

JOURNAL

OF

SINGING

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF SINGING, INC.



From Words to Music: Three Song Cycles of Juliana Hall

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OCATING EXCELLENT CONTEMPORARY ART SONGS to teach to one's students or to perform has always been a daunting task, because the music is often difficult to sing, to memorize, and because many modern art songs lack audience appeal. But what if the level of difficulty was worth the work because the songs were so remarkable, and what if those same songs were in fact appealing to audiences?

The present writer has long been drawn to the music of Juliana Hall, having first discovered her songs through a friend when seeking material to record. Later, Hall invited me to Yale to premiere her song cycle, *Letters from Edna*. Now after many years, I remember and perform her music because of its compelling listener appeal, drawing both laughter and tears from audiences.

What sets Hall's songs apart from other composers of her generation is that she gives great attention to detail, chooses emotionally charged texts, and writes effectively for both piano and voice, demonstrating an ease of how the hand fits the piano and how the word is shaped in the voice. She also uses constantly changing rhythmic motives that highlight her text settings, so that no two songs sound alike.

Hall's harmonic language in her songs is typically that of an extended tonality that sounds modern without giving the impression of belonging to a specific school of composition (e.g., atonal or romantic). A lack of key signature in her songs simplifies modulation, as tonalities move easily through a variety of keys. This allows the postmodern harmonies to heighten the emotional content of the poetry. Depending on the text, the harmonic content specifically heightens the mood Hall wishes to create, be it tonal, chromatic, or dissonant. The songs often are through-composed in form; they are always multimetric; and the accompaniment sometimes uses word painting to enhance the meaning of the words. Each song is different in tempo and uses the full extent and range of the instrument based on the needs of the text. Tempos are clearly marked in her scores with suggested mood and color interpretations for the artists to apply. The melodic writing style that characterizes her work also supports smooth transitions while drawing the listener in sometimes unpredictable directions. The level of difficulty of songs is wide ranging, with some songs appropriate for advanced singers, while others are appropriate for student singers. Tessitura and range have been considered carefully for the vocal line and also enhance the text.

Hall has observed two changes in her composing from earlier to more recent works: in her earliest years as a composer she explored many more

Journal of Singing, May/June 2015 Volume 71, No. 5, pp. 573–585 Copyright © 2015 National Association of Teachers of Singing

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texts in foreign languages, composing songs in French, German, and Spanish, whereas her more recent work has focused almost exclusively on English-language texts. Earlier she experimented in larger forms, such as choir anthems, a cantata, and even a chamber opera, but now is artistically drawn to smaller forms, including songs and solo instrumental works, such as pieces for cello, English horn, piano, and saxophone. Hall feels that her music has not really "evolved" over the years, as it has always sought to reflect the colors and styles of the various texts she has chosen to set. She asserts that, although her compositions are "her" musical works, the style of each particular work is unique, in that it is structurally inspired by the chosen text.¹

Juliana Hall's work, which emerges out of her relationship with American poets, writers, and her own musical traditions, deserves more attention than it has received to date, in spite of the fact that she has been recognized with a Guggenheim Fellowship in Music Composition in 1989, as well as several awards from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP).²

Born in 1958 and currently living in Connecticut, Juliana Hall is best known as a prolific composer of classical art songs, having written over thirty-five song cycles comprised of more than 250 individual songs.³ While Hall's music is of a high caliber, it has maintained a low profile because much of it remains in manuscript form and because Hall has not in the past self-published it online. This changed with the 2013 launch of her personal website (www.JulianaHall.com).

Among a number of past commissions from various performers are two from the Schubert Club of St. Paul, Minnesota for David Malis and Dawn Upshaw, one from the Mirror Visions Ensemble premiered at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York City, and another from soprano Elizabeth Dubberly which was premiered in Montevideo, Uruguay. This author recorded *Lorelei* and four songs from *Theme In Yellow* on the Vienna Modern Masters label (VMM2005). The song cycle *Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush* is published by Boosey & Hawkes (VAB313).⁴ And Hall's *Letters of Edna* was released on CD by Albany Records in 2013. Recent commissions include a cycle for tenor Joel Burcham, and two works for soprano Korliss Uecker and mezzo Tammy Hensrud.

Hall wrote her first composition at age 13, a work for flute, piano, children's choir, and narrator, setting the creation story from Genesis; it was first performed at her family's church in Chesapeake, Ohio, where she grew up. Her mother was the church pianist and director of the children's choir in which Juliana sang; it was in this choir that she had her first experiences with the joining of text with music, and in which she first learned the importance of textual meaning and clear enunciation. Additionally, her grandmother was an English teacher, always reciting poetry, and her grandfather enjoyed singing folk songs; they spent Sunday afternoons with Hall's family singing and playing songs together.⁵

She then began her musical career as a pianist, studying with Jeanne Kirstein at the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati with Jeanne Kirstein, followed by further study with Lee Luvisi and Seymour Lipkin. As a piano student of Boris Berman at the Yale School of Music, Hall also studied composition with professors Martin Bresnick, Leon Kirchner, and Frederic Rzewski. After receiving her master's degree in composition from Yale, she completed her studies with Dominick Argento in Minneapolis.⁶

Hall's music has gone on to be performed in over two dozen countries in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia by more than one hundred performers, including singers Karen Burlingame, Cherie Caluda, Richard Lalli, David Malis, Susan Narucki, Pamela Jordan Schiffer, Dawn Upshaw, and Jayne West, as well as pianists Margo Garrett, Gilbert Kalish, Mark Markham, and J.J. Penna. Various compositions have been broadcast on BBC Radio (London); National Public Radio (Washington D.C.); Radio Arts Indonesia (Jakarta); Radio France (Paris); Radio Monalisa (Amsterdam); WGBH Radio (Boston); and WQXR Radio (New York), among others.⁷

U.S. venues where Juliana Hall's compositions have been heard include the 92nd Street Y, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, and the Morgan Library & Museum in New York; Ambassador Auditorium in Los Angeles; the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; the French Library and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston; the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford; and the McKnight and Ordway Theatres in St. Paul. The Norfolk Chamber Music Festival and the Tanglewood

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Music Festival have both presented Hall's songs, and the *Oakland Post*, reporting on a performance at the Ojai Festival, wrote that,

[t]he saintly Dawn Upshaw . . . spent 40 minutes Wednesday in Herbst Theater presenting songs from a dozen American Thirty-Something composers . . . So how are we doing in the young composer department? Judging by the evening, the future of American art song is safe, robust even . . . On top of the list: Juliana Hall's Sonnet (E. Bishop), with its unaccompanied opening, rich, Straussian line arching through the song.⁸

Although there have been numerous professional concert performances through the years, Hall's primary motivation for composing comes purely from "within." She says she has developed a rhythm for her work, regularly creating works based on ideas that present themselves to her from her constant reading of poetry and literature. Whether a performance is anticipated or whether a commission has been undertaken is secondary for her, because she allows her "imagination to guide her." In this way she is able to remain as close as possible to what she feels "needs" to be written, free of worldly concerns.⁹

To illuminate Hall's compositional style traits we will consider three of Hall's song cycles for mezzo soprano. *One Art* from 2001 is set to poetry of Elizabeth Bishop that combines four different poetic themes into an interesting cycle. The four songs have various themes: "Imber Nocturnus," which speaks of shadows; "A Word with You," which has a theme of a visit to the zoo; "One Art," which describes the art of losing; and "The Wave," which describes the sea.

Dreams in War Time from 2003 is set to seven haunting poems by Amy Lowell; it was composed just after the war in Iraq began.

After 9/11 and two years of war in Afghanistan, the idea of more war was just so dark and heavy. I felt so sad about it all, that I just wanted somehow to express my despair. After searching for a while, I found the set of poems by the early 20th century American poet Amy Lowell. Though the poetry does not depict the outward war directly, it does effectively paint a picture of the dark, bizarre, and twisted fragmentary feelings and images one has in one's dreams and nightmares at such times as when war is raging.¹⁰



Example 1. "To Arthur Davison Ficke," from *Letters from Edna*, mm. 33–34; used by permission.

The 1993 song cycle, *Letters from Edna*, set to letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay, weaves lively histories about Millay's life as a poet while living in New York City. The texts offer insight into Millay's interesting relationships with her family, friends, and business associates. The work was dedicated to Katherine Eberle, a friend of Ms. Hall.

With each cycle, there is a delightfully different approach to each of the songs, depending on the text. The composer's musical motives depict the many moods of each poet. For example, the Millay letters are all responses to letters she received from her literary lawyer Arthur Davison Ficke, her friend Anne Gardiner Lynch, her agent Harriet Monroe, her sister Norma, and her mother. They are remarkable testaments to Millay's personal relationships with friends and family members. There are references to Millay's experiences seeing the new sights after her move to New York City. For example, she describes libraries, churches, warships, chimneys, and even brewery signs. She even shares her delight in being invited to lunch with poet Sara Teasdale. These experiential, almost diary-like events are heightened by whimsical outbursts, such as, "Whadda you know about that!" (Example 1).

Also we find the use of personal pet names, such as when she calls her sister "little sweet sing." Millay's own colloquialisms, such as "I allus wants to" instead of "I always want to," are charming additions to the letters, making Millay seem more human and contemporary. Hall sets these idiosyncratic comments beautifully, making overt melodic and rhythmic choices, sometimes by doubling the piano and voice parts, or by her use of

rhythmic gestures that mimic the text exactly. In the context of the cycle, these text-based motives and gestures contribute to the overall theme of the cycle and effectively help us to deepen our appreciation of Millay's world.

Hall's text setting innovations are not exclusive to the writings of Millay. In the Elizabeth Bishop setting of *One Art*, written for cello and voice, the musical structure and motivic development in "Imber Nocturnus" create a unity with the text. In the text, "And now creeps down the soft, sweet shadow of the rain. Over this black-roofed

town on stealthy-stealing feet she comes again," we hear the use of alliteration. Hall sets words like "soft," "sweet," "shadow," and "stealthy-stealing" in descending melodic half and whole steps and thirds, which are underscored by eighth note *pizzicati* musical motives found in the cello accompaniment. The poet's use of sound binds the line into the overall syntax creating a mood that clearly sets the scene for the audience (Example 2).

The same holds true in the cycle *Dreams in War Time*, where in movement "III," a dark waltz is underscored



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Example 2. "Imber Nocturnus," from One Art, mm. 1-30; used by permission.

with bar-room piano motives. Amy Lowell's free verse jars with its irregular line lengths. Her most important point comes at the end of a line: "I gambled with a silver money, the dried seed vessels of 'honesty' were stacked in front of me. Dry, white years slipping through my fingers one by one, one by one" (Example 3). Hall's music and Lowell's text both repeat "one by one" for emphasis and structural unity.

Hall said, "When I find a poem I like, I recite the text aloud over and over until I find the nuances I wish to stress when setting the music." This is what makes her text setting excellent. A simple example is found in the song: "To Arthur Davison Ficke," Millay's literary lawyer. The text reads: "It's not true that life is one damn thing after another—it's one damn thing over and over..." Hall sets the melody in steady eighth note



Example 3. "III," from Dreams in War Time, mm. 14-29; used by permission.

rhythms, but with syncopation on the word "damn," making the emotional connection the author feels come alive. Audiences laugh with delight to hear the frustration the author shares, as it mimics their own feelings and portrays Hall's easy ability to convey humor (Example 4).

Similarly, Amy Lowell's poetry from *Dreams in War Time* in movement "II" includes the line, "My own face lay like a white pebble, waiting." The text is perfectly nightmare-like when suspended by the slow

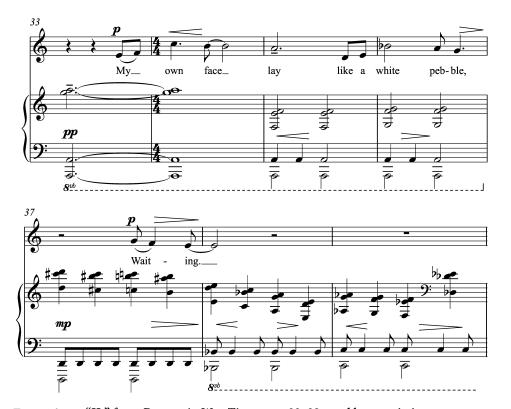
tempo marking of quarter note = 44. Furthermore, the sustained rhythms on the words "own" (dotted quarter note), "lay" (dotted half note), and "white" (half note) bring extra stress to the melodic phrase, emphasizing the seriousness of the grave digger seeing the shadow of her own face on the dried leaves behind her (Example 5).

Exquisite melodies abound in Hall's writing. Her tribute to Millay's "Mother" in the final movement of *Letters from Edna* outlines a soaring motive in the piano right hand to set the mood, and she uses similar

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Example 4. "To Authur Davison Ficke," from Letters from Edna, mm. 3–8; used by permission.



Example 5. "II," from *Dreams in War Time*, mm. 33-39; used by permission.



Example 6. "Mother," from Letters from Edna, mm. 1-3; used by permission.

melodic phrases to assist the coda. Note how the vocal line also has wave-like melodies that undulate through the singer's range in a caressing manner (Example 6).

Other beautiful melodic examples are demonstrated in "To Anne Gardner Lynch" from *Letters from Edna*, where the soprano/alto duet in the piano right hand again outlines vaulting melodies to create an ambiance of ease, love, and appreciation for Millay's friendship with Anne. These elegant melodies echo the emotional, arching quality of Puccini or Strauss (Example 7).

Long lyric lines versus irregular phrase lengths are another hallmark of Hall's style. The first movement of *One Art*, "Imber Nocturnus," has two and three bar phrases at the beginning that later are broken down into fragments. These alternating phrase lengths enhance and support the text prosody exceptionally well (see Example 2).

Harmonic choices in accompaniments set the text in an especially supportive manner in Hall's music. Double stops of major sixths, melodic groups of sextuplets, and later arpeggios in the cello part in the third song, "One Art," from the cycle *One Art*, provide a sparse harmonic texture to the vocal line. This creates a haunting mood, but also underlies the text: "The art of losing isn't hard to master. Then practice losing farther, losing faster: places, and names, and where it was you meant to travel. None of these will bring disaster. I lost my mother's watch, and look!" (Example 8).

Accompaniment textures vary dramatically from song to song. From sparse thin lines that occasionally double the vocal line to arpeggios to thick chords in the piano accompaniment, Hall uses whatever device enhances the song. In movement "VI" in *Dreams in War*

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Example 7. "To Anne Gardner Lynch," from Letters from Edna, mm. 1-10; used by permission.

Time, for example, Hall uses chord clusters to set the text for which the vocal melody incorporates *glissandi*, *portamenti*, and sirens. This suits the fantasy setting brilliantly (Example 9).

Rhythmic choices, especially in the accompaniment, set the scene for the mood the text describes. For example, in *Dreams in War Time*, movement "V," a gypsy dance in 6/8 meter takes over the accompaniment and contrasts with the vocal melody, which moves in both triadic and scalar motion for the text: "I followed a procession of singing girls who danced to the glitter of tambourines." While the melody's range is only from A_4 to F_5 with few intervallic leaps of more than a major sixth, the rhythm varies in typical Juliana Hall style. Eight bars into the song, an interjection of rapid sixteenth and

thirty-second repeated notes heighten the mood established by imitating gypsy instruments, and that motive is reiterated once more eighteen measures later in the song. These alternating rhythmic variations are Hall's primary signature and are often found throughout these three cycles for mezzo soprano (Example 10).

Hall's song cycles are especially compelling for their strong rhythmic impetus, graceful melodies, and fanciful text settings. Hall's skillful, sensitive creativity brings life to texts in a way that charms audiences. She deserves public appreciation for her extraordinary contribution to modern art song composition. She can certainly now join other esteemed living American women composers such as Libby Larsen, Lori Laitman, and Judith Cloud.



Example 8. "One Art," from One Art, mm. 27-44; used by permission.

Hall's contributions are contemporary "gems" that every teacher and performer will want to add to their repertoire.

APPENDIX

To help visualize the overall quality of these nineteen songs, the following list outlines the individual details of the songs. Using Judith Carman's abbreviation key from "Music Reviews," one can determine if any song suits one's need. Each entry follows the format of: title, key, range, tessitura, meters used, metronome marking,

and difficulty level. Abbreviations are: Diff=difficulty level; V=voice; P=piano; M=medium; mD=moderately difficult; D=difficult; DD= very difficult; Tess=tessitura; mL=moderately low; M=medium; mH=moderately high; H=high, CR=covers range; CS=covers staff; X=no clear key center.

One Art, for mezzo soprano and cello. Soon to be published by Juliana Hall Music. Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. 2001.

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Example 9. "VI," from *Dreams in War Time*, mm. 1-7; used by permission.

- 1. "Imber Nocturnus." X; D_4 – G_5 ; Tess: mH; 5/4, 4/4, 2/4, 3/4, \downarrow =52; V/M, C/mD; pages.
- 3. "One Art." X; A₃-A₅; Tess: CR; 4/4, 5/4, 2/4, 3/4, \rfloor =60; V/D, C/mD; 6 pages.
- 4. "The Wave." C_4 - A_5 ; Tess: CR; 6/8, 9/8, \downarrow . =96-100; V/ mD, C/D; 6 pages.

Dreams in War Time, for mezzo soprano and piano. Published by Juliana Hall Music. Poetry of Amy Lowell. 2003.

- 1. "I." X; $C_4^*-G_5$; Tess: CR; 4/4, 5/4, 2/4, 3/4, J=44; V/mD, P/M; 2 pages.
- 2. "II." X; B_3 - F_5 ; Tess: M; 4/4, 3/4, 2/4, = 44; V/M, P/M; 2 pages.
- 3. "III." $F^{\#}$; D_4-F_5 ; Tess: M; 3/4, 4/4, J = 120; V/M, P/mD; 4 pages.
- 4. "IV." Tonal; E_4 – G_5 ; Tess: MH; 4/4, 2/4, J=138; V/mD, P/D, 4 pages.



Example 10. "V," from Dreams in War Time, mm. 1-5; used by permission.

- 6. "VI." X; G_3 - F_5 ; Tess: L; 4/4, 6/4, 3/4, 2/4, 0/4, = 52; V/mD, P/mD, 3 pages.
- 7. "VII." X; F_{3}^{*} -A₅; Tess: CR; 4/4, 3/4, 2/4, 6/4, \rfloor =126; V/DD, P/D, 6 pages.

Letters from Edna, for mezzo soprano and piano. Published by Juliana Hall Music. Prose of Edna St. Vincent Millay. 1993.

1. "To Mr. Ficke and Mr. Brynner (December 5, 1912)."

- Tonal; C_4 – F_5 . Tess: MH; 4/4, 3/4, 2/4, J=92; V/D, P/D; 6 pages.
- 3. "To Anne Gardner Lynch (December 23, 1921)." Tonal; A_3-F_5 ; Tess: MH; 4/4, 2/4, 3/4, J=60; V/D, P/mD; 3 pages.

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- 4. "To Harriet Monroe (March 1, 1918)." Tonal; C_4 – F_5 ; Tess: CR; 3/4, 2/4, 4/4, \downarrow =160; V/M, P/M, 2 pages.
- 5. "To Norma Millay (May 25, 1921)." Tonal; C_4 – G_5 ; Tess: M; 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, \downarrow =72; V/M, P/MD, 2 pages.
- 6. "To Arthur Davison Ficke (July 9, 1943)." Tonal. $G_{3}^{\#}-F_{5}$; Tess: MH; 4/4, 5/4, 2/4, 3/4, J=132; V/M, P/MD, 4 pages.
- 8. "To Mother (June 15, 1921)." Tonal. D_4 – E_5 ; Tess: M; 6/8, 3/8, 4/4, 5/8, = 108, V/M, P/M. 4 pages.

NOTES

- 1. Juliana Hall, email correspondence with Katherine Eberle (July 8, 2012).
- 2. Ibid.
- 3. Ibid.
- 4. Ibid.
- 5. Ibid.
- 6. Ibid.
- 7. Ibid.
- 8. Ibid.
- 9. Telephone interview with Katherine Eberle, (September 14, 2012).

- 10. Ibid.
- 11. Personal conversation between Juliana Hall and Katherine Eberle, Yale University (1995).

Katherine Eberle, mezzo soprano, has a career that includes a wide array of professional and collegiate engagements in both the United States and abroad. She specializes in art song, oratorio, chamber music, and opera. In the past twenty-five years Eberle has performed in professional engagements with orchestras, choral organizations, and chamber music groups. Concert credits include solo performances with the symphonies of Detroit, Lansing, and Saginaw (Michigan), and Atlanta, Macon, Rome, and Valdosta (Georgia). She has given over 100 solo recitals as a guest artist in 18 states, as well as in Brazil, Canada, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Russia, and St. John and St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. She made her New York debut at Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall in 1994. She was an Artistic Ambassador for the United States Information Agency doing solo concert tours in South America (in 1995 she appeared in Argentina, Ecuador, Peru, Trinidad, and Tobago) and in Korea in 1997. A Van Lawrence Fellowship Winner from the Voice Foundation, Eberle was a 2012 Obermann Fellow in Residence, for her research on women composers. Eberle earned degrees from the Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory (BME), the University of Cincinnati (MM), and the University of Michigan (DMA). She has taught at the University of Iowa since 1991. In addition to standard repertoire, Eberle's CD recording *In this Moment* is available on the Albany Record label. Her DVD, Pauline Viardot: Singer, Composer, Forgotten Muse is available through www.amazon.com and at her e-store (www.keberle.com).

PUBLICATION DEADLINES

Vol. 72 No. 1	Vol. 72 No. 2	Vol. 72 No. 3	Vol. 72 No. 4	Vol. 72 No. 5
Sept/Oct 2015	Nov/Dec 2015	Jan/Feb 2016	Mar/Apr 2016	May/June 2016

Article manuscripts should be submitted directly to the Editor-in-Chief. All manuscripts are evaluated by the Editorial Board. Decision to publish rests with the Editor-in-Chief. The deadlines published here refer to articles that have already been accepted for publication.

Features and Reviews by C 01 May 2015	ontinuing Contributors 01 July 2015	01 Sept 2015	01 Nov 2016	01 Jan 2016		
Submission of Advertisem 01 July 2015	ents 01 Sept 2015	02 Nov 2015	01 Jan 2016	01 Mar 2016		
Issue to be placed in mail a 24 Aug 2015	approximately 23 Oct 2015	29 Dec 2015	23 Feb 2016	24 April 2016		
Issue to be received by sub 4 Sept 2015	scribers approximately 5 Nov 2015	13 Jan 2016	6 Mar 2016	7 May 2016		
(Dates of delivery may vary depending upon local office policies.)						

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