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Program Notes

American Death Ballads was composed especially for tenor Brian Thorsett. We have been frequent collaborators since 2011, when he premiered the complete set of my *Three Settings of W. B. Yeats* for string quartet and tenor. At his urging, I transcribed and published my *Three Poems of Christina Rossetti* (originally for medium voice) for high voice, which he premiered at the San Francisco Conservatory in 2014. *American Death Ballads* was premiered by him at the San Francisco Conservatory, November 1, 2015, with pianist John Churchwell, and at the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) Conference in Chicago, July 10, 2016, with pianist Warren Jones.

The choice of texts for my *American Death Ballads* was inspired partly by Copland's *Old American Songs*, which I deeply admire, but more by my dear friend and colleague the late Conrad Susa's *Two Murder Ballads*. The ingenuity of Susa's accompaniments for his ballads in imagining anew the original source material owes a great deal to Copland's accompaniment for his songs. Though the content of my songs is completely original and not based on preexisting melodies, I have tried to expand on this further, as the texts are much longer, and go through many different moods and characters. The four texts I chose include stories about murder, death, and dying. Though two of the texts were written in England, they traveled to the colonies almost immediately. The subjects of the texts had spent time in America, and their stories were well known to Americans.

Wicked Polly is a cautionary tale. Polly has lived a dissolute and immoral life, saying, "I'll turn to God when I grow old." Suddenly taken ill, she realizes that it is too late to repent. She dies in agony and is presumably sent to hell; young people are advised to heed. My musical setting is stately and preacherly in character for the narrator; for Polly it becomes pleading and remorseful.

The Unquiet Grave was brought to the attention of Alan Lomax, the great American field collector of folk music, by English folk singer Shirley Collins. The text is taken from an English folk song dating from 1400. In *The Unquiet Grave*, a young man mourns his dead lover too fervently and prevents her from obtaining peace. The dead woman complains that his weeping is keeping her from peaceful rest. He begs a kiss; she tells him it would kill him. When he persists, wanting to join her in death, she explains that once they were both dead their hearts would simply decay, and that he should enjoy life while he has it. My setting is in a flowing *Andante* with a rocking accompaniment. Three voices are delineated here: the narrator, the mournful lover, and the dead lover speaking from the grave.

The Dying Californian first appeared in the *New England Diadem* in 1854. Its lyrics are based on a letter from a New Englander's sailor to his brother who is dying at sea while on the way to California to seek his fortune in the California gold fields. He implores his brother to impart his message to his father, mother, wife, and children. My setting opens with the singer alone in a moderate dirge tempo, then, joined by the piano, moves through many tonalities and moods before ending with supreme confidence as the speaker "gained a port called Heaven/Where the gold will never rust."

Captain Kidd was a Scottish sailor who was tried and executed for piracy and murder in 1701. The American connection to this ballad is that Kidd escaped to America and for a time lived in New York and Boston, though he was a wanted criminal by the British authorities and was extradited to Britain, where he was hung at "Executioner's Dock." The lyric was printed in Britain in 1701, traveling to the colonies almost immediately. Though the didactic tone of the text is similar to *Wicked Polly*, it expresses no regret until the final lines: "Take warning now by me, and shun bad company, / Lest you come to hell with me, for I must die." My setting is fast and spirited, expressing the confidence of a man who lived life as he wanted.

—David Conte

Texts

Wicked Polly

Young people who delight in sin, I'll tell you what has lately been:
A woman who was young and fair died in sin and deep despair.

She went to frolics, dances and play in spite of all her friends could say.
"I'll turn to God when I get old, and He will then receive my soul."

One Friday morning she took sick, her stubborn heart began to break.
She called her mother to her bed, her eyes were rolling in her head:

"O mother, mother, fare you well, your wicked Polly's doomed to hell,
The tears are lost you shed for me; my soul is lost, I plainly see.

"My earthly father, fare you well, your wicked Polly's doomed to hell.
The flaming wrath begins to roll; I'm a lost and ruined soul.

"Your counsels I have slipted all, my carnal appetite to fill.
When I am dead, remember well, your wicked Polly groans in hell."

She wrung her hands and groaned and cried and gnawed her tongue
before she died;
Her nails turned black, her voice did fail, she died and left this lower vale.

Young people, let this be your case, oh, turn to God and trust His grace.
Down on your knees for mercy cry, lest you in sin like Polly die.

The Unquiet Grave

"The wind doth blow today, my love,
And a few small drops of rain;
I never had but one true-love,
In cold grave she was lain.

"I'll do as much for my true-love
As any young man may;
I'll sit and mourn all at her grave
For a twelvemonth and a day."

The twelvemonth and a day being up,
The dead began to speak:
"Oh who sits weeping on my grave,
And will not let me sleep?"

"Tis I, my love, sits on your grave,
And will not let you sleep;
For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,
And that is all I seek."

"You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
But my breath smells earthy strong;
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
Your time will not be long.

"Tis down in yonder garden green,
Love, where we used to walk,
The finest flow'r that e're was seen
Is withered to a stalk.

"The stalk is withered dry, my love,
So will our hearts decay;
So make yourself content, my love,
Till God calls you away."

The Dying Californian

Lay up nearer, brother, nearer,
For my limbs are growing cold;
And thy presence seemeth dearer
When thine arms around me fold.

I am dying, brother, dying,
Soon you'll miss me in your berth,
For my form will soon be lying
'Neath the ocean's briny surf.

Tell my father when you see him
That in death I prayed for him,
Prayed that I might only meet him
In a world that's free from sin.

Tell my mother—God assist her
Now that she is growing old—
That her child would glad have kissed her
When his lips grew pale and cold.

Listen, brother, catch each whisper,
'Tis my wife I speak of now;
Tell, O tell her how I missed her
When the fever burned my brow.

Tell her she must kiss my children
Like the kiss I last impressed,
Hold them as when last I held them,
Held them closely to my breast.

It was for them I crossed the ocean,
What my hopes were I'll not tell;
But they gained an orphan's portion,
Yet He doeth all things well.

Tell them I have reached the haven
Where I sought the precious dust,
And I gained a port called Heaven
Where the gold will never rust.

Captain Kidd

My name was Robert Kidd, as I sailed, as I sailed,
My name was Robert Kidd, as I sailed.
My name was Robert Kidd, God's laws I did forbid,
And so wickedly I did, as I sailed, as I sailed,
And so wickedly I did, as I sailed!

My parents taught me well, as I sailed, as I sailed,
My parents taught me well, as I sailed.
I cursed my father dear, and her that did me bear,
And so wickedly did swear, as I sailed, as I sailed,
And so wickedly did swear, as I sailed.

I'd a bible in my hand, as I sailed, as I sailed,
But I sunk it in the sand, as I sailed.
I made a solemn vow, to God I would not bow,
Nor myself one prayer allow, when I sailed, when I sailed,
Nor myself one prayer allow, when I sailed.

I murdered William Moore, as I sailed, as I sailed,
I murdered William Moore, as I sailed;
And being cruel still, my gunner did I kill,
And much precious blood did I spill, as I sailed, as I sailed,
And much precious blood did I spill, as I sailed.

To Execution Dock, I must go, I must go,
To Execution Dock, I must go;
To Execution Dock, where many thousands flock,
But I must bear my shock, and must die, and must die,
But I must bear my shock, and must die.

Come all ye young and old, see me die, see me die,
Come all ye young and old, see me die;
Come all ye young and old, you're welcome to my gold,
For by it I've lost my soul, and must die, and must die,
For by it I've lost my soul, and must die.

Take warning now by me, for I must die, for I must die,
Take warning now by me, for I must die;
Take warning now by me, and shun bad company,
Lest you come to hell with me, for I must die;
Lest you come to hell with me, for I must die.

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American Death Ballads

for Medium Voice and Piano

Anonymous

David Conte

1. Wicked Polly

Stately, preacherly ♩ = 63

mf

Young peo - ple who de - light in sin, I'll

Stately, preacherly ♩ = 63

tell you what has late - ly been: A wom - an who was young and fair

died in sin and deep de - spair.

9

She went to fro-l-ics, danc-es and play in

mp

12

spite of all her friends could say. "I'll turn to God when I get old, and

mf

Just a bit broader ♩ = 58

Tempo I ♩ = 63

f

15

He will then re - ceive my soul."

Just a bit broader ♩ = 58

Tempo I ♩ = 63

f marcato

27 *mp*

“O moth - er, moth - er, fare you well, your

mf *p*

29

wick - ed Pol - ly's doomed to hell, _____ The tears are lost you shed for me; _____

mp

32 *mf*

my soul is lost, I plain - ly see.

mf

48 *molto rit.*

wick - - - ed Pol - ly groans in

50 **Slower, heavy** ♩ = 54 *mf*

hell.” She

Slower, heavy ♩ = 54

54

wrung her hands and groaned and cried and gnawed her tongue

mp

14

68

peo - ple, let this be your case, oh, turn to God and trust His grace. Down

71

on your knees for mer - cy cry, lest you in sin like

allarg.

Suddenly faster ♩ = 112

74

Pol - - - ly die.

allarg.

Suddenly faster ♩ = 112

77

2. The Unquiet Grave

Anonymous

Andante, not too slow ♩ = 84

mf

Andante, not too slow ♩ = 84

*mf**mp*

"The wind doth blow to - day, my love, And a

few small drops of rain; I nev - er had but

one true - love, In cold grave she was lain.

25 *p*

dead be-gan to speak: _____ "Oh who sits weep - ing

cresc. *mf* *p*

29

on my grave, And will not let me sleep?"

33 *p* *crooningly*

"'Tis I, my love, sits on your grave, And will not let you

mp *p*

37

sleep; _____ For I crave one_ kiss_ of your clay - cold lips, And that is_ all I

68

dry, my love, So— will our hearts de - cay; So

71

make your-self con - tent, my love, Till

74

A bit slower ♩ = 80

God calls you a - way."

8vb

3. The Dying Californian

Anonymous

Moderately slow, solemn ♩ = 56

p

Lay up near - er, broth-er, near - er, For my limbs are grow-ing cold;__

5

And thy pres - ence seem-eth dear - er When thine arms a - round me fold.__

9

I am dy - ing, broth-er, dy - ing, Soon you'll miss me in your berth,__

13

For my form will soon be ly - ing 'Neath the o - cean's brin - y

17

surf. Tell my fa - ther when you see him

p

21

That in death I prayed for him, — Prayed that I might on - ly meet him

25

In a world that's free from sin. — Tell my moth - er —

29

God as - sist her Now that she is grow - ing old — That her child would

33

glad have kissed her When his lips grew pale — and cold. —

61 *poco rit.* **Tempo I** ♩ = 56 *mp*

It was for them I

66

crossed the o - cean, What my hopes were I'll not tell; But they gained an

70 *mf*

or - phan's por - tion, Yet He do - eth all things well.

cresc.

74

Tell them I have reached the ha - ven Where I sought the pre - cious dust, —

mp

*allarg.***Broader, with supreme confidence** ♩ = 44

78

And I gained a port called Heav - en

f

Broader, with supreme confidence ♩ = 44

allarg.

81

molto rit.

Where the gold will nev - - - er rust. —

molto rit.

4. Captain Kidd

Anonymous

Fast, spirited ♩ = 120

f

My name was Rob - ert Kidd, as I

Fast, spirited ♩ = 120

f *mf*

4

sailed, as I sailed, My name was Rob - ert Kidd, as I sailed. My

f

7

name was Rob - ert Kidd, God's_ laws I did for - bid, And so wick - ed - ly I did, as I

mf

10

sailed, as I sailed, And so wick-ed-ly I did as I sailed!_____

14

f My par-ents taught me well, as I _____

17

sailed, as I sailed, My par-ents taught me well, as I sailed. I _____

20

cursed my fa-ther dear, and her that did me bear, And so wick-ed-ly did swear, as I _____

48 *cresc. poco a poco*

be - ing cru - el still, _____ my gun - ner did I kill, _____

p *cresc. poco a poco*

51

_____ And much pre - cious blood _____ did I spill, _____

54 *poco allarg.* *a tempo* ♩ = 120

_____ as I sailed. _____

poco allarg. *a tempo* ♩ = 120

ff *ff*

57

_____ churning _____

95

die; Come all ye young and old, you're wel - come to my gold, For by

98

it I've lost my soul, and must die, and must die, For by it I've lost my soul, and must

101

die. Take warn-ing now by me, for I must

104

die, for I must die, Take warn-ing now by me, for I must die; Take

107

warn-ing now by me, and_ shun bad com - pa - ny, Lest you come to hell with me, for I must

110

die, for I must die; Lest you come to hell with me, for I must

rit.

rit.

114

Faster ♩ = 132

die.

Faster ♩ = 132

ff

sffz

8va

8vb