

Love, Loss, and...Einstein?

A Chamber Recital

Aidan Smerud, Bass-Baritone
Brian Suits, Piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)

Despite his surging reputation internationally, Mozart was desperate to lessen his financial issues in his final years. His concert tours of Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin in the late spring of 1789 had brought a temporary reprieve, but by late 1790 his problems grew dire, evidenced in letters to his friend and lender, Michael von Puchberg: “I have now been obliged to give away my quartets...for a pittance, simply in order to have cash in hand.”¹ As a result, Mozart composed music with increased urgency, publishing nearly a dozen editions of works in 1791 alone.

Among the pieces published in 1791, the concert aria “Per questa bella mano” -- composed for solo low voice and obbligato² double bass -- has become a favorite for performers despite its challenges. The vocal requirements of the aria are expansive and require easy navigation throughout the singer’s registers. Franz Xaver Gerl, who first performed the piece, clearly possessed an impressive range as he sang both bass repertoire (Sarastro, *Die Zauberflöte*; Osmin, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*) as well as baritone roles (Don Giovanni, *Don Giovanni*; and Figaro, *Le nozze di Figaro*). Meanwhile, the double bass obbligato is equally challenging for modern performers due to the less standard “Viennese” tuning required for effective performance

Per questa bella mano (1791)³ (Anonymous Italian Poet)

Per questa bella mano,
per questi vaghi rai
giuro, mio ben, che mai
non amerò che te.
L'aure, le piante, i sassi,
che i miei sospir ben sanno,
a te qual sia diranno
la mia costante fé.
Volgi lieti o fieri sguardi,
dimmi pur che m'odi o m'ami.
Sempre acceso ai dolci dardi,
sempre tuo vo' che mi chiami,
né cangiar può terra o cielo
quel desio che vive in me.

Because of this beautiful hand,
because of these charming eyes
I swear, my beloved, that I will
never love anyone but you.
The breezes, the plants, the rocks,
that know well my sighs,
they will tell you
of my constant fidelity.
Grant me either happy or cruel glances,
tell me if you hate me or love me.
Always enflamed by your sweet glances,
I want you to say that I am yours forever,
neither heaven or earth can change
the desire that I feel in me.

¹ Eisen, Cliff and Stanley Sadie, “Mozart, (Johann Chrysostom) Wolfgang Amadeus,” from *Oxford Music Online*.

² Obbligato: An elaborate melodic part accompanying a solo or principal melody and usually played by a single instrument.

³ Brad Suverkrop, “Per questa bella mano,” in IPA Source.

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681– 1767)

As a young man, Georg Philipp Telemann was forbidden from composing as his mother and advisers feared he would pursue a career in music. As a result, they confiscated his musical instruments to discourage him. This did little to dampen Telemann's spirit however, who composed in secret, playing on borrowed instruments at night or in secluded places.⁴

This story of defiance would foreshadow Telemann's legacy on German musical life; as he refused to be limited by his official positions, redefining the role of the professional musician. To bring music to the public he held concerts for music lovers, published the first German music periodical *The Faithful Music Master*⁵, and composed secular works that utilized sacred texts or themes.⁶ Telemann's works were at the forefront of musical innovation; creating music that was approachable for the public as well as the courts.

The accessibility of Telemann's music is evident through its musical language, technical requirements, and choice of subjects. It is hard to imagine a work that better exemplifies that spirit than his *Requiem for a canary experienced in art* which is equal parts sincere and cynical in its humor. The first and second arias (I, III) utilize frequent musical "sighs" on the text "O weh" (O woe) and "beklaget" (mourn), establishing an exaggerated melodramatic scene. They are followed by a third aria (V) which expresses rage at the animal responsible for the canary's demise, wishing the brute would choke on the bird. The final aria (VII) is a moment of sincerity, in which the performer says goodbye to his beloved canary. The closing recitative of the work summarizes the final moral of the story with an unexpected ending.⁷

Trauermusik eines kunsterfahrenen Canarienvogels⁸

Requiem for a canary experienced in art

(1737)

I. Aria: Oh weh, mein Canarin ist tot.

O weh, mein Canarin ist tot.
Wem klag' ich meine Not?
Wem klag' ich meine bittren Schmerzen?
Wer nimmt dies Leid mit mir zu Herzen?
Wem klag' ich diese Not?

O woe! My canary is dead.
To whom can I cry in my distress?
To whom can I cry about my bitter pain?
Who will take this pain to heart with me?
To whom can I cry in my distress?

II. Recitative

So gehet's mit der Vogel Freude
und mit den Dingen dieser Welt.
Die Unlust ist den Lüsten beigesellt.
Die Freud' vergehet mit dem Leide.
Ja, ja, der schlaue Vogel kann dies lehren.
Er war mit seiner Lust vortrefflich anzuhören

This is what happens to the joy of a bird
and to the things of this world.
Languor is bound up with lust,
The joy fades with the pain.
Yes, yes, the clever bird can teach this.
He was superb to listen to with his art,

⁴ Zohn, Steven, "Telemann, Georg Philipp," from *Oxford Music Online*.

⁵ Trans: *Der getreue Musik-meister*

⁶ Zohn

⁷ Ewald Demeyere, "'O woe! O woe! My canary is dead!' Secular cantatas & Overtures" Liner notes for Georg Philipp Telemann, *Cantate oder Trauer-Musik eines kunterfahrenen Canrien-Vogels*. Recorded January 1 2009, accessed September 15, Naxos Music Library, 3-6.

⁸ Demeyere, 24-28.

und fast ein Wunder seiner Zeit.
Der kleine Hals war wohl geschliffen,
und hat manch feines Lied gepiffen zur Fröhlichkeit.
Allein, die Freud' ist aus.
Er lieget nun gestreckt,
und wird mit Schwarzer Erd' bedeckt.

III. Aria: Ihr lieblichen Kanarienvögel

Ihr lieblichen Kanarienvögel,
beklaget mein Freud' und eure Zier.
Ihr Vögel, die ihr sonst so wunderschön,
mit künstlich liblichem Getön
den muntren Ohren pflegt zu dienen:

IV. Recitative

Was soll ich mehr zu deinem Lobe singen,
o edler Canarin?
Du kannst dein helles Kehlchen also zwingen,
daß aller Ohren, Herz und Sinn,
die dich gehört, bewegt wurden.
Nur dir, dir grausamer Tod allein,
konnt der verliebte Ton doch nicht beweglich sein;
denn du hast grob und vermessen,
den teuren Bissen weggefressen.

V. Aria: Friß, daß dir der Hals anschwelle

Friß, daß dir der Hals anschwelle,
friß, du unverschämter Gast!
Daß dich der Vogel zerkratze, zerrisse
und dir den Magen und Därme zerbisse,
bis du ihn gespieen hast;
friß und berste auf der Stelle!

VI. Recitative

Allein, was will ich ferner klagen.
Was wird wohl auch nach meiner Trauer fragen
der strenge Bruder Tod.
Er muß so einen Papgei als Raben,
so einen Canarin als Sperling haben
zu seinem Morgenbrot;
und schonet keinen Vogel nicht.
Wohlan, so fahre hin, betrübtes Wort; fahr hin,
du mein geliebter Canarin!
Sollt gleich das Glück mir seines gleichen wiedergeben
(wie wohl es kaum geschieht),
so kommst du doch in meinem ganzen Leben
mir nimmermehr aus meinem Sinn

VII. Aria: Mein Canarine, gute Nacht!

Mein Canarine, gute Nacht!
Eh' wird das Federvieh sich in die See versenken,
als ich an deinen treuen Fleiß nicht sollte denken,
so gut hast du's bei mir gemacht.

and almost a wonder of his age.
His little throat was well-honed,
and happily whistled many a fine tune.
Alone, the joy is gone!
Now he lies prostrate,
and will be covered with black earth.

You lovely canaries
mourn my joy and your beauty.
You birds, who otherwise so wonderfully,
with artistic beautiful sounds,
are accustomed to serve our keen ears.

What more can I sing in thy praise
oh noble canary?
Thus though could'st open thy bright throat
so that all ears, hearts, and minds
who heard thee, would be moved.
Only thou, cruel Death, thou alone
could be unmoved by the beloved sound;
for thou hast roughly and boldly
devoured the precious mouthful.

Eat, so that thy throat swells up,
eat, thou outrageous guest!
So that the bird scratches and tear thee,
and chews on thy stomach and intestines,
until thou hast spit them out!
eat and burst on the spot!

Alone, what more can I lament?
What, after my tears, will be demanded of me
by the strict brother Death!
So he must have a parrot or a raven
a canary or a sparrow
for his breakfast,
and spares no bird!
Well then, Farewell! Distressing world, Farewell!
my beloved canary!
Should I be lucky enough to be given your like again
(though that hardly ever happens)
you will never, throughout my life,
fade from my memory.

My canary, good night!
The flock will drown more easily
than I will forget thy true zeal,
since thou has done so much good for me.

VIII. Recitative

Nun dann, so nehmt die kleinen Glieder in eure Hand,
und setzt den Vogel sanfte nieder in kühlen Sand.
Macht, daß er sicher möge liegen,
um mich bei meinem Leide zu vergnügen.
So lasset dieses noch die letzte Ehre sein,
daß ihr schreibt auf den Leichenstein:
“Dat de der Hagel!
Hie ligt en Vagel,
de kunn mann neerteck quinqualeeren
und alle Minschenb konten teren.
Du Streckbeen!
Als du wollst düssen Vagel freten,
so wull ich dat du wär wat an den Hals geschmeten”

Now then, take the tiny limbs in your hand,
and put the bird down softly in the cool sand.
See that he may lie safely,
in order to divert me from my pain.
So let this be the last honour,
that on his tombstone is written:
“May the devil take thee!
Here lies a bird
who could sing so beautifully,
and bring joy to everyone.
Grim reaper, thou!
Because thou would'st eat this little bird,
I want to strangle thee!”

KEVIN PUTS (1972)

Winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in Music for his debut opera, *Silent Night*, Kevin Puts has been hailed as one of the most important composers of his generation. Critically acclaimed for a richly colored, harmonic, and freshly melodic musical voice that has also been described as “emotional, compelling, and relevant,” his works, which include two operas, four symphonies, and several concertos, have been commissioned, performed, and recorded by leading orchestras, ensembles, and soloists throughout the world.⁹

Einstein on Mercer Street was composed in 2002 for the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, directed by Kevin Noe, for baritone Dr. Timothy Jones. A collaborative process from the ground up, Puts enlisted the talent of the poet laureate of the state of Delaware, Fleda Brown, to compose the poetry that would give the audience a “sense of a large-scale narrative arch and an almost operatic sense of completion by the end of the work.” After the publication of the poetry, Puts expressed a “weariness” of the traditional song cycle format and embraced a larger form which combined the nine poems into three movements. There are only two breaks in the work, after poems II and IV. This combining of poems acts like Einstein’s own mind, moving seamlessly from the mundane to his practical experiments within moments. Included below are the original poems as they were published.¹⁰

While a student at the famous Polytechnic Institute at Zurich, Albert Einstein fell in love with the only woman in his class, a Serbian named Mileva Marić, who at first was able to keep up with his mind. They talked physics and declared they'd never settle for a bourgeois life. Their first child, Liesel, was born before Albert decided they could marry. They either gave her away or she died. Nothing is known about her.

They had two other children before their divorce. By this time Mileva had given up her career and had sunk into a severe depression. A few years later, Einstein won the Nobel Prize and – even though he was married by then to his cousin Elsa – he sent Mileva all the prize money. Twenty-three years later, after Einstein had become a U.S. citizen and a professor at Princeton University, the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan. Einstein had nothing to do directly with the development of the bomb.

⁹ Kevin Puts, “Biography,” <http://www.kevinputs.com/bio.html>.

¹⁰ Kevin Puts, “Einstein on Mercer Street,” Program notes.

I.

Ah, Mileva, it's always you I turn to
in my thoughts, on my walks down Mercer Street,
lone old lump inside my gray raincoat,

The parabola of my felt hat.
They keep me like a Kubla Khan
at Princeton. My floating hair they talk of:

His floating hair. Beware! Beware!
Weave a circle around him thrice.
Reporters flash in my face. Even the bomb,

they claim, was my idea. One marketable God
of the Intellect, they want. But what they catch—
each shot's a different man.

Put them together, flip quickly,
and I'm still, I swear, the man you once
thought: a motion picture, a wave, a music,

a disturbance in something else. In you,
maybe, as you are in me. As if I'd never
left you. A man never loses the woman

He has children with. Even dead.
It's the hope—what we thought we could be—
That hangs like a moon

over the field of my losses.
Oh my Dollie, my schnoxel, this is your
Jonzerel-silly-names, fastened to you

By my nerve-endings. We were going to fly
so far outside the gravity of the bourgeoisie,
we would remain all thought, wit, music—

eternal students, the "we" of significant work,
ein Stein, one stone. Then it all felt like stone.
Now I talk to myself.

II.

Still, somewhere inside the so-called ether,
I feel you listening—dark, peevish
As always, your intelligence rasping like wire

against mine. Somewhere I'm still
playing Mozart—In spite of you—half the night,
a fool for him, and Bach, their harmonies,

their unfailing return after infinite variations
as if the starting point were all time sucked inward,
or some anthropomorphic God were calling

eternity back into this intersection with friends.
Three divertimenti: clarinet, piano, me on violin,
the children asleep, you my angry Mileva

curled in shadows, what we each called love, I guess,
the mathematics we mad of our marriage,
against the emptiness.

III.

It appears that the universe bend toward
itself, a geodesic dome,
two hands, fingertips touching like a person

in thought. If I moved faster than light, I could
draw the bow back
into the music's mouth, rewind data.

Never allow, for instance, that monstrous,
nuclear heartbreak, *not* my invention—
it was the math that got pushed so far

off the edge of reason.
Where were you? Turning back, giving up
your books, no longer able to follow me.

IV.

Rewinding: Up through swirls of snow, switchback
turns, precipices, up to Splügen Pass.
You brought opera glasses

and my blue nightshirt. Heads touching as one,
we studied a snowflake, fractal,
circular. At dawn we sent snowballs down the slopes,
imagined the village below, avalanched.
Always we had to oppose, to disturb!
The disturbance of pregnancy, then:

our atoms inexorably carrying on.
I withdrew, as I do, to follow a thought.
Even then I guessed the extremes things could come to:

the snowball chain of split nuclei
that can start forking through plutonium,
doubling, quadrupling from one generation
to the next in millionths of a second, releasing
matter back to vast, primordial energy
you can never put your hands on again.

V.

I thought I was a pacifist. Good work needs
a certain peace. Ah, then Lieserl—
we agree, didn't we, what to do

when she was born? So as not to undo
the future. (Who knew then if we'd ever
marry?) "As what do you have the child registered?"

I had to know that, at least. To be a Jew—
another strike against her. You think
it's peace you've won, but sometimes

it's only quiet, while the violence grows,
a snowball chain where you can't see.
After the boys were born,

Lierserl would knot and twist
in my troubled stomach: this cramp.
Every day it feels as if I'm giving birth.

The doctors say drink milk and more milk.
I wanted peace, so I could think.
This is what I get.

And in Germany, Hitler rose up
Like all my dreams of deformed children,
Children sinking in the waves, children lost

VI.

I note the universe goes from order to disorder,
yet it remains. With my own eye
I saw a man fall from a building

into a rubbish heap and live.
The man said he felt no downward pull,
which made me guess that we ride along

inside our own frame, you in your truth,
me in mine. Why did I have to wear socks,
then, to please you? Because of a universal

fact: mass can't help but bend toward mass.
I like only shoes, these two boats
that keep me pretty much afloat

by themselves, an elegant sequence, like notes.
Take Mozart: his perfect symmetry
that gets where it's going. But there has to be

someone outside the music, to listen,
for it to break the heart with joy.
Who else is left to listen to me, old enemy?

VII.

Since Elsa died, I'm down to
Chico the dog, *Tinef* my sailboat—
Worthless thing, but a pleasure—

and this fame. If I could do it again,
I swear I'd become a plumber.
The mind can't stand too much pure thought.

It oppresses. You oppress me
Still, my dear, forever brooding.
Things ought not *be* all probability. This

will make you mad: I told Elsa once,
"If you (meaning her, of course)
were to recite the most beautiful poem,

it would not come close to the mushrooms
and goosetrackings you cook
for me." Plain things, like sailing.

I can sail now like a swan. I like to be
carried along, making calculations,
but I admit, truth's not ordinary:

it disappears as soon as you look.
It's like catching the wind,
trying to make it bend to fit your mind.

VIII.

When I was a schoolboy
 in the Alps in the rain
at the razor edge of a cliff,

among small black birds,
 when I slipped
in my poor shoes and was barely

caught by a classmate—
 what do you think
would be the mathematics of this?

Since a person freely falling
 could go on forever,
and it's only the sudden embrace

that holds you here,
 or there, how does one
show up at the coordinates

on time? Were we at the right
 place, or wrong,
my little veranda, my Dollie,

my little street urchin? We did
 save each other once, I think,
and once is all there is.

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