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Yearning, Yearning, Yearning...

I've been yearning for a lot of things lately. It's a strange place to inhabit: a liminal space between what we have and what we desire. It is just as often a stagnant place as it is a state that propels us into action to achieve our dreams. It is also a dangerous place. While it is in our human nature to yearn, to hope for greener plains, brighter days and objects of desire, yearning can also mean intense suffering. For my graduating recital I have selected works that explore different kinds of yearning. From the erotic, romantic yearning of Verlaine's poetry in Debussy's *Ariettes Oubliées*, to the duelling desires of revenge and forgiveness in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, pining for unrequited love in Ned Rorem's *Six Songs for High Voice*, and a wish for a bright future in Glière's *Concerto for Coloratura Soprano and Orchestra*, I yearn to understand the nature of yearning.

Ariettes Oubliées

Claude Debussy's settings of Paul Verlaine's poems feature different aspects of yearning throughout the six songs. A quote from Favart in the score for the first song "C'est l'Exstase" sets the theme:

“Le vent dans la plaine suspend son haleine” (the breeze on the plain holds its breath)

From the outset a mood of longing is established that carries throughout the rest of the work.

A bright change of pace comes in the fourth song, “Chevaux de Bois” which breaks the sombre mood of the previous “L’ombre des Arbres” to express a yearning for fun and frivolity at the merry-go-round.

Finally, the last pair of songs “Green” and “Spleen” contrast young, naïve desire with insecure anguish. In “Green” the poet begs their love not to break their heart, and in “Spleen” they are in a constant state of fear that their love will leave. There is no happy resolution, only the word “Hélas!”, expressing the yearning for comfort and stability.

Six Songs for High Voice

Ned Rorem’s *Six Songs for High Voice* were composed in 1953 for soprano Virginia Fleming, who according to the composer “had a very high, well-placed voice, but a small voice.”¹ He further stated that the work “is a cycle because I say it is a cycle.” And that “[the songs] go together, but the poetry doesn’t go together.”²

¹ Henry, Leon Austin Jr, “The Song Cycles of Ned Rorem: a Technical Survey,” *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, 4240 (1986): 94, https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/4240.

² Ibid.

While the poetry of this cycle comes from various poets writing on various topics, there is an overarching theme of yearning throughout the work, especially in “Rondelay” in which Amyntas cries: *“wretched I to love in vain!”*.

Furthermore, in “Song for a girl” the protagonist urges her potential future lovers to *“take me take me some of you, while I still am young and true”*- displaying a youthful desire for first love and connection. This is contrasted with the more gentle and erotic longing of the fifth song, “In a Gondola”. This tender song sung “all in a half-voice” expresses desire for a delicate “moth’s kiss” and for a lover to brush the singer’s face like a flower “till I grow aware who wants me”. An interesting detail in the score is Rorem’s note at the end of the piece: “Paris- midnight. 2 December 1953” rendering even clearer the state of quiet late-night longing the piece evokes.

Rigoletto

The key conflict in Verdi’s 1851 opera *Rigoletto* is the clashing of desires between the titular character and his young daughter Gilda. Gilda yearns for freedom from her father’s overbearing protectiveness, she yearns to know more about her family history and mother who died when she was very young, and she yearns for the cute boy she sees at church every Sunday. When that boy turns out to be Rigoletto’s employer (The Duke of Mantua) in disguise, Gilda is kidnapped and assaulted, and Rigoletto yearns for revenge.

In Act Two of the opera we see these two viewpoints side by side. Even though Gilda is traumatised by her treatment at the hands of the Duke and his courtiers she still pleads her father to show mercy. Rigoletto, blinded by desire for revenge, ultimately ignores her pleas –

setting into effect a chain reaction that leads to Gilda's demise. In the Act Three finale she confesses to her father how her unrequited love for the Duke led her to sacrifice her life for him:

"V'ho ingannato... colpevole fui... l'amai troppo... ora muojo per lui!.."

(I deceived you... I'm guilty... I loved him too much... Now I'm dying for him)

As karmic justice, Rigoletto is left alone, now yearning not only for his lost wife, but also his only child.

Concerto for Coloratura Soprano and Orchestra

Russian composer Reinhold Glière's 1943 *Concerto for Coloratura Soprano and Orchestra* was written for the lyric coloratura Deborah Yakovlevna Pantofel-Nechetskaya. As the work is a vocalise, this gives me freedom as a performer to explore my own interpretation of the music. When I hear the Andante movement, I feel a sense of deep longing. Perhaps this is a by-product of the historical context of the piece – composed in Soviet Russia at the height of World War II. I imagine myself lost in a snowy landscape, climbing over hills towards an unknown horizon. Conversely, in the Allegro I feel a sense of bubbling hope. The snow melts and I start to see glimpses of a brighter future. Yearning is anguish, but it is also hope for better things to come.
