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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Night: A Commissioning Project

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts

in

Contemporary Music Performance

by

Kirsten Ashley Wiest

Committee in charge:  
Professor Susan Narucki, Chair  
Professor Diana Deutsch  
Professor Nancy Guy  
Professor Aleck Karis  
Professor Lei Liang

2019

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

## EPIGRAPH

Though my soul my set it darkness, it will rise in perfect light;  
I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.

Sarah Williams

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Professor Susan Narucki for her support as the chair of my committee. Her guidance and devotion have proven invaluable in numerous ways.

Chapter 2 includes musical excerpts whose rights belong solely to the composer, Joseph Bishara.

Chapter 3 includes a musical setting of two poems by Giordano Bruno and their English adaptation translations: *Unico augel del sol* and *Bench'a tanti martir*. These texts exist in the public domain, and translators are credited within the text. All musical examples and their rights belong to the composer, James Erber, and to his publisher, Composers Edition.

Chapter 4 includes a musical setting of a Runic inscription and text in Old Norse, compiled and transliterated by Jeffrey Holmes. All text and musical example rights belong to Holmes, and reproduction rights to his publisher, Composers Edition.

Chapter 5 includes a musical setting of a French translation of the poem, *Being Beauteous*, by Arthur Rimbaud. All text use and musical example rights belong to the composer, Gérard Pape.

The Appendix includes the musical setting of four Finnish poems by Eino Leino: *Sua katselen*, *Sydän*, *Rauha*, and *Iltarukous*. All text usage rights and responsibilities belong to the composer, Kaija Saariaho. English translations of the poetry by Kirsten Ashley Wiest and Päivikki Nykter.

## VITA

- 2011 Bachelor of Music, *cum laude*, Chapman University
- 2011-2013 Teaching Assistant, California Institute of the Arts
- 2013 Master of Fine Arts, California Institute of the Arts
- 2013-2015 Teaching Assistant, University of California San Diego
- 2015-2019 Instructor of Record, University of California San Diego
- 2019 Adjunct Instructor of Music, California State University San Bernardino
- Doctor of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music Performance, University of California San Diego

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Contemporary Music Performance

Studies in Vocal Performance  
Professor Susan Narucki

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Night: A Commissioning Project

by

Kirsten Ashley Wiest

Doctor of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music Performance

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Susan Narucki, Chair

As a singer of contemporary classical music, working with composers on the creation of new repertoire is a large part of my artistic output. While working to create new pieces for the classical voice is an exciting adventure, it also requires a great deal of intellectual and artistic exploration, creativity, and problem solving. For my dissertation project, I spearheaded a commissioning project of new repertoire written for my unique individual voice, culminating in a live performance and resultant audio and video

documentation. This paper serves to discuss the ideas behind the commissioning project, the strengths and challenges of the individual pieces, and to shed light onto the process of working in the creation and premiering of new classical vocal repertoire.

## INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite things about being a new music-focused singer is the opportunity to premiere works by living composers. Working to create the first interpretation of a piece of newly created repertoire is a highly enjoyable challenge. With no previous performances to reference, no guidelines of performance practice, and no singer colleagues with whom to discuss strategy of successful technical and artistic execution of the piece at hand, the premiere singer of a new work must delve deep into their artistic and technical toolboxes to bring a meaningful life to these new pieces, while continuously growing their vocal and artistic capabilities and strengths to meet the demands of ever-developing compositional ideas. This need for continual vocal and artistic growth is what drives my work as an interpreter of new vocal pieces, and this level of fastidious work is what lies at the core of my love of classical singing.

I have been collaborating with composers and giving premiere performances of new works for many years, and decided to begin a commissioning project of my own in the summer of 2016 in order to establish more repertoire for my higher-sitting coloratura voice than currently exists in the greater new music repertoire. In this project, I selected the composers I wanted to write for my voice, worked with them on developing pieces appropriate to my instrument, and offered insight to the classically trained voice through conversations with each composer. In exchange for their pieces, I guaranteed them a live performance at my dissertation concert as well as audio and video documentation of the

performance. Giving the world premiere performances of these pieces is an exhilarating challenge, but my ultimate goal is to program and perform these pieces as frequently as possible, each time getting to know them more intimately and discovering new compositional nuances and methods of successful and expressive vocal and musical execution.

## CHAPTER 1: CREATING THE PROJECT

The composers I chose to program and work with on this commissioning project write in aesthetically strong, distinctive, compositional languages, each spanning a wide array of sonic landscapes. Their compositional styles complement each other well while providing the contrast needed for a full and diverse recital program, while showcasing differing aspects of my own artistry and capabilities of my instrument and personal musical tastes.

Joseph Bishara is a highly regarded horror film score composer with whom I have collaborated several times on film tracking projects, including his score for *The Conjuring 2*. Bishara started out as a performer in the metal band, Yesterday's Tear, later known as Drown, touring and recording with them beginning in 1994. But by 1998, his focus had fully shifted to composing, when he was hired for his first film score in a Biblical drama, *Joseph's Gift*. In 2006, he began to score for horror films, including *Unearthed* and *The Gravedancers*. In 2011, filmmaker James Wan, best known for directing the *Saw* horror series, connected with Bishara, working together on big-box horror films *Insidious*, *Insidious: Chapter 2*, *Insidious, Chapter 3*, *The Conjuring*, *The Conjuring 2*, and *Annabelle*. This work alongside Wan boosted Bishara into popularity within the genre and led to his prominence as a respected film composer.

Bishara's compositional style utilizes dissonant acoustic and manipulated electronic sonic materials as a basis for developing a haunting, sparse atmosphere that

lives on the edge of dissipation, creating a sonic space where sounds gently emerge from silence and linger with an unsettled stillness. These sonic materials build in key moments of intensifying swells, only to disappear just as quickly into nothingness. His use of the voice is treated the same as an instrument, built upon atmospheric mood setting and expression of heightened emotions and subconscious thoughts. This type of music works brilliantly with the screen, where the music is composed to show a multidimensional relationship between actor, space, and situation within a narrative.

A recognized avant-garde champion of the horror film genre, Bishara has recently begun pushing himself into the world of classical concert music, exploring how he can successfully replicate moments of emotional intensity in music without reliance on motion picture. His fearless exploration into the world of dissonance and extended techniques in his usual medium captivated my attention, and I commissioned a short concert piece for his choice of soprano with percussion, soprano with light electronics, or solo soprano, of which he ultimately settled on solo soprano. The result is a short textless vocalist for a cappella soprano, entitled *Black Sunday*.

Much like in the film music of Bishara, Parisian-based composer, Gérard Pape, also places importance in expression of thought and emotion at the core of his compositional exploration. A recently retired professional psychotherapist, Pape is captivated and motivated by the vast range of human emotions, and the resulting outward physical and sonic manifestations of these internal states of being. This manifests in his acoustic compositions through specifically notated manipulations of timbre. In his vocal

works, these timbral variations are based on emotional states of being or states of mind, wherein a marking from his works such as “horrified” represents a particular timbre to be discovered by the performer, and “frozen, trembling” will manifest in a timbre that is greatly different. These timbral variations in vocal works are meant to serve as insights into the character or narrator’s inner world, i.e., the thoughts and emotions happening within them at any given moment that we do not explicitly garnish from the text at hand.

Treating chaos as a part of formal structure is an integral part of Pape’s compositional style. His vocal music is highly notated, centered around microtonal pitch contours that mimic differing speeds and widths of an otherwise naturally occurring vibrato inherent in the classically-trained singing voice. While the pitches are prescribed, their mode of execution in rhythm is not. Pape gives the singer instructions on how many times within a given timeframe each note or set of notes are to be repeated, resulting in figures that will never be replicated exactly the same way twice. He goes on further to say that there should be no sense of regularly within the repetitions of notes or note patterns, building the formal chaos from lack of pulse, fixed rhythm, and somewhat variable overall duration of sound.

Manipulation of vocal timbre and resonance through the lens of emotional intent is a subject I have long been interested in. As a singer, I often rely on expression musicality through emotional storytelling of set texts. Necessary timbral changes from basic emotions like happy, sad, and angry, are fairly simple to achieve, however, the more complex emotions such as love, fear, despair, amusement, etc., are more nuanced and are

easiest to access and convey when singing from a place of emotional commitment to the expression of the text. Seeing this approach taken a step farther in Pape's musical output drew me to his works. Our first collaboration together, *Being Beauteous*, is his first exploration of the coloratura voice and its unique sonic capabilities.

London-based composer, James Erber, comes from the New Complexity lineage of composition. A former student of Jonathan Harvey and Brian Ferneyhough, Erber's works center around advanced polyrhythms and often contain twelve-tone melodies displaced over octaves. Twelve-tone music is one of my favorite types of vocal writing, with Anton Webern as a central figure of composers of my favorite repertoire. Much like Webern utilized the tone rows to create text settings that were rooted in Romantic tradition, Erber utilizes his own row constructions to elegantly tell the story of the text at hand.

Erber's compositional output is written exclusively for acoustic classical instruments, with only one previous vocal piece in existence. Composed in 1981, *Tacciono i Boschi* does not appear to be of the New Complexity ideology, but instead functions more as an extended recitative. When I first approached Erber for additional pieces for soprano and piano in 2016, I was expecting to receive a piece similar in structure to *Tacciono*. But instead Erber returned to his New Complexity roots in our first collaboration, entitled *Phoenix*. In spite of its difficulty in rhythm and pitch, this setting of two poems by 16th century poet, Giordano Bruno, is impressively lyrical in affect and beautifully follows the natural ebb and flow of the Italian language of the poetry. The

result is a romantically expressive song cycle that is modern in harmonic and melodic language, but harkens back to textures and colors from Baroque era solo motets, chant, and plainsong, with hints of Verdian overt expressionism embedded within the dynamic contours and sustained phrases of the vocal line.

Jeffrey Holmes is a native Los Angelean whose musical structures and inspiration derive largely from his cultural heritage in Sweden. Beginning his musical journey as a guitar player in rock bands, Holmes transitioned to classical guitar as a segue to classical music composition. By the beginning of his Masters degree studies in 2001, he had already created his own harmonic language wherein scales doubled, or began again, at the seventh rather than at the octave. The result is a scale structure that is ripe with microtonal intervals, living somewhere between the Just Intonation of Ben Johnston and the 43 notes to the octave of Harry Partch. This, paired with a strong rhythmic drive that is central to most all of his musical output, gives him a very distinctive, identifiable musical voice.

Heavily engaged in the study of the ancient Viking culture, Holmes writes and compiles his own texts for vocal pieces in Runic and Old Norse, both of which he actively studies. The subjects of his created texts are rooted in Norse mythology and consist of dramatically described, often exaggerated descriptions Scandinavian landscapes. But Holmes doesn't always like the text of his vocal works to be understood. A proponent of Magick, or the harnessing of naturally occurring, subtle energies and elements, he values the hidden or underlying meaning of things which are presented at

face value, and actively tries to activate underlying meanings and subtexts within his vocal works. This holds true in, *Mara*, our third collaboration together.

After receiving scores for all four of these newly commissioned works, common themes began to emerge from the pieces and their texts, and the title of the concert was born: NIGHT. These new commissions from Bishara, Pape, Erber, and Holmes are centered around darkness and a hope or active search of finding a source of light within the dark. The Bishara features a solitary voice exploring the void around them through sound, ultimately resolving into a place of familiarity; the Pape is set from the viewpoint of a young Rimbaud who has just had his heart crushed by a failed relationship and is struggling to come to terms with beginning a new life without his partner – an event which ultimately drove him away from art and writing poetry altogether; the Erber speaks on love strong enough to breathe renewed life into a person; and the Holmes depicts scenes from nightmares, ending in the calm and stillness of a waking dawn.

Kaija Saariaho's *Leinolaulut*, or Leino Songs, was also selected to compliment the commissioned portion of NIGHT. Composed in 2007 for soprano Anu Komsu, this piece is comprised of a setting of four poems by Finnish poet Eino Leino, and is Saariaho's first setting of poems in her native Finnish language. This song cycle is musically lush, sonically pleasant, and filled with ringing sustain in both piano and soprano parts. The texts used fit the theme of night, from the "Heavenly stars" of the second song to the "dream, dream, dream" and "deep sleep" of the final movement. Because this piece was not a part of the original scope of this project and contains no relevance to the

commissioning and premiere performance process, it will not be further discussed in this paper; however, a translation of the texts exists in the appendix, and audio and video recordings of the live performance are available for reference.

The program order as performed was *Black Sunday* by Joseph Bishara, *Leinolaulut* by Kaija Saariaho, *Phoenix* by James Erber, *Mara* by Jeffrey Holmes, and *Being Beauteous* by Gérard Pape. This order allowed the program to build in sonic intensity, beginning with a cappella soprano, moving into a slowly-developing aural landscape in the Saariaho, to a more complex but acoustically sparse and dry Erber, into a dense and aggressive Holmes, and ending with a sonic explosion of constantly moving microtonal singing with dense piano chords and arpeggiation in the Pape. Through this program order, a crescendo of sonic engagement and emotional expression was created, climaxing with the Holmes, and dissolving into the absurd with the final piece.

Both multitrack audio and still-frame video were used to document the live performance. Composers will receive unedited live video in addition to live audio tracks with minimal editing to correct for balance between soprano and piano, where appropriate. Future performances of all pieces will be considered as appropriate situations arise or are created, including professional recitals in the upcoming 2019-2020 season and beyond.

## CHAPTER 2: BLACK SUNDAY BY JOSEPH BISHARA

I first met film composer Joseph Bishara in 2011 when tracking for a horror film he was scoring, entitled *II.II.II*. I didn't know much about him at the time, but was immediately drawn to his use of the human voice in an instrumental role: the singer was given no text, was to use little to no vibrato except in key expressive moments, and was expected to produce pitches without any surrounding musical references within a cloud of pitchless electronic noise. This was an exciting challenge for me. The ending effect was a captivatingly ethereal and haunting vocal line that supported and provided insight to the action happening on screen. The experience stayed with me for some time thereafter as I reminisced what it was like to push the limits of my voice and musical capabilities during the session. It was the first time I had sung in my extreme high register with such sustain, and was the formative experience in knowing that I would pursue coloratura repertoire in my career.

Bishara's musical ideas are adventurous and unprecedented in his field of film scoring, utilizing a mixture of traditional methods of playing and extended techniques to create dissonant harmonies on acoustic classical instruments. Highly regarded in the horror film scoring world, Bishara has frequently expressed a desire to learn more about classical composition and try his hand at writing acoustic works for the stage. Interested to see what he would create, I asked him for a piece up to 6 minutes in duration for soprano with percussion, soprano with light electronics, or solo soprano. The result was

*Black Sunday*, a textless vocalise that utilizes a cappella sustained microtonal tunings that create a sonic world comprised of vastness, instability, and uncertainty. Over the course of the piece, a singular musical theme slowly evolves and deconstructs over time, ending where it began but slightly changed in rhythmic duration. This element of musical familiarity with varying manifestations over the entirety of the work amplifies the feelings of instability and vast wandering through an echo-like effect which becomes slightly mutated with each new repetition.

To highlight this inherent instability and sense of wandering for the premiere performance, I sang *Black Sunday* from the back corner of the stage without any stage or room lights on. Hearing this piece in the dark enabled the audience to create their own mental images from the resulting music without any pre-prescribed visual bias, offering an homage to the composer's roots in film, as each audience member constructed their own unique mini-film in their mind as the piece was performed. This production choice also created a frame for the night theme of the recital while allowing the piece to serve as a prelude to the music of increasing difficulty ahead.

After settling on a short piece for solo soprano, I left Bishara to work on his own schedule. When I received the score to *Black Sunday* a few months later, the piece was written as if for a flute, sitting an octave too high to be successfully sung in entirety during live performance by the human voice.



**Figure 1:** *Black Sunday* by Joseph Bishara, excerpt

After speaking with Bishara about this, we decided that a vast majority of the piece should be taken down the octave, only jumping up to place for the section of sustained high B's and A's near the end for dramatic impact.



**Figure 2:** *Black Sunday* by Joseph Bishara, excerpt

This choice makes sense as a musical trajectory, however the change in octave did create a change in timbre that altered my initial relationship to the work.

When hearing the piece in my head at the octave written, a spookier, more haunting and unapologetic timbre rang in my mind. I was not able to replicate this exact tone color in the lower octave where my voice is not as penetrating, and where there are more vocal breaks and differing registers to navigate. I tried to compensate for this by adding in differing percentages of air mixture to the sound, i.e., mixing in more breath sound for certain notes than for others. I believe this helped to create the spooky,

haunting effect which I was looking for, but did not replicate the sharp, piercing ringing sensation of notes in the uppermost octave. Instead, it resulted in the opposite effect of the super-focused vocal tone of the extreme high register, as the center of the tone in the lowered octave was often filled with breath and sometimes became nearly hollow. This was contrasted with the vocal clarity and narrow focus to resonance of pitch on the high B's and A's near the end of the work, but my initial instinct for the tone color of the work was not able to serve as the sonic foundation of the piece in this particular recital-style presentation.

In the future, I would like to make a recording of this piece where everything is sung at written pitch in order to explore the more piercing, penetrative vocal timbre that I initially heard in my head upon first seeing the score. This will require several days of vocal tracking to avoid overexertion and excessive strain to the instrument, as well as multiple hours of editing to stitch together phrase by phrase splices of the piece. But I do think that with meticulous vocal health and condition management, prolonging of the recording process over several days, and careful planning of needed edits to sew together the recorded bits and pieces into one larger work of meaningful art, this piece will eventually be possible to record as written, creating documentation of the ultimate interpretation that I hear in my head.

### CHAPTER 3: PHOENIX BY JAMES ERBER

I first connected with British composer James Erber over Facebook in 2015. Through his social media posts, Erber's New Complexity compositional style caught my eye, and his recordings peaked my interest as an avid interpreter of difficult and avant-garde music. I began to research his work and learned that he is a former student of Jonathan Harvey, whose work, *Song Offerings*, is one of the most beautiful pieces for soprano and ensemble that I have ever performed. Hoping there might be the same expressivity in Erber's music, I searched for his vocal works but continuously ran up against a wall. Finding none of his compositions for voice readily available online or in libraries, I messaged him directly to ask if any in fact existed. Erber had been intrigued by my own social media posts of my work in singing, and was thrilled to send me an unpublished score and recording of his only piece for voice, a 1981 setting of *Tacciono i Boschi* for soprano and piano.

Upon my first viewing of the score, I was surprised at the relative simplicity of the piece. The vocal lines resembled more of a recitative than a complex piece of work, with some places mirroring the writing of an Anglican chant. The sparsity of the piano part helped to highlight the voice while the two parts frequently play off of each other in hocketing rhythms and shared pitch material.

Tacciono i boschi  
for soprano and piano (1981)

James Erber  
Text by Torquato Tasso

The musical score is for a piece titled "Tacciono i boschi" by James Erber, with text by Torquato Tasso. It is written for Soprano and Piano. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 54, *poco rubato*. The Soprano part begins with a *p* dynamic, followed by *mf*, *gliss.*, *(pp)*, *p*, and *(mp)*. The lyrics are: "Tacciono i boschi e i fiumi, e'l mar, senz' on - da gia - ce." The Piano part includes instructions: "inside the piano", "on the keys", *pp*, *sempre*, and *poco marc.* at the end. A note at the bottom left says "*p* sempre" and "♩ throughout (to \_\_\_)".

**Figure 3:** *Phoenix* by James Erber, excerpt

The song was short in duration, clocking in at about two minutes in length – too short to program alone and leaving it in need of pairing with other works in order to create a set of songs for recital presentation. I told Erber I wanted to program this piece, but needed others to pair it with to which he replied that he would love to write some settings of poems by 16th century figure, Giordano Bruno. The resulting piece, *Phoenix*, was written dedicated to my husband, Jeffrey Holmes, and me as a wedding gift in December of 2016.

The style of this new composition is much more rhythmically complex in both soprano and piano, with time signature changes and polyrhythms occurring nearly every bar. The span of the piano and vocal registers are both significantly expanded, and the overall musical form is longer and more sophisticated.

In the first movement of *Phoenix*, "Unico augel del sol", a lover compares himself with the mythical Phoenix. The lover himself burns with transitory earthly love, while the

flames which periodically consume the Phoenix (the symbol of divine love) cause him to be reborn to new life.

Unico augel del sol, vaga Fenice,  
Ch'appareggi col mondo gli anni tui,  
Quai colmi ne l'Arabia felice,  
Tu sei chi fuste, io son quel che non fui.  
Io per caldo d'amor muoio infelice;  
Ma te rattiv'il sol co' raggi sui.  
Tu bruggi 'n un, ed io in ogni loco;  
Io da Cupido, hai tu da Febo il foco.

Hai termini prefissi  
Di lunga vita, e io ho breve fine,  
Che pronto s'offre per mille ruine;  
Né so quel che vivrò, né quel che vissi:  
Me cieco fato adduce,  
Tu certo torni a riveder tua luce.

Only bird of the sun, fair Phoenix,  
Who equals the world's years with your own,  
Which you live out in Arabia Felix,  
You are what you were, I am what I was not.  
I die unhappy from the heat of love,  
But the sun revives you with his rays.  
You burn in one, and I in every place.  
I have my fire from Cupid, you from Apollo.

You have fixed terms  
Of long life, and I have a short course,  
Which readily reveals itself in a thousand ruinings;  
Neither do I know what I shall I've out, nor what I have lived:  
Blind fate leads me,  
While you will surely return to see your light again.

*(adapted from the translation by George Kay)*

The piano plays a modern two part invention throughout the movement, while the vocal line expresses the text above, often showcasing word painting through pitch contour and rhythmic notation. An example of this appears in measure 6 of the song, where the words “ch'appareggi (which equals)” are all notes equal in rhythmic duration, but the notes surrounding the phrase are not equal to those particular words.



**Figure 4:** *Phoenix* by James Erber, excerpt

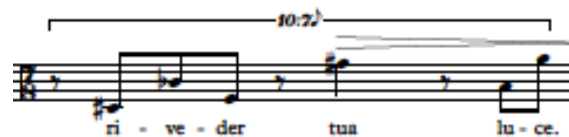
In measure 29 of the movement, Erber chooses to elongate the rhythm of the voice on the word “lunga (long)”, creating a literal setting of the word within the musical

storytelling by setting the rhythm of the word to be longer in duration than the notes preceding and following in the phrase.



**Figure 5:** *Phoenix* by James Erber, excerpt

On the word “luce (light)”, he sets the pitches to ascend, mirroring the symbolic ascension of light through the lens of love.



**Figure 6:** *Phoenix* by James Erber, excerpt

This approach to text setting helps the singer to contextualize the difficult rhythms and pitch content throughout the piece. Being able to rely on the meaning of the sung text in order to create the intended musical and dramatic arc of the notated phrases enables this complex music to work well in the human voice. Without careful text setting to follow natural contours of language, paired with help from compositional word painting as seen in Erber’s songs, the New Complexity compositional style can often come off as overly mechanical or detached from emotional expression. In short, it can easily sound like pitched mathematics instead of like expressive, meaningful music that is conveying a message. However, Erber manages to create a beautiful work through careful study of the

Italian text and wise notational choices in pitch contour and rhythmic relationships between notes and larger phrases.

The largest challenge within this movement is establishing and maintaining a steady pulse. The piano begins with a two bar introduction that is of no help in establishing the big beat of the piece. Bar one is notated in 5/8 with the right hand playing a figure in 8:5 and the left hand in 7:5. This moves into bar 2 in 7/8 with the right hand in 9:7 and the left hand in 10:7. When the soprano enters on the downbeat of bar 3, she is singing 5:4 in a 2/8 bar with the piano playing 9:8 and 3:2 underneath.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for 'Phoenix' by James Erber. It consists of three staves: a vocal line (soprano) and two piano staves (right and left hands). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 50. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into three measures. Measure 1 is in 5/8 time, with the right hand in 8:5 and the left hand in 7:5. Measure 2 is in 7/8 time, with the right hand in 9:7 and the left hand in 10:7. Measure 3 is in 2/8 time, with the soprano in 5:4, the right hand in 9:8, and the left hand in 3:2. Dynamics include *mf*, *mp*, *pp*, *f*, and *p*. The vocal line has the lyrics 'U - ni - co - ce - au - gel' under the notes. The piano part features complex rhythmic patterns with various note values and rests.

Figure 7: *Phoenix* by James Erber, excerpt

The first moment of real clarity of pulse occurs in measure 8 of the song, where exists a true 3/8 bar comprised of eighth and sixteenth notes. This is a place to lock into a solid pulse for the remainder of the movement, as is the right hand of the piano interlude in bars 10-11. The remainder of the movement has key moments where the soprano and piano lines relate to each other with some rhythmic unisons hidden within the complex

rhythmic equations, but not all are easy to latch onto due to speed of changing materials in the piano and registration of the soprano.

The second movement of *Phoenix*, "Ben ch'a tanti martir", is a paean to love which has caused the poet to suffer unimaginable torments while also rewarding him with transcendental vision.

Ben ch'a tanti martir mi fai soggetto,  
 Pur ti ringrazio, e assai ti deggio, amore,  
 Che con si nobil piaga apristi il petto,  
 E tan impadronisti del mio core,  
 Per cui fia ver, ch'un divo e viv' oggetto  
 Di dio piu bella imago in terra adore.  
 Pensi chi vuol, ch'il mio destin sia rio,  
 Ch'uccide in speme, e fa vivo in desio!

Pascomi d'alts impresa;  
 E ben ch'il fin bramato non consegua,  
 Et in tanto studio l'alma si dilegua,  
 Basta, che sia si nobilmente accesa,  
 Basta, ch'alto mi tolsi,  
 E da l'ignobil numero mi sciolsi.

I thank you and am grateful to you, o Love,  
 For you opened by breast with so generous a wound  
 And have so mastered my heart,  
 That it adores a divine and living object,  
 The most beautiful image of God on earth.  
 Let him who will think that my fate is cruel,  
 For it kills in hope and revives in desire.

I am nourished by my high enterprise,  
 And even if the soul does not attain the desired end,  
 And is consumed by so much zeal,  
 It is enough that it burns in so noble a fire;  
 It is enough that I have been raised up on high  
 And delivered from all ignoble ties.

(adapted from the translation by P. E. Memmo Jr.)

This movement contains many more vocal challenges than the first, but remains beautifully moving in its composition. The first challenge the singer faces is the speed of text. Notated at eighth note equals 70, this movement moves much quicker than the first, and generally contains more syllables per bar, which is not an insurmountable issue, however, the span of the vocal registration per syllable also generally covers more ground in shorter amounts of time, demanding strength in quick, seamless shifts between vocal registers from the singer.

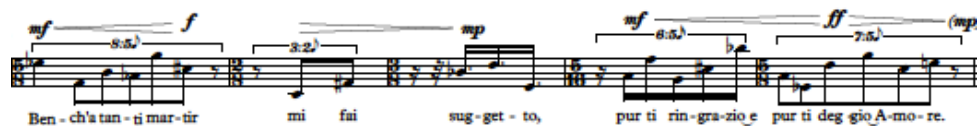


Figure 8: *Phoenix* by James Erber, excerpt

This large-leaping style is one of my favorite types of music to sing, similar in many ways to the late vocal music of Anton Webern for which I have a great admiration. But this can be limiting for some singers wishing to take on this piece who have not yet fully developed this particular skillset. Once this skill is strengthened, singing large leaps can be very rewarding through moving the muscles of the face, mouth, throat, neck, and abdomen in a delicately choreographed routine that appears effortless to the untrained eye.

Within the second movement, every bar of the vocal line changes rhythmic structure within differing time signatures, with only three instances of two consecutive bars having the same time signature throughout the entire movement.



**Figure 9:** *Phoenix* by James Erber, excerpt

This compositional technique creates a unique atmosphere reflective of spontaneity of thought and a narrator who is speaking off the cuff and from his heart. But this way of writing has the potential to create a disorienting feeling for the singer through consistent disguising of the strong beats within each measure. Downbeats, when sung or played by the piano, are good points of reference, but performers must be careful to hold the integrity of the pulse within the complex polyrhythms and subdivisions of each measure as well. With the rhythmic structure of the piano generally no help in tracking the larger

beat patterns for each time signature, the singer is forced to be entirely self-reliant on a strong, infallible internal pulse throughout the movement.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Che con sì no-bil pia-ga - pris - te il pet - to, e tal im-pa-dron-is-te del mio co-re". The score includes various dynamic markings such as *mf*, *f*, *mp*, *p*, *ff*, *pp*, and *mf*. There are also slurs and phrasing marks throughout the piece.

Figure 10: *Phoenix* by James Erber,

This movement ends with a sparsely accompanied humming soprano, representing the song of the Phoenix. The melody is beautiful and lyrical, but presents its challenges in registration through high, sustained, closed-mouth singing. This can be achieved through some finessing with a vocal sound that is narrowly focused with a high placement and fully relaxed tongue. When executed properly, the result is a beautiful and ethereal end to these wonderfully expressive love songs.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece. The tempo is marked "Più lento, tranquillo" with a metronome marking of 60. The instruction "(bouche fermée)" is written above the first few notes. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *pp*, *mp*, *f*, *mf*, *mp*, *pp*, *p*, *mf*, *mp*, *pp*, and *ppp*. There are also slurs and phrasing marks throughout the piece.

Figure 11: *Phoenix* by James Erber,

James Erber's song cycle, *Phoenix*, is a visually complex score, but invites a vocally romantic interpretation that results in aurally sonorous musical expression. While the difficulties of rhythm and pitch contour must at first be painstakingly practiced through mathematical calculation and limitless repetition, the text ultimately drives the musicality of the piece and frames the reason for why these difficult rhythms are necessary to delivering the message of the poetry: love, like life, is difficult, irregular, uncertain, and prone to moments of extremity. After the foundation of pitch and rhythm has been carefully built, allowing the story of the poetry to carry the burden of performance brings to life a beautifully moving, rich musical experience that is deserving of many performances to come.

The score of *Phoenix* is now available for purchase through Composers Edition.

## CHAPTER 4: MARA BY JEFFREY HOLMES

I first met composer Jeffrey Holmes in the fall of 2009. By the spring of 2011, he had written a four-movement song cycle for my voice with piano, entitled *Fragments*. This cycle was based on a Latin text that was broken up, or fragmented, over long melismatic lines. As a young, developing coloratura soprano, I found these extended phrases very difficult to sing, and the overall tessitura of the piece was a bit too low, often sitting near the bottom of the treble staff. But I was determined to perform the piece to the best of my ability, programming it over half a dozen times in the years to come.

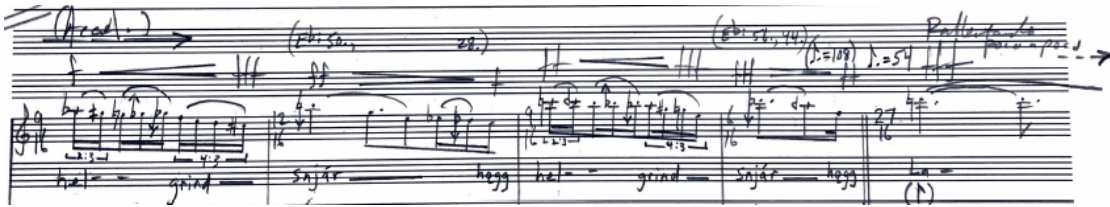
When another singer asked Holmes to write a piece for bass-baritone and trombone for the summer of 2016, he jumped at the opportunity and created a dramatic multi-movement work in Old Norse for a premiere that ultimately fell through. With no signs of future plans for the piece, he reworked it for high soprano and flute, and wrote another set of pieces for soprano, flute, guitar, and percussion to accompany these duo pieces. The result was a large-scale work that Holmes calls a monodrama. In this piece, *Myrkriða, Ljósleiðá*, exists two characters: one character who is alive and heads toward the moment of death is represented by flute and a variety of small percussion instruments that the soprano plays while singing; and one character who is in the afterlife and heads backwards toward the moment of death is represented by the larger ensemble. These two stories interweave over the course of approximately 25 minutes, ending in a calm, a cappella recitative from the soprano followed by slow repeated chords from the

ensemble. This work was originally to be performed as a part of NIGHT, but due to unforeseen circumstances, was replaced with a new commission for soprano and piano, titled *Mara*.

*Mara* marks my third collaboration with composer Jeffrey Holmes. Written during the winter of 2019, this piece is comprised of three continuous songs with piano introductions on a Runic and Old Norse text compiled by the composer.

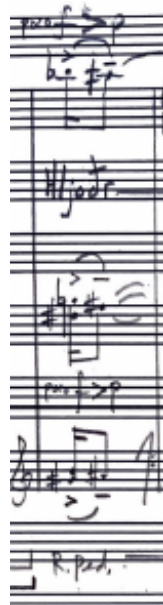
I. Ór Vetrinn Hljóðr vatn blár skikkja Herfiligar kala þoka Dauði vindr galagaldr	I. From Winter Silent lake, blue cloak Harsh freezing mist Death-wind sings spells.
II. Ók Náttá Qlfossa tunglskin ormr Sky dreyrigr bylgja Úrvedr kala	II. Become Night Turbulent river, moonlit Serpent Blood-stained clouds billow Cold rainstorm.
III. At Gap Ægir meinsamr ríkr dreki Þrymja færa dǫuðarorð Snjár hogg helgrind bardagibani hefnd	III. To the Chasm Violent sea, powerful Dragon Thunder hurls death-tidings Snow strikes death-gate, Battle-Slayer, vengeance.

This work utilizes musical themes that evolve and return periodically over the course of the piece to support a dramatic arc which culminates in quickly-rising pitch material in the soprano part near the end of the third song that combines elements from all three musical or motivic themes, ultimately climaxing on a sustained high D accompanied by a *rallentando* in tempo.



**Figure 12:** *Mara* by Jeffrey Holmes, excerpt

The first musical theme introduced is the theme of the lake. This is represented by chord clusters marked with an accent followed by tenuto in both piano and soprano parts, with descending equal tempered microtonal scales in the soprano. These sonorities serve to build up resonance while symbolizing the depth of a lake below a calm, placid surface.



**Figure 13:** *Mara* by Jeffrey Holmes, excerpt

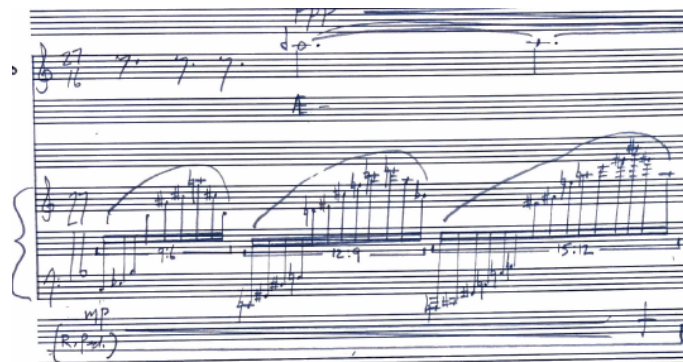
This lake theme comprises the foundation of the first song in the piece, and returns momentarily in the second and third songs, in addition to being prominent in the piano prelude and interludes.

The second theme represents the river, and is seen mainly in song two, but also appears in song three and in the piano prelude and interludes between songs. This theme is constructed of polyrhythmic scales with grace note figures in the piano, while the soprano part is divided into a turbulent ascending motivic melody and descending equal tempered microtonal scales that are more complex and include more pitches than the lake theme.



**Figure 14:** *Mara* by Jeffrey Holmes, excerpt

The third theme to appear is the theme of the ocean, represented by wide register arpeggios in thirds and fifths. This theme serves as the foundation of the third song, but also appears in the piano prelude and interludes. The soprano moves over this theme in an elongated, slowly descending motivic melody.



**Figure 15:** *Mara* by Jeffrey Holmes, excerpt

Holmes' compositional language consists of microtonality in third, quarter, and sixth tones, heavily utilized throughout the soprano lines. This tuning system serves to create harmonically tuned over and undertone series that are representative of the scales being used in any given musical moment. The scales in this music do not repeat at the octave, but instead at the seventh, lending to more frequent microtonal intervals within scale passages. This musical language Holmes has created can be complex to settle into at first, but makes great amounts of sense when paired with the harmonic language of support from the regularly tuned piano underneath, as the notes to be sung occur naturally in the harmonic series of overtones from the sustained piano chords.



**Figure 16:** *Mara* by Jeffrey Holmes, excerpt

The text of the songs is mostly elongated over melismas, often times several bars long in duration, obscuring the meaning of the text as it is being sung. This creates a state that is somewhat between reality and fantasy, described in the title of *Mara*, or “dreams”.

But being unable to decipher much of the text, nor inherently understand the chosen language of Old Norse and the closing Runic inscription, does not dampen the dramatic impact of this piece. Holmes' use of a wide array of dynamics, driving rhythmic and polyrhythmic figures, and extremities of range in both piano and voice create a turbulent, exciting landscape that lives somewhere between the Impressionism of Ravel, the extremity of operatic Ligeti, and the mathematical precision of Xenakis.

The melismas of *Mara* generally fit better my voice better than the melismas of *Fragments* because of their higher tessitura, their propensity for more forward motion, and the sonic support from the ringing piano material underneath, which all make it easier to sustain and move through the long phrases. The language of Old Norse is not yet comfortable in my mouth, as some of the consonant clusters feel awkward and are difficult to make quickly enough to properly sustain the vowels of the text. This is a skillset I will continue to develop while planning future performances for this enthralling work.

After hearing the premiere performance at NIGHT on April 13, Holmes decided to make slight revisions to the soprano lines around the climax near the end of the third song. Instead of having the soprano build up to the highest note (D) by small steps on the downbeats of the preceding bars, he lowered many notes above the staff throughout the entirety of the third song to notes at or near the top of the treble staff in hopes of making the high D near the end sound more stratospheric, unprecedented, and climactic. Future

performances of *Mara* will occur with these edits. The new version of the score is available for purchase through the composer's publisher, Composers Edition.

## CHAPTER 5: BEING BEAUTEOUS BY GÉRARD PAPE

I initially connected with French composer, Gérard Pape, via Facebook in 2014. After winning Grand Prize in the Young Musician's Foundation Concerto Competition in 2015, I received a well-documented and highly publicized performance of György Ligeti's *Mysteries of the Macabre* with the YMF Debut Orchestra. It was at this time that Gérard saw my love of performing psychologically explorative and demanding music through my work on the Ligeti aria, and proposed working together on a future endeavor. Over the years, he has expressed deep interest in writing a character in one of his several operas for me, but the funding to mount the project has not yet been secured, and thus the continued composition of the piece has not commenced.

Fascinated by his approach to the psychological aspect of music, humanity, and singing, I searched for works by Pape for soprano and piano to program on a former recital, and came up empty handed. After reaching out to him directly to ask if he has any songs or cycles for soprano and piano, he replied no but that he would love to write something for me. The result was an approximately 14 minute work for microtonal soprano with piano on the French text, "Being Beauteous", by Arthur Rimbaud.

Devant une neige un Être de Beauté de haute taille.  
Des sifflements de mort et des cercles de musique  
sourde font monter, s'élargir et trembler comme un  
spectre ce corps adoré: des blessures écarlates et  
noires éclatent dans les chaires superbes. Les  
couleurs propres de la vie se foncent, dansent, et  
se dégagent autour de la Vision, sur le chantier.  
Et les frissons s'élèvent et grondent, et la

In front of the snow stands a tall Beauteous Being.  
The hissing of death and circles of muffled music  
make this adored body climb, expand, tremble:  
black and scarlet wounds  
burst in the superb flesh.  
The proper colors of life darken, dance,  
and give off around the vision, upon the yard.  
And the shudders rise and fall, and

savoir forcenée de ces effets se chargeant avec les sifflements mortels et les rauques musiques que le monde, loin derrière nous, lance sur notre mère de beauté, - elle recule, elle se dresse. Oh! nos os sont revêtus d'un nouveau corps amoureux.

the maniacal flavor of these effects being charged with the mortal hissing and raucous music that the world, well behind us, hurls on our mother of beauty-she withdraws, she stands up. O! Our bones are dressed again in a new amorous body.

Pape's setting of "Being Beauteous" frames the text from the point of view of the young poet Rimbaud, disheartened from the ending of a violent extramarital affair with fellow poet, Paul Verlaine, resulting in a heartbreak so great that it is rumored to have ultimately prompted Rimbaud to move away and leave his literary career all together. Intended to be performed from this point of view as if immediately following the initial break up, Pape utilizes notated timbres in the vocal line as a way to peer into the psyche of the confused, disheartened character.

Figure 17: *Being Beauteous* by Gérard Pape, excerpt

This quickly-changing extramusical layer serves to help the singer bring to life a character who is disturbed, emotionally volatile, and overtly expressive of his emotions.

But finding how to create these differing vocal timbres and emotional affects is not simple. The vocal range of each notated state of being already plays into natural vocal timbre, as does the inherent color and resonance of each individual singer's instrument.

To find ways to vary these naturally occurring timbres while still adhering to the prescribed pitches, dynamics, and states of being requires great imagination and creativity in manipulation of the instrument. Differing emotional intents do vary the shape of the overall vocal tract in minute ways, slightly altering the resulting vocal timbre. This is the reason singers can sound happy, sad, or angry while singing. However, to create the more nuanced timbres that Pape asks for requires a shift in mentality toward an ultimate freedom of expression to a degree that may normally be considered taboo. In this realm, all actions and emotions must be greatly heightened, with exaggerated differences between the called for “exploding”, “waves of sensuality”, “excited”, and “soft, sensual”, which occur in successive measures and with each change of word.

Figure 18 is a musical score excerpt for the piece 'Being Beauteous' by Gérard Pape. It features a vocal line with various performance instructions and dynamic markings. The score is divided into four measures, each with a specific instruction above it: 'exploding!' (12"), 'waves of sensuality' (6"), 'excited' (4"), and 'soft, sensual' (7"). The notes are marked with '34P:6"', 'R.x7:6"', 'R.x4:4"', and 'P=17:2" P=26:3" P=17'. The lyrics are 'EDA - TENT DANS LES CHA - I - RS'. The dynamics are marked as 'sub ffff', 'sub mf', 'mp', 'sub ff', 'f', and 'ff'. The tempo is marked as '♩ = 75'.

Figure 18: *Being Beauteous* by Gérard Pape, excerpt

To further heighten the emotional affect of the character and highlight his instability, Pape utilizes the extremes of the coloratura vocal range throughout the piece.

Figure 19 is a musical score excerpt for the piece 'Being Beauteous' by Gérard Pape. It features a vocal line with various performance instructions and dynamic markings. The score is divided into two measures, each with a specific instruction above it: 'sub. frozen, trembling voice' (10") and 'hoarse, breathy' (8"). The notes are marked with 'R.x8:3"/R.x8:3"/R.x8:4"', 'R.x9:5"', and 'R.x11:3"'. The lyrics are 'MU - SI - QUE - SOUR - DE'. The dynamics are marked as 'sub pp' and 'pppp'.

Figure 19: *Being Beauteous* by Gérard Pape, excerpt

Much like in the Erber, vocal acrobatics are required in order to achieve the desired seamless shifts between registers. However, Pape’s use of register shifts often more closely mirrors the extreme leaps of Mozart than the consistent usage of Webern. In this piece, much like in Mozart’s arias, extreme high passages are usually prepared by passages in the lower register, helping to relax the muscles surrounding the vocal folds before stratospheric singing, much of which is sustained over long periods of duration. This helps the singer to maintain the physical endurance necessary for this extreme style of singing, which is particularly needed in the Pape because there are no moments of rest or places for the singer to breathe until measure 81, already well over 10 minutes into the piece as notated.

In lieu of traditional rhythmic notation, Pape elects to use durational time as a marker for length in this piece, with additional remarks on each pitch to denote the number of times each note or set of notes repeats (R), pulses (P), or arpeggiates (A) within the given amount of time; rests are notated by “S”.

Figure 20: *Being Beauteous* by Gérard Pape, excerpt

Pape states that the performers need not be concerned with exactness of notated duration of time, and in fact should avoid feeling a pulse of quarter note equals sixty through the transfiguration of counting seconds. Instead, time is actually relatively free, wherein relationships between sections should remain proportionally accurate. Pape also states that repetitions, pulses, and arpeggiations should not be rhythmic or predictable, but should vary in terms of speed of repetition. This is a form of constructed chaos that he utilizes as a compositional tool. I personally believe that performers and audience members alike need some regularity of pulse to latch onto in order for chaos to be effective, however, Pape specifically asked for zero moments of regularity in this performance. This also makes it more difficult to accurately track durational time, particularly when trying to feel seconds passing by without morphing into the feeling of quarter note equals 60 beats per minute.

Feeling durational relationships while accurately performing the specified number of pulses and repetitions on the correct microtonal pitch contours is a challenge that requires creative thinking and problem solving. Because singing a melody utilizes the right side of the brain and language utilizes the left side of the brain, we as singers are already fully-engaged with just a simple melody and text. But to also add in counting of repetitions over specific predetermined durations of time is far from easy, and is something I am still striving to perfect. Through rigid practice, repetitions of smaller numbers have become accurate, but larger numbers like 28, 34, and 49 remain

approximate. This is something I will continue to work to perfect for future performances, and is something that should be given due attention by future performers.

The many layers of notational complexity in Pape's *Being Beauteous* require special consideration and a studious approach to decipher and realize, but the end result is well worth the means: a unique, shimmering sonic landscape occurs as a result of the microtonal soprano lines against the regularly tuned piano; a heightened sense of anticipation builds through swells of dynamics, often unpredictably; and an emotional arc takes audiences for an unexpected journey through realms of trepidation and delight. Creating a character who is perhaps lingering on the very edge of sanity is a performative strength of mine, and is well suited to the coloratura voice. There are many successful aspects of Pape's piece, and others that could perhaps be better tailored to suit a singing human being whose instrument is based on breath.

## CONCLUSION

The pieces that comprised the commissioned part of my dissertation recital, NIGHT, presented challenges that required creative problem solving as a singer and interpreter. With each repeated performance, these solutions will become more refined and the overall impact of the pieces can in turn be heightened. I have enjoyed the challenge of bring these works by Bishara, Erber, Holmes, and Pape to life, and actively seeking opportunities to program them as again as an entire recital or as individual parts of the whole.

For the next live performance of the Bishara, I would like to engage in new ways of creating the timbral resonance I long to hear from the notated stratospheric register, without creating a unpleasant harsh or pressed vocal tone. I would also like to explore minimal staging or more creative lighting design to accompany the wordless vocal lines, many of which can be beautifully shaped through performer-added dynamics.

The Erber songs are a part of my first solo album, *Luminous*, which also features works written for my voice. This album has finished post-production and is awaiting mail out to record labels large and small. Printing of a small batch of sample discs is on the to-do list for June, at which time they will be sent to labels for consideration of distribution.

The Holmes, now in its edited form, has been pitched to several concert series in Los Angeles for the upcoming season. For the next performance, I will work to integrate the musical phrasing the way it is notated in the score instead of relying so heavily on my

natural musical instincts. This is an easy change to make, requiring only time for the muscles to accept the reframing of strong and weaker notes within phrases. The published, typeset score will also be instrumental in facilitating this process.

For the next performance of the Pape, I want to return to key moments of regularity in the overall pulse, giving myself, the pianist, and the audience something to latch onto during the 14 minutes of musical chaos. I will continue to work toward accurate relationships between sections, most notable those that last longer than 10 seconds per musical statement. Working up this piece is much like training for the vocal Olympics – the singing muscles have to build up to the proper stamina level over time. One day I will be ready to perform the piece and make it last the full 14 minutes, but until then, the durational relationships can still be more accurate.

The pieces from this program will comprise the core of my first European solo recital tour during 2020. I am currently working together with musical contacts to create concerts in London, Paris, and Stockholm. It is my goal to present this repertoire in Europe to showcase the fabulous work of these dedicated composers while making new contacts through those who may come to or hear of the concert.

More commissions are in my future as I continue to grow and perfect the repertoire available for coloraturas to sing. I hope to inspire composers to create the works they hear in their head without fear of limitation by singer abilities, singers to be adventurous and take risks, and audiences to be drawn by curiosity to new works.

## APPENDIX

Kaija Saariaho *Leinolaulut*, settings of four Eino Leino poems. English translations by Kirsten Ashley Wiest and Päivikki Nykter.

### *Sua Katselen*

Sua katselen silmin ma huikaistu  
kuin kaunista sateenkaarta,  
sua silmäni sulkien muistelen kuin  
meren laskija lehtosaarta.

Sua katson ma hiljaa henkien  
kuin kuvaa äitini armaan  
ja ukson, ett' enkelit lapsuuden  
nyt lähellä liikkuvat varmaan.

When I open my eyes, I am mesmerized  
by a beautiful rainbow.  
When I close my eyes, I remember you  
as a fisherman remembers his island

When I look, breathing silently,  
like a picture of my graceful mother,  
I believe that angels of childhood  
stir nearby.

### *Sydän*

I.  
Sydän, mitä sahaat?  
Sahaatko lautaa  
neljää, joiden  
välissä maata,  
maata mun mieluisa on?  
Sahaan ma rautaa,  
kahleita katkon,  
että sun henkesi  
vapaa oisi,  
henkesi onneton.

II.  
Sydän, mitä kuiskaat?  
Kuiskitko kummaa  
polkua päivän  
tunturin tietä  
taivahan tähtiä päin?  
Kuiskin ma tummaa  
runoa Tuonen,  
kuiluja vaivaa  
virkkamatonta,  
autuutta ylpeäin.

I.  
Heart, what do you saw?  
You are sawing  
four pieces of wood  
for me to comfortably  
lie between.  
I am sawing my iron  
shackles open,  
so that your  
unhappy spirit  
will be free.

II.  
Heart, what are you whispering?  
You whisper  
the path of the day,  
down the mountain road  
and toward the Heavenly stars.  
I whisper dark  
poems of death,  
troublesome gaps  
abound.  
Arrogant blessedness.

### *Rauha*

Mitä on nää tuoksut mun ympärillän?  
Mitä on tämä hiljaisuus?  
Mitä tietävi rauha mun sydämessäin,  
Tää suuri ja outo ja uus?

Minä kuulen kuink' kukkasat kasvavat  
ja metsässä puhuvat puut.  
Minä luulen, nyt kypsyvät unelmat  
ja toivot ja tuo'ot muut.

Kaikk' on niin hiljaa mun ympärillän,  
kaikk' on niin hellää ja hyvää.  
Kukat suuret mun aukeevat sydämessäin  
ja tuoksuvat rauhaa syvää.

What are these scents around me?  
What is this silence?  
What does this peace in my heart mean,  
so big and strange and new?

I hear the flowers growing  
and the trees talking in the woods.  
I believe my dreams are growing, too,  
bringing hope and more dreams.

Everything is so quiet around me,  
everything is so tender and good.  
The flowers bloom inside my heart  
and the fragrance is deep peace.

### *Iltarukous*

Unta, unta, unta  
syvää uinumaan.  
Lunta, lunta, lunta  
päälle mustan maan.

Yössä, yössä, yössä  
öiset lunnut lentää.  
Työssä, työssä, työssä  
lepää tuskat sentään.

Lennä, lennä, lennä  
aatos inehmon!  
Mennä, mennä, mennä  
aika maata on.

Dream, dream, dream  
deep sleep.  
Snow, snow, snow  
on black earth.

In the night, in the night, in the night  
fly the birds of the night.  
In work, in work, in work  
my pains do rest.

Fly, fly, fly  
thoughts!  
Go, go, go,  
it's time to sleep.