Serse, HWV 40
   Tradir di reggia sposa ... Sapra delle mie offese

La mort d'Ophélie, H 92A

Canciones de exilio
   Salario
   Suspiro
   Elección
   Certeza
   Decisión

- Intermission -

Goethe-Lieder
   Mignon I
   Mignon II
   Mignon III

Love After 1950
   Boy's Lips
   Blonde Men
   Big Sister Says, 1967
   The Empty Song
   I Make My Magic

* Indicates Canadian Composer
Her Voice Resounds

We live in a time when the variety of voices allowed to declare themselves through art is expanding – a time when a woman’s voice, at last, can resound. However, the male perspective has long reigned supreme. For centuries, male composers have set poetry by male poets about distinctly male experiences. Though they may try, such poets and composers can never truly express the female perspective, just as no woman could reach to the core of the male experience. While there is value in exploring what a woman’s voice sounds like when she was imagined by a man, what of the truly female perspective?

For this recital, I have opted to explore both sides of the coin: the male gaze and the female. I have included pieces performed from the point of view of female characters who were written by men, as well as works that utilize texts written by women about their own lives and about the very concept of womanhood. These pieces paint a varied picture of the joy, anguish, rage, madness, and longing that can color a woman’s life, whether that woman is real or imaginary.

“Sapra delle mie offese” takes place in act one of Handel’s three-act tragicomedy Serse, first performed in 1738. In this aria, Princess Amastre has just discovered that the Persian King Xerxes (Serse), to whom she was betrothed, intends to marry another woman. She is appropriately incensed and begins to plot her revenge. In this aria, Handel depicts Amastre as more than entitled to her indignation. In the many long melismatic passages, one can imagine Amastre oh so slowly plunging her knife into faithless Serse’s back.

Louis-Hector Berlioz’s marriage to the Irish Shakespearean actress Harriet Smithson began as more of an obsession than a romance. After seeing her perform the role of Ophelia in Hamlet, Smithson became, to him, a literary ideal brought to life – Juliet and Ophelia, first, Harriet second. La mort d’Opélie (The Death of Ophelia) sets a French adaptation of Gertrude’s monologue in act IV, scene vii of Hamlet written by Ernest Legouvé. In the monologue, Gertrude describes the death of the beautifully mad Ophelia. The piece was composed in 1842, by which time Berlioz’s marriage to his Ophelia had long since faltered. The piece serves as an elegy to his severed marital bond with Smithson. Ophelia has always been defined by how she relates to male figures. Therefore, there is power in the fact that her final moments are described by a woman. Berlioz’s personal relationship to the piece cannot take that away – if anything, it gives him the emotional tools to inject the piece with haunting sorrow that resonates long after the singer’s final, whispered note.

Canciones de exilio (Songs of Exile) bleeds with equally justifiable, though far more harrowing, rage. Julia Esquivel de Velasquez (1930-2019), a theologian and poet, was a fierce advocate for the Maya, Quiche and other indigenous peoples of Guatemala during the Guatemalan Genocide that occurred throughout the three-and-a-half decades long Guatemalan Civil War. During the war, Guatemala’s US-backed military governments systematically targeted indigenous civilians. 200,000 Guatemalans died by the war’s end in 1996, primarily in government executions. This was the context in which Esquivel, banished to Switzerland in 1980 due to genuine threats to her life because of her advocacy, wrote the poetry Jeff Smallman selected for Canciones de exilio (2010). The cycle begins with Esquivel’s longing for her homeland, followed by her stating that “you” cannot know her people’s pain until “you” have felt it, addressing the listener directly. Esquivel then rages at the atrocities carried out on her beloved land, before anguishing at her people’s pain and rousing her people, as well as the listener, to continue the fight.

Hugo Wolf was not the first to set texts from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1795-96 bildungsroman Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship – Schubert and Schumann beat him to the punch. However, if Ernest Newman, the author of Wolf’s 1907 biography, is to be trusted, Wolf did it best, penetrating “into the very depth of Goethe’s mood.” Mignon, who sings these three songs within the novel, is central to Wilhelm Meister: Wilhelm rescues her from the abusive director of a theatre troupe, after which they travel together and she develops a secret and unrequited love for her rescuer. Eventually – and perhaps, inevitably – she succumbs to a heart attack, or, as The Literary Encyclopedia states: unfulfilled longing for Wilhelm and her native land. Wolf’s settings of her songs ring with the
tragedy and ambiguity of her existence, as a girl of mysterious parentage living a wandering life. In the first song, “Heiss mich nicht reden”, she sings of a secret she has vowed not to reveal but yearns to release. “Nur wer die sehnsucht kennt” is a lament about the pain of longing for that which she cannot possess. In “So lasst mich scheinen”, she yearns for the freedom of death, having been made old too soon by suffering. She is a figure defined by longing – an idealization of noble, feminine suffering.

Each of the five songs in American composer Libby Larsen's song cycle, Love after 1950 (2000) explores different angles of love from a modern woman’s perspective. In the preface, Larsen describes the set as “no Frauenliebe und -Leben,” referring to the well-known song cycle by Robert Schumann, “rather ... the new women’s Frau, Love ‘em and Leave ‘em.” Each song is accompanied by a stylistic subtitle: “Boy’s Lips” (Rita Dove) is a blues, “Blond Men” (Julie Kane) is a torch song, “Big Sister Says, 1967” (Kathryn Daniels) is a honky-tonk, “The Empty Song” (Liz Lochead) is a tango, and “I Make My Magic” (Muriel Rukeyser) is subtitled “Isadora’s dance”.

We begin in adolescence, with the revelation of a first kiss, then move onto a playful display of sensuality in “Blond Men”, followed by, to quote Larsen, the “beauty-school dropout” stylings of a young woman decrying beauty’s pain. Humor then takes a backseat as we explore lost love through the metaphor of an empty shampoo bottle. Though the text for the final song was taken from Rukeyser’s Five Songs from Houdini (1973), Larsen reinterprets the text as a woman reclaiming agency over the light and dark of her existence, freeing herself of her chains to share the “sunlight magic” of true love. After drowning, burning with rage and vindication, and yearning for a lost homeland, we see her set free at last.