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# JOURNAL

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# SINGING

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Kathleen Roland-Silverstein

Two cutting edge contributors to the American vocal music landscape, Juliana Hall and Nico Muhly, are featured in this issue's review. Also of interest in this issue's review is a new collection from Joan Frey Boytim, nationally known vocal coach, author of *The Private Voice Studio Handbook*, and compiler/editor of many important anthologies for the classical voice studio. Boytim has created a new collection that further augments her important scholarly contribution.

Juliana Hall (b. 1958). ***Night Dances, 6 Songs for Soprano and Piano on Poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay.*** Publisher: Juliana Hall Music, 2013. "The Crickets Sang," B<sub>4</sub>-G<sup>#</sup><sub>5</sub> (Dickinson); "Some Things are Dark," D<sub>4</sub>-B<sup>b</sup><sub>5</sub> (St. Vincent Millay); "Song," G<sub>3</sub>-B<sup>b</sup><sub>5</sub> (Bronte), 4) "Sleep, mourner, sleep!" G<sub>3</sub>-B<sub>5</sub> (Bronte); "A Spider Sewed at Night," G<sub>3</sub>-G<sub>5</sub> (Dickinson); "Sonnet," G<sub>3</sub>-A<sub>5</sub> (Bishop).

***O Mistress Mine, Twelve Songs for Countertenor and Piano, on Texts from Plays by William Shakespeare.*** Publisher: Juliana Hall Music, 2015.

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"Lawn as white as driven snow" (*The Winter's Tale*); "O happy fair!" (*Midsummer Night's Dream*); "If love makes me forsworn" (*Love's Labour's Lost*); "Who is Sylvia?" (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*); "O, mistress mine" (*Twelfth Night*); "If music be the food of love" (*Twelfth Night*); "Take, o take those lips away" (*Measure for Measure*); "Tell me where is Fancy bred" (*The Merchant of Venice*); "Come away, come away, death" (*Twelfth Night*); "This is a very scurvy tune to sing" (*The Tempest*); "Blow, blow, thou winter wind" (*As You Like It*); "Fear no more the heat o' th' sun" (*Cymbeline*).

Both song cycles are available through Classical Vocal Reprints.

Juliana Hall is one of America's most prolific living composers. Her songs and vocal chamber works have been performed and commissioned by a great number of both young American rising stars and established artists, and the upcoming 2016-2017 season promises more premieres of new and exciting works from Ms. Hall. Her music has been performed at some of the most eminent music venues in the world, including the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., Wigmore Hall in London, and the Theater du Chatelet in Paris. Following study at the Yale School of Music, where she earned a master's degree in music composition, Ms. Hall completed her compositional studies with Dominick Argento, one of America's foremost song composers. She is also the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Music Composition.

*Night Dances* was premiered in 1987 by eminent soprano Dawn Upshaw and pianist Margo Garrett, thanks to a commission from the Schubert Club

of St. Paul, Minnesota, and has enjoyed many performances since. The texts, all by women poets, touch on images of night and sleep. The songs require vocal virtuosity and extensive range, both melodically and dynamically, and the requirements for the pianist are equally challenging—unsurprisingly, as the composer is herself an accomplished pianist. The tonal language is adventurous, and Hall's text setting is spot on and exquisite, even when she elevates the text to the vocal stratosphere. The first, "The Crickets Sang," captures both the hopping movement of the insects, and the larger frame of the twilight, transitioning to night, in which they sing. Here, and throughout the cycle, there is a special vocal effect, a glissando glide on the word, "vastness." "Some Things are Dark" illustrates Nightmare personified, with chilling use of whispered text and extreme leaps in the vocal line. In "Song," arpeggios for both singer and piano portray a sort of uneasy, tender lullaby, and glissandos are used to illustrate the fretful rocking of the child in its cradle on the sea. The uses of glissando and *Sprechstimme*, and a static piano accompaniment, are very effective in "Sleep, mourner, sleep." The song concludes with both voice and accompaniment "slowing to a stop as they are 'turned to stone.'" The penultimate song, "A Spider sewed at Night," is a brief and droll excursion for the singer, continuing the composer's use of speech and glissando. Finally, "Sonnet," one of the most touching poems in the literature about the healing power of music, opens with a page of freely sung unaccompanied recitative. Piano and voice conclude the cycle with a flowing, melismatic, and tonally satisfying duet, finally

coming to rest together on the last word, “sleep.”

*O Mistress Mine*, a song cycle for countertenor voice, was composed for the late Brian Asawa, who died tragically and much too young in early 2015. Asawa was scheduled to premiere the songs in the summer of 2016; countertenor Darryl Taylor was able to step in and perform the premiere, dedicated to the Asawa’s memory, at the 2016 Norfolk Chamber Music Festival. A recording of the songs with Mr. Taylor and the composer is due to be released sometime in 2017.

The songs are much more tonally conservative than those of *Night Dances*, and Ms. Hall has scaled back vocal and musical demands as well for these particular texts. After extensive consultation with Mr. Asawa, and after listening to his recordings in order to completely understand the parameters of his unique instrument, the composer crafted “a set of love songs . . . texts from ten plays of William Shakespeare, since the countertenor voice first attained prominence in musical performance during his lifetime. They are all famous passages set to music by hundreds of composers over the centuries. Their universal appeal and insight into our humanity is timeless. The texts form a narrative arc illuminating the ever changing nature of love, from the time we first encounter it as youths to our awareness of its many varying qualities as we age. Shakespeare’s words evoke the joy of experiencing love, but also touch upon its deeper complexities as the most profound and perhaps the most difficult of all human experiences” (from the program notes for the premiere performance).

In these songs, as in all of Juliana Hall’s wonderful creations, the composer has sensitively allowed the text

to dictate the tonal palette and direction. *Night Dances* and *O Mistress Mine* are two very different cycles, but both are artful and adroit expressions of superb poetic and musical choices.

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Nico Muhly (b. 1981). **“Lorne Ys My Liking,” for Countertenor, Tenor, and Piano.** St. Rose Music Publishing Co. and Chester Music Ltd., 2015

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American composer Nico Muhly was very much in the public eye when his opera *Two Boys* was cocommissioned and premiered by the English National Opera (2011) and the Metropolitan Opera (2013). His compositional style is an eclectic mix of influences, which include Anglican choral tradition, minimalism, and contemporary pop music. He has collaborated with such disparate musical figures as singer Björk, composer Phillip Glass, and violinist Hilary Hahn. “Lorne ys my liking” was premiered by tenor Allan Clayton, countertenor Iestyn Davies, and pianist James Baillieu in December of 2015, at London’s Wigmore Hall. Created as a companion piece to Benjamin Britten’s canticle, “Abraham and Isaac,” the unearthly marriage of the countertenor and tenor voices is an exquisite combination too infrequently heard, and “Lorne ys my liking” is a marvellous setting for this unusual vocal combination. Like the Britten canticle, it is a setting of a text from the medieval Chester Mystery play. Muhly sets a scene for Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacob (Mary’s sister), and Mary Salome (mother of the disciples James and John) at the tomb of Jesus. “There they weep,” Muhly writes, “and are confronted by two angels with the faces of children,” Angelus Primus and Angelus Secundus, two more roles

for the singers. The lines of the five characters of the drama are randomly assigned to the two voices throughout. These are not the sweet androgynous angels of a Botticelli painting; Muhly describes them in the preface to the piece as “frightening, mysterious, and highly stylised.”

The composer conjures a sense of mystery and drama from the outset, with both vocal lines exchanging drones (indicated in the score with diamond note heads), the drone creating what Muhly calls a “halo” around the text sung by the other. The composer’s directions throughout the score are very specific; instructions include “always slightly quieter than you might think,” “dangerous,” and “think a Handelian ‘louré’ here.” The piano delivers a variety of effects, by turn percussive, atmospheric, arpeggiated, and driven, and often dovetailing with the vocal line drone. When the women declare their intention to sit and weep, the piano disappears altogether, creating a lovely and intimate moment for the two voices. There are some exacting sections rhythmically, where the singers are asked to create an incantatory and improvisatory ambience while remaining keenly aware of the movement of the other vocal line.

Both singers join the pianist at the keyboard in the last six pages of the piece. While at no point do the singers play and sing simultaneously, this requirement makes necessary that both singers be excellent musicians, not intimidated by the multiple challenges, musical and dramatic, of the score.

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Joan Frey Boytim, compiler. ***Introduction to Art Song: Songs in English for Classical Voice Students. Four Volumes for Soprano, Mezzo***