

Program Notes

I think we can all agree. Music, and the arts in general, have been our source of strength and outlet for creativity during this pandemic. Today's program is a testament to this statement. This program is our endless pursuit to create and tell the stories that need to be heard...despite the challenges and fears that we are currently presented with as artists.

I am thrilled to share today's program with Dr. Lorelee Songer. Dr. Songer is a proud BSU alum and currently serves on the voice faculty at Taylor University where she is an active recitalist, opera and oratorio performer, conductor, and educator.

This afternoon's program will begin with Dr. Songer's presentation of *Little Black Book*. *Little Black Book* represents a true collaboration between composer, librettist, and performer. Commissioned by Dr. Songer, the text was fashioned by Caitlin Vincent as a combination of both hers and Lorelee's romantic histories, seamlessly blending their separate stories into a unified tale, by turns funny and poignant, that highlights the struggle to find love in the digital age. Composer Susan LaBarr's setting of the story, which alternates soaring lyricism with patter songs and musical theatre-inspired idioms, highlights the humor and pathos of the texts.

You might have noticed that today's program has a title. I love a recital program in which I can unify the poetry, music, and performance with a theme. This program explores the trials and tribulations and utter bliss of love from a woman's perspective with a particular focus on ideals of both the past and present. The poetry addresses all of the pinnacle moments within a woman's lifetime: the ups and downs of the dating/courting phase, falling in love, marriage, birth, and death.

I've longed to perform Robert Schumann's *Frauenliebe und leben* (1830), A Woman's Life and Love, ever since I became acquainted with the song cycle but I could never find the appropriate time and venue to do so...but in a time that seems so limiting, scary, and "not normal" for artist, I thought "heck, now is the time." I have truly lived through some of the experiences within this masterful song cycle and I think it's a story that I can share with the audience in a very personal and honest way. This cycle documents a woman's life "like a series of old photographic snapshots."¹

Again, this is the season of "not normal," so I have asked Dr. Songer to join me in sharing the story of a woman's life and love to provide two perspectives and perhaps link the stories with accounts that are more relevant and contemporary (cycles by LaBarr and Rusche). The cycle features eight songs, set to text by German poet Adelbert von Chamisso) and to divide them into two parts was very natural. The first four songs share the newness and *innocence* of love before marriage and the last four songs feature life after the wedding day and the *experience* of love. Dr. Songer's presentation of *Little Black Book* presents a modern account on the ups and

¹ James Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to the Lieder* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

downs of finding love and dating, so I thought it would be interesting to pair the piece with the first four songs of Schumann's cycle. A 21st-century woman's perspective paired with an 18th century perspective on dating/courting. This is also the intent for the second half of the program.

While excerpts of Marjorie Rusche's *Songs of Love and Death* premiered in 2014 in New York City, Dr. Cara Chowning and I had the distinct privilege of premiering the entire cycle, written for voice and piano, at the International Music by Women Festival in March of 2020 (right before the pandemic shut everything down). Throughout the process of preparing these songs, I have also had the honor of working directly with Rusche via email, phone calls, and a ZOOM call. The cycle features five songs, each featuring the text of a different poet:

- I. Wild Nights (Emily Dickinson)
- II. An Irish Airman Foresees His Death (William Butler Yeats)
- III. This is Just to Say (William Carlos Williams)
- IV. After Reading St. John the Divine (Gene Derwood)
- V. Love Comes Quietly (Robert Creeley)

Rusche does not hold back on the musical content that heightens each of the extreme emotions and moments that surround love, relationships, and loss. She incorporates the entirety of the vocalist's range both vocally and artistically, with incredibly acrobatic melodic and rhythmic gestures and the noticeable omission of vibrato at moments to increase the dramatic content (IV. After Reading St. John the Divine) that balance the softer, legato moments (V. Love Comes Quietly).

The cycle pairs beautifully with the last four songs of Schumann's *Frauenliebe und leben*. Both capture snapshots of the utter bliss and intimate moments of love that balance the bitterness, heartbreak, and fear of death and many special moments in between. I hope that you, the audience, find these moments that link the past with the present.

While *Frauenliebe und leben* has been considered controversial and problematic to a modern audience because of its very traditional depiction of a woman's life and her "place" in society, I believe it holds a timeless message of life especially in the midst of loss which is why it is still a relevant story to share. Hold on to the moments that matter. Embrace the joy in life and always hold on to love, especially in a time like this.

-Dr. Kelci Kosin