

SONGS OF REDEMPTION

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the commission and study of a new song cycle entitled *Songs of Redemption*. Inspired by faculty and mentors who encourage storytelling and communicative art, this project introduces new and relevant themes into the musical canon. Commissioning *Songs of Redemption* was a rewarding process in learning to collaborate with new composers and developing an original interpretation of new music. Selecting the texts for the cycle and then completing a full study of the cycle textually, musically, and dramatically allowed me to understand the story from all perspectives. This project has allowed me to be strategic in my artistic communication in having freedom to curate creative messages. I hope that this project inspires young musicians to make statements about the world we live in through their art.

INTRODUCTION & INSPIRATION

Storytelling has the powerful ability to engage the listener emotionally and to speak to the soul. Performance art creates a space for sharing stories that allow the viewer to walk alongside a character's journey, seeing it, hearing it, and feeling it themselves. It teaches empathy and fosters understanding across difference and disagreement. Live performance art is especially powerful in that it cannot be repeated. It is a moment in time, an inimitable dialogue between observer and creator, whose performance adapts according to the response of the observer and the emotions occupying the space that day. It is an opportunity to communicate the murmurs of one's soul, its pains and joys, and to share them in communion with others.

Because it incorporates language, vocal music has a special ability to communicate. For millennia, composers and writers have collaborated to use art to communicate what stirs their passions. This is a trend that continues today, as new composers and librettists create works that discuss the modern political and social climate. For example, Zach Redler and Jerre Dye's opera *The Falling and the Rising* (2018) addresses the sacrifices, challenges, and rewards of military service.

My studies at Texas Christian University in both Vocal Performance and Strategic Communication have taught me that regardless of its quality, if our work fails to communicate effectively, it is purposeless outside of fostering beauty and artistry in the moment of performance. My purpose as a person is to use my talents to serve the world's greatest needs. My purpose as a musician is to use my art to combat the world's brokenness and pain, by creating beauty, joy, and love through my art, as well as communicating about hot topic issues to foster empathy and understanding across incongruity.

My voice teacher, Angela Turner Wilson, my opera director, David Gately, and professors outside the music department, encouraged me throughout my four years at TCU to make impactful and important art. That's what we learn as opera majors – how to communicate clearly and impactfully. It is this philosophy that initially inspired me to create a piece of performance art.

At the end of my junior year of college I was hired by Fort Worth Opera to sing in their *Frontiers* showcase, a new-music initiative where contemporary opera composers could apply to have their work performed by young professionals. I was cast in an excerpt of *Fordlandia* (2018), an opera by William Susman and Stuart Rojstaczer about Henry Ford building his motor company. I played the mistress of Ford's son. While the aria was beautiful, it was also uncomfortable and fatiguing for my voice. The process of collaborating and communicating with the composer to accomplish a comfortable product while still maintaining the integrity of the piece intrigued me. Additionally, I was challenged and excited by the chance to develop an original interpretation of a piece. The aria had never been performed before, so instead of framing my character development around typical performance practice or relying on past interpretations, I had the freedom to do what I wanted (with respect to the composer's and librettist's wishes). The experience piqued my interest in contemporary opera and working with new composers. It was further developed when I had the opportunity to do a premiere sing-through and workshop of *The Ghosts of Gatsby* (2018), an opera about the tumultuous

relationship between F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, composed by Evan Mack, the composer of the song cycle being studied in this project. These experiences led me to commissioning a ten-minute song cycle from Mack.

COMMISSIONING NEW MUSIC

I chose to commission a song cycle because of the freedom the genre grants musically, thematically, and dramatically. Commissioning a song cycle meant that I could select the theme, texts, and adapt them to tell whatever story I liked. Combining new source material (music) with established source material (texts) gave the work some structure and gave me a starting point in my analysis, whereas commissioning a short new opera, for example, would have been a purely creative project.

The first step in commissioning the cycle was obtaining the funds to finance the commission. Evan Mack generously agreed to charge me a sum of \$3,000 (typically, 1 minute of music costs \$1,000 – so the worth of the cycle is \$10,000). I applied for three grants: one through the College of Fine Arts, and two through the Honors College. I was fortunate to receive all three grants, equating to \$3,750.

Once I was certain the project could be funded and completed, I began searching for texts. Since I knew I would be studying the cycle dramatically, I wanted to create a character that could be developed. I began browsing through letters written after World War II; a letter would give the cycle a speaker, and the modern language would aid in the ease of communication and contemporary style of the composition. At this point in my search, I did not have a specific theme or topic in mind. The letter I found most compelling is from the REFLECT Project conducted by Trent Bell. This project involved meeting with prison inmates and asking them to write letters with advice to their former selves. I was strongly drawn to the theme of redemption. None of us are perfect humans, and we all make poor decisions. It is through acceptance and acknowledgement of our brokenness that we can start to piece ourselves back together and find true joy. The topic of redemption is important and relevant, and I hope the song cycle encourages listeners to forgive the people who have wounded them or to come to terms with their mistakes and forgive themselves on the path to wholeness. I hope that this project speaks to my generation and gives young singers relatable themes to contemplate in performance.

The letter's author is a man named Jaime. I do not know what crime Jaime is imprisoned for, but his letter is heart-wrenching. His regret spills onto the page, and his self-loathing is evident in between the lines. The letter is the centerpiece of the song cycle, entitled "Mirror," and lies between two other movements. The first movement, "Reflection" takes text from the poem "Betrayal," by Lang Leav, and reads:

I cannot undo what I have done.
I can't un-sing a song that's sung.
And the saddest thing about my regret –
I can't forgive me, and you can't forget.

I was drawn to this text because it gives a well-rounded perspective on the topic of regret. Often, even when others are able to forgive our mistakes, they cannot be forgotten or reversed, and perceptions are altered. The consequences of our mistakes often make us unable to forgive ourselves. This text is a strong lead in to Jaime's letter by providing a sort of prequel to the topic.

The final movement, "Self," is completely unaccompanied, with a Biblical text from Isaiah 43:1. The verse reads, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine." Since this project's conception, I had planned on incorporating religious undertones. As a devout Catholic and an imperfect person, I have experienced the redemption of God many times and believe that true redemption is spiritual. If God, the perfect entity, can forgive our wrongdoings enough to take them upon himself and die for us, to show us that we are more loved than our sins are hated, we should be able to forgive ourselves and others.

Mack incorporated electronic music throughout the song cycle that manipulates both Felix Mendelssohn's Psalm 42 "*Wie der Hirsch Schreit*" and "*Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit*" from Johannes Brahms's *Requiem*. The text is indistinct in the electronic music, but both pieces address humanity's longing for God in times of suffering, as well as God's redemptive power. The electronic elements also feature muffled speaking, which Mack and I recorded. These selections give the theme credibility through their success and establishment over time, and further connect the idea of redemption with its spiritual roots without stating it outright.

SONG CYCLES

Gathering songs together into cycles allows composers to contemplate themes, topics, or stories in an extended way, or to address the output of a specific poet.¹ Compiling songs together began as a seemingly simple concept and grew into a large and multifaceted genre. Interestingly, however, the song cycle as a genre does not have many identifying traits. Other than having more than two songs and being connected through a theme or composer, the song cycle boasts musical and structural freedom. Typically, the nature of a song cycle is cyclical, as indicated in the name. Many are associated with nature, life cycles, or the passing of seasons, as well as organic metaphors surrounding ideas of truth, unity, wholeness, or progress.

The genre emerged in the early nineteenth century in Europe. By this point in history, almost every European country had a unique songwriting tradition. The rise of the song cycle can be attributed to the conception of the relationship between music and words. Its emergence would have been inconceivable without the lyric poem, a fundamental force of literary Romanticism in the late eighteenth century. The lyric poem had been previously associated with music and singing in classical Greece. Specifically, the *lyric-I* poem was a poem in which the first stanza was written in the first person, connecting the inner motivations of the poem to the author. Thus, poetry began to be seen as the music of the soul. Poets of the Romantic era believed that music would further heighten and better express the inexpressible emotions of their poetry.

Because singing was still an amateur pursuit, settings of poetry were still folkish and simple. They were strophic to emphasize the text, and written for voice and piano (sometimes guitar).

¹ For an overview of the history of song cycles, see Laura Tunbridge's *The Song Cycle* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

The cycles were often based around a poetic topic such as seasons, months, collections of flowers, the experience of wandering, a sequence of emotional states, or an examination of imagery. The order was not as important as the unifying theme. Only as song cycles began to draw inspiration from literary narratives did the order become important.

As the nineteenth century continued, song cycles began to follow their own internal storylines, encouraging listeners to think of them as complete entities with a specific order. The idea that song cycles have underlying coherence is important to note, as it implied the genre worthy of intelligent and serious contemplation. This transformed the genre encouraging a movement away from strophic composition towards through-composed song cycles. This new style allowed the music to take its own course rather than being restricted by repetitive form, and also gave music greater freedom to express the text directly. This growth established the song cycle as a work in its own right, rather than a mere musical addition to a poem. This change in perspective took the song cycle out of the realm of amateur performers.

Thanks to its elevated status, the song cycle became a vehicle for musical exploration, and interacted meaningfully with changing conceptions of musical modernity. Following song cycles through history gives musicians a unique timeline of avant-garde compositions. It continues to captivate composers because its close relationship with poetry and use of a single vocalist encourages exploration and experimentation of self-expression.

Due to its Austro-German heritage, the song cycle saw a decline after World War I and II. Later, the genre was further transformed through the arrival of technology. Composers who continued to write song cycles after 1950 truly seemed to be working in the genre's afterlife, and the recording industry, which focused on nineteenth century repertoire rather than new works, did not do anything to help the genre's resurgence. After World War II, song cycle composition became more reflective than projective, and dealt more with musical, political and personal history rather than forward-thinking. The history of late twentieth-century song cycles does not read as a modernist trajectory; rather, it looks backwards. For example, Schubert's *Winterreise* (1827) resonated with post-war European musicians and audiences due to its contrast with the symphonic and operatic works that had been used for Nazi propaganda. In his play *The Habit of Art* (2009), Alan Bennett writes a line for Benjamin Britten that reads, "I just want an audience to think that this is music that they've heard before and that it's a kind of coming home – even when they're hearing it for the first time." While the famed composer did not actually say this, it is a sentiment that accurately describes twentieth-century song cycles.

Many song cycles have been written since the mid-twentieth century, but the main concept remains the same as the original genre's definition: a song cycle still refers to a group of songs that surround a central theme that is established by textual or musical features. The genre's persistence can be attributed to the broadness of its definition. Composers who continued to compose song cycles in the early 1950s removed themselves from Austro-German traditions by avoiding setting German texts. These historical restrictions forced composers to modernize the song cycle through technology. The ability to record performances gave performers fixity for the first time, and encouraged a re-evaluation of the relationship between score and performance. Composers began to give performers more freedom in the score, and more opportunities for improvisation. This gave the singer the ability to shape a work.

So where does *Songs of Reflection* fit on this timeline? Obviously, it is a modern composition that incorporates technology. It explores the themes of regret and redemption, and ties to the original idea that song cycles are a means for self-understanding and expression. Much of the score encourages vocal freedom and improvisation. The song cycle also alludes to older musical traditions through the incorporation of biblical text and the use of Brahms and Mendelssohn choral compositions in the electronic music.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Movement 1: Reflection (from the poem “Betrayal” by Lang Leav)

I cannot undo what I have done.
I can't un-sing a song that's sung.
And the saddest thing about my regret –
I can't forgive me, and you can't forget.

This text, provides a prologue of sorts, introducing the topic of redemption. Lang Leav, novelist, poet, and winner of Goodreads Reader's Choice Award, captures the core of regret – the realization that our actions cannot be undone. Despite being granted forgiveness, perceptions are forever altered and things can never be quite the same. Self-forgiveness thus becomes seemingly insurmountable. Leav clearly writes that the challenge is not that the speaker is unforgiven by her offender; rather, she is unable to forgive herself. The largest obstacle to redemption is guilt. This text leads into Jaime's letter, which illustrates the poem's themes.

Movement 2: Mirror (from Trent Bell's REFLECT project, based on “Letter from Jaime”)

I stand in front of my mirror, and drift off of the days where we played little league or when we cuddled our kids. We had so much fun. We had so much life to live. We knew better when we done wrong but we done it anyway – Drugs, *lying* to those who trusted me...dropping out. Why, why, why, WHY couldn't we have done the right things in life, with so much life to live. The only good thing that has ever happened was the day my daughters were born. I just shake my head...you need to get yourself together. We are better than this...better than this. There is still so much life to live. Twenty years in a cell...all but ten is a very long time. Jaime, Jaime, JAIME! Life is far from over.

Movement 2: Original letter transcription

Jaime,

There so much that has gone on in my life. So many mistake have been made. Jail, drugs, stealing and lying to those who trusted me. The only good thing that has ever happened was the day my daughters were born. Even with them we made bad decision. Why couldn't we have done the right things in life. Dropping out of school, thinking we knew it all was a real big mistake. People who said they were friend were only influences. We allowed them to get into our head. Jaime, Jaime, Jaime, we knew better when we done wrong but we done it anyway. We can't blame no one but ourself. I sit

here in this jail cell and say; Jaime, how could we have been so stupid to commit another crime after getting such a break 2 month prior. I just shake my head. We are better than this. Being incarcerated is not a place people should want to be. Jaime you need to get yourself together. There is still so much life to live. I stand in front of my mirror and drift off to the days when we played little league baseball. We had so much fun, or when we cuddled our kids. We chose a path that in life was wrong. 20 yrs all but 10 is a very long time but we will get through it. Doing what we have done in life is not what I would want to see anyone go through. Life is far from over Jamie. The mistakes we made in the past are the mistakes we will learn from. I say this now and I say it tomorrow, “Don’t do what I did.”

It seems as though Jaime’s entire life is filled with regret. The text in the song cycle has been adapted from the original letter, which paints a slightly different story of Jaime. For the purposes of this project, I will focus on the text used in the song cycle. Jaime begins by looking in the mirror and reflecting on his life and remembering the person he used to be, addressing his former self (the pronoun “we” encompasses present Jaime and past Jaime) – he remembers playing Little League and cuddling his children. He remembers how hopeful his life was, and how happy he was. The tone of the text changes drastically as Jaime becomes frustrated, explaining his poor decisions. It’s almost as if recalling the good moments only makes his current situation more painful, as he reminisces the life he could have had. He writes, “We knew better when we done wrong but we done it anyway.” It’s almost as if his conscience is telling him, “I told you so.” He continues to write, “Why couldn’t we have done the right things in life, with so much life to live.” This sentence indicates that Jaime believes his actions have extinguished his once-hopeful future. The letter shifts once again, this time as Jaime remembers the day his daughters were born – presumably a day of great hope and joy. The remainder of the letter’s tone is inspirational, as Jaime writes, “You need to get yourself together. We are better than this. There is still so much life to live,” and eventually, “Life is far from over.” Perhaps the reminder of his daughters, and the hope that still drives their lives, reminded Jaime that his life is not over yet. The end of the original letter reads, “The mistakes we made in the past are the mistakes we will learn from.” Perhaps these last few lines are determination to not make the same mistakes again. Again, the end of this letter leads into the final movement, as it ends full of determination, hope, and resolution.

Movement 3: Self (Isaiah 43:1)

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine.

Fear is humanity’s greatest motivator and its greatest obstacle to living freely. Fear lies at the root of many other emotions; for example, at the root of regret and guilt is the fear of never being able to return to our original state. This Bible verse starts by commanding us not to fear – to eliminate any obstacle to redemption. Why are we redeemed? Because our mistakes have already been paid for through Christ’s crucifixion. The debt has been paid and the page is fresh. If God, the perfect entity, can forgive our mistakes, why is it so challenging for us to forgive our own mistakes? Because we feel the effects of them, and that is unavoidable. But in His death, Christ felt the effects of our mistakes as well, and still, the innocent victim forgives. Our identity does

not lie with our mistakes, because the consequences are temporary. Our identity as sons and daughters of Christ is eternal.

MUSICAL ANALYSIS

Like many song cycles, *Songs of Redemption* is musically inspired by the text which it serves. The first movement, *Reflection*, begins with a sort of aleatoric improvisatory pattern of notes in the right hand, simple, with no distinct meter. The use of open fourths and fifths in the right hand creates a very open sound, reminiscent of a reflective state of being. When the vocalist enters, the piano becomes rhythmically distinct. The simplicity of the piano line is echoed initially by the vocal line, which remains on the same note and moves stepwise, communicating a sort of stunned realization as the vocalist sings, “I cannot undo what I have done.” As the text continues on, the melody becomes more lyrical, leaping to higher notes and giving the singer room for more expression. The singer pauses, thinking, while the simple noodling continues in the piano line, leading to a heavy statement that climaxes the piece, communicated through a thick block chord that holds through the phrase, “I can’t forgive me, and you can’t forget.”

The second movement, *Mirror*, is more complex than *Reflection*. The theme of reflecting on one’s past by looking through a mirror is showcased throughout the movement in that the left and right hand of the piano mirror each other. For example, if the right hand plays an interval of a minor seventh (G4 leaping up to F5), it is echoed in the left hand (F4 jumping down to E3). The vocal part is also quite symmetrical. The first section of the movement is haunting, moving back and forth between simple florid notes and heavy, dissonant block chords. This communicates the speaker reminiscing the simplicity his life could have had, while living a complicated, dark life in prison. Later, the music becomes especially frantic, communicating the confusion, frustration, and regret of the text. The thickness of the accompaniment then comes to a sudden halt, where the singer – whose line has become increasingly higher, expressing amplified regret at his continual past mistakes – suddenly sings, “Why couldn’t we have done the right things in life, with so much life to live.” The absence of accompaniment underneath this line expresses the desperation for a fresh page. The movement shifts as the speaker remembers his one good memory – the day his daughters were born. Suddenly the music becomes hopeful, melodic, and beautiful – filled with promise. The triplets in both the vocal line and the piano part remind me of a steady heartbeat, a pulse that keeps us moving towards a goal. Each phrase in the vocal line begins on a high Bb, starting each phrase with confidence and strength. The section ends with an ascending vocal line that corresponds to the text, “There is still so much life to live.” The movement closes by echoing the theme used at the beginning, indicating that circumstances have not changed, and Jaime is still right where he started; however, the realizations that happened through the movement leave him hopeful, as seen through an upwards harmonic resolution of the vocal line.

The final movement, *Self*, is the simplest and shortest of all. The vocal line is simple, reminiscent of a lullaby, especially in the humming sections. Mack emphasizes the idea of identity by writing leaps on the word “I.” Completely rhythmically free and unaccompanied, this movement communicates newness, and a blank page. It is free.

DRAMATIC ANALYSIS

The greatest lesson I have learned through studying *Songs of Redemption* dramatically is that while the source material should inform the storytelling, it does not have to restrict the storytelling. At the beginning of this project, I assumed my character would be Jaime, the speaker of the letter. After doing preliminary tablework with the cycle, however, my dramatic coach, David Gately, and I, decided to make the character Jaime's wife.

The story we developed is set in present day. Jaime has been incarcerated for 20 years and still has 10 more years to serve. He has not been in touch with his wife since he was imprisoned. Jaime and his wife got married at a young age. Both were living dangerous lifestyles and involved in illegal activity. When Jaime's wife became pregnant with twin girls, she chose to turn her life around to create a safe and healthy household for her daughters. Jaime did not. After their daughters were born and Jaime's behavior became dangerous for their children, his wife reported him to the police.

As the cycle begins, Jaime's wife is coming home from work. She has developed a successful career as a nurse while Jaime has been in prison. She walks in and throws her mail on the counter, taking off her coat and putting down her purse. Popping open a beer, she starts to flip through her mail, and stops, stunned, as she sees a letter addressed to her from her husband. In the first movement, she sings of her guilt at turning Jaime in, and struggles with deciding whether or not to open the letter. She finally decides to read it, and tears it open as the second movement begins.

In the second movement, she reads the letter from Jaime. Some of the lines were adapted to be sung as her reactions to Jaime's letter. As she reads and reacts, she goes on a journey from painful remembrance to frustration with Jaime, to determination to improve. Forgiveness and peace are finally achieved in the final movement.

COMPOSER/PERFORMER COLLABORATION

Collaborating with Evan Mack on this project was a very rewarding experience. The majority of our collaboration took place in selecting texts and discussing the direction of the cycle in general. It was impactful to have a say in creating a new piece of music, and the process as a whole taught me to make strong, important choices as a musician.

After I had spent a few months working on the cycle, Mack and I set up a Facetime rehearsal so that he could hear the cycle and give some feedback and perspective. Having worked with Mack on his operatic compositions before, I had a strong understanding of his style, and he did not have much feedback for me in terms of the musical interpretation of the piece. He advised me to take advantage of the stillness and moments of silence in the final, unaccompanied movement, and to create more musical contrast by varying the energy of each onset in the final movement.

There were a few textual tweaks that I felt were necessary upon completing the dramatic analysis of the cycle, which I suggested to Evan. He responded enthusiastically to each proposal. The text of the second movement, "Mirror," is from Trent Bell's REFLECT project, specifically from the

Letter from Jaime. While the original letter contains non-standard English, the text we pulled for the cycle only has one line that is grammatically incorrect. I felt that the sudden switch of voice was confusing to the performer and listener, and that it would lead performers to overthink the dramatic intention behind the line, which reads, “We knew better when we done wrong, but we done it anyway.” In an effort to maintain consistent through the movement and for the sake of character development, Mack agreed to rewrite the line to read, “We knew better when we did wrong, but we did it anyway.” The second textual edit was a rewrite of the line, “Twenty years in a cell...all but ten is a very long time.” It now reads, “Twenty years in a cell...ten more to go is a very long time.” This edit was made to clarify the intention behind the text.

PERSONAL RELEVANCY AND REFLECTION

Commissioning this premiere, selecting the texts, and studying the character both musically and dramatically has been a process of self-reflection. This project unearthed personal wounds while simultaneously giving me an opportunity to understand and make peace. Studying the cycle showed me that good can come out of any situation, no matter how dire it may seem, if we choose be open to it. Additionally, I appreciated having the chance to understand and take on a perspective that is not often portrayed as a protagonist – an incarcerated, African-American man who has been the “bad guy” of his own story, but who gets to become the hero. Accepting his story as my own was very humbling as I went through the dramatic study, and opened my eyes to how similar humans are at their core.

Curating this project has been extremely meaningful to me as a musician and as a communicator. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to put the skills I’ve cultivated at TCU to use through this commission and premiere. This project has been relevant to me in that it combines my two passions: music and communication. Of course, it is helpful that music is a form of communication, but this project specifically has allowed me to be strategic in my artistic communication through having full reign in the content of the messages. I hope that this project inspires young musicians to use their voices and their art to make statements about the world we live in.

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