

Doug McConnell
Selected List of Vocal Works

Simple Songs (2016)

This is an ongoing collaboration between Bill Reyer, poet-in-residence at Heidelberg University and myself. All of the songs described below are based on texts by Bill for which I have supplied the music.

Haiku: Become one with B flat.....the challenge of this song was to allow this pitch to play constantly as its own mantra of sorts, while other figures and harmonies surround it. Bill's poem evokes the soft breeze, the sweet bird song, the growing lichen, as the everyday self is left behind.....

A Summer Lizard: the text is a children's poem, according to Bill, one that I believe has great charm. In some ways, this is the most "classical" piece in the set, but mostly in jest. Suffice it to say that this is a piece about a lizard with a great sense of self.....

A Prayer for the Day: by far the most serious song in the set. Bill's poem evokes the memory of Nat Turner, to reflect on our own troubled racial landscape, circa 2017. The final line, "Grant us, O Lord, peace in our day," is repeated as a mantra in the second half of the song. Bill sings this line over and over again, while the piano presents its own repetitive melody, a sorrowful setting of the spiritual, "I'm Troubled in Mind." The song ends with an unsettling, dissonant chord.

Your Lullaby: Words to a Newborn: Bill wrote a lullaby text, and I decided to evoke the spirit of Brahms. The song is a mash-up of sorts, between Bill, Johannes and myself. At times, you will hear snippets of the more famous lullaby setting before it morphs back to McConnell. There are some references to the troubled times that this newborn child will have to experience, but this time, gentleness and hope rule the day.

Still the Same: good chums can discuss anything at their favorite watering hole.....Bill's lively text of fun and merriment needs an equally spirited setting, which I have tried to provide. Expect to hear snippets of tunes that you already know, including "*There's a Tavern in the Town*" and a couple of classic Ray Charles tunes, among other delights....

Balm (2015)

Balm, a new composition for soprano and organ, was written in memory of the nine members of Mother Emanuel AME Church, in Charleston, South Carolina, who were murdered as they conducted a bible study in their own church building. By extension, the piece is also dedicated to all people who have lost their lives through violence and the families/friends that they have left behind.

The piece is cast in several sections. A mournful introduction quotes a passage from the Book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament, one that describes the pain of those who grieve over loved ones

that have been killed. The longer section of music that follows takes a motive from the spiritual *There is a Balm in Gilead* and turns it into a question: Is there a balm in Gilead?

Fortunately, the famous spiritual also provides the answer that we seek: Yes, there is a balm in Gilead, and it will help us to heal our sin-sick souls. The mood of the composition changes completely. The soprano and the organ take turns expressing the loving phrases of the sacred song; the text fragments that are presented in the vocal line alone appear below. A final coda section quotes a second passage from scripture, one that tells us that God has heard the prayers of his people. Hopefully we have listened as well and will use this moment to bring about positive change in our world.

Some pipe organs feature a stop called the *vox humana*. I am borrowing the term, rather than the stop's distinctive, nasal sound, to represent how the soprano and organ work together in this piece. Imagine an organ where a stop is pulled by the organist and a real human voice enters the texture. That is what I have tried to do in this composition, especially in the more tormented portions of the work, where mere words fail to express the intensity of the pain. For these passages, the soprano sings her vocal line on a neutral syllable, as if she is an instrumental line in the organ composition. In the second half of the work, the soprano and organ share the presentation of the spiritual, as we come together to heal and to hope.

TEXT:

Oh, that my head were a spring of water,
And my eyes a fountain of tears.
I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.
-Jeremiah 9: 1

Sometimes I feel discouraged.....to make the wounded whole.....There is a balm in Gilead....
To heal the sin-sick soul.....Don't ever be discouraged.....You can tell the love of Jesus.....
There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole.....to heal the sin-sick soul.....

- *There is a Balm in Gilead*, selected phrases appearing in the soprano line

Now my eyes will be open,
And my ears be attentive to the prayers offered in this place.

-2 Chronicles 7:15

Langston's Lot: Song is a Strong Thing (2015-16)

Dream Variations
Spirituals
Breath of a Rose
Listen Here Blues
Troubled Woman
Alabama Earth
Spring Song

Almost 20 years after *Langston's Lot*, my first song cycle on the poetry of Langston Hughes, colleagues Gail Levinsky and Jackie Edwards Henry asked me to create a second set. This time, they requested Hughes poems that would reflect a female point of view. Fortunately, Langston provided some fine choices! As before, this cycle provides seven movements involving a broad selection of themes, as provided by Hughes himself. The hope for a better day, despite the reality of everyday

reality is apparent throughout this composition. As before, the musical styles are varied and diverse, allowing for a sensitive portrayal of Hughes' ideas. The vocal lines are designed for a mezzo-soprano, although a soprano with a strong lower range should be comfortable.

***I Will Lift Up My Eyes* (2011)**

Soprano, piano. Written for and premiered by Carol Dusdieker, soprano. This is an intimate setting of Psalm 121; it begins with an extended solo for soprano alone, before the piano enters with a gentle, lilting accompaniment that shifts meters. Suitable for concert or church use. (4' 30'')

***Blooming in Eden* (2004)**

Soprano and piano. Commissioned by the Mississippi Music Teachers Association, in honor of their 50th anniversary as an organization. A festive recital piece, based on a text by the German hymn writer Paul Gerhardt, (1607-1676.) (4' 20'')

***Langston's Lot* (1996)**

I've Known Rivers
Joy
Conservatory Student Speaks of Higher Instrumentation
Blues at Dawn
Song for Billie Holiday
Oppression
Daybreak in Alabama

Tenor voice, alto saxophone, piano. Commissioned by Gail Levinsky and Jackie Edwards-Henry, *Langston's Lot* is a song-cycle for tenor, alto saxophone and piano which celebrates the work of Langston Hughes. The selected texts reflect the poet's sincere love of life, his people and their African-American cultural heritage. Lyric beauty and simplicity dominate the overall style of the poems, a quality which is reflected by the accessible nature of the musical settings. As a poet, Langston Hughes was very influenced by music, especially, jazz, blues and gospel. All of these popular music styles are reflected in the song cycle, combined with traditional classical musical forms and procedures. The composer would like to dedicate this work to the memory of a close friend, Kirk Bollinger, whose eclectic tastes in music and other forms of artistic expression would resonate with those of Hughes himself. (24')

Recorded on the CD release, *Saxophone and Other Voices*.

***Songs of the Beloved* (1992-93)**

Kiss Me!
Dream Images (Upon my Bed by Night)
My Beloved, My Friend
Set Me as a Seal Upon Your Heart
My Garden, My Vineyard

Soprano, flute, (C flute, alto flute, piccolo), piano, chamber women's chorus. Commissioned by the Mississippi Music Teachers Association (MMTA.) Winner, 1993 Composition Prize, Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters. This extended song cycle draws its texts from the love poetry of the *Song of Songs*, in the Old Testament. The scenario presents a young maid from Shulem, who is waiting for her lover to arrive. In the five movements, the maid explores her many emotions, as the cycle explores the many aspects of the gift of love. The piece is dedicated with love, to my wife Joan.

Three Baptism Songs:

***Cradling Children in His Arms* (1992)**

Tenor, flute and organ. A lively, active setting of *Gaudeamus Pariter*, with a text by Nikolai F.S. Grundwig (1783-1972.) Written to commemorate the baptism of my daughter Susan Alaina McConnell, born on January 6, 1992. (3'')

***The Good Shepherd* (1989)**

Soprano duet, choir, organ. The name Rachel means lamb, or ewe. Our daughter Rachel Joan McConnell was born on February 27, 1989, and baptized on Good Shepherd Sunday. This short piece brings all of these themes together. The choir's appearance is a brief one; a simple, unison passage, using the St. Columbia tune, often used with the hymn text, *The King of Love My Shepherd Is*. (4')

***Baptized into Your Name Most Holy* (1986)**

Medium voice, organ. 1988, Chantry Press, Springfield, Ohio. This piece uses the hymn tune *Wernur den lieben Gott last walten* by George Neumark (1621-1681) as a setting for a text by George Rambach (1693 – 1735). The text describes the covenant that we have with God through baptism, reminding us of God's continual presence and love, no matter what we may have to experience in life. This setting was composed to celebrate the baptism of my son Alan, who was born with congenital heart disease. Alan's brief life brought joy to his parents, family and friends. Born on June 30, 1976, he died on August 19, 1987, following open heart surgery. Alan's baptism song was also used at his memorial service. Published by Chantry Press; now out of print. Please contact the composer for music. (4')

***Set Me as a Seal upon Your Heart* (1987)**

Soprano, flute. 1987. This brief duet, based on a famous text from the *Song of Songs* was first composed for the wedding of my brother Wayne, and his wife, Kay Steigerwalt. Another version of this piece appears in my song cycle, *Songs of the Beloved*. A more recent version for choir and flute is also available. The original duet was published by Chantry Press, but is now out of print. Please contact the composer for music. (3'')

***Songs of Celebration* (1986)**

Resurrection Day (4' 20'')
The Paschal Presence (4')
Song to the Holy Spirit (4')

Soprano solo, SATB chamber chorus, string quintet, organ. Commissioned by Steven Hauser for the choir of St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Old Lyme, Connecticut. Premiered June, 1986. This three-movement work features a prominent soprano solo for the first two movements, with less participation in the final movement. The choir appears in the outer movements only. All three movements are based on the poetry of Elizabeth Randall-Mills, an accomplished poet and a member of the St. Anne's congregation.

***Psalms from Prison* (1985)**

Blessed are the People Oppressed
How Long Will These Walls Stand?
Harken to the Cries
Chains and Leg Irons/Where Do We Go From Here?
Thou art my Cosigner; Thou art my Shepherd
I am Compelled to Protest
We Are Marching

Bass-baritone, piano. On October 18, 1972, Benjamin f. Chavis, Jr., along with nine of his co-workers affiliated with the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, were sentenced to a combined total of 282 years in prison. The charges against the group, later to be known as the “Wilmington Ten,” included “unlawful burning” and “conspiracy to assault” during the race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1971. Over the next ten years, Chavis spent many months in five different penal institutions in North Carolina and considerable sums of money in legal battles, before the conviction was finally overturned. For more information: <http://www.ucc.org/ucc-celebrates-pardons-of>

While in prison, Dr. Chavis wrote a series of 150 psalms, corresponding to the number found in the Bible. This modern set of psalms are not intended to paraphrase the original poetry, but does advance the Biblical theme of vindication through faith in God, while also addressing the social issues related to the struggle for civil rights and social justice.

The song cycle attempts selects nine of these psalms and spreads them out over the course of seven songs. The harmonic language is strongly dissonant at times, in keeping with the intense struggles that the poems describe. But local tonal centers also emerge, used to represent the hope for redemption and forgiveness. (approx. 25 minutes)

***Four Wedding Songs* (1977 – 1980)**

A Wedding Blessing
Psalm 100
Hear Us Now Our god and Father
I Will Sing the Story

Medium/high voice, organ; piano accompaniment is also possible. The collected songs above were composed as wedding gifts written for friends, and in one case, my wife Joan for our wedding (*I Will Sing the Story*). While each song was written for a wedding service, they can also be used for other occasions. The published version of these songs is currently out-of-print; please contact the composer for copies of the music. Length of each song: between 3-4 minutes.