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Program Notes

When tenor Brian Thorsett, a singer and artist I have long admired, asked me if I had composed any music for voice and string quartet, I returned to sketches of settings of Yeats that I had worked on nearly thirty years ago. *When You Are Old* was composed in 1983, and premiered at Cornell University by mezzo-soprano Mimmi Fulmer; *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* was composed in 1984, but had never been performed; and *The Sorrow of Love* existed in very rough sketch form. I was delighted by Brian's invitation to resurrect and complete these songs. Brian Thorsett premiered these songs in a recital at Calvary Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, in January, 2011.

The first and last song are thematically related, both in terms of subject matter and musical treatment. Both poems deal with Yeats' unrequited love for the beautiful and ardent Irish Nationalist, Maud Gonne. *The Sorrow of Love* was written in 1891, only two years after Yeats met and fell in love with her. In the first stanza, natural images overshadow the sorrow of mankind. In the second, a figure with "red mournful lips" arises, seeming to carry with her the weight of epic tragedy, and indeed the illusion to "laboring ships" suggests Helen of Troy. In the third stanza, the natural world is now filled with the infinite sadness of human suffering. Following the repeat of images from the first to the third stanza, my music in these is thematically related. In the first stanza, dense chords express "knots of feeling" associated with the beloved. The string quartet often supports the voice with long, held chords, in the manner of a recitative. The second stanza is accompanied by more animated running eighth notes in the strings, and rises to a climax on the words: "And all the sorrow of her myriad years." The return of the opening music in the third stanza is now harmonically clouded and unresolved.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree was published in 1888, and is Yeats' description of a utopia, a longing for the peace and tranquility of the country while residing in an urban setting. The poem is filled with the rhythms of nature: bees and growing plants, and the lapping of lake water. My setting is in a lively compound meter, suggesting the speaker's excitement and joy in returning to a beloved place.

When You Are Old returns to the themes of nostalgia and regret of the first poem, though perhaps less tortured and more accepting. The music is generally more sober, less overtly passionate than the first song, though it also rises to its climax at the end of the middle stanza on the words "And loved the sorrow of your changing face," with the quartet playing intensely expressive music. The last stanza finds the speaker wiser and still accepting of his situation, and now reaching for images of mountains and stars, accompanied by soft, high chords. The song ends resigned, and a bit wistful, with high harmonics in the violins.

—David Conte

David Conte (b. 1955)

For biographical information visit:
www.davidconte.net

Available Editions

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I. The Sorrow of Love

5

The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,
The full round moon and the star-laden sky,
And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves,
Had hid away earth's old and weary cry.

And then you came with those red mournful lips,
And with you came the whole of the world's tears,
And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,
And all the burden of her myriad years.

And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,
The curd-pale moon, the white stars in the sky,
And the loud chaunting of the unquiet leaves,
Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.

II. The Lake Isle of Innisfree

10

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

III. When You Are Old

14

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true;
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;
And bending down beside the glowing bars
Murmur, a little sadly, how love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

—William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

Yeats Songs

for High Voice and String Quartet or Piano

I. The Sorrow of Love

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

David Conte (b. 1955)

Moderately, with intense expression ♩ = 80

Voice

Piano

f *p* *mf* *mp*

7 A *mp*

The quar - rel of the spar - rows in the eaves, The

p

13 *mf*

full round moon and the star - la - den sky, And the loud song of the

mf

18 B

ev - er - sing - ing leaves, — Had hid a - way earth's old — and wear - y cry. —

mp *pp* *f*

23 rit.

—

p *mf* *mp* *p*

29 C More motion, undulating ♩ = 96 *mf*

And then you came —

gently pulsating

32

— with those red mourn - ful lips, — And with you came the

II. The Lake Isle of Innisfree

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

Moderately fast; eager, alert $\text{♩} = 112$ *mf* David Conte (b. 1955)

Voice

Piano

mf *mfp*

7

13

19

p

I will a-rise and go now, —

and go to Inn-is - free, — And a small cab-in

build there, — of clay and wat-tles made; Nine bean - rows will I

have there, — a hive for the hon-ey - bee, — And live a - lone in the

25 **H** *f*

bee - loud glade

32 **I** L'istesso tempo $\text{♩} = 112$ *mf*

And I shall have some

40

peace there, for peace comes drop - ping slow, Drop - ping from the

47

veils of the morn - ing to where the crick - et sings;

III. When You Are Old

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

David Conte (b. 1955)

Moderately, quietly expressive ♩ = 80

Piano

mp sempre legato

9 *poco rall.*

17 **A** Just a bit slower ♩ = 76 *mp*

When you are old and grey — and full of sleep, — And

p pp mp

24 **B** Tempo I ♩ = 80

f *mf*

nod-ding by the fire, take down this book, And slow-ly read, and dream of the soft look —

31 *f*

— Your eyes had once, — and of their sha-dows deep;

38 **C** More motion ♩ = 92

How man-y loved your mo-ments of glad grace, — And loved your

45 *cresc.* *f*

beau-ty with love false or true; — But one man loved the pil-grim Soul; — in