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Kathleen Roland-Silverstein

ONWARD, UPWARD: SONGS ABOUT WOMEN

Following the creative evolution and gifts of composers whose work continues to enrich us is a satisfying task for any musician and reviewer. The work of composer Jonathan Dove has long intrigued me, and an early song cycle offers an excellent introduction to one of Britain's foremost composers for the voice. American composer Juliana Hall continues to amaze with another solo *tour de force* monodrama and a continued collaboration with a wonderful singer-poet. Edition Breitkopf adds to an opera aria series that stands as one of the finest of its kind available.

Dove, Jonathan (b. 1959). *All the Future Days: Songs for Mezzo-Soprano or Soprano and piano*.

Poems by Ursula Vaughan Williams. Edition Peters, 2006. "Time Being"; "Autobiography"; "Penelope"; "Spider"; "Martha"; "The Siren."

Jonathan Dove, a British composer whose contribution to opera and song

in the twenty-first century has been enormous (with 25 operas thus far), is perhaps not as well known on our side of the Atlantic. To my knowledge, his songs have not been reviewed in the *Journal of Singing*. His opera, *Flight*, was a sensation when it premiered in Glyndbourne in 1998, and has since received more than 85 performances worldwide. His early training as a pianist, organist, and violist, and his work as an accompanist and *repetiteur*, acquainted him early on with the parameters of and possibilities for the singing voice. His experience brings the depth and expertise found in his extraordinary piano writing, which is lyric, challenging, and luminous.

The poetry of Ursula Vaughan Williams (1911–2007), widow and biographer of the iconic British composer of the early twentieth century, was a successful poet and librettist in her own right, well known to the public long before their marriage. The knotty texts of *All the Future Days* coalesce in their union with Dove's music, handled by the composer with great sensitivity. In the program notes from the beautiful recording by mezzo soprano Kitty Whately and estimable pianist Simon Lepper (*Nights Not Spent Alone*, Champs Hills Records, 2016), the poetry is described by Dove as "portraits and self-portraits of women: women waiting, women remembering."

While designated as a cycle for mezzo soprano or soprano, the range requires a technically adept, high lyric mezzo who is capable of sustaining and blossoming on notes above the staff (G_5 and A_5), and descends below the staff, to B_3 only a few times, once to an $A^{\#}_3$. The songs always strike the ear as lyric and flowing, yet are rhythmically complex, with frequent meter changes and cross rhythms between voice and

piano that require superb musicianship from both performers. Each song stands alone, differing from all the others in the way they paint the individual woman of the poetic text. Dove links the texts of the first two songs; "Time Being" is a prelude, its 'short lifetime' leading to a lifetime recollected in *Autobiography*," writes the composer in the program notes by Julian Grant in the aforementioned recording. "Penelope" is a series of recitative-like thoughts by the abandoned wife of Ulysses, who traces his likeness on a wall with a stick of ash. "Spider" delicately describes its subject, creating a rhythmic dance between singer and pianist. "Martha," a meditation from the heart of the biblical Martha, is a gentle *barcarolle*, lending the careworn but beloved woman of the gospel story a heavy tread. The final song, "The Siren," is a relentless outpouring of love and grief that begins with a long, intricate, and energetic piano prelude, and ends with an ascending vocalise, finishing the song and the cycle on a triumphant note.

All the Future Days offers a wonderful first delve into this composer's *oeuvre* for the seasoned singer and pianist. This reviewer and singer looks forward to exploring more of Dove's more recent work for the voice.

Hall, Juliana (b. 1958). *Cameos for soprano or mezzo soprano*, On

Poems by Molly Fillmore. "Sarah Albritton"; "Kay WalkingStick"; "Nellie Mae Rowe"; "Alice Dalton Brown"; "Agnes Pelton"; "Corita Kent." E. C. Schirmer, 2021.

Julianna Hall is a composer passionate about writing for the human voice, and adept at finding unusual texts that

speak of the human experience, in the most quotidian or the most trying of circumstances. The liner notes of the recent recording of *Cameos* (performed by the poet with outstanding collaborative pianist Elvia Puccinelli, faculty at the University of North Texas College of Music; see review in “The Listener’s Gallery,” p. 545–546) include Hall’s stated objective in all her songs: “[M]y goal for setting a poetic text to music reflects this quality of great writing; poets see truth and beauty in even the most ordinary of things.” Fillmore’s poetry, a collection titled *Bold Beauty*, examines the lives and work of six female artists of the early twentieth century through the creation of spare and enigmatic prose that speaks in staccato bursts. Molly Fillmore is a soprano with a serious vocal performance résumé, with a masters degree from the University of Maryland, and solo turns at venues that include the Metropolitan Opera, Washington National Opera, and the Kennedy Center Concert Hall. She currently serves on the faculty as

professor of voice at the University of North Texas.

From the first, Hall’s compositional voice is instantly recognizable in these song settings. Her choice of interesting, unusual, and often less well known texts, combined with a musical, harmonic, and melodic language that can be barbed, tonally adventurous, and gloriously jagged, brings a union of word and music that intrigues the listener, and thoroughly engages performers seeking to serve and illuminate the “truth and beauty of ordinary things” expressed by the poet. The accompaniment often adds a percussive quality to the musical texture. The pianistic voice, while not usually virtuosic or soloistic, interweaves with the voice, sometimes doubling it, but not usually independent. Each song concludes with a piano postlude.

While reviewing the songs, I began to notice the sprinkling of musical quotes in *Cameos*, and in an email exchange with the composer, Hall confirmed her use of musical figures and quotes, including snippets from

the Christmas carol, “Good King Wenceslas,” a well known circus tune, “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing,” “America the Beautiful,” and even “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” and the “A-B-C” song of childhood. The songs are wide in range, and lie in a higher tessitura for both voice types, ascending to C₆ for the soprano, and to A₅ for the mezzo voice. They are challenging, best served by an experienced and technically secure singer. Hall also shared with me representative paintings by the artists of the poems, and it is hoped that, at some future date, these might also be made available on the composer’s website.

Hall, Juliana (b. 1958). *Ahab: Monodrama for Baritone or Bass-Baritone and Piano*, on a Text by Caitlin Vincent. E. C. Schirmer, 2020.

This is not the first collaboration between the composer and librettist Caitlin Vincent, a poet and soprano. It is the third such collaboration in the creation of Juliana Hall’s monodramas, a fascinating project that has included thus far *Sentiment* and *Lady Godiva* (reviewed in this journal May/June 2020). *Ahab*, of course, is the iconic figure from Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and the text follows the titular character’s descent into insanity; the work is essentially a mad scene. In a recent podcast by the Lied Society Round Table (April 2020), the composer spoke of her work with the librettist and with the singer for whom it was created, Zachary James (<https://www.zachjames.com>). James commissioned *Ahab* as part of a project featuring all works by women composers, and was a collaborative partner with Hall in the creation of *Ahab*.

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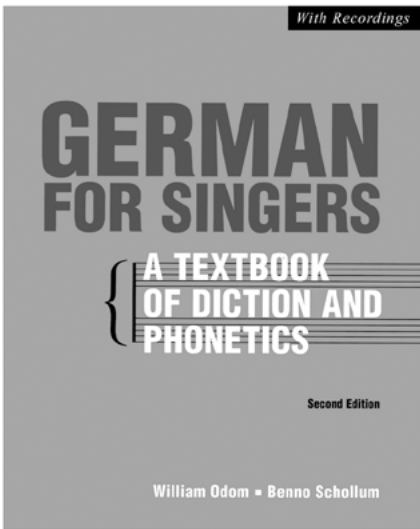
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The piano accompaniment is a powerful force here in the delineation of Ahab's final moments, containing all the distinctive qualities of Hall's approach—extended and sometimes harsh tonality, the percussive elements mentioned earlier, and sudden shifts in mood and tonality, in *Ahab*, at the end, to a lovely, transparent and redemptive color. The range traverses two octaves, from a low E₂ to E₄, and calls for use of a large tonal color palette from the singer. The three monodramas now completed by Juliana Hall are unique, powerful additions to this subgenre of classical art song.

Ling, Peter Anton, editor. *Oper-Aria, für Alt, Mezzosopran 1* [lyric], **Sopran 3** [dramatic coloratura], **Sopran 4** [dramatic]. Edition Breitkopf, 2017. German, English, Italian, French, Russian. (Composers include Alfredo Catalani, Francesco Cilea, Claude Debussy, Umberto Giordano, Christoph Willibald Gluck, Wilhelm Kienzl, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Jules Massenet, Giacomo Meyerbeer, W. A. Mozart, Modest Mussorgsky, Otto Nicolai, Amilcare Ponchielli, Giacomo Puccini, Aribert Reimann, Gioachino Rossini, Camille Saint-Saëns, Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, Piotr Iljitsch Tschaiakowsky, Giuseppe Verdi, Carl Maria von Weber, Richard Wagner.)

A continuation of the Breitkopf series reviewed here first in the November/December 2015 issue of *Journal of Singing*, three volumes for baritone, this excellent set of anthologies carries on the work of Dr. Peter Ling, member of the faculty at Hannover

Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien, and brings the total published thus far to sixteen volumes. As in all the earlier anthologies, each book contains contextual information for each aria and role, as well as in-depth performance suggestions by knowledgeable experts. Readings of all the texts by native speakers, and translations in both German and English of the original texts, can be accessed on the Breitkopf website (replacing the CDs offered with the earlier anthologies in the series).

In the insightful foreword, the rationale behind the *Fach* system as so powerfully represented in this series is presented in a cogent and compelling fashion. "Each role demands its corresponding physique, the necessary power and flexibility (in the larynx as well as in the breathing apparatus) and an adequate psychological affinity and imaginative power in order to really be successfully sung and credibly brought to life onstage," reads the foreword to the *Alt* collection. A coterie of teachers and singers have selected the arias for

each anthology. Some of the selections will be outside of those in more standard (and less exhaustive) operatic anthologies, but stand as worthy examples of repertoire scrupulously chosen for each voice category. In the volume for *Sopran 4*, the contributors have created a further division of seven arias for "highly dramatic" soprano, including "Divinites du Stix" (*Alceste*, Gluck), "Abscheulicher, wo eilst du hin" (*Fidelio*, Beethoven), "Ozean, du Ungeheuer!" (*Oberon*, von Weber), "Traft ihr das Schiff" (*Der fliegende Holländer*, Wagner) "Hojotoho" (*Die Walküre*, Wagner), "Mild und leise" (*Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner), and "Ritorna vincitor!" (*Aida*, Verdi).

The Breitkopf series is a seriously impressive endeavor, with a meticulous approach to organization and accessibility to educators and performers, ultimately answering the questions stated by Marilyn Schmeige in the foreword, "What could I sing onstage right now? What repertoire might I grow into? What should I avoid at all costs?"

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
 Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
 But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than
 before known,
 Arouse! for you must justify me.

 I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
 I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.

 I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping,
 turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
 Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
 Expecting the main things from you.

"Poets to come," Walt Whitman