CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

"LIFE IS MADDERING"
STEVEN J. VAIL IN GRADUATE VOICE RECITAL

An abstract submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Music,
Performance

by

Steven J. Vail

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California State University, Northridge
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ABSTRACT

“LIFE IS MADDENING”
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Let us consider that we are all partially insane. It will explain us to each other; it will unriddle many riddles; it will make clear and simple many things which are involved in haunting and harassing difficulties and obscurities now.
– Mark Twain [Christian Science]

A great volume of material has been written in textbooks to suggest that a composer suffers from a handicap, a sort of emotional or psychological torment which, when properly channeled, produces a brilliant musical work. From Beethoven’s deafness to Chopin’s presumed epilepsy, biographical resources inevitably highlight these ailments/taboo [however unfortunate] as substantially contributive to each composer’s success. Indeed impediments have come to be considered almost a necessity for artistic genius; that is, it is impossible to compose anything worthwhile without having experienced some deep distress or ailment which propels ones work to its highest potential. While it may be true that many composers held in the highest esteem, including each of the composers for this project, encountered particular hardship, perhaps their suffering is not of special significance to their music. Although suffering may focus inspiration, the idea of art imitating life must cause us to consider suffering or torment is common to each living being, life is maddening and the exemplary composers are merely
the most expressive of that commonality.

Wolfgang A. Mozart’s _Ezio_ highlights a classic story of treachery, forbidden love and the familial casualties that ensue. Fulvia’s threat to expose her father’s assassination attempt on the emperor creates a typical, albeit fantastic, family feud complete with name-calling – noting the rhythmic stress and subsequent melisma on the words “ingrata” and “traditor.” “Va dal furor portata” is perfect vehicle for such an argument with the prelude setting a distraught mood, anticipating the very thoughts of the enraged father before the first line seemingly explodes in a robust _forte_. If ever an opera exhibited relational dysfunction, however, few are more exemplary than _Le Nozze di Figaro_ (subtitled in Italian as “The Day of Madness”). In the thick of an already tumultuous plot, Basilio’s aria of maturation paradoxically describes a ridiculous encounter with the mythical “Dame Composure,” and a horrendous beast. “In quegli anni” is set in a typical Italian form with an _andante_ opening section, slower middle, a minuet in this case, and an up-tempo, _allegro_ conclusion. This creates intriguing figures in the orchestration related to the plot of Basilio’s story, particularly with the thunder and crashing of the storm.

If love were ever responsible for driving a composer to madness, Robert Schumann is likely its best-known victim. The legendary love story between Robert and Clara Wieck inspired the creation of the _Liederkreis_ song cycle, featuring the poetry of Eichendorff. Robert superimposed his feelings of hope, desire, frustration, and ultimate victory into these settings, beginning with “In der Fremde.” Comprised of a chromatic and melancholy accompaniment, the piano mirrors the depression of the text set in a lyric melody that is echoed and anticipated by the piano several times throughout piece. The infamous “Waldesgespräch” follows with the woman’s soothing arpeggios luring the
young man to his destruction with the stark change of key in the accompaniment. Just when all feels dark and lost, a shimmer of hope emerges in the most beautiful song of the Liederkreis. “Mondnacht,” is the romantic blending of the starry night and the fertile earth coupled with a gently moving bass line. The poet longs for this blending, to be with his beloved in a strophic textual setting of the very soul of the poet. The introduction and melody return over and over, demonstrating the infatuation with which our lover perpetually fixes on his beloved. In his setting of “Wehmut,” Robert seems to mourn some relational hindrance, likely reminiscent of his struggles with his obstinate father in law. The chordal accompaniment does little other than to support the tonality and thus affirm the inner struggle of the lover, the piano only taking its own, small response with a short postlude of condolence. The cycle finally concludes with a triumphant exclamation of joy in “Frühlingsnacht.” A giddy accompaniment celebrates the union of the lovers with quick, short bursts of energy descending with the gradually quickening of rhythm and volume until the poet’s final words – “She is yours!” Although Robert and Clara were wed in spite of her father’s objections, it should be noted that Robert was later driven to a state of insanity in which he claimed to hear voices and eventually attempted suicide. Robert died in an insane asylum in 1856, at which time Clara and life-long friend Johannes Brahms, believing that Robert’s illness had tainted his compositions, destroyed a few of Robert’s later works.

The maddening potential of love is seen even more clearly as infatuation with the songs of Gabrielle Fauré. “Clair de lune” was Fauré’s first setting of Verlaine’s passionate poetry and was considered by Ravel to be one of the most beautiful songs ever written. An independent solo piece for the piano with its own distinct melody and harmonic
structure subtly weaves the vocal line into the texture, [a ground-breaking occurrence in French mélodie]. The piece exemplifies Fauré’s increased use of modality, subtler harmonic touches, and the implementation of motivic material functioning as linking elements. In a similar mood, “Le Secret” opens with a brief, four-chord introduction which subtly and warmly appears to awaken two lovers after an intimate evening. And yet, despite the poet’s desire to suppress the secret of the rendezvous, his excitement can hardly be contained at the climactic “penché.” Tennyson’s famous concept “‘Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all” is further indicative of love driving a person to madness, particularly in the sorrow found in “L’absent.” A bare accompaniment depicts both swaying grass and tolling bells in a rocking and melancholy mood, an atmosphere which continues until the *un poco piu mosso* where it finally gives way to triplet figures, enhancing the emotionalism of the piece while continuously crescendoing to the cathartic cries of the lover and child. The realization of loss is made even more plangent by the melancholy chords beneath a hesitant vocal line conceding the final mystery of the absent one: “un cercueil.”

No portrayal of the commonality of human suffering would be complete without a comment on religion. Indeed, the very institution to which humans cling for relief from suffering often becomes the very cause of it and, in madness, the desire for something greater than the self is all too attractive. Of the American composers famous for setting religious texts, few are as prolific as Charles Ives. His heart-warming, 20th Century compositions hearken to a simpler time in American culture as seen in this particular set of songs. Ives sets the classic hymn “Shall we Gather at the River” to a tone of curiosity and concern. Whether reminiscent of loss as with “In der Fremde” or a longing for eternal
intimacy as with “Le Secret,” Ives seems to wonder if any reunion will occur. The selection of a haunting 12/8 melody stands in stark contrast to the traditional hymn, lending more toward the curiosity particularly within those phrases which close with ritardandi. Curiosity gives way to introspection with “Serenity” and chant-like vocal lines indicative of a further spiritual necessity to quiet the heart. A soft, ethereal piano accompaniment appears to confirm this mantra along with the composer’s request for “little or no change in tempo or volume throughout.” Finally, in an andante realization, Ives’ “Religion” impresses what feels like a religious conclusion; that “the heart lives by faith” regardless of creed, emphasized with the fortissimo chords beneath “There is no unbelief” and the softer, maestoso conviction that “God knoweth why.”

Ives also wrote several reflective pieces about home and his early 1900s childhood which were heavily entrenched in American folk song and religious concepts. For Ives the idea of home is closely linked with the possibility to withdraw from life’s madness and to re-immersse oneself into a loving and soothing environment. A proverbial “flash-back” or “trip down memory lane” is certainly appropriate. The selection of “Old Home Day” brings with it familiar tunes including “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” along with additional images of early 20th Century American pastimes including white picket fences and “the dear old trees.” “Remembrance” brings Wordsworth’s “The music in my heart I bore, long after it was heard no more” into further focus with a slow and dampered, arpeggiated introduction sounding a distant memory in the ear of the singer - “My father’s song.” The longing for home continues in “Down East,” again with a sound, a song in this instance, which conjures memories in a
haze of chromaticism before the “down home” melody and a restatement of the initial “Remembrance” with the reappearance of the “Nearer my God to Thee” tune.

*Peter Grimes*, long upheld as Benjamin Britten’s greatest contribution to operatic literature, brings an examination of life’s madness to its ultimate culmination. The opera is rife with struggle, an echo of Britten’s own struggle. From the tumultuous scoring of the sea, to the hero’s sad rejection by the Borough, to the heart-breaking “mad scene,” the audience observer cannot help but to be overwhelmed with sorrow and even, in some manner, privately pained. It was only the urging of Britten’s first mentor, librettist W.H. Auden, that spurred Britten to begin the exploration of his feelings of disaffection, alienation, and oppression. In an often quoted letter to the composer, Auden writes,

> If you are to develop into your full stature, you will have to think, to suffer, and to make others suffer, in ways which are totally strange to you at the present, and against every conscious value that you have; i.e. you will have to be able to say what you never yet have had the right to say – God, I’m a shit.

In her book, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, Claire Seymour describes how Britten came to that suffering.

For Britten, opera was the natural medium through which to explore and express his private concerns...unable to openly confront these issues in life, Britten dramatized them in his music, searching for a metaphorical, a magical space, place or language where his sexuality and identity could be powerfully redefined. His art thus became a “haven,” as he sublimated and transferred his emotional tensions from the real world to the creative world of his imagination. The inherent ambiguity of opera, where “meaning” might be either enhanced or obscured by the interaction of text and music, provided Britten with a protective screen behind which he was able to return obsessively to the fruitless gratification of his desire for the unattainable, indefinable and illegitimate.

In the midst of the town’s gossip at Auntie’s tavern, Peter returns to the borough with his new apprentice and, in a seemingly drunk or delusional state sings the beautiful “Now the
Great Bear and Pleiades” aria in which he longs for the chance to amend his unfortunate past. The aria demands precision and tremendous control as the vocal line is primarily sung on E-natural in the tenor passagio, lending a placid and bewildered tone to Peter’s pondering. Despite whatever provisions the horoscope may have allowed, the town’s rejection and criticism drive Peter to the brink of insanity with the tantric “To Hell with All Your Mercy.” Like “Now the Great Bear,” this aria also requires especial attention on the singer’s part due to the frequent change of registers and a constantly chromatic vocal line. The aria reaches its climax with the agitato fortissimo “Peter Grimes!” before dipping to a placid triple piano and the dolce “What harbor shelters peace?” and Peter’s suicide by drowning.

These ponderings on suffering, with libretti which teem with familial discord, love, loss, religion, and rejection are all subjects quite familiar to humankind, if not common-place. And yet they are the very themes which make these compositions the most memorable. With such a spectrum of suffering possible to each person in nearly every aspect of life – be it rejection by the musical establishment as with Ives, Fauré’s marital strife or any of the ailments which plague our composers, perhaps we might allow each other the grace of insanity as Twain suggests. Perhaps we are all in some way, in some reaction to life’s madness, insane.
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTH RIDGE
MIKE CURB COLLEGE OF ARTS, MEDIA, AND COMMUNICATIONS
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

PRESENT:

STEVEN J. VAIL | TENOR
ROGER CANTRELL | COLLABORATIVE PIANIST

"LIFE IS MADDENING"

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE MASTER OF MUSIC DEGREE IN VOCAL PERFORMANCE.
"LIFE IS MADDENING"

RECITAL PROGRAM

“A family is a place where minds come in contact with one another. If these minds love one another, the home will be as beautiful as a flower garden. But if these minds get out of harmony with one another, it is like a storm that plays havoc with the garden.”

— Buddha

I. Va, dal furor portata
   from Ezio (Metastasio)
   In queglianni
   from Le Nozze di Figaro (Da Ponte)

   +---+

   “Love is a temporary insanity curable by marriage or by removal of the patient from the influences under which he incurred the disorder.”

   — Ambrose Bierce

II. Liederkreis (Eichendorff)
   I. In der fremde
   III. Waldesgespräch
   V. Mondnacht
   IX. Wehmut
   XII. Frühlingsnacht

   +---+

   “I have loved to the point of madness; That which is called madness, That which to me, is the only sensible way to love.”

   — Francoise Sagan

III. Clair de lune (Verlaine)
    Le Secret (Silvestre)
    L’absent (Hugo)

   +---+

   INTERMISSION
"Religious ideas have the fate of melodies, which, once set afloat in the world, are taken up by all sorts of instruments, some of them woefully coarse, feeble, or out of tune, until people are in danger of crying out that the melody itself is detestable."

– George Eliot

IV. At the River (Lowry)
Serenity (Whittier)
Religion (Bixby)

Ives
(1874 – 1954)

"The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

– Maya Angelou

Old Home Day (Ives)
Remembrance (Case & Bixby)
Down East (Ives)

+-+-+

"Insanity is the only sane reaction to an insane society."

– Thomas Szas

V. Peter Grimes (Slater & Crabbe)
Now the Great Bear and Pleiades
To Hell with All Your Mercy

Britten
(1913 – 1976)

with Megan Vail, soprano
TRANSLATIONS

Va, dal furor portata

Go, transported by fury,
reveal the treachery;
but remember, ingrater, who is the traitor.

In queglianni

In youth, when one’s inexperienced reason is of little value,
I too had the same fire.
I was a fool, but now I am not.
But with time and troubles, Dame Composure arrived
and I drove my childish whims and obstinacies out of my head.

She took me to a small, nearby house one day.
She took down from the wall of that peaceful residence -
the hide of a donkey.
"Take it," she said, "oh dear son!"
Then she disappeared and left me.
While I was silently looking at the gift, the sky clouded over,
the thunder boomed, the rain poured mixed with hail.
There I used the donkey's hide she had given me to cover my limbs.
After the storm ceased, I didn't take two steps before a horrible beast
appeared before me; already it touches me with its greedy mouth, and
now I have no hope of defending myself.
But the smell of my despicable garment so stole the beast's appetite that,
scooring me, it returned to the woods.

Thus fate made it known to me that, from shame, dangers, humiliation,
and death, one can escape wearing the skin of an ass.

In der fremde

From my homeland, behind the red flashes of lightning,
the clouds come here.
But father and mother are long dead;
no one there knows me anymore.

How soon, ah, how soon will that quiet time come when I too shall rest,
and over me the beautiful forest's solitude will murmur?
And no one here will know me anymore.
Waldesgespräch

"It is already late, it is already cold; why do you ride alone through the wood? The wood is vast and you are alone, you beautiful bride! I will lead you home."

"Great is the deceit and cunning of men; my heart has broken from pain. The forest horn is heard here and there, Oh flee! You do not know who I am."

"So richly adorned are mount and lady, so wondrously fair the young form; now I recognize you - God stand by me! You are the witch Loreley."

"You recognize me well - from the lofty cliffs my castle gazes silently down into the Rhine. 'It is already late, it is already cold;' you will never again leave this wood."

Mondnacht

It was as if heaven had softly kissed the earth, so that, in a shimmer of blossoms, she could only dream of him.

The breeze wafted through the fields, the ears of corn waved gently, the forests rustled faintly, the night and stars were so clear.

And my soul spread its wings out, flew through the still lands, as if it were flying home.

Wehmut

Sometimes I can sing as if I were happy, but secretly, tears well up and free my heart.

The nightingales, when spring breezes play, let their songs of yearning resound from the depths of their dungeons.

Then all hearts listen and everyone rejoices; yet no one truly feels the anguish of the song's deep sorrow.
Frühlingsnacht

Above the garden and across the sky
I hear migrating birds passing;
that means that spring is in the air;
below, everything is already beginning to bloom

I want to rejoice, I want to weep -
I still feel as though it cannot be!
Old wonders appear again with the moonlight.

And the moon and stars say it,
and, in a dream, the grove murmurs it,
and the nightingales sing it:
"She is yours!" "She is yours!"

Clair de lune

Your soul is a chosen landscape
charmed by masques and bergamasques
playing the lute and dancing
and almost sad beneath their fanciful disguises!

Even while singing in he minor key
of victorious love and fortunate living,
they do not seem to believe in their happiness
and their song mingles with the moonlight -

the calm moonlight, sad and beautiful
which sets the birds in the trees dreaming
and makes the fountains, the tall slender fountains
among the marble statues, sob with ecstasy!

Le Secret

I want the morning to ignore the name I told the night;
in the dawn wind, silently, would it evaporate like a teardrop.

I want the day to proclaim the love I hid from the morning,
and, leaning over my open heart, to set it aflame like a grain of incense.

I want the sunset to forget the secret I told the day,
and to carry it away with my love in the folds of its pale robe!
L’absent

You paths of swaying grass, valleys, hills, and leafy forests, why are you grieving and silent?
  - He who came here never comes again.

Why is no one at your window and why is your garden without flowers?
Oh house, where is your master?
  - I do not know. He is elsewhere.

Dog, guard the dwelling
  - For what reason? The house is empty now.

For whom are you weeping, child?
  - For my father.

Woman, for whom do you weep?
  - For the absent one.
Where has he gone?
  - Into the shadow.

Waves that groan against the reefs, where have you come from?
  - From the dark prison.
And what are you carrying?
  - A coffin!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Steven would like to thank:

YOU for coming to this culminating recital. I am honored that you have chosen to spend your Sunday afternoon with me.

Those who support me emotionally and spiritually through life's madness, especially my family and the loving congregation at New Life Church of the Nazarene.

Those who have supported me financially along this journey, especially the generous donors to the Department of Music, the Society of Singers, Los Angeles, and the Department of Graduate Studies.

Dr. Robert Danes, Prof. Elizabeth Sellers, and Dr. Craig Johnson for your service on my thesis committee, your input and expertise are invaluable.

The Creator for the ability to create and perform music and for love that overcomes life's madness.

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IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING

"Perspectives"
Megan Vail in her Master of Music recital
Roger Cantrell, Collaborative Pianist
STEVEN J. VAIL | TENOR

Twenty-three year old American tenor Steven J. Vail studies at California State University at Northridge where he will complete his Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance with scholarships from the Mike Curb Department of Music, the Society of Singers, Los Angeles, and a generous grant from the Department of Graduate Studies. Throughout his education, Mr. Vail has sung "Doorman," "Washington Dandy 2," and "Fogarty" in The Ballad of Baby Doe, "Kaspar" in Amahl and the Night Visitors, "Monostatos" in Die Zauberflöte (a performance which received a third place nod from the National Opera Association), and has been featured as a soloist for the Messiah (Handel), Rejoice in the Lamb (Britten), and Magnificat (J.S. Bach) oratorios. He has held choral internships as an assistant and section leader for First United Methodist Church of San Diego, La Jolla Presbyterian Church, Torrey Pines Christian Church and St. Stephen's Lutheran Church in Granada Hills. Additionally, Mr. Vail has sung in the chorus for San Diego Opera's performances of Tosca, Rigoletto, Nabucco, and Turandot and in Lyric Opera San Diego's productions of Amahl and the Night Visitors and H.M.S. Pinafore. Recent engagements include Tosca with the Intimate Opera Company of Pasadena and Street Scene with Northridge Opera. Mr. Vail is a member of the American Guild of Musical Artists and currently serves as a board member of Point Loma Nazarene University's MusicAlumni organization after having graduated with honors for his completion of a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy and Theology.
Roger Cantrell began his operatic career at the age of 17 as the protégé of renowned pianist, composer, and conductor Dr. Isaac Van Grove. He continued his piano studies with Madame Stephanie Shehatovich at Inspiration Point Fine Arts Colony and later with distinguished Polish pianist Jacob Gimpel. After conducting studies with Dr. Fritz Zweig and local engagements in the Southern California area, he accepted a position as Associate Music Director for Seattle Opera. Cantrell made his Lincoln Center debut conducting Peter Brook's controversial production of *La Tragédie de Carmen* and was later hired as Associate Music Director for Houston Grand Opera’s 10th Anniversary national tour of their award-winning production of *Porgy and Bess*, performances of which included San Diego Opera, Louisville Opera, Dallas Opera, San Francisco Opera, Los Angeles Opera, and Pompeii, Italy. As a coach, pianist, stage director or conductor he has worked with many of the world's great opera stars such as Martina Arroyo, James MacCracken, Fiorenza Cosotto, Ivo Vinco, Carol Neblet, Regina Resnik, Rita Hunter, Justino Diaz, John Reardon and many others. He has musically prepared and advised many well known movie and television stars such as Christine Baranski, Cybil Shepherd, David Hasselhoff, Emmy Rossum, and Robert Guillaume to name a few. Broadway producer Cameron MacIntosh invited Cantrell to become musical director for his Tony Award winning production of *Les Misérables* where, during the Kennedy Center run of performances, he was personally pleased to conduct a special birthday performance for First Lady Nancy and President Ronald Reagan. Another invitation from MacIntosh followed to lead the Los Angeles company of *The Phantom of the Opera* with Tony award winner Michael Crawford. During the ensuing years he also led international tours of *Phantom* and Prince’s Tony Award winning production of *Show Boat*. He also shared the podium with Maestro Zubin Mehta and the Los Angeles Philharmonic for a nationally televised concert in honor of the 25th Anniversary of the Los Angeles Music Center.