Boston Text & Tone Festival

January 2024

Welcome, all, to the Boston Text and Tone Festival. Thank you for joining us!



And thank you to all of our collaborators who have worked tirelessly to put together these four concerts. A special thank you to poet Letta Neely, who will open each program with a performance of her work. To access PDFs of texts and translations for the concerts, please scan the QR code to the left or go to: http://www.textandtonefestival.com/texts

Program Notes

The poet John Keats, in a letter to a friend written in 1818, praised a certain intangible trait found in the authors he admired (he used Shakespeare as an example). He defined the trait this way: "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—"

"Being in" is quite an unspecific verb here-wouldn't we expect something more flowery from a poet like Keats? But this unspecificity is perhaps the key. What does it mean to "be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts"? What does it feel like?

From the very beginning of this concert, we are right there, "being in" that feeling, those doubts and uncertainties. Langston Hughes asks, "Which way to go?...Lord God, I do not know." Bewildered, we are at some kind of crossroads with Hughes, suspended in an uncertain present. And it feels like Keats's "fact & reason" won't help us get through! What can we turn to?

Perhaps, instead of "reaching after fact & reason," we can "be in" the "temporary eternal in poems" (Mahmoud Darwish), or the even longer eternity of art (frozen, as in Keats's Grecian urn). Many of tonight's poets imagine such a transcendence, a stopping of the clock. But we can't stay forever. The eternal is temporary. "The poets build homes with clouds," but Darwish's clouds "have short lives in the wind." And, "amid [an] endearingly sweet moment in time," Claude McKay's lovers "realize their love for each other is transient. How can they hold onto this moment?" (from Shawn Okpebholo's "note from the composer").

Versions of this struggle play out across many of tonight's texts. Sometimes the "uncertainties, Mysteries, and doubts" are recast as imagined places of comfort and safety, even to the point of self-delusion; other times, they are places of deep pain and suffering. "Being in" them might not be a choice in the first place. Many of tonight's poets lived through tumultuous times, and their poetry reflects it.

As we traverse these spiritual crossroads with all of our poets this evening, we also find ourselves at an artistic crossroads: the intersection of text and tone! Tonight's program features song, poetry recitation, song transcription, melodrama, songs without words, and vocalise. Each of these marriages of text and tone is an invitation into a different expressive world...

-Elias Dagher



Thursday, January 18, 2024, 7:30 PM

Distler Performance Hall, Tufts University, Medford, MA

Text and Tone, Deconstructed

Alexis Peart | mezzo-soprano Daon Drisdom | tenor James Demler | baritone Elias Dagher | piano Pierre-Nicolas Colombat | piano Letta Neelv | poet **Ibrahim Dagher** | guest reader

Five Settings of Langston Hughes

(recited texts in italics)

Harlem - Bewilderment

Mother to Son - Song to the Dark Virgin

Dreams - Hold Fast to Dreams

I look at the world - We have Tomorrow

Who but the Lord? - Feet o' Jesus

To Mv Mother

Describing Clouds Another Day Will Come

from Seven Songs for Piano

I. I am a Girl

III. Come Home

VII. Water Comes from the Mountaintop

The Fugitives, Op. 122, No. 2

Two Odes of John Keats I. Ode to a Nightingale

II. Ode on a Grecian Urn

Chanson écossaise

from *Lieder ohne Worte*

Book 1, No. 2 (A minor) Book 2, No. 1 (E-flat Major)

Vocalise, Op. 34, No. 14

A Song Without Words

Romance

Florence Price (1887-1953)

text Langston Hughes (1901-1967)

text Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008)

Komitas (1869-1935)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) text Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

George Antheil (1900-1959)

text John Keats (1795-1821)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) text Robert Burns (1759-1796)

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Charles Samuel Brown (1940-2021)

text Claude McKay (1890-1948)

Shawn E. Okpebholo (b. 1981)

Program Notes

The Bonds set serves as a complementary foil to *Winterreise*. It shares many themes with Schubert's cycle, showing some of the darker emotions that romance can bring out while also contemplating the end of love as time goes on. One could consider Bonds' settings of Millay in this context as being sung from the perspective of the object of Schubert's protagonist's affections. The set provides a feminine (and, in Millay's case, queer) perspective on what an end to love can mean, casting the spiraling turmoil of *Winterreise* in a new light. In *Winterreise*, the end of love is catastrophic. Müller highlights the failings of the male speaker to win the prize of his beloved, and the lack of control he wields over his fortunes. In Bonds' set, however, the end of love is natural. The speaker never expects control over their surroundings to begin with, but adamantly puts their foot down when their beloved attempts to exert control over them. Bonds and Millay achieve a level of agency never afforded to the object of affection by Schubert and Müller.

-Sam Crosby-Schmidt

In the inherited interpretation of Winterreise, death is one of the overriding themes. Fair enough. Müller's poems make numerous references to graves and general "end of life imagery"; Schubert famously corrected the proofs of the manuscript on his own deathbed; and, well, Death is one of the major obsessions of the Romantic movement. As evident as this association is, however, it runs the risk of oversimplifying a work whose message is more ardently preoccupied with the bewildering squeamishness of finding oneself alive. Indeed, as the main character reaches the gates of death with the most noble music of "Das Wirtshaus," Death denies entry and "Mut!" follows directly after with its hysterical motifs, defiant modulations, and full blooded chord voicings. In Schubert's reading of Müller, death is a tempting but ultimately unsatisfactory answer to the sometimes tormenting questions of finding oneself alive. Centering death in a reading of Winterreise also puts us in a position of sympathy towards the main character when they perhaps are not fully deserving of it. While there are numerous moving depictions of dissociation after a trauma, blind sympathy for this character weakens the power of Winterreise by not considering how much this person's bitterness (Die Wetterfahne), relationship with violence (Einsamkeit Mut!), and self-indulgent helplessness are perhaps partially responsible for their own torment. In the final phrase of the bleak and peculiar "Der Leiermann," Müller's character, in Schubert's setting, must crescendo; through all the pain, confusion, and deception of life's questions, and with death eliminated as a suitable answer, Winterreise's final limit is to propose art-making as perhaps the last chance for solace. Not just the making of art, but that it be in service of communion. This is the Schubertian message.

-Pierre-Nicolas Colombat



Friday, January 19, 2024, 7:00 PM

Goethe-Institut Boston, Boston, MA

Faithful, to the Grave

Sam Crosby-Schmidt | tenor Felix Gygli | baritone Letizia Palmieri | piano Pierre-Nicolas Colombat | piano Letta Neely | poet

Selections from settings of sonnets by Edna

St. Vincent Millay

"Even in the moment"

"I know my mind"

"What lips my lips have kissed"

Margaret Bonds (1913-1972) text Edna St. Vincent Millay

(1892-1950)

Winterreise

I. Gute Nacht

II. Die Wetterfahne

III. Gefror'ne Tränen

IV. Erstarrung

V. Der Lindenbaum

VI. Wasserflut

VII. Auf dem Flusse

VIII. Rückblick

IX. Irrlicht

X. Rast

XI. Frühlingstraum

XII. Einsamkeit

XIII. Die Post

XIV. Der greise Kopf

XV. Die Krähe

XVI. Letzte Hoffnung

XVII. Im Dorfe

XVIII. Der stürmische Morgen

XIX. Täuschung

XX. Der Wegweiser

XXI. Das Wirtshaus

XXII. Mut

XXIII. Die Nebensonnen

XXIV. Der Leiermann

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) text Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827)

Excerpt from "Alpha"

when god was a child he began to speak tongues his mother did not know often before slumber, she relayed direct transcriptions to dream weavers dependent as she was on overnight delivery.

-Letta Neely

Program Notes

"I have never acknowledged the difference between 'serious' music and 'light' music.

There is only good music and bad music."

-Kurt Weill

Here we present to you only good music. Each piece is designed for a setting as intimate as this one, whether intended for a salon in 1840 or a Berlin nightclub in 1920. Telling of sweet love, hot love, and luxurious rest, the songs in this cabaret bouquet are of private thoughts, shared through timeless poetry and delectable melodies.

-Joanne Evans



Saturday, January 20, 2024, 7:30 PM

Somerville Music Spaces, Somerville, MA

Cabaret Bouquet

Joanne Evans | mezzo-soprano Elias Dagher | piano Letta Neely | poet

Stay in My Arms Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964) text Marc Blitzstein

from Brettl-Lieder

"Mahnung"

"Galathea"

"Arie aus dem Spiegel von Arcadien"

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

texts Gustav Hochstetter (1873-1944)

Frank Wedekind (1864-1918)

Emanuel Schikaneder (1751-1812)

In der Fremde Robert Schumann (1810-1856) from *Liederkreis* Op.39 text Joseph von Eichendorff (1788-1857)

Eine rote Rose Ruth Schönthal (1924-2006) text Ingrid Olbricht (1935-2005)

Noch ahnst du nichts von Herbst des Haines from *Frühe Lieder* Schönthal text Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926)

Frühlingsnacht Schumann from *Liederkreis* Op.39 text Eichendorff

lch hab, ich bin, ich wär
Mischa Spoliansky (1898-1985)
text Mischa Spoliansky
arr. Ryan McCullough (b. 1987)

Blue William Bolcom (b. 1938) from *Cabaret Songs* text Arnold Weinstein (1927-2005)

Speak Low Kurt Weill (1900–1950) text Ogden Nash (1902–1971)

from *Cabaret Songs*Funeral Blues
Johnny

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)
text W. H. Auden (1907-1973)

Hôtel Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) from *Banalités* text Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1919)

Les chemins de l'amour Poulenc text Jean Anouilh (1910-1987)

Mon Homme Maurice Yvain (1891-1965)

text Jacques-Charles (1882-1971) & Albert Willemetz (1887-1964)

Les moulins de mon coeur Michel Legrande (1932-2019) text Eddy Marnay (1920-2003)

Program Notes

Although *La bonne chanson* was written in the context of Fauré's intense love for Emma Bardac (who would eventually marry Debussy), the Verlaine poems he chose to frame his feelings express an idealized love and evoke the respectful remove of amour courtois (courtly love). Verlaine's choice of octo-syllables and alexandrins (12 syllables) for the meter of his verses makes the association to the late Middle Ages clear. The first poem begins with a seemingly endless list of pleasant images and references. It is only in the last line that we find out all of these wonderful allusions are in the likeness of the beloved's name (rather than, as might be expected, their physical appearance). This sense of cordially distant yet resplendent adoration is underlined by the last two lines of "J'ai presque peur" where the poet allows themself the transgression of restating "Que je vous aime" as "Que je *t'aime.*" In a typically post-Wagnerian manner, little motifs and musical referents are peppered through the work and Fauré's signature harmonic slipperiness make for a musical vocabulary that transcends the rationality of more traditional musical languages. It could almost be better described as a musical aroma.

-Pierre-Nicolas Colombat

Very shortly after the end of World War II, Britten toured a devastated Germany with the legendary violinist Yehudi Menuhin to perform recitals in liberated concentration camps for surviving inmates. Overwhelmed by the horrors he saw firsthand and likely affected by a variety of required vaccinations, Britten fell ill and was bedridden for a period of time upon his return to England. It seems only appropriate that he would commence work on setting The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, poems he had known for many years, while still suffering from high fever and yet working vehemently at a rapid pace. One of the greatest English poets, John Donne was a man preoccupied with death and repentance. This theme permeates each poem in the cycle, and through Britten's music we experience a profound sense of despair at the savagery of the modern world. The piece challenges the singer and pianist technically in ways which exceed that of all his other cycles. The powerful drama and sudden emotional and musical contrasts throughout the cycle can be overwhelming to the listener. One is constantly confronted with anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and desperate hope surrounding the end of life. And yet, there is the opportunity for contemplation, repentance, and analysis of life's riches. In the final song, the listener is left with a potent and positive message: death should not be so arrogant, for upon the end of life, it too will die.

-Eric Rieger

Shot through this afternoon's deeply personal poetry is a shared obsession with transformation and renewal. Each speaker either intimates or outright declares a lack of personal wholeness. In Verlaine's case, this lack is betrayed "between the lines." But anxiety seems to boil under the stained-glass veneer of stability. A glance at the first lines of Donne's sonnets reveals the state of the speaker.

How do our poets emerge from these places of fracturedness? Donne and Verlaine propose wildly contrasting remedies, each poet reaching for a different agent of change: who can heal me? How can transformation and renewal come about? Through young love, idealized, courtly, perfect? Or through God's intervention: the violent, exorcistic "battering" of the heart? Perhaps there is a third way: a mystical intertwining of souls. Quarles sings of a romantic relationship, colored in religious language, proclaimed in the most effusive of metaphors which celebrate the many paths of intermingling and roles of exchange between two souls-in-love. In vividness of language both poetic and musical, today's concert promises to be a feast. We are honored that JJ and Eric are joining us to share this program.

-Elias Dagher



Sunday, January 21, 2024, 2:00 PM

Hunneman Hall, Brookline Public Library, Brookline, MA

Britten's 17th Century & Fauré's amour courtois

Eric Rieger | tenor JJ Penna | piano Letta Neely | poet

Canticle I: My beloved is mine and I am his, Op. 40

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) text Francis Quarles (1592-1644)

La bonne chanson, Op. 61

- 1. "Une sainte en son auréole"
- 2. "Puisque l'aube grandit"
- 3. "La lune blanche luit dans les bois"
- 4. "J'allais par des chemins perfides"
- 5. "J'ai presque peur, en vérité"
- 6. "Avant que tu ne t'en ailles"
- 7. "Donc, ce sera par un clair jour d'été"
- 8. "N'est-ce pas?"
- 9. "L'hiver a cessé"

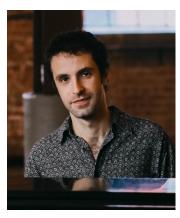
The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, Op. 35

- 1. IV: "Oh my blacke Soule! now thou art summoned"
- 2. XIV: "Batter my heart, three person'd God"
- 3. III: "Oh might those sighes and teares return againe"
- 4. XIX: "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one"
- 5. XIII: "What if this present were the world's last night?"
- 6. XVII: "Since she whom I lov'd hath pay'd her last debt"
- 7. VII: "At the round earth's imagined corners"
- 8. I: "Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?"
- 9. X: "Death be not proud"

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) text Paul Verlaine (1844-1896)

Britten text John Donne (1572–1631)

Artists



Elias Dagher

Pianist and festival founder Elias Dagher values music's power to tell stories and build community. He lives in Quincy, MA. In 2022, Elias completed a two-year fellowship in collaborative piano at Bard College. He spent the summers of 2022 and '23 at the Tanglewood Music Center as a fellow, and currently maintains an active performance schedule at various venues across New England. Please see eliasdagher.com for more information.

Some of Elias's most influential teachers have included Eugene Kaminsky, Jeffrey Goldberg, Julian Martin, Jerome Lowenthal, Alexander Korsantia, Vivian Weilerstein, Cameron Stowe, Kayo Iwama, and Erika Switzer. Elias also plays the mbira dzavadzimu, a plucked instrument of metal keys wound over a wooden soundboard which comes from the Shona people of Zimbabwe.



Pierre-Nicolas Colombat

A Lied-lover at heart, pianist and festival founder Pierre-Nicolas Colombat's musical activities also include research, writing, and community organizing. He has been participating regularly in international art song festivals and competitions since 2020. He and his duo partner Vinicius Costa were awarded a prize in both of the competitions in which they participated (Wigmore Hall 2022 and IVC 2023). OperaWire praised his "tight partnership"

and "brilliant programming" with soprano Meredith Wohlgemuth on the occasion of his Carnegie Hall debut in 2021. His writing on music includes his Doctoral Dissertation (Music and Modern Power), his Masterarbeit which undertakes a Marxist analysis of the methods and media involved in the historical dissemination of music as well as further essays and concert reviews for the Boston Music Intelligencer and Sinfonieorchester Basel.



Sam Crosby-Schmidt

Boston-based tenor and composer, Sam Crosby-Schmidt hails from Woodbury, MN. Their recent roles include Basilio (Le Nozze di Figaro), Little Bat (Susannah), and Frederic (Pirates of Penzance), and this April they will be singing the role of Flute in Britten's A Midsummer Night's Dream. They perform frequently with the Boston Conservatory Conductors' Choir and have sung with the King's Chapel Choir, Church on the Hill Choir, and St. Cecilia's Choir. No

stranger to opera, musical theater, choral, or concert settings, Sam is an active performer, composer, arranger, and collaborator in a wide variety of genres. They are passionate about performing new works as well as music by composers with marginalized identities. Sam is currently in their second year of the Master of Music program at Boston Conservatory at Berklee.



James Demler

Bass-baritone James Demler is known for his versatile repertoire spanning the operatic, oratorio, concert, and popular music genres and has been a regular performer with Boston Lyric Opera, BMOP, and Odyssey Opera. In 2023 he joined the roster of the Metropolitan Opera, covering the role of the Notary in Der Rosenkavalier, sang Don Alfonso in Cosi Fan Tutte with the Newport Festival in Rhode Island, and returned to the Berkshire Opera Festival as

Benoit/Alcindoro in La Boheme. Mr. Demler first gained national attention at Houston Grand Opera, where he appeared as Moralès in Carmen, De Bretigny in Manon, and Peter in Hansel and Gretel. He made his Carnegie Hall debut with the Opera Orchestra of New York as Dikson in Boieldieu's La Dame Blanche. He teaches at Boston University.

Artists



Daon Drisdom

Georgia native and graduate from the New England Conservatory of Music, tenor Daon Drisdom is praised for his rich tone and compelling stage presence. His classical credits include performances in the baritone and tenor repertoires. He continues to perform regularly with music organizations in Boston including Odyssey Opera & Boston Modern Opera Project (B.M.O.P.) and Boston Lyric Opera as a chorister. One of Drisdom's musical

passions is telling stories and giving life to words through song. He finds joy in helping others understand the style and stories of the black music repertory. In Massachusetts he served as Music Teacher at the John F. Kennedy School in Somerville Public Schools and is currently the Director of Choirs at Boston Latin Academy in Boston Public Schools.



Felix Gygli

Swiss Baritone Felix Gygli was recently named winner of the 2023 Kathleen Ferrier Awards in London and received the Lied Prize of the Queen Sonja Competition in Oslo. In the 23/24 season he will join the International Opera Studio at Opera Zurich. He was a member of the Académie Lyrique of the Verbier Festival 2023, where he was awarded the Prix Thierry Mermod for the most promising singer of the Academy. In 2024, he will be taking part in the Carnegie

Hall SongStudio. Felix is a keen recitalist and appears regularly with pianists JongSun Woo and Tomasz Domanski in recitals across the UK, France and Switzerland. A regular performer of oratorio repertoire, he has performed Fauré's Requiem, Mendelssohn's Elijah, Bach's St Matthew Passion and multiple Bach cantatas around Europe.



Joanne Evans

Hailed as "a singer to watch" (Classical Voice America), London-born mezzo soprano Joanne Evans spent the past summer at the Merola Opera Program, before which she was an Artist in Residence with Opera Colorado, performing the roles of Maddalena in Rigoletto, and Lucienne in Die Tote Stadt. As Olga in Eugene Onegin with Music Academy of the West last Summer, Joanne "was a magnificently earthy Olga, her rich mezzo tone and prescient

temperament, perfect for the role" (Voice Santa Barbara). Alongside singer and conductor, Micah Gleason, Joanne is a co-founder of Loam, an artistic partnership presenting semi-immersive musical works. Joanne was named winner of the Marilyn Horne Song Competition and the Handel Aria Competition. Joanne is a proud beneficiary of a Career Bridges grant.



Letta Neely

Letta Neely, originally from Indianapolis, Indiana, is a Black lesbian playwright, performer, poet, mother, teacher and community activist who has been involved in progressive, anti-racist and queer liberation movements all her adult life. Her work focuses on the connections and intersections of queerness, Blackness, and awareness. She is currently touring "Pulling It All Into The Current" a one woman spoken word- infused play. The show has been to

Boston, Edinburgh, NYC, New Hampshire, and her hometown of Indianapolis, Indiana. Her literary work has been included in numerous anthologies, literary journals, and bathroom stalls. Letta is the Story Weaver in Residence at Emerson College's Elma Lewis Center and hosts FireWater Poetics. Her newest book: Geographies of Power will be released in the Fall of 2024.

Artists



Letizia Palmieri

Born in 2000 in Italy, pianist Letizia Palmieri graduated cum Laude and honorable mention at Conservatorio "Nino Rota" in Monopoli, studying with M° Paola Bruni and M° Roberto de Leonardis. She received a Graduate Performance Diploma and Professional Studies Certificate from The Boston Conservatory at Berklee under the tutelage of M° Michael Lewin, with whom she currently studies. She is the recipient of numerous international prizes and had her

solo debut with orchestra in Italy at the age of 13, performing Beethoven Concerto No. 1 with "Suoni del Sud" in Vieste. She also performed Chopin Concerto Op. 11 in October 2019 at teatro Radar in Monopoli with the Orchestra Sinfonica of Conservatory "Nino Rota". TV appearances have included ORF TV AUSTRIA, TGR RAI 3, TG1 RAI FAI Day 2018.



Alexis Peart

Mezzo-soprano Alexis Peart has been praised for her "plush yet robust voice" and "incredible clarity" in roles ranging from baroque operas to world premiere performances. In the 2023/24 season, Alexis joins Boston Lyric Opera as a Jane & Steven Akin Emerging Artist, making her company debut as Thisbe in Rossini's La Cenerentola, Big Stone in AuCoin's Eurydice and Dorothée (cover) in Bologne's L'Amant Anonyme. She was the alto soloist in the

Assabet Valley Mastersing's Messiah and frequently appears in concert and recital programs with Castle of Our Skins. She can be heard on the Grammy-nominated recording of Anthony Davis' X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X, produced by Boston Modern Orchestra Project and Odyssey Opera, and on several art song recordings released by PARMA Recordings, LLC.



JJ Penna

JJ Penna has performed extensively with a variety of eminent singers, including Kathleen Battle, Harolyn Blackwell, Measha Brueggergosman, Denyce Graves, Ying Huang, Susan Narucki, Roberta Peters, Florence Quivar, and Andreas Scholl. He has held fellowships at the Tanglewood Music Center, Banff Center, Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, Music Academy of the West, and San Francisco Opera's Merola Opera Program. He received his

training under Martin Katz, Margo Garrett, and Diane Richardson. Devoted to the teaching of classical song literature, he has been on the faculties of The Juilliard School, the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, the Bowdoin Festival, Westminster Choir College, the Renée Fleming Song Studio, and Vancouver International Song Institute. He currently teaches at the Yale University School of Music, The New England Conservatory, and the Steans institute of the Ravinia Festival.



Eric Rieger

American tenor Eric Rieger enjoys an international career that has led him across Europe and the United States. Dr. Rieger has been featured at the Claudio Monteverdi Festival in Italy, the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, and Carnegie Hall. A passionate recitalist, Dr. Rieger has performed an eclectic repertoire of art song with the Boston Art Song Society, Lyric

Fest in Philadelphia, Market Square Concerts in Harrisburg, and St. John's Smith Square in London. His solo debut album is titled Poet's Journey: Song Cycles of Benjamin Britten with pianist J.J. Penna. In addition to his performance career, Dr. Rieger is in demand as a voice teacher and currently serves as Assistant Professor of Voice at Florida State University.



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