveillant et j'en ai une
 répétition pour toi. Cela fait un ~~très~~ aspect curieux
 contrasté avec le portrait que j'ai fait de moi où le
 regard est vague et voilé tandis que lui a quelque
 chose de militaire et des yeux noirs petits et vifs.
 Je lui en ai fait cadeau et je jeterai aussi sa femme
 si elle veut poser. C'est une femme facile, une
 malheureuse bien résignée et bien pas grande chose
 et si insignifiante que moi, j'ai grande envie de
 faire ce brin d'herbe poudreuse lui. J'ai causé quelquefois
 avec elle lorsque je faisais des oliviers derrière leur
 petit mas et alors elle me disait qu'elle ne croyait
 pas que j'étais malade - enfin cela lui le dirais
 à présent aussi si tu me voyais travailler la
 pensée claire et ~~très~~ les doigts si sûrs que
 j'ai dessiné sans prendre une seule mesure
 cette pièce de délacroix ou pourtant il y a ces
 quatre mains et bras en avant - gestes et
 tournures de corps pas précisément commodes ou
 simples -
 Je t'en prie envoie moi bientôt la toile si cela
 est possible et puis je crois que j'aurai besoin
 de 10 tubes de blanc de zone en plus.

Cependant je sais bien que la guérison veut
 si on est brave et en dedans par la grande
 résignation à la souffrance et à la mort par
 l'abandon de sa volonté propre et de son
 amour propre. Mais cela ne me veut pas
 j'aime à peindre à voir des gens et des choses
 et tout ce que fait notre vie - l'acte -
 si on veut. Une vraie vie serait dans
 autre chose mais je ne crois pas que
 j'appartiens à cette catégorie d'âmes qui
 sont prêts à vivre et aussi à tout moment prêts
 à souffrir.

Quelle drôle de chose que la touche le coup de brosse
 en plein air exposé au vent au soleil à la caquette
 des gens ou travaillant comme on peut un remplet
 subit à la diable. Alors pourtant on attrape le
 bras et l'essentiel - le plus difficile c'est ça -
 mais lorsqu'on reprend après un temps cette
 étude et qu'on arrange ses coups de brosse dans
 le sens des objets - certes c'est plus harmonieux
 et agréable à voir et on y ajoute ce qu'on a
 des rêveries et de sourire.

Figure 40. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, September 10, 1889.
<http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let801/letter.html>. Touch source.

However, I know quite well that recovery comes, if one is brave, from inside, through the great resignation to suffering and death, through the abandonment of one's own will and one's self-love. But it's not coming to me, I love to paint, to see people and things and everything that makes up our life – artificial – if you like. Yes, real life would be in something else, but I don't think I belong to that category of souls who are ready to live and also at any moment ready to suffer.

What a funny thing the touch is, the brushstroke. Out of doors, exposed to the wind, the sun, people's curiosity, one works as one can, one fills one's canvas regardless. Yet then one catches the true and the essential – that's the most difficult thing. But when one returns to this study again after a time, and orders one's brushstrokes in the direction of the objects – certainly it's more harmonious and agreeable to see, and one adds to it whatever one has of serenity and smiles.

Ah, I'll never be able to render my impressions of certain figures I've seen here. Certainly the road to the south is the road where there's something brand new, but men of the north have difficulty in getting through. And I can see myself already in advance, on the day when I have some success, longing for my solitude and distress here when I see the reaper in the field below through the iron bars of the isolation cell. Every cloud has a silver lining.

To succeed, to have lasting prosperity, one must have a temperament different from mine, I'll never do what I could have and ought to have wanted and pursued.

But as I have dizzy spells so often, I can only live in a situation of the fourth or fifth rank. While I clearly sense the value and originality and superiority of Delacroix, of Millet, for example, then I make a point of telling myself, yes I am something, I can do something. But I must have a basis in these artists, and then produce the little I'm capable of in the same direction.

Appendix C: NYFOS Press Quotes



"The New York Festival of Song revived the art of the song recital when many had left it for dead."
THE NEW YORKER

"Evenings that can feel like dream dinner parties — the kind where a group of fascinating strangers come together to have wonderfully, unexpected conversations."
OPERA AMERICA

"Narrative, language, distilled emotion, melody, the personality embedded in a single voice, and the intricate interlocking of the piano part all bond in a complex chemistry."
NEW YORK MAGAZINE

"One of the longstanding delights of New York's music scene."
THE NEW YORK TIMES

"One of the city's most valuable and far-sighted resources for the performance of song literature: classical, jazz, musical theater, pop and all the variations in-between."
TIME OUT NY

"Sophisticated humor and self-revelatory philosophy that gave the evening a feeling of having been a gathering of friends."
THE WASHINGTON POST

RECENT PERFORMANCES 2011-2013

"You can always depend on NYFOS to serve up probing, provocative concerts filled with worthwhile music and outstanding singers."
TIME OUT NY

"Steven Blier and Michael Barrett's incomparable series." **THE NEW YORKER**

"insightful and imaginative, touching and funny."
THE NEW YORK TIMES

"Since their first concert in 1988, Steven Blier and Michael Barrett's New York Festival of Song has grown into a cultural mammoth without losing its boutique intimacy." **OPERATURGY**

"one of the most exciting groups making music in New York today."
THE JEWISH DAILY FORWARD

"full of attitude, class, wit, and always, first-class music-making."
THE BOSTON MUSIC INTELLIGENCER

"An imaginatively programmed series of concerts that at their best are both pithy and enormous fun." **OPERA NEWS**

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR STEVEN BLIER

"Steven Blier is a national treasure when it comes to the art of song."
THE NEW YORK TIMES

"Blier loves the thrill of musical discovery, loves to share his cleverly designed programs with his audience, which responds by hanging on every word of his savvy blend of erudition and plainspoken cool." **OPERA NEWS**

"Blier's determination to serve the music is what hits you hardest at a concert. That commitment, not to mention his disarming manner when he introduces the songs, creates an intimate bond with an audience that really does deserve the overused word 'special.'"
THE BALTIMORE SUN

"As an impresario, accompanist, and teacher, Blier is among the most significant forces that have revolutionized recital programs in America over the past few decades." **BILLEVESÉES**

"Steven Blier, is that rare being, a gifted performer who's also a deep source of knowledge about song." **CLASSICAL TV**