

The Songs of Lori Laitman

With the recording sessions for her fourth compact disc near completion and the recent release of her third compact disc (*Becoming a Redwood*, 2006, preceded by *Mystery*, 2000 and *Dreaming*, 2003), Lori Laitman's diverse accumulation of beautiful and sophisticated art songs are being made available to all of us. "It is difficult to think of anyone before the public today who equals her exceptional gifts for embracing a poetic text and giving it new and deeper life through music. She has an unerring way of enhancing a text's beauty and meaning while not obscuring the text through artifice or excess."¹ Laitman is an American composer par excellence whose songs have already begun to be in the mainstream of professional and student repertoire.

Composer Lori Laitman was graduated magna cum laude, with honors in music, from Yale College, and received her M.M. in flute performance from the Yale School of Music. Her early intention was to compose for film and theater, but by 1991, her emphasis changed to song composition. Following are but a part of the accolades she has received.

Lori has been commissioned by The University of Central Arkansas to compose a one-act opera for a fall 2008 premiere, "...an opera based on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and my librettist is the brilliant poet David Mason."² The Lyrica Society has commissioned a cycle for the Harvard-Lyrica Dialogues 2008. It will premiere March 7, 2008 and will commemorate the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

In 2006, Ms. Laitman was one of two composers-in-residence at Songs Across America in Conway, Arkansas. In 2005 she appeared as composer-in-residence and keynote speaker at The Athena Festival in Murray, Kentucky and was the featured composer at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C. Adelaide Whitaker has commissioned several works from Laitman, the latest of which are settings of Sylvia Plath, entitled *The Blood Jet* (awaiting its premiere); Music of Remembrance, a festival in Seattle dedicated to music related to the Holocaust, has already premiered her *Fathers* for baritone and piano trio, *Holocaust 1944* for baritone and doublebass, and *The Seed of Dream*, a group of several songs commissioned by the organization on poetry of Vilna ghetto survivor Abraham Sutzkever (premiered in May 2005). The cycle *Five Lovers*, commissioned by soprano Jama Jandrokovic to her own bibliographical poetry, premiered at Alice Tully Hall in May 2005. In February of 2004 the San Francisco Song Festival's American Art Song Competition for Composers awarded Laitman first place for "Men with Small Heads" (from the cycle by the same name). Her Holocaust opera, *Come to Me in Dreams*, was premiered by the Cleveland Opera Company in June of 2004. David Bamberger, General Director, was so moved by her songs that he requested permission to weave them together to create an opera. The accolades go back to the early 1990s and are a strong affirmation of the value of Laitman's contribution to American art song.

Laitman composes for voice and piano as well as unique voice and instrument combinations. She has composed for all voice types, including cycles and individual songs. A number of sets can be sung by more than one voice type.

A wide range of poets, fifty in number, are represented in Laitman's 170 settings: living and dead, male and female, American and international. All settings are in English with the

exception of one song, which combines English and Yiddish. Emily Dickinson, Sara Teasdale, and Mary Oliver are strongly represented. Male poets include Robert Browning, Thomas Hardy, and contemporary poets Thomas Lux, Paul Muldoon (2003 Pulitzer Prize winner), and Dana Gioia. Whether responding to the humor of Lux or the lyricism of Teasdale, one has the impression that Laitman has considered the poetry deeply and that her settings are a visceral response to what she considers vital to the intention of the poet. Additionally, Ms. Laitman has a special interest in Holocaust poetry and has composed five Holocaust-related song cycles to date.

Listeners have variously compared Laitman's songs to the likes of Barber, Strauss and Rorem. Lori attributes the similarities to the gifted vocal composer's intuitive ability to make the best choice for setting a phrase. Of her dedication to text, she states "...every word in every poem is bound inextricably to the music."³ Rhythm and meter are devotedly derived from nuance of prosody, continuously changing. There is nothing academic about this approach. The songs are inspired and creative in their flexibility, with delightful new ideas emerging constantly. Her Neo-Romantic melodic writing consistently takes surprising and unpredictable direction, never abrupt, but smooth, pleasing and natural. Tessitura and range are thoughtfully considered. Tempos are flexible, with fluctuation indicated specifically throughout each song, including suggested mood and color changes, always reflecting the varying thought and/or emotion of the poem.

Post-modern harmonies are carefully chosen by Laitman to intensify emotional content; those choices also beautifully assist the singer in effectively interpreting the poetry. The lack of key signature in many cases allows for easier fluctuation in and out of tonal centers. Accompaniments unobtrusively contribute an interesting and complimentary life of their own, with infinite nature of simplicity or complexity, texture and rhythmic pattern. The color and nuance of the settings vary from poet to poet as the composer responds to the spirit intrinsic to the style of each.

The level of difficulty of the songs varies as well. Some are vocally demanding while others are appropriate for studio teaching at the undergraduate level. Instrumental writing in the chamber works is often virtuosic.

The earliest published songs by Laitman comprise a six-song cycle of settings of American poet Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) entitled *The Metropolitan Tower and Other Songs* (1992). Two later cycles feature the music of Teasdale: *Mystery* (1998), five songs for baritone or mezzo-soprano, and *The Years* (2001), five songs for soprano. Of her Teasdale settings, Ms. Laitman says, "I keep returning to setting Sara Teasdale because I feel her lyrical style of poetry is perfect for my music—it's usually very easy for me to set her words; melodies just sort of flow out..."⁴ In 1918, Teasdale won the precursor of the Pulitzer Prize for her collection of poetry entitled *Love Songs*.

"Metropolitan Tower" is set by Laitman in the form ABA1. The opening key is Ab major, moving through several tonal centers in section B with three changes of key signature, and concluding in A major. Immediately striking about this setting is the exchange of material between the piano and the vocal line (Example 1). The first two measures of the left hand of the piano are taken as a point of departure for the first two phrases of the vocal line. The descending

fourth of the piano right hand, measure 3, is heard first in measure 5 in the voice, and several times thereafter. The vocal line in measure 7 takes its material from the right hand piano line stated in measure 2; the inner voice of the piano in measure 5 is heard in the vocal line at the opening of B; this dialogue between piano and voice continues throughout. The vocal phrases of the song are predominantly gently arched and the constant eighth note rhythm in the accompaniment suggests movement. The walk at dusk during which the persona experiences "Love's birth." The lengthened duration of key words gives the impression that each of those sustained moments is captured and tenderly embraced by the memory. Also of interest are the more closed texture of the accompaniment in section B, perhaps for the more intimate recollection of conversation, and the change of prosody, with each phrase beginning after the downbeat, in contrast to A. In the conclusion (A1), Laitman captures the recollection of the beginning of love with a hemiola prolonging the moment, "...heart Love's birth..." The seven measure postlude recalls the introductory material, ending the song with a satisfying sense of completeness.

Laitman also favors her Teasdale setting entitled "Spray," from the cycle *Mystery*. The persona is certain that his distant loved one thought of him all through the night. Laitman's directive, "forceful, like waves crashing" and *forte* dynamic level make it apparent that the accompaniment portrays the turbulent seashore at which the solitary lover stands. The two opening vocal phrases (also *forte*) move downward rapidly in sixteenth notes extending the vigorous introduction of the piano (Example 2). There are several sections to this quickly paced and passionate song. After seven measures of agitation a slower, more introspective mood overtakes the text as the persona imagines a message of love present in the wind and spray. Soon thoughts drive forward, again *forte*; the opening pounding rhythms of the accompaniment return, and there is a black key glissando text painting of the splashing waves at "...Drenched me." An interlude of descending sixteenth notes and a quiet repetition of the pounding waves' rhythmic motif leads to a third section Laitman marks "sexily" and "slow." Here the accompaniment is more sparse and the vocal range more contained, as the persona acknowledges that "There are so many ways to love, And each way has its own delight." The final section of the song, marked "rocking," as the lover realizes he can be content with a symbol of the distant one's feelings for him. A final minute splash of spray is heard in the piano at the conclusion. This song is a masterpiece of complex emotional turmoil condensed into a tiny scena and requires a skilled interpreter with some life experience.

The poetry of Emily Dickinson also figures prominently in the songs of Laitman. Three of the six songs of *Days and Nights* (1995) are Dickinson settings; others are the *Four Dickinson Songs* (1996), *Between the Bliss and Me* (1997), *One Bee and Revery* (2002), *Two Dickinson Songs* (2002), and *Fresh Patterns* (2003). All were written for soprano; a lower key of the *Four Dickinson Songs* is available. Additionally, Ms. Laitman does not object to transposition.

In contrast to the long lyrical lines and poetic structural fidelity of the Teasdale songs, a great number of the Dickinson settings contain melismas, text repetitions, and syncopation. Frequent changes in meter add interest and unexpected accentuation to the metrical regularity of the writing of this poet. Poetic lines may be broken into sections that become short exclamatory phrases (for the more exuberant poems); at other times the lines are extended melodically. While

the accompaniments are independent and varied in texture and style, as a whole the piano serves a more rhythmical function in these settings through more vertical writing and repeated rhythmic figures. The less exuberant poetry ("I gained it so," "I could not prove") combines some of the above-mentioned elements with longer, more lyrical phrases for the voice and less alteration of the poetry.

"Over the Fence" from *Days and Nights* is a perfect example of Laitman's approach to Dickinson's more buoyant writing. The unrestrained nature of these high spirited verses is mirrored in wide rising intervals for the soprano and accompaniments that crisply dialogue with and punctuate the vocal phrases. The song is marked "playfully" and Laitman writes skipping, rollicking triplets in the voice and piano. The statement, "God would certainly scold" is set "freely;" the word "scold" is given a five-beat trill for a humorous touch. This song has many directives, theatrical and otherwise, for the singer and pianist: "Overact!," "point thumb at self," and "a la Rameau" to name a few. In terms of audience and performer enjoyment, this song is sheer fun.

Perusing the list of songs by Laitman, one notices that she does not shy away from the most well-known poems, and, in this author's opinion, never fails to achieve her own unique and vivid interpretation. Her setting of American author Elinor Wylie's "Little Elegy" (2002) easily withstands comparison to the Rorem and Duke settings, so distinctive is its character. Two styles of accompaniment unify the song. First, in the introduction and continuing through measure nine, then recurring in the measures fifteen through seventeen (in the same harmonic language), is a melody in the right hand punctuated by chord tones on the off-beat in the left hand (Example 3). Second, as seen in measures 12-13, there is a step-wise pattern in the left hand taken up by the right; this pattern recurs in measures 18-19 in a different key, and also concludes the song in the treble clef of the piano. Note that the first occurrence of the pattern is in imitation of the vocal phrase which concludes the first quatrain, measures 11-12. The introduction has melodic material which will be used for the first entrance of the voice as well as later in measure 15. Of additional interest is the use of whole-tone writing at the end of the fourth and eighth poetic lines for the words "seen" and "you," creating an unique aura for the person addressed and his/her visage.

Laitman joins the lines of this poem together in irregular phrase lengths which are gracefully shaped. Melismas adorn the words "sweet" and the final occurrence of the word "you." The tempo is flexible, with specific indications of relaxing and increasing the pace. The song ends quietly with a lack harmonic resolution, with fermatas, and pedaling reflecting the continued memory of the person to whom the song is sung.

Men with Small Heads (2002), a cycle of four songs on poetry of Thomas Lux (b. 1946), was commissioned by Adelaide Whitaker for countertenor David Daniels and baritones Stephen Salters and Randall Scarlata. Lux has said of his poetry, "I want my audiences to have fun, enjoy it, be moved by my poetry. And I want it to be understandable by dogs and cats -- so that anyone who has never read poetry can relate to it."⁵ The writing for the voice is alternately declamatory and crisp, or lyrical. Accompaniments are predominantly thin in texture, imitating, punctuating, and commenting on the prose, quite often quirkily on the off-beat. Underscoring the curious nature of the texts is a heavy use of harmonic seconds in the piano. Two of the songs

require exceptional articulation because of tempo; all require the ability to communicate with humor. As usual, directives from Laitman let the singer know exactly what she has in mind for interpretive choices, including sections marked “freely,” allowing the performers some creative latitude.

The first song, from which the cycle takes its name, is a six year old’s impression of the size of the heads of people in his home town (“I was glad my parents’ heads were normal size...”). The tessitura of the song is high, and the range is C3 (one staccato occurrence) to G4. There are two melodic cells that recur frequently in the voice and piano parts: the step-wise descending fourth and whole- or half-step alternations.

“Refrigerator, 1957,” the second song, begins languorously in 3/4. As the contents of a refrigerator are discussed the melody remains lyrical and graceful; the tempo turns lively as the subject of the song is revealed: the maraschino cherries, along with the directive from Lori: “ham it up! (like Johnny Carson’s intro).” The persona (again a child?) then speculates on why he has never seen the cherries being eaten, and their origin: “Maybe they...were status symbols bought with a piece of the first paycheck from a sweatshop which beat the pig farm in Bohemia...” The contrast of the lyrical vocal line and the oom-pah accompaniment have the best effect when played up to the fullest. Also present are instances of the step-wise melodic alternations which occur in the first song. This song has a slightly lower tessitura, a couple of Bb2s, and a couple of G4s. “Refrigerator, 1957” and “Men With Small Heads” were performed by Randall Scarlata at the Kennedy Center in January of 2003.

In “A Small Tin Parrot” a parrot pin is described, its brilliant colors, and how it will eventually be lost, then perhaps found, hopefully by a child or someone sad. Short rhythmic cells are tossed back and forth between voice and piano, at times echoing the same pitches (like a parrot’s repetitions), at other times transposed. The tempo is quick and there are frequent irregular meters such as 5/8 and 7/8. The highest pitch employed in this song is E4; Laitman was thoughtful to give the voice a rest from the somewhat demanding range and tessitura of the first two songs. There is one C3, a character tone to be sung breathily. “Snake Lake,” the last of the cycle, would make a wonderful companion piece to “The Serpent” by Rorem. The composer asks at several times for the letter “s” to be lengthened to a hiss or gives an option for the same. A loud expelling of breath is requested at the conclusion of the word “here.” Lori states, “The ‘squiggly’ musical figures employed in both voice and piano symbolize swimming and water, and the accented notes are meant to portray the lurking danger—and sting—of a snake bite.”⁶ These “squiggly” figures are mordent-like sixteenth-note alternations similar to those mentioned above which occur in the previous songs, a unifying device for the cycle.

Pulitzer Prize winner Mary Oliver’s (b. 1935) poetry appears in three song cycles of three songs each, all conceived for the soprano voice: *Sunflowers* (1999), *One or Two Things* (2000), and *Early Snow* (2003, commissioned by Adelaide Whitaker for Jennifer Check). Oliver is a naturalist whose poetry embraces the beauty of the world around us, as reflected in the titles of the songs of *Early Snow*: “Last Night the Rain Spoke to Me,” “Blue Iris,” and the eponymous third song. Of all the works discussed thus far, this cycle has the most frequent suggestions for accelerating, relaxing, or changing tempo, as though Laitman not only derives rhythm and pitch from the text but is also attuned to the pace of emotional response to thought. There are

instances of text painting throughout: lulling repeated rhythms of the falling rain, twinkling stars represented by grace note octaves in the treble clef, mordents depicting the flutter of wings as crows settle in the snow and rolled chords as they fly away, to name a few. This is also one of the higher cycles, with several occurrences of Bb5.

“Last Night the Rain Spoke to Me” may be divided into three sections: The rain falls, speaks of joy in returning to earth, and the sky clears; the stars appear, and the scene is described; the persona realizes her/his oneness with nature. In the first section the accompaniment, though simple, is enriched by added seconds, fourths and sevenths. Repeated rhythms in the piano suggest the gently falling rain throughout this section. The composer has pointed out that all of her songs have a sort of “über-phrasing” because she tends to return to the same notes at the peaks of several phrases within a song. This setting is an excellent example of this element of her writing, in which several phrases reach up to G#5 and descend to F#5 before moving independently onward. The opening section concludes with two measures of unaccompanied text, “Then it was over. The sky cleared,” and a fermata, which combine to create a hushed stillness depicting the emerging night sky. Section two then begins with a significant increase in tempo and a change in mood from contemplative to the dawning realization of the oneness of all things. In the final section, a “coda” expressing wonders that await us, the rhythmic cell of the rising fifth which occurs in the left hand of the piano at the beginning of the song returns briefly, and stars sparkle again in the right hand, integrating the three sections. At the conclusion, the final lines of the poem are quietly sung with examples of text painting, “...imagine! the long and wondrous journeys still to be ours” is set with an ascending octave leap and a melisma on “imagine;” a two note phrase expresses both “long” and “wondrous.”

The poem of the second song of *Early Snow*, “Blue Iris,” personifies a fly and the wind, as the author attempts to decide what to do with his/her life, “Now that I’m free to be myself, who am I?” The final song philosophizes on the snowfall and the blanket of white with which it covers the earth.

Baritone William Sharp is the dedicatee of the cycle *The Throwback*, completed in 2004. The poetry is drawn from the works of the Irish poet Paul Muldoon (b. 1951), winner of the 2003 Pulitzer Prize, and professor at Oxford and Princeton Universities. The five poems share a common theme of the cyclical nature of life, addressing birth, death, generations and continuity. Although the composer comments on her website that she does not object to individual songs being excerpted from cycles for performance, these songs, because of theme, and contrasting tempi and length, make an excellent grouping. “Cradle Song for Asher,” the first of the set, is a favorite of Laitman: “When they cut your birth cord yesterday / it was I who drifted away. / Now I hear your name (in Hebrew, “blest”) / as yet another release of ballast / and see, beyond your wicker / gondola, campfires, cities, whole continents flicker.” A rocking accompaniment is maintained throughout. “The Ancestor,” describes “freely and hammily,” in the style of an old-fashioned waltz (“with some modern reality thrown in”), a family’s old treasures, not passed down through generations but perhaps purchased at flea markets or found in the attic: a nineteenth century Hungarian portrait, a straw-hatted man in a daguerreotype, the Webster’s dictionary with an inscription to a stranger, and more. The time signature is predominantly 3/4 and tempo begins at quarter = 160, moving as quickly as 192 in one section, and relaxing in

others. The opening describes the portrait of the “great-grandmother who bears down on us” with cross relations (does she look cross?) in the accompaniment and/or vocal line as well as an abundance of pungent seconds between all voices (Example 4). Combined with the phrasing and staccato articulation, a mood of curiosity is established as the description of peculiar items continues. The straw-hatted man is depicted with similar articulation but with a thinner texture, and for each item in the poem thereafter the composer varies the style of the accompaniment, including sustained and/or repeated chords, tremolo, and rolled chords. In the final section, the poet returns to the portrait of the great-grandmother, who is possibly part of the family after all, in the grander scheme of things.

The rocking motion of “Cradle Song for Asher” returns in “Redknots,” the third song in the cycle. The persona speaks of the flight of the birds in migration. Their stopping point for feeding is Delaware Bay, and is predicted to happen on the day the persona’s son is due to be born. The “flowing, legato” approach to the song, along with the rhythmic pattern and moderate tempo, indicate that the persona is at peace with the natural order of events and their interconnection. Wide intervals and hocket-like exchange of eighth notes between the left and right hands of the piano underscore the vocal melodic material from measures 2-18 which will be adapted in various ways for the remainder of the song (Example 5). Occasionally the recurrence is identical; more often it is a general shape that is followed, or a rhythmic or melodic cell with varied melody or rhythm. The song is wonderfully integrated by this reuse of material. A few more interesting facts about the song which were pointed out by Laitman are the use of the same rhythm under the text “...meant to touch down” and “meant to drop in,” the vocal phrase in the shape of a pregnant woman’s belly, and the sixteenth note patterns in the piano which represent the flight of the redknots.

Following is an unusually short song of six measures entitled “The Breather,” the poem of which might serve as an epitaph: “Think of this gravestone / as a long, low chair / strategically placed / at a turn in the stair.”

“The Throwback,” the final song of the cycle, is a parent’s sentimental list of things about a daughter which remind him of his own mother, whom the daughter never met: the way a clothespin is held between the chin and chest, the twiddling of the thumbs, a tiny patch of psoriasis behind the ear. The tempo is lively to start and the mood playful, with staccato punctuation in the piano, both hands written in the bass clef. The baritone sings in thirds and sixths with the piano, often above the right hand writing, giving the opening of the song a warm, rich texture. The crisp opening articulation of the beginning of the song returns briefly just before the end, rounding out the form. After the first portion of the song lists characteristics of the child, a two-measure transition to a more lyrical style, at a slightly slower tempo, introduces dissonance into the previously tonal language (Example 6). In measures 26-27 the left and right hand writing in the piano is in parallel seconds; there is a cross relation of A natural and Ab in measure 28; and polytonality begins in measure 29 (arpeggios sweep from the left hand of the piano, in Db major, into the right hand, in C major), lasting four measures and perhaps representing the merging of the present and the past, the two generations. The tonality settles into Db, with a Gb pedal of four measures soon thereafter, which adds to the building of intensity until the poem reaches the words “...flare up,” at which point Laitman abruptly changes the harmony from Db major to F major: “...it’s as if you’re a throw- / back to the grandmother you

never met, / the mother whom I sight / in this reddish patch of psoriasis / behind your ear that might / suddenly flare up into the helmet / she wore when she stood firm against Xerxes.”

A thirteen-measure interlude follows, incorporating previously introduced material of pedal and vocal melodic shape. The first line of the poem is repeated with the return of the crisp articulation of the opening accompaniment and the same vocal melody (although one-half step higher than the opening of the song). The final arpeggiated measures of the postlude recall the middle, legato section.

Completed in 2003 and premiered by soprano Barbara Quintiliani, the cycle *Becoming a Redwood* includes four settings of poems by Dana Gioia, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Composed for her husband on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, the cycle is unified by recurring musical material, the predominance of Bb as a tonal center, melodic exchange between voice and piano, a great deal of freedom for the performers, and poetic themes suitable to an enduring relationship: love, suffering, and healing through the passing of time. Mood, tempo, and length of the songs are well-ordered for contrast. The range of the entire cycle is Bb3 to Bb5; the opening song is available in a higher key, raising the only Bb3 of the cycle to C4.

The first song of *Becoming a Redwood*, “The Song,” is loosely based on a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke which compares the union of two souls to a note drawn by a bow from a pair of strings. For the purpose of discussion, the song will be separated into four sections. The first section contains two vocal phrases which pose two rhetorical questions: “How shall I hold my soul that it / does not touch yours? How shall I lift / it over you to other things?” The musical phrases for the questions expand over a ninth and tenth respectively, and the vocal melodic shapes of all of the other sections are clearly derived from this opening material. In all but the second section, the phrases begin similarly, with either a rising major or minor seventh arpeggio, or a mixture of ascent by step and skip; however, the second phrase in section one is particularly important to the musical development of the cycle in that it concludes with a repeated, sigh-like motif for the text “over you to other things” which recurs in other sections, either identically or in some type of variant (Example 7). In the same example, note the repetitive patterns in the left and right hands of the piano and the crescendos which build in intensity until “other things.”

The beginning of the second section uses the interval of the descending sixth in the vocal melody on the words “sink below,” for text painting. The accompaniment moves away from the pulsing repetition of the first section, and the “sigh” motif recurs three times.

In the third section, the piano introduces a triumphant treble-clef, octave variant of the sigh motif for the piano, where Laitman indicates, “bring out melody.” The motif is then heard in the voice, followed by a restatement in the piano. The ensuing climactic vocal phrase for the text, “...that from two strings could draw one voice,” is given a soaring melody and overlaps with a double statement of the new, more victorious version of the “sigh” motif in the piano, followed by the accompanist’s literal repetition of the vocal melody used for the final phrase of text (Example 8).

An unusual type of writing which is found in each of the four songs of this cycle ushers in the conclusion of the song. The repeated octaves and rhythms here are one of several

occasions in which Laitman chooses to make transitions with non-melodic rhythmic pulsation. Here it may represent the permanency and persistence of the relationship referred to in the poem. The vocal melody of this final section returns to the rising arpeggiated figure, and is echoed in fragments in the piano. The postlude is derived from the prelude material rhythmically and melodically, with a more sparse texture. Broken octave Bbs in the right hand of the piano are harmonically inconclusive, perhaps because indicating the lack of answers to the rhetorical questions posed by the poem. Additionally, this ending leads well into “Pentecost,” the second song, which begins with a key center of Bb minor.

“Pentecost” is a heart-rending outpouring of grief following the death of the poet’s infant son. Unbearable moments of the day are described and the pain of loss is likened to inextinguishable flame. Beginning the poem are lines which tell of no relief; the left hand of the piano is an ostinato in 6/8 “representing a haunting memory.”⁷ The emotional content of each vocal phrase is prolonged by its repetition in the piano, in its entirety, for the first seventeen measures of the song. Thereafter, the accompaniment figures begin to vary, with echoes of the vocal line in the piano becoming less literal, or less immediate, or fragmented, or rhythmically varied. Having expressed the difficulty of the nights, the poem turns to morning, which Laitman emphasizes with a harmonic shift to A minor. The emotional pace gains momentum, climaxing with the lines, “Comfort me with stones. / Quench my thirst with sand” during which the soprano is given fortissimo G4-G5 octaves and a Bb5 fermata with a dramatic decrescendo on the word “thirst” (Example 9). This is a powerful moment for the soprano with excellent dynamic range and control. There are two motivic devices in the song that should be mentioned. The sigh motif of “The Song” opens the first vocal phrase and occurs in other places in the song. Secondly, a more predominant cell recurs several times; one such instance is for the text “...memory / Repeats its prosecution” which “takes on different meanings as it appears under different phrases”⁸ (Example 10). There are several indicated portamenti in this song suggestive of keening which add drama to this very skillful setting by Laitman. The conclusion of the song is a quiet vocalise which includes both motives and suggests diminished but lasting sadness, unresolved, ending on the pitch Ab. Laitman indicates on the last page: “This song should surge and ebb in its tempi - as indicated by ‘push’ and ‘relax.’ It should have a hypnotic and improvisational quality. It should ‘breathe’ and remain constantly expressive.” The impact of this song and poem is difficult to describe and simply must be experienced.

The brief, ironic “Curriculum Vitae” is a relief after the intensity of “Pentecost:” “The future shrinks / Whether the past / Is well or badly spent. / We shape our lives / Although their forms / Are never what we meant.” The dominant pitch of Bb opens the accompaniment and is heard repetitively. Pedaling indications blur the accompaniment, suggesting the unusual harmonics of the carillon. For the composer, this represents the passing of time. The vocal melody is written in four phrases, the second two derived in contour and pitch from the first two. The accompaniment under the second pair of phrases begins the same as the first as well, resulting in AA1, a candid and appropriate form for the simple truth of the poem. The melodic and dynamic range for the singer are less demanding than the more emotional first two songs of the cycle, extending only to G4 and dynamically from *mezzo-piano* to *forte*. Of additional interest in the postlude are two phrases ending in fermatas, each of which are excerpted from the vocal melody, and each of which are incomplete, as a direction in which one sets out, but is interrupted, complimenting the message of the poem. The final four measures of the song are a

repetition of a single pitch in the accompaniment, again recalling the carillon and the passing of time.

Finally, the most lengthy poem, "Becoming a Redwood," is comprised of nine tercets which vividly and frankly describe the sights, smells and sounds that would emerge in a field at night if one stood silently long enough. The idea that time must pass before the world returns to its normal rhythms following an intrusion, as well as the idea of harmony with nature and of all things being "right with the world" make the poem a perfect conclusion for the cycle. The vocal range is D4-Ab5 and the mood is quiet at times (*mezzo-piano*) and exuberant at others (*forte*) with many ascending octave (and smaller) leaps. There are several examples of text painting, including an expanding opening accompaniment for "the sounds start up again," a quick vocal setting of the word "crickets" underscored by clusters in the piano, and an interesting building of a cluster, quarter note by quarter note, in the right hand of the piano under "breaking through the earth's crust" combined with repeated, persistent C4 in the left hand. Additionally, examples of melodic exchange between the voice and piano are present, and the opening melodic fragment of "Stand in a field" begins several phrases in the song, in identical or varied rhythm.

"Becoming a Redwood" incorporates melodic and rhythmic material from the other songs of the cycle. An interlude of ten measures introduces the victorious motif from "The Song" and it is heard in octaves seven times before the voice reenters. There are many more statements of this motif throughout the remainder of the song. Additionally, the accompaniment in the interlude begins to be more repetitive, calling to mind the unchanging accompaniment in "Pentecost" (which in that song represents pervading sorrow). Occasionally it is broken by eighth note rests, and takes on the character of the carillon-like accompaniment in "Curriculum Vitae." There is a literal melodic quote from "Pentecost" at the text "Coyotes hunt these hills and packs of feral dogs," indicating a parallel with the text "...innocence consumed by these implacable..." of "Pentecost" (this is a reference to the "Tongues of fire" caused by pain). Also quoted from "Pentecost" is the motif used for the text "danger comes" which is discussed above.

A fifteen-measure postlude begins by quoting the opening vocal melody of "Becoming a Redwood," then dwindling and returning to the "sigh" motif of "The Song." This time the motif is stated four times; the second and fourth being interrupted by fermatas as were the quotations mentioned above in the postlude of "Curriculum Vitae." Finally, the vocal melody of measures 3-5 of "Pentecost" are quoted, and the tolling of the bell closes the postlude as the song and cycle conclude with a reference to the passage of time.

To date, Laitman has completed three additional Gioia settings, including her only composition written specifically for tenor, "The Apple Orchard." The text is gender specific and written in honor of her father-in-law's eightieth birthday. The persona is a "city boy" recounting a walk through an apple orchard with a woman he loved. He recalls an urge to spin her toward him, but the moment was lost. Marked "sensual, wistful," this is the first occasion for which Laitman chose to employ the same rhythm (bolero-like) in the accompaniment for the entire length of a song. Additionally, the song begins and ends in the same key, which is unusual for this composer. Rolled chords are employed in the treble clef beginning with the first mention of the smell of the blossoms, and become more frequent as the poem progresses, coloring the description of the reaching branches as "...spring's ephemeral cathedral." Laitman states,

“Repeated arpeggiated chords create tension and a buildup to ‘pure desire’ and the rhythmic anticipation of ‘nothing consumed’ heightens the climax.”⁹ A melodic cell in the vocal melody occurs both at the text “nothing” and “everything,” providing a musical link for the two ideas. Underscoring the loss of the opportune moment are two additional musical devices that unify the song. The first is an octave melodic shape which first occurs at measure eight, recurring three times. The second is the melody beginning in measure twenty-two for “A quarter mile of trees in fragrant rows...,” heard twice more in variation. The song concludes with a restatement of the opening vocal melody, an octave higher, in the piano.

Lori Laitman’s website, www.artsongs.com, lists the songs by date of composition, is kept current, and provides various other information such as answers to frequently asked questions, reviews, links for purchasing music and compact discs and for listening to audio excerpts. The consistently high level of her work, her considerate composition for the voice, the wide variety of poetry and compositional style combine to make her work a mandatory addition to the repertory of the professional singer and teacher, and the student.

Endnotes

1 Gregory Berg, “The Listener’s Gallery,” review of *Becoming a Redwood: Songs of Lori Laitman*, by Lori Laitman, *NATS Journal of Singing*, May/June 2007, 612.

2 Lori Laitman, e-mail message to author, May 22, 2007.

3 Lori Laitman, e-mail message to author, January 1, 2003.

4 Lori Laitman, e-mail message to author, February 3, 2003.

5 Dana Savage, “Thomas Lux: Poetry for the People,” *Rambles: a Cultural Arts Magazine*: 6 (1998): 1, http://www.rambles.net/daina_savage.html.

6 Lori Laitman, liner notes, *Dreaming* compact disc, Albany Records Troy 570, 2003.

7 Lori Laitman, liner notes, *Becoming a Redwood: Songs of Lori Laitman* compact disc, Albany Records Troy 865, 2006.

8 Lori Laitman, *ibid.*

9 Lori Laitman, *ibid.*

$\text{♩} = 72$ *Lyrical, Legato*

mf

pedal ad lib

poco rit. *mf* *a tempo*

We walked to - geth-er in the dusk To watch the

poco rit. *a tempo*

tow - er grow dim - ly white, And saw it lift a -

Example 1. "The Metropolitan Tower," mm. 1-9. © 1997 by Merion Music, Inc., Theodore Press Co; used by permission.

♩. = 66

f

forceful, like waves crashing

f

Red

Red

Red

Red

mf (*still loud, just don't cover voice*)

simile...

mf

mf

1 I

3 knew _____ you thought of me all night, _____ I

5 knew, _____ though you were far a - way; _____

Example 2. "Spray," mm. 1-6. © 2001, Enchanted Knickers Music; used by permission.

= 112 *Flowing, with somewhat flexible tempo* *poco rit.* *mf*
 Voice: _____
 Piano: *mf* _____
 *

5 *A Tempo* *take a little time* *pick up tempo*
 out you No rose can grow; No leaf be green If nev-er
 Pno. *A Tempo* *take a little time* *pick up tempo*

10 *take a little time* *mf*
 seen your sweet face; No—
 Pno. *take a little time*

Example 3. "Little Elegy," mm. 1-14. © 2002, Lori Laitman. Enchanted Knickers Music, BMI; used by permission.

5

Bar. *p* down on us, — as if be - hold - ing the mote in our

Pno. *simile...*

10 *poco rit.* *a tempo* eye, — from a nine - tenth cen - tu - ry Hun - gar - i - an —

Pno. *poco rit.* *a tempo* *mp* *mf* *ped.* * *ped.* * *simile...*

Example 4. "The Ancestor," mm. 5-14. © 2003, Lori Laitman. Enchanted Knickers Music, BMI; used by permission.

Baritone

mf *sub. mp*

The day our son is due—

Piano

mp *mf* *mp*

Bar.

— is the ver - y day the red - knots are meant to touch down on their

Pno.

mf

7

tiniest rit. *a tempo*

long haul— from Chi - le to the Arc - tic Cir - cle, where they'll

tiniest rit. *a tempo*

mp *mf*

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 1-3) features a Baritone line with lyrics 'The day our son is due—' and a Piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 4-6) features a Baritone line with lyrics '— is the ver - y day the red - knots are meant to touch down on their' and a Piano accompaniment. The third system (measures 7-9) features a Baritone line with lyrics 'long haul— from Chi - le to the Arc - tic Cir - cle, where they'll' and a Piano accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf*, *sub. mp*, and *mp*, and tempo markings like *tiniest rit.* and *a tempo*. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature changes from 8/8 to 3/4 and then to 10/8.

Example 5. "Redknots," mm. 1-9. © 2003, Lori Laitman. Enchanted Knickers Music, BMI; used by permission.

26 *poco rit.* ♩ = 114

change character to more lyric poco rit. ♩ = 114 *very legato*

mf

31 *mf*

it's as if you're a throw - back to the

simile...

Example 6. "The Throwback," mm. 26-34. © 2003, Lori Laitman. Enchanted Knickers Music, BMI; used by permission.

30 *stretch a bit* *a tempo* *mf* *push*
like a bow that from two strings could

stretch a bit *bring out melody* *a tempo* *push*
mf *mp* *mf* *mp* *mf*

37 *f* *broaden* *a tempo* *relax* *push* *relax*
draw one voice

broaden *a tempo* *relax* *push* *relax*
f *mp*

Tea *Tea* *Tea* *Tea* *Tea* *Tea* *Tea* *Tea*

Example 8. "The Song," mm. 30-42. © 2004, Enchanted Knickers Music; used by permission.

41 *push* $\text{♩} = 72$ *ff* *wailing* 9

Com-fort me with stones.

push $\text{♩} = 72$ *ff*

Tea Tea Tea Tea Tea Tea

45 *rit.* *melt into sadness* *mp* $\text{♩} = 60$ *push* *gently*

Quench my thirst with sand. I of-fer you this scarred and

rit. $\text{♩} = 60$ *push*

mp *p*

Tea Tea Tea Tea

Example 9. "Pentecost," mm. 41-47. © 2004, Enchanted Knickers Music; used by permission.

15 *sink into "memory"* *poco rit.* *A Tempo*

mem - o - ry re - peats its pro - se - cu - tion.

poco rit. *A Tempo* *push* *relax*

mp *mp*

Tea Tea Tea Tea Tea

Example 10. "Pentecost," mm. 15-17. © 2004, Enchanted Knickers Music; used by permission.