Abigail Head, soprano
Sonny Yoo, piano

November 11, 2022 5:30 pm, Ramsey Recital Hall

I.
from Harmonia Sacra
We Sing to Him
Henry Purcell
(1659-1695)

II.
from Cycle of Holy Songs
Psalm 148
Ned Rorem
(b. 1923)

Four Walt Whitman Songs
I. Beat! Beat! Drums!
Kurt Weill
(1900-1950)
II. Come Up from the Fields, Father
III. O Captain! My Captain!
IV. Dirge for Two Veterans

III.
from Cycle of Holy Songs
Psalm 142
Ned Rorem
(b. 1923)

I Never Saw Another Butterfly
Lori Laitman
(b. 1955)

I. The Butterfly
II. Yes, That’s the Way Things Are
III. Birdsong
IV. The Garden
V. Man Proposes, God Disposes
VI. The Old House

Dan Phipps, Saxophone

IV.
from Cycle of Holy Songs
Psalm 150
Ned Rorem
(b. 1923)

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the degree Doctor of Musical Arts in Vocal Performance.
Abigail Head is a student of Dr. Elizabeth J. Knight

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Notes, Texts, and Translations

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
   A time to be born, and a time to die;
   A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
   A time to kill, and a time to heal;
   A time to break down, and a time to build up;
   A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
   A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
   A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
   A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
   A time to seek, and a time to lose;
   A time to keep, and a time to cast away;
   A time to tear, and a time to sew;
   A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
   A time to love, and a time to hate;
   A time for war, and a time for peace.”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

As the quote above says, there is a season for everything. Even a season for war. For most of my life, the United States has been at war in the Middle East. The War on Terror, fueled by the attack on the World Trade Centers in 2001, is the closest that war has ever come to my home. There have been school shootings, riots, civil unrest, and mobs storming the White House, but there has not been an actual war on American soil since the 19th century. On top of that, the wars in my life have become more remote as technology advances.

On February 20th of this year, a war started in Ukraine, unlike any war ever seen in my lifetime. Soldiers posted videos of themselves preparing to fight like they were preparing to play a game. The reality that wars can now be seen in real-time through the eyes of the young men and women who are fighting was shocking and horrifying and struck a deep chord within me.

I have great respect for those who are willing to serve their country in battle. Several of my family members have served in the armed forces, including my grandmother, who served as one of the first female marines in World War II. I watched the events unfolding in Ukraine and realized that, though I am not a fighter, I have a voice. Thus, this recital was born.

The songs I am presenting tonight reflect my emotional reaction to the war in Ukraine and my reactions to the widespread violence that is experienced daily in the United States and around the world. Suffering is a part of the human experience, whether we like it or not. Finding something to hold onto, to establish hope, is crucial to survival. My hope is found in my faith foundation, turning my eyes to God in times of crisis.

The first set on the program features a brief piece by Henry Purcell, the only non-American composer featured in the recital. The simple text of We Sing to Him sets the tone for the evening, invoking an intention for every song. Purcell’s musical line, typical of the 17th century, features text painting through the use of rhythmic and melodic figures that draw the ear to the text.

Following this is the first of three Psalm settings by Ned Rorem. Psalm 148 starts joyfully with the text “praise ye the Lord.” This command is repeated several times to all of creation in bright, syncopated passages. The unexpected harmonic shifts in the first section of this piece, as well as the disjointed rhythm, serve as reminders that beauty can be found in the imperfect. The middle section, however, calls to mind the uncertainty with which we experience life with featuring sweeping steady lines in a minor key before returning to the command to praise the Lord.

The next set of songs is Kurt Weill’s setting of four poems by Walt Whitman (1819-1892). Whitman wrote these poems about the American civil war in the 1860s, but Weill set them during and just after World War II. The powerful text and the poignant music speak to the horror and pain of war both up close in “Beat! Beat! Drums” and
far away in “Come Up from the Fields, Father.” The final piece of this cycle, “Dirge for Two Veterans,” concludes things with the singer watching a set of soldiers, a father and son, be laid to rest.

The second Psalm setting from Rorem’s cycle is Psalm 142, a cry for God to help in times of trouble. The solemnity of Rorem’s setting captures the deep ache of loss that accompanies war and violence. This piece features the steadiest rhythm of all of these Psalm settings in the piano line, calling to mind the constant cries for help from those in need. The piano takes over the cry for help as the psalmist ponders thoughts of isolation and weakness before returning with a hopeful plea for the end of the song.

_I Never Saw Another Butterfly_ offers a different perspective on war as it features poetry written by children from the Terezin Concentration Camp in World War II. These pieces are poignant, quirky, charming, and tragic when considering the atrocities experienced by each writer. Laitman selected each of the texts in this cycle from a book by the same name that contains children’s poetry and drawings found in Terezin. In her notes about the cycle, Laitman discusses the hopeful texts written in such horrible surroundings. Her use of alto sax throughout this cycle provides a haunting duet to the vocal line.

“The Butterfly” was written by Pavel Friedman, born January 7, 1921. Pavel was deported to Terezin in April of 1942 and died in Auschwitz on September 29, 1944, at 23 years old.

“Yes, That’s the Way Things Are” and “Man Proposes, God Disposes, are children’s rhymes signed by Miroslav Kosek, Hanus Löwy, and Eli Bachner.

Kosek was born on March 30, 1932, was deported to Terezin in February of 1942, and died at Auschwitz on October 19th, 1944, at age 12.

Löwy was born on June 29th, 1931 and was deported to Terezin in September 1942. He died in Auschwitz on October 4, 1944, at age 13.

Bachner was born on May 20, 1931 and was deported to Terezin in February 1942. Bachner was sent to Auschwitz with his family on May 18, 1944. He survived Auschwitz and immigrated to Israel in March of 1947.

“The Garden” and “The Old House” were written by Franta Bass, born September 4, 1930. Franta was deported to Terezin in December of 1941 and died in Auschwitz on October 2, 1944, at age 14.

The only signature on the manuscript of “Bird Song” is the date 1943.

The final piece on the recital is Rorem’s setting of Psalm 150. In this piece, the word praise is sung 16 times. The majestic and stately tone of the piece, heightened by the dramatic chords in the piano line, serves as a reminder that joy can be found even amid darkness. The final vocal lines of the piece are unaccompanied and free, allowing for a moment of release from the mounted tension of the grand piano chords before the accompaniment returns fuller and faster than before for a final glorious moment.

War touches everyone, from the elderly to children. Though we cannot all fight physical battles, we can find ways of seeking peace and bringing hope to those around us. If this recital touches your heart, I ask that you consider what you can do to touch the lives around you. Donating to a charity benefitting Ukraine, volunteering at a local shelter, or even offering a smile to someone who is suffering can have an enormous impact. What can you do to bring hope to the world?