

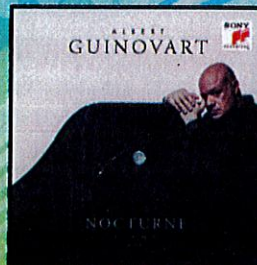
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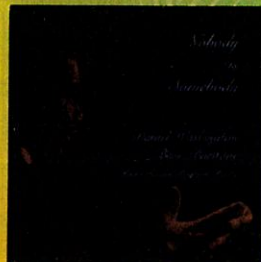
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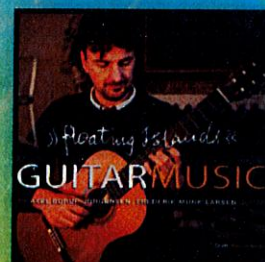
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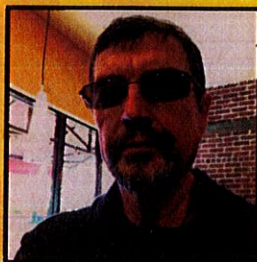
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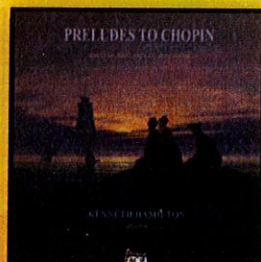
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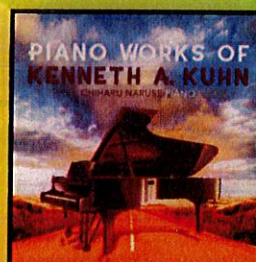
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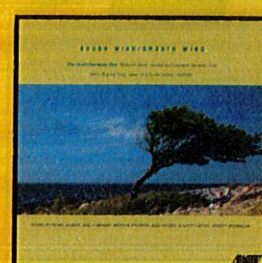
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Robert Pound



Sabrina-Vivian Höpcker



Scott/Garrison Duo

A Poet's Journey in Song: Composer Robert Pound on Setting Oscar Wilde

BY COLIN CLARKE

It is always fascinating to be introduced for the first time to a composer's music. Robert Pound is a composer and conductor who is Professor of Music at Dickinson College. His *The Orbit of the Soul* works with texts by Oscar Wilde; it forms the core of our interview while introducing us to Pound's distinctive, polyvalent voice.

The Orbit of the Soul was commissioned to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Oscar Wilde's death. Can you give an account of its genesis?

In 1999, I heard my colleague, pianist Jennifer Blyth, perform Rzewski's *De Profundis*, a work in which the pianist recites excerpts from Wilde's letter from Reading Gaol. I was moved by the weight of Wilde's testament and by the beauty of his imagery and language. In 2000, the Clarke Forum at Dickinson College was developing a symposium around the centennial of Wilde's death and the semi-centennial of George Bernard Shaw's. Professor Doug Stuart, then Director of the Clarke Forum, proposed to have a performance to end the symposium. Jen suggested I create my own setting of Wilde's letter for her and our colleague in voice. Doug liked the idea and commissioned the work. I then delved into reading Richard Ellman's excellent 1988 biography, Wilde's *De Profundis*, *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol*, and as many others of his works as I could. When I lighted on the line "Every work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy ... Every single human being is the fulfilment of a prophecy," it sparked with one of the themes Ellman develops, that Wilde anticipated and even sought a spectacular downfall. Together, these elements ignited a vision for a composition in which Wilde tells of his journey from pinnacle to abyss, and they suggested several musical means of illustrating and supporting the text.

What is it about Wilde that appeals to you? The man? The writings? Or a combination of both?

I love the works, certainly. I am always struck, in reading Wilde or watching performances of his work, by his sparkling wit and the elegant lyricism of his words. I literally laugh aloud with them,

whether reading *The Importance of Being Earnest* or watching George Sanders' portrayal of Sir Henry Wotton in the 1945 film *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Amid all the wit, Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan* attains a tone of sincere poignance, which I find moving. As an artist, I am grateful for and enlightened by the still fresh perspectives of *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying*, and I admire the way in which Wilde engaged his critics, undaunted and often cheerful. My feelings toward the man himself are more complicated. While Wilde could be remarkably patient, gracious, and kind, there's something irritatingly naïve, careless, and even foolish in his numerous capitulations to his young lover Lord Alfred Douglas, in his search for his downfall, and in his shock that his tragedy ended up an abject misery for him, bleak and bitter, not veiled in "a purple pall and a mask of noble sorrow." Also, his behavior toward his wife and children troubles me, though I feel that I understand it. Still, I do believe Wilde served great artistic and societal causes, and I am inclined to view his disaster as having yielded much good in bringing about the reform of prisons, particularly the way in which imprisoned children were treated. Even with its blemishes (whose life has none?) and the great disaster, it was indeed an extraordinary life, yielding much that is good, enduring, and well worth retelling.

After the Prelude for solo piano and "Prophecy," your piece The Orbit of the Soul comprises three sections in a total of 15 parts: "Uncompleted Passions," "Midnight in One's Heart," and "Creed Made Complete." Could you say more about this structure?

The "Prophecy" frames the entire work, returning near the very end of Part III. At the beginning, we are about to hear Wilde's life as a fulfillment of a prophecy. He states that he must look on his life differently, in order to make God look on it differently. He seeks some greater good in the path he took, rather than be defeated in regretting it. (To me, this is exemplary nobility in the face of devastating disaster.) The music of the Prelude was written last; it takes statements from the work which is to follow and presents them as a kind of wordless prophecy of what is to come. The first section illustrates his position at the pinnacle of the Victorian literary world. The second section reenacts the shame and horror of his imprisonment. In the third section, Wilde articulates the good he derived from his experience.

The song "Prophecy" is a key aspect of the piece, it strikes me. As the booklet notes say, "Every single human being is the fulfillment of a prophecy because every human being is the realization of some ideal" and in Wilde's case this is manifested by seeing his life as an heroic act: celebrity, incarceration (the Underworld) and apotheosis." A personal question, I know, but what is it about Wilde's life journey that appealed so strongly to you?

My first introduction to the biography of Wilde came through the 1997 film *Wilde*, which is based on Ellman's biography. I was enthralled by the sensationalism of the story, which I had not known to that point, though I was familiar with some of Wilde's works. As a young artist, I was beguiled by Wilde's extravagant declarations on "art for art's sake," but I had also been wrestling with my own sexuality for some years. I was out to some persons in some contexts and closeted among others. I therefore read some of my own challenges in Wilde's story. My generation and I are unspeakably fortunate to have come of age in an era and a place where homosexuality is not forbidden by law, though much antagonism undeniably persists. I never had to worry about being condemned for being gay, but I was not willing to accept the more personal ramifications of being completely open, either. So I resonated with the double life which Wilde cultivated and flaunted. In current times, since numerous nations have declared same-gender marriages legal, and now that I am entirely public about my sexuality, I find myself more interested in Wilde as an historic figure and in his story as a powerful drama at the heart of which is a reverence for and intoxication with beauty.

I also would like to examine your use of sources: all Wilde, his letter (De Profundis, an open letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, written while he was in jail for his homosexuality), other letters, The Ballad of Reading Gaol and The Artist. Diverse sources, yes, but they come together to tell a poignant story. Could you give some insight on the genesis of the text (almost a libretto) for your piece?

Exploring the breadth of Wilde's *oeuvre* was one of the greatest rewards of developing this piece. I hoped to be as comprehensive as possible in taking passages from as many of his works as possible (plays, critical essays, poems, stories, *Dorian Gray*), telling the story as richly and thor-

pages or typescript. As the deadline of the first performance drew near and as I began setting some key parts of the text, it became clear that I had too much for the original occasion, which I believe was to be an approximately 15-to-20 minute piece. I therefore pared the libretto down into the present text, but I always hoped I would have occasion to complete the work. At present, I am looking to develop a one-hour monodrama for the singer and pianist on this recording. Even so, I remain content that the 25-minute work presented in this recording is a self-sufficient narrative.

I'm interested also in Richard Ellman's multiple award-winning biography of Wilde (so much so that I now want to read it!) referenced in the booklet notes. What marks this out?

It is a deep, thoroughly researched, beautifully written biography, empathetic to Wilde, but not indulgent, not sycophantic. It is an elegant, replete writing befitting the rich life of an elegant writer.

Your musical language is wide-ranging but generally approachable. I say this because I note you have studied with Milton Babbitt, often associated with high Modernism. (Perhaps track 10, line 247, the parlando "At night the empty corridors ..." with its piano accompaniment generated from the inside of the piano, aurally perhaps the most "modern" moment of the cycle, is a part of this?)

In composing this work, I set aside my graduate school style, which had been more thornily Modernist, more overtly emblematic of my studies with Babbitt. This change was deliberate, but entirely to serve the subject. I wasn't looking to become a different kind of composer, nor to leave that other sound behind for good, but I wanted to situate the sound of this work in an aesthetic which matched Wilde's own. I had no interest in imitating composers contemporary with Wilde, but I did want to match the lyricism and filigree of his words with similarly lyrical and filigreed music. Nevertheless, Babbitt exerts a vast influence on this work, though it may surprise many to know it. One facet of composition to which he awoke and deepened my sensibilities is text setting. He made me aware of such ingenious connections between words and music throughout the repertoire (e.g., Mozart, Schumann, Verdi, of course Schoenberg, and Harold Arlen), that I felt I was seeing and hearing relations of text and music as entirely new again. I had always loved opera and was eager to write my own texts and libretti, but these discussions ignited a new and deeper passion for this pairing, such that it became the focus of my doctoral research and composition. The ways in which I tie the music to Wilde's text, the ways in which I musically match Wilde's narratives and concepts, the way in which the structure of the composition embodies Wilde's personal journey, all stem directly from those studies with Babbitt.

As an extension of this, please could you give the reader an overview of your significant teachers, and how you found your own compositional voice?

I am fortunate to have had a series of fine and generous teachers. Bob Lee, my junior-high band director, was the first to encourage my early forays into composition, and was my first teacher in harmony, orchestration, transposition, and piano. Joseph Golden, a musician of exceptionally wide-ranging abilities and experience, was named organist and choirmaster of my home church when I was 13. My lessons with him in composition, theory, and conducting, as well as our many and lengthy conversations about repertoire and musicians (especially of the vocal repertoire and singers), remain a fruitful resource for me. In college at North Texas, I was assigned to some committed and thoughtful graduate students (Mike Carson, Steven Cooper, Tom Norris) who must have found us underlings frivolous and tedious. During my junior year in England, I studied with Sebastian Forbes and George Mowat-Brown. Lessons with George were a major catalyst, encouraging me toward bold experimentation. Because of this new turn, my teachers at the end of my undergraduate years and the beginning of my graduate years ended up with a pretty stubborn pupil. Both Martin Mailman and Stephen Albert struggled to get me to see what I needed as a young composer, and I imagined I was doing *them* a favor by taking their advice here and there. But they did have an impact, one which can be heard overtly in the lyricism of *The Orbit of the Soul*; I am fortunate that I didn't get completely in my own way of learning from those two. Then there was Milton. I count my years with Milton Babbitt as among the greatest treasures I have been privileged to enjoy in my life. So many insights into music, composition, repertoire, listening, and the profession, all wrapped in his delightful wit and warm personality. Most pronouncements began with the grandfatherly "My dear boy," and the most special information was uttered in an earnest whisper in his gravelly baritone. It was

adopted all of the Juilliard student composers, inviting us to a (roughly) bi-weekly seminar at his apartment. He exhorted us to reach out to our audiences, to be active and not passive, to engage, surprise, and dazzle them, excellent composition lessons for the contemporary composer. Even since graduating, I continue to benefit from the advice of visiting composers at Dickinson College. Masterclasses for my students with the likes of Libby Larsen, Thea Musgrave, and Caroline Shaw have been just as educational to me as to my students.

Your music can bear great sadness (I think here of song No. 6, "To bear a tragedy"); it can also be highly illustrative (I think of the descent for both voice and piano at "there is no such thing as changing one's life; one merely wanders around in the circle of one's own personality"). This sort of variety in your expression is borne out by some of your pieces, but there seems to be a dramatic common ground: the drama of "Oedipus an Colonus," for example (a YouTube video is available), or your "coda" to The Soldier's Tale, the incredibly clever and playful "Dove il diavolo ha la coda" (available on a Soundcloud recording). There's also a thread of lyricism, heard throughout the present piece in the vocal writing but also perhaps in the incredibly interior chamber piece pilgrimage, a 40-minute piano trio (Soundcloud). What might you yourself identify as common threads in your music—ones heard also in Orbit of the Soul?

For one thing, I would say that, regardless of the particularities of the musical surface, most of my works elaborate on thoroughly contrapuntal structures. All the works you cite above are built on something like a chorale, a contrapuntally integrated harmonic progression ("... my dear boy!"). That's one highly technical thread. I also love the challenge of embodying narrative in music. For instance, I have relished occasions to write incidental music, each an engaging puzzle about making the notes sound out the plays' structure and action, as well as the characters' emotions. My "abstract" instrumental pieces also entail such narratives. Indeed, *pilgrimage* is a very personal narrative, but it doesn't concern me whether the audience hears that particular story because I, like many artists, aspire for my compositions to work like myth; though we may share in some generalities of their meanings and applications, each person filters a unique understanding through his singular experience.

This is a simply beautiful recording for Orbit of the Soul, so clear, and the singer's tone is so vibrantly rendered. Can you tell us about this choice of singer? Looking at your biographies, I note you are both affiliated to Dickinson College.

The greatest resource a composer can have, apart from willing audiences, is a musician who believes in your work. Jonathan Hays and I have known each other since he joined Dickinson's faculty in 2008, and he has buoyed me with his enthusiasm for my music ever since. In fact, this recording really came to be because Jonathan prodded me to get my vocal works on disc (and/or online). I was very glad to have him as an interpreter because he is so thoughtful about the music and the texts; he reads the texts and around the texts so extensively, bringing to the music a deep understanding of them. He is equally meticulous in learning music and performing it, having both a very sharp ear and excellent keyboard skills. And of course, Jonathan's is a beautiful voice, capable of power and vulnerability. Not least among the factors in the sound of the album are the engineers, Rob Friedrich and Thom Moore of Five-Four Productions, who expertly captured and rendered Jonathan and Craig's performance.

How involved were you with the recording itself? And how much did Jonathan Hays and pianist Craig Ketter liaise with you as they worked on their interpretation?

I was the producer of this recording, hiring and coordinating engineers and performers, seeking funding, and scheduling the space. Jonathan sang *Orbit* for me a few times at the college well before the recording sessions. The three of us rehearsed together at Craig's New Jersey home in preparation as well. They came perfectly prepared, had great ideas about how they thought the piece should go, and received my suggestions and requests with warmly collegial openness. One could not ask for a better musical team.

You seem to have such an affinity for writing for the voice, or voices. The 50-minute requiem-elegy (Soundcloud) is remarkable in taking the ritual of church music and morphing it into your own mode of expression, and it all sounds beautifully rewarding for the singers. Some composers take physical limits of the performers into consideration when they compose, others less so (read: not at

all). *Where do you see yourself on this spectrum?*

When I was in grad school, I was under the impression that a contemporary composer was *supposed* to push the limits of musicians, to take performance skills to new levels. In that place and at that time, there was a culture of raving almost obsessively about exceptional technical feats in music, and I guess I got caught up in the thrill. In any case, that was not an ideal stance. It yielded some extremely difficult works, which, though performed brilliantly at their premieres by excellent musicians, have tended to send musicians running screaming ever since. Now I bear in mind that a new piece is always an exploration of the unknown and is therefore always inherently challenging. On occasion I still find myself so convinced of and set on a special figuration or effect that, once I have simplified it as much as possible, I may yet leave it in the piece, realizing that it may give the musicians trouble. The *requiem-elegy*, composed for the mostly young musicians at Dickinson College, has two notable moments like this. At the premiere, one went pretty well; the other, not so well. But the spirit of the moment was achieved, and so, on that occasion, I was more than satisfied with the approximation. On the other hand, there is a kind of musician keen to seek and tackle exceptionally difficult works. The late Lloyd Arriola (1972–2016), pianist, was one. When Lloyd died in July 2016, I was in the middle of composing a piano sonata according to his specifications: it was to be “*an extremely virtuosic, hour-long contemporary response to Beethoven’s Hammerklavier and Roger Sessions’ sonatas!*” I will ultimately complete the work in Lloyd’s memory; getting it performed is a different matter. I must gratefully add that I composed my recent song cycles knowing that the amazing Craig Ketter would be premiering them: For Craig, it seems impossible to write anything impossible!

You might have to help listeners out a little when it comes to your extant discography, as ArkivMusic isn’t that helpful, and one I found solely through perusing your online worklist was on CD Baby (the Music for Trumpet); similarly Sleep Cycle. How many albums feature your music so far?

The Orbit of the Soul is my grand debut in making albums entirely of my music. Another one of my dear friends and an essential supporter of mine, trumpeter Jack Sutte, kindly included one of my pieces on each of the two albums he made, *Beyond the Moon* (2010) and *Fanfare Alone* (2014). I served as a co-producer on those albums, a timely education for making my own recording, and through those projects, I was fortunate to get to know and work with engineer Rob Friedrich and Five-Four Productions. One can also hear portions of my trio *creation fables*, charmingly adapted as the soundtrack of the short film *In the Beginning* by my best friend from childhood, Rick Hamilton.

Can I ask about upcoming recordings? I see that there is one coming up of the 2010–11 piece Unquiet Spirit and of the settings of poetry by Seamus Heaney, Relics of Memory.

With William Ferguson, tenor, Jonathan, Craig, Rob, and I recorded three other song cycles of mine—*Unquiet Spirit* (texts by Maxine Kumin), *Relics of Memory* (Seamus Heaney), and *Together and Together* (Paul Muldoon)—at the same time we recorded *Orbit* (August 2016). That’s another hour and a half of songs and duets. I had the authors’ permissions to set those texts, but I await the publishers’ permissions to be able to release the album. The late Glen Roven, Executive Producer of *The Orbit of the Soul*, became an enthusiastic proponent of my music when I approached him with these two album proposals. He was eager to start the song-cycle recording as soon as we had done all the production work on *Orbit* in early July 2018. I will be forever grateful to him, sad that he didn’t get to see this album released, and sad that we will not collaborate again. What a wonderful spirit we have lost.

Other recording projects I am contemplating include an album of some of my instrumental chamber works, a recording by the Amernet Quartet of my two string quartets, the second of which they premiered, and a multi-media (i.e., music video) release of the *requiem-elegy*.

R. POUND *The Orbit of the Soul* • Jonathan Hays (bar); Craig Ketter (pn) • ROVEN 10118 (25:02)
Available from Amazon and iTunes

Robert Pound’s *The Orbit of the Soul* takes on a huge challenge: not only that of rising to Wilde’s astonishing writing, but in doing so also reflecting the complexity of Wilde’s character, a character that courted notoriety whilst also fearing it. Taking as a starting point the assertion that “every single human being is the fulfilment of a prophecy because every human being is the realization of some ideal,” Pound sets Wilde’s life as the reflection of a template of the archetypal hero:

youthful victories lead to a journey to the underworld, whereafter Wilde emerges from communion with the dead in a kind of apotheosis (with Wilde as advocate for better conditions for prisoners, plus the subsequent success of his writings). This is reflected in the titles for the work's three main sections: "Uncompleted Passions" (which begins immediately after "A Prelude Consonant"), "Midnight in One's Heart," and "Creed Made Complete." The booklet notes helpfully indicate the sources of the text, an ultra-successful stitching of passages from *De Profundis*, *The Ballad of the Reading Gaol*, and *The Artist*. The elision between the penultimate "Truth in Art" and the final "Every single work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy" is masterly indeed.

Although the work was originally premiered by a mezzo (Lynn Holding, in 2000), the present performance with baritone seems to hold a particular pathos. Perhaps that is due to Jonathan Hay's superb interpretation: Technical aspects such as diction and pitching are so superbly managed that one's attention is fully focused on Pound's narrative. Pound's lines are beautifully written but by no means easy: The cruelly exposed "Clapham Junction" leaves nowhere to hide. And within the span of a mere 25 minutes, Pound's musical expression traverses a multiplicity of expressive means without any sense of musico-linguistic contradiction; the Cage-like sounds of the prepared piano in "Midnight in One's Heart" sit perfectly with the recitative, almost plainchant reference of the opening of the subsequent "Creed made complete," or with the opening "A Prelude Consonant," or with the aspirational harmonies of the penultimate "Truth in Art."

The role of the piano is vital, an equal participant which moulds the musical response to the text. Craig Ketter is superb, his clarity impeccable, the piano sound simply beautiful. Credit here also is due to the engineers: The highest praise I can lavish is that it reminds me of the record label Hyperion's finest achievements in this field. This is a positively revelatory release. **Colin Clarke**