

Spring 5-2-2015

Senior Recital: Sam Plotkin, composition

Sam Plotkin

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Recommended Citation

Plotkin, Sam, "Senior Recital: Sam Plotkin, composition" (2015). *Music Senior Recitals*. Book 13.
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THE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC
VASSAR COLLEGE

Senior Recital

Sam Plotkin, *composition*

Saturday, 2 May 2015

1:30 PM

Martel Recital Hall
Skinner Hall of Music

Please silence all cell phones or other personal electronic devices and refrain from texting. Use of these instruments may disturb other audience members and will cause interference with in-house recording and webcasting.

Program

Keyometry

Sam Plotkin
(b. 1992)

BRAWL

John Mason '16, Zach Sherman '16,
Christa Ventresca '17, and Alex Voynow '15, *timpani*

Hands

Aubrey Hays '15 and Karen Ratcliffe '16, *sopranos*, Anna Abrams '18, and
Cassie Stirpe '15, *altos*, Jack Rowland '15 and Joe Sopchak '16, *tenors*,
Conor Chinitz '18 and Ben Slaw '15, *basses*
Mr. Plotkin, *conductor*

BRIEF INTERMISSION

Icarus, He Flies!

Noah Boden '17 and Jake Sheehy '15, *violins*, Joanna Plotkin '17, *viola*,
Zach Lucero '15, *cello*, Mr. Plotkin, *electric guitar*

The Dragon, Parts I, II, and III

Mr. Plotkin, *acoustic guitar and vocals*

Program Notes

Keyometry - for Electronics

This piece, no matter how many times it's heard, will never be the same twice. What you'll hear is not a through-composed work, but rather a series of electronic oscillators being affected by algorithmically controlled pitch shifters. In other words, eight computers play random notes along a specific scale pattern. Programmed using Max/MSP, Keyometry would play forever if allowed, so what we hear is actually a 6-minute, 17-second snapshot of an infinite system of possible permutations. Despite all this complexity in its design and function, the piece is a calming escape into allowing technology, for a brief moment, to affect the entirety of our soundscape.

BRAWL - for Four Timpanists

BRAWL was born of the idea of taking the word "brawl" for a title (thanks to Jim Osborn for the inadvertent inspiration), and imagining what that might sound like interpreted musically. Going along with this implied idea of aggression, timpani drums made sense for an instrument. Still, timpani traditionally are for a solo performer, and it didn't follow to write a piece about "brawling" with oneself (that's a piece for a different instrument), so BRAWL is performed by four players with one drum each. In its final form, the piece actually takes this idea of aggressive competition and turns it into cooperation, where lines move across all four drums, while still pitting themes against one another.

Hands - for SATB Choir; Poem text by Siv Cedering (1939-2007)

The idea for this piece came not from a desire to set this particular poem to music, but actually from a dream I had last fall where I was struggling to put rehearsals together for a choir piece on my senior recital. At the time, I didn't have a choir piece written, or even planned, and I thought, "How am I not writing for choir?" The challenge then, was what text to set. I had experimented before with poems of J.R.R. Tolkien (more specifically, I tried to set the Hobbit riddle about a fish), but these didn't seem quite right. I was struck at one point when I was reading an article about the history of language and how certain words seemed to appear to have more common roots than others. "Hands," apparently, is one of the most ubiquitous words in human language. So, I tried to find a poem with this theme of hands as a universal piece of human experience, and Siv Cedering's poem fit the profile perfectly. Though it's written in first person from the poet's perspective, it uses imaginative metaphor to describe a uniquely but universally human quality.

Biography of the poet, courtesy of her website: "Siv was the author of eighteen books plus four books of translations, she also was an exhibiting sculptor and painter, a book illustrator, and a writer of songs and TV programs for children. She appeared in Harper's, Science, Ms., The New Republic, Paris Review, Svenska Dagbladet, Dagens Nyheter, Partisan Review, Georgia Review, BLM, etc., and in approximately 200 anthologies and textbooks. She received

major awards for fiction, poetry, screenwriting, and visual art. Born by the Arctic Circle in Sweden, she lived with her husband Hans Van de Bovenkamp at Twin Oaks Farm and Sculpture Garden in Sagaponack, New York. Sadly, Siv Cedering passed away at her home on November 17, 2007. She will be greatly missed by many.”

February 5, 1939 - November 17, 2007

Icarus, He Flies! - for String Quartet

Icarus, He Flies! is a musical adventure into ancient Greek myth, following the events that take place on and around the island of Crete. We begin in the first movement with “Theseus in the Labyrinth,” where Theseus navigates the labyrinth and eventually comes face to face with the infamous Minotaur. In the end, Theseus is able to ground the beast, who is portrayed by the cello, with a few swift stabs of his sword. In the second movement, we are taken to the top of the tower which stands on top of the labyrinth. “Daedalus’ Great Escape” begins by introducing Daedalus, the architect of the labyrinth, and his son Icarus, who have been locked in this tower by King Minos to prevent knowledge of the labyrinth from reaching the mainland. Daedalus, who is loosely represented by the viola, builds two sets of mechanical wings of feathers and wax for himself and Icarus to try to escape from the island by air. In the third movement, “Icarus, He Flies!”, Daedalus warns Icarus, whose character we hear in the addition of an electric guitar, not to fly too low and wet the feathers, but also not to fly too high, and melt the wax in the heat of the sun. Icarus famously disregards his father’s words, and his wings are melted as he flies too close to the sun. In the fourth and final movement, “Welcomed by Death and the Sea”, Icarus has crashed into the Mediterranean, and is slowly sinking to his death, weighed down by the crumpled mass of his father’s wings.

The Dragon, Parts I, II, and III - songs for Guitar and Voice

In the fall of 2012, I was sitting in my noticeably small dorm room playing around on my guitar, and the lyric emerged: “And they sang, ‘O, Holy Monster, what are you?’” Within a day or so, “The Dragon” was born. I had written songs for guitar and voice before, but this was the first one that I felt was truly indicative of a “style” for me. As I wrote more over the next few years, I began to realize that I was writing an album. This really became clear when Part II was written, and by the time Part III happened in the spring of 2014, I was very much writing with a complete record in mind. “The Dragon (...And Other Stories),” with a lot of help from friends, family, and classmates in the form of a Kickstarter campaign, will be released later this year, courtesy of a beautiful job of engineering, mixing, and mastering by Jeremy Katzenstein ’15.

The song tells a story in three parts of a dragon who is the guardian of a small valley port town, and who wishes only to be viewed as a friend to the townspeople instead of worshipped as a god. Parts II and III expand the dragon’s backstory of having a former lover who is no longer around, and tells of his search to find her again.

I’ve decided not to include the lyrics to these songs in this program note, opting instead for the above synopsis. Everyone who has heard this group of songs performed live thus far has not had the lyrics in front of them, and I’d prefer for today’s audience to experience it the same way: to hear the lyrics first and interpret them second, rather than reading them first and forming a reaction before hearing the music (this differs from “Hands” in the sense that Siv Cedering’s poem was the primary version of the piece, with the music being formed around it).



I have so many people to thank for helping me to make this vast, overdramatic effort happen. First and foremost, I would like to thank all of the sixteen Vassar students who are performing these pieces, and have dealt with my sometimes haphazard process in rehearsals. I owe you all so much. I would like to thank the Music Department, and all of my teachers and advisors who have helped me along the way: Susan Botti, Terry Champlin, Kathryn Libin, Peter McCulloch, Eduardo Navega, Jim Osborn, Justin Patch, Michael Pisani, Richard Wilson, and Ed Xiques. A very special thank you to Amy Kawa and Jane Podell, without whom the Music Department would collapse into dust. Thanks to fellow and previous Directors of the Mahagonny Ensemble, Julia Boscov-Ellen and Jesse Greenberg, who were instrumental in helping me learn the ins-and-outs of running rehearsals and keeping everything generally under control. Thanks to all the players and singers in the Mahagonny Ensemble who have helped us bring to life some of the best music in the world for the past two years. Thanks to my partner-in-crime at ViCE Student Music, Jeremy Katzenstein, who is also doing an amazing job engineering my first full-length album. Special thanks to all of my friends, my teammates at Vassar Ultimate, my housemates, and anyone who ever came to a concert or showcase for me. I love you all so much. Most importantly, I would like to thank my family. To my grandparents, Nancy and David Gluck, my Aunt Susan, and my Uncle Joel and Orapin, and to the newer members of my family, Aura and Joseph, I could never thank you all enough for your never-ending support and generosity. To my little cousins Jasmine and Micah, I know you’re only big enough to play ukulele now, but I expect to be writing cello concertos for you guys by 2025. To my sisters Joanna and Rachel, thank you for withstanding my childishness and utter incompetence for the past 20 years. There’s more to come, I promise. Finally, to my dad, Sidney Plotkin. Your unwavering support for every decision I’ve made in life, as well as teaching me to properly brew coffee, means more to me than you could ever know.

This concert, along with everything I do in music, is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Marjorie Gluck.