

*The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of Music
presents*

Songs and Lieder of Robert Owens
Erin Pratt, mezzo-soprano
accompanied by
Dr. Stephen Fiess, piano*

Friday, March 5, 2021

12:00 PM

Virtual

Program

From **Three Countee Cullen Songs, Op. 27**

Robert Owens
(1925-2017)

I. From the Dark Tower

Three Songs for a Deep Voice, Op. 18

Robert Owens

Poems by Emily Brontë

I. The Old Stoic

II. Tell me, tell me

III. Sleep brings no joy to me

Drei Lieder für eine tiefe Stimme, Op. 47

Robert Owens

Poems by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

I. Vorfrühling

II. Die Beiden

III. Manche freilich...

From **Border Line, Op. 24**

Robert Owens

Poems by Langston Hughes

XVI. The End

**Dr. Fiess' accompaniments were recorded in advance and replayed in the hall during the performance.*

Erin Pratt is a student of Dr. Jeanne Fischer.

About the Artists:

Erin Pratt is a PhD Candidate in musicology at UNC Chapel Hill, where she is writing a dissertation on German strophic song as an advisee of Mark Evan Bonds. In her musical practice, she works to combine insights from research and performance in her study of German song. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Music and Classics from Smith College, where she studied voice with Karen Smith-Emerson and Jane Bryden. While at Smith, she won several prizes for her singing, including the Judith Raskin prize and the Ernst and Lori Wallfisch Prize. At UNC, she studies voice with Jeanne Fischer.

Dr. Stephen Fiess, a native of Stratford, Ontario, Canada, holds a Bachelor's degree in Piano Performance from the University of Western Ontario; a Master's degree in Piano Performance from Indiana University; and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Piano Performance, Pedagogy and Literature from the University of Colorado at Boulder. He also holds an Associate certificate in Piano Performance from the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto. He also holds an Associate Certificate in organ from the American Guild of Organists.

Dr. Fiess has composed ballets that have been performed in Colorado and a ballet that was performed at the International Dance Festival of Havana, Cuba. He has composed several published piano solos and duets, including *Northern Wilderness Suite* and *Lorelei Suite*, published by Waterloo Music. Dr. Fiess is currently organist at First Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina and teaches piano privately in Cary.

Program Notes:

The songs of **Robert Owens** (1925-2017), an African American expatriate who lived in Germany for most of his life, occupy a unique and fascinating position in the song repertory. Though he is often associated with African American Art Song, he thought of himself as a composer in the European tradition, and took Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann as sources of inspiration. After learning some German from prisoners of war at a camp where he served during World War II, Owens used the GI Bill to move to Europe, where he studied piano in France and Vienna. In 1959, he was finally able to fulfill his lifelong dream of moving to Germany, where he continued composing and playing piano even as he pursued a second career as a stage and film actor. Owens' international identity led him to write fascinating songs that join the poetic focus and harmonic inventiveness of the twentieth-century American song tradition with the structural designs and motivic drive of the classical German repertory.

“From the Dark Tower”

Countee Cullen (1903-1946)

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Not always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;
Not everlastingly while others sleep
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
We were not made to eternally weep.

The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
White stars is no less lovely being dark,
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.

As a pianist, Owens frequently accompanied American singers in concerts as they toured in Germany. He composed songs for some of these singers as he got to know their voices. The **Three Countee Cullen Songs, op. 27**, were the product of one such collaboration. Written for the soprano Rhea Jackson, the songs take up texts by Countee Cullen, an African American poet whose life and career unfolded at the center of the Harlem Renaissance. As a poetic

prodigy and influential literary critic, Cullen advocated for a conservative poetic style influenced by the English Romantic tradition, and looked down on the modernist styles used by contemporaries like Langston Hughes. “**From the Dark Tower**,” a sonnet that Owens sets as the first song of this cycle, exhibits this philosophy in its use of a strict meter and a meticulous rhyme scheme. Owens paints the poem’s guarded, wounded optimism in chiaroscuro, frequently shifting between major and minor chords, and between shimmering melodies in the high register and quieter, more contemplative statements in the middle voice. The song ends on an unresolved dissonance with the wish that some beauty will one day spring from the “agonizing seeds” planted in the present.

“The Old Stoic”

Emily Brontë (1818-1848)

Riches I hold in light esteem,
And Love I laugh to scorn;
And lust of fame was but a dream,
That vanish’d with the morn:

And if I pray, the only prayer
That moves my lips for me
Is, ’Leave the heart that now I bear,
And give me liberty!’

Yes, as my swift days near their goal,
’Tis all that I implore;
In life and death a chainless soul
With courage to endure.

When Owens arrived in Germany in 1959, he quickly stumbled into an opportunity to be an extra in a film in which his landlord was involved. He was soon offered additional opportunities to act, and he accepted them—despite having no training as an actor. He took lessons in diction and breathing for the stage from a singing friend, an alto for whom he wrote the **Three Songs, op. 18**, as thanks. Setting poems by Emily Brontë, the author of *Wuthering Heights*, the songs express profound melancholy and despair. The title of the first song, “**The Old Stoic**,” refers to an adherent of a philosophy that prioritizes wisdom over worldly experience. The text expresses a desire for liberation in death that was denied in life. Owens sets the text with a ternary (ABA) form, beginning with a searching melody that stubbornly resists resolving to the piano’s G Minor key. The central section—the expression of the speaker’s true wish—breaks from this dour mold, rising to an impassioned plea and culminating in a fleeting G Major triad that sets the word “liberty.” In the end, though, the opening material returns; the plea remains unanswered.

“Tell me, tell me”

Emily Brontë

Tell me, tell me, smiling child,
What the Past is like to thee.
—An Autumn evening soft and mild
With a wind that sighs mournfully.

Tell me what is the Present hour.
—A green and flowery spray,
Where a young bird sits gathering its power
To mount and fly away.

And what is the Future, happy one?
—A sea beneath a cloudless sun:
A mighty dazzling sea
Stretching to Infinity.

“Sleep brings no joy to me”

Emily Brontë

Sleep brings no joy to me,
Remembrance never dies,
My soul is given to misery,
And lives in sighs.

Sleep brings no rest to me;
The shadows of the dead,
My wakening eyes may never see,
Surround my bed.

Sleep brings no hope to me,
In soundest sleep they come,
And with their doleful imag'ry
Deepen the gloom.

Sleep brings no strength to me,
No power renewed to brave;
I only sail a wilder sea,
A darker wave.

Sleep brings no friend to me
To soothe and aid to bear;
They all gaze on how scornfully,
And I despair.

Sleep brings no wish to fret
My harassed heart beneath;
My only wish is to forget
In endless sleep of death.

The second song, “**Tell me, tell me,**” sets a dialogue between the biting, ironic voice of an older speaker and the naïve wishes of a “smiling child.” The music for the older voice remains consistent, driving and embittered. The child, by contrast, responds to each question with new music, gradually increasing in both pitch and certainty over the course of the song. The child’s final response transforms the motif of the first speaker, rendering it gentle and affirmative, before rejecting its logic entirely to end the song with a series of free, gently dissonant chords. Finally, the song “**Sleep brings no joy to me**” ends the set in dramatic fashion. The speaker’s restless visions of the dead are set with crashing, dissonant arpeggios that shift rapidly between keys. A central section briefly cools the temperature as the voice enters an exceptionally low register whose darkness emphasizes the speaker’s hopelessness. The opening material then returns, but with even greater desperation than before. The song ends with a wish for restful sleep in death—a word that Owens sets with one of his characteristically long final notes.

Owens published three song cycles that set German-language texts during his lifetime. Of these, the **Drei Lieder für eine tiefe Stimme (Three Songs for a Deep Voice), op. 47**, are the most ambitious and complex. The songs are settings of texts by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, an Austrian poet and playwright well known in musical circles due to his collaboration with Richard Strauss on such operas as *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Hofmannsthal’s poems, however, have not been frequently set as songs; Owens’ set therefore presents three fascinating exceptions to this trend.

“Vorfrühling”

Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1847-1929)

Es läuft der Frühlingswind
Durch kahle Alleen,
Seltsame Dinge sind
In seinem Wehn.

Er hat sich gewiegt,
Wo Weinen war,
Und hat sich geschmiegt
In zerrütteltes Haar.

Er schüttelte nieder
Akazienblüten
Und kühlte die Glieder,
Die atmend glühten.

Lippen im Lachen
Hat er berührt,
Die weichen und wachen
Fluren durchspürt.

Er glitt durch die Flöte
Als schmerzender Schrei,
An dämmernder Röte
Flog er vorbei.

Er flog mit Schweigen
Durch flüsternde Zimmer
Und löscht' im Neigen
Der Ampel Schimmer.

Es läuft der Frühlingswind
Durch kahle Alleen,
Seltsame Dinge sind
In seinem Wehn.

Durch die glatten
Kahlen Alleen
Treibt sein Wehen
Blasse Schatten.

Und den Duft,
Den er gebracht,
Von wo er gekommen
Seit gestern Nacht.

“Before Spring”

Translated by Erin Pratt

The spring wind runs
Through bare avenues;
Strange things are
In its breeze.

It has swayed
Where there was weeping,
And has snuggled up
In ruined hair.

It has shaken down
Acacia flowers
And cooled limbs
That smolder in breathing.

It has touched
Smiling lips,
It has felt its way through
The soft and lively fields.

It slid through a flute
As an aching scream,
It flew past
The reddening dawn.

It flew with silence
Through whispering chambers
And extinguished in bending
The streetlamp's glimmer.

The spring wind runs
Through bare avenues;
Strange things are
In its breeze.

Through the icy,
Bare avenues,
Its breeze sweeps
Pale shadows along.

And the fragrance
That it brought
From whence it came
Since yesterday night.

The first song of the set, “**Vorfrühling**,” depicts the uncanny, mysterious quality of the moment before a change through the image of a wandering spring wind, brimming with potential energy. The song plays with timbre, register, and texture in much the same way that Hofmannsthal’s symbolist poem plays with the sounds and colors of the German language.

“Die Beiden”

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Sie trug den Becher in der Hand
— Ihr Kinn und Mund glich seinem Rand —,
So leicht und sicher war ihr Gang,
Kein Tropfen aus dem Becher sprang.

So leicht und fest war seine Hand:
Er ritt auf einem jungen Pferde,
Und mit nachlässiger Gebärde
Erzwang er, daß es zitternd stand.

Jedoch, wenn er aus ihrer Hand
Den leichten Becher nehmen sollte,
So war es beiden allzuschwer;
Denn beide bebten sie so sehr,
Daß keine Hand die andre fand
Und dunkler Wein am Boden rollte.

“The Couple”

Translated by Erin Pratt

She carried the cup in her hand
(Her chin and mouth resembled its edge)
So light and certain was her walk
That not a single drop leapt from the cup.

So light and firm was his hand:
He rode upon a young horse,
And with a careless attitude
He compelled it to a trembling halt.

And yet, when he was meant to take
The light cup from her hand,
It was too heavy for the both of them;
For both were shaking it so badly
That neither hand found the other,
And dark wine ran across the ground.

“**Die Beiden**,” by contrast, is a comic song about an awkward courtship. Owens depicts the confidence and self-assuredness of the girl, who carries a cup of wine, and the boy, who enters riding a horse that symbolizes his virility, with good-natured ostinatos in the piano and legato vocal lines in the low register. When the pair meets, however, all of their individual confidence evaporates into hesitance and trembling anticipation. They fail to make contact, and the wine spills on the ground in a line Owens sets with a languid melisma. Appropriately enough, the song opens with a premature climax.

The last song, “**Manche freilich...**,” sets a dense and allusive text about inequality and the impotent, fervent wish to escape from the systems that perpetuate it. The poem, written when Hofmannsthal was just twenty years old, depicts society as a ship in which the charmed lives of the fortunate people above deck are shadowed by their dependence on the labor of the people trapped in the hold, where they work themselves to death rowing the oars. Owens depicts this ship with a rolling, relentless ostinato in the bass that supports a declamatory vocal line. The ostinato eventually gives way to a dramatic middle section in which the speaker mockingly laments the hypocrisy of the profiteers. The ostinato returns for the final section of the song, which introduces the lyric speaker, the “I,” for the first time in the entire song cycle. The voice cries out, struggling against the confines of the unjust system to which it is bound; but the ostinato returns, and the song ends as it began. The ship persists in its course.

“Manche freilich...”

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Manche freilich müssen drunten sterben,
Wo die schweren Ruder der Schiffe streifen,
Andre wohnen bei dem Steuer droben,
Kennen Vogelflug und die Länder der Sterne.

Manche liegen immer mit schweren Gliedern
Bei den Wurzeln des verworrenen Lebens,
Andern sind die Stühle gerichtet
Bei den Sibyllen, den Königinnen,
Und da sitzen sie wie zu Hause,
Leichten Hauptes und leichter Hände.

(weiter)

“Many, of course...”

Translated by Erin Pratt

Many, of course, have to die down there
Where the heavy oars of the ship swipe;
Others live up above, near the helm,
And know the flights of birds and the lands of the stars.

Many lay with always-heavy limbs
At the roots of this torturous life;
To others are accorded the chairs
Near the Sibyls, the queens;
And there they sit, as if they are at home,
With empty heads and empty hands.

(continued)

(des Weiteren)

Doch ein Schatten fällt von jenen Leben
In die anderen Leben hinüber,
Und die leichten sind an die schweren
Wie an Luft und Erde gebunden:

Ganz vergessener Völker Müdigkeiten
Kann ich nicht abtun von meinen Lidern,
Noch weggehalten von der erschrockenen Seele
Stummes Niederfallen ferner Sterne.

Viele Geschicke weben neben dem meinen,
Dureinander spielt sie alle das Dasein,
Und mein Teil ist mehr als dieses Lebens
Schlanke Flamme oder schmale Leier.

(continued)

But a shadow falls from the one life
Into the other life,
And the light ones are bound to the heavy ones,
Bound as they are to the air, bound as they are to
the earth:

From the toils of entirely forgotten peoples
I cannot avert my eyes;
Nor keep away from my appalled soul
The silent prostration of distant stars.

Many fates are woven near mine;
Existence plies them all together,
And my lot is greater than this life's
Thin flame or meager lyre.

“The End”

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

There are
No clocks on the wall,
And no time,
No shadows that move
From dawn to dusk
Across the floor.

There is neither light
Nor dark
Outside the door.

There is no door!

The final song on the program, “**The End**,” offers a glimmer of hope. The text was written by Langston Hughes, one of the most famous American poets of the twentieth century and a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes personally gave a copy of his book *Fields of Wonder* to Owens upon their first meeting in 1958. Owens set dozens of poems from this book over the course of his career, grouping them into cycles that directly reflect Hughes’ groupings of the poems in the collection. *Border Line*, op. 24, was composed in 1964; “The End,” the final song of the set, is profoundly enigmatic and ambiguous. The song imagines a timeless space, which Owens depicts using rolling chords in the piano that obscure rhythm and meter. The voice stakes out a territory in the upper register before retreating rapidly into the lower register. Then, with the transformative final line, this timeless space is revealed also to be—spaceless. Is this a prison, a nothing place of terrifying emptiness? Or is it perhaps the boundless possibility offered when one can escape the strictures of time, of light and dark, of outside and inside? *There is no door!*