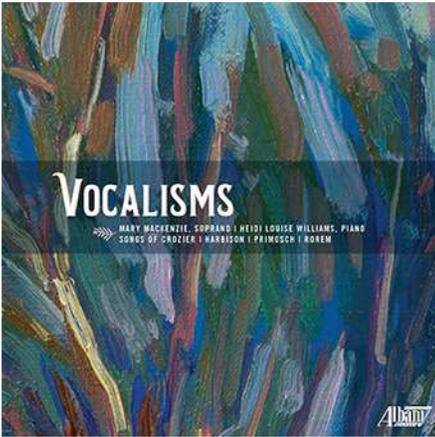


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FEATURE INTERVIEW by Colin Clarke



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***SongFest*: Soprano Mary Mackenzie and Pianist Heidi Louise Williams discuss American Art Song today.**

BY COLIN CLARKE

CC: SongFest (www.songfest.us), the US's premier art song festival and training program, is obviously a big part of this disc, so let's start by having a look at that. The Harbison "Vocalism" pays homage to SongFest?

Mary Mackenzie: Yes! John Harbison has been a recurring composer-in-residence at *SongFest* for many years, and dedicated *Vocalism* to the program. He composed Part I and Part II separately, and I had the privilege of premiering Part II when I first attended *SongFest* in 2006.

Heidi Louise Williams: The connections formed at *SongFest* certainly played a role in how our recording eventually took shape. In 2004, John Harbison invited both James Primosch and Daniel Crozier to *SongFest* as composers-in-residence. It is the place where Jim and Dan—who both had studied with Harbison—first met. In addition to introducing them to one another, John Harbison eventually also introduced them to Mary. The rest of the story of this album has to do with my studies at Peabody, where I met Dan, and with our subsequent collaboration a number of years after we finished school.

And can you explain what "SongFest" is all about and its importance?

MM: *SongFest* is a wonderful summer program for young singers that is exclusively focused on the performance of Art Song. The singers who attend range in age from undergraduate students to those who are in the early stages of professional development. During your time there, you are asked to prepare a wide variety of repertoire from standard German lied and French chanson, to American art song, to Bach cantatas, to musical theatre, to modern song; and you attend and perform in several masterclasses and concerts. You also have the opportunity to take lessons with voice teachers from around the country, and work directly with the composers-in-residence. It is absolutely a wild few weeks, but you leave having gained an immense amount of musical knowledge and having a new group of friends and colleagues! The classical singing world often feels very opera-centric, and I know from personal experience and fellow colleagues that we don't always feel like we fit neatly into that world. *SongFest* was a place where I could explore my voice and try a lot of different repertoire with tons of support and no judgment. I have been so happy to see its growth over the years and see so many singers come out with a strong passion for performing art song and making it a core part of their career.

The sheer variety of contemporary American art song is laid bare on your album, I feel. What determined the choice of program?

HLW: The idea for the album began with Daniel Crozier. I had recently recorded and continue to perform Dan's *Winter Aubade* (2009) for solo piano, which he wrote for me to premiere on my earlier solo album for Albany Records, *Drive American*. Collaborating on this was such an inspiration to both of us that Dan invited me to consider recording a good number of his piano chamber works. This grew into a focus on his songs, leading us to contemplate including a variety of composers from both older and younger generations that Dan, especially, felt connected to—but also, that he felt I would connect with. John Harbison, a very deep influence and mentor to Dan, was immediate; as was Ned Rorem, who for many years has been a mentor-figure in Dan's life. These two composers suggested works of theirs for the album which had not previously been recorded commercially. About a year into the project, I spent some time with Ursula Oppens, who had just premiered John's *Seven Poems of Lorine Niedecker*, and urged me, with Mary, to consider adding this work to the album—which is how this set came to be included. Finally, the strong affinity for text setting, robust scoring, and metaphysical, spiritual themes shared by Dan's friend and colleague James Primosch, also Harbison's former student, made the album complete. It was Jim, John, and Dan who recommended Mary and I to one another. Mary and I, who started out as if on a 'blind date', could not believe the perfect synergy of this music combined with our collaborative relationship, from the very first rehearsal!

What makes the breadth and depth of this album so special, in terms of its diversity, is its representation of great Art Song written by two iconic American composers of the highest stature, known for their mastery of text setting, paired with two highly successful and reputed younger-generation composers who have borne out the many influences of their teachers and mentors, mingled with the strength of their personal convictions as expressed through their own highly individual artistic voices. What emerges from this diversity is at once a palpable dynamism and a unified purpose. In the words of Mozart, "Love is the soul of genius." Mary and I can honestly say that this project has fostered and deepened our mutual respect and love for each other (composers included), and for this great music which embraces so many sources that weave through our country's musical fabric—everything from folk-inspired song to jazz to objectivism to traces of Medieval plainchant, a French-inspired enchantment with harmonic color, counterpoint, traditions of high church, and a sophisticated love for great literature, that spans many centuries up to the present day.

There is one additional aspect which I feel makes this music so compelling in combination. Not only do these four composers share an innate gift and consummate skill for text setting; they also are all superb pianists with a great love for the instrument, able to paint a canvas of texture and timbre on the piano that surrounds the voice with a myriad of sonic environments. Just this aspect alone is stunning to contemplate, and it is important to recognize how significant the role of the piano is to each of these composers. These are collaborative settings to the core. What an honor it has been to perform them!

Starting at the beginning, Harbison's "Vocalism" is subtitled "A Grand Aria" and is a setting of Whitman. It's a great way to start as it celebrates the sheer power of the voice: Mary, is it as much a joy to sing as it sounds? There's a real feeling of exhilaration about the performance!

MM: Absolutely! It was quite fun learning the rapid-fire Part I *after* I already knew Part II – which is much more laid back and jazzy. My favorite *Vocalism* memory is a coaching Heidi and I had with John when we were preparing for the recording. As he was giving us notes, he said it should sound like the piano and the voice were "competing." This one word perfectly captured the spirit of how to perform it. The trick is, it's not a competition in terms of volume. It's more a mental game and trying to out-manuever one another. Trust me, it works. Heidi and I always have a blast performing it that way.

Also, Heidi, I notice the piano part is very alive in the first, more lyrical in the second. I notice from your biography you have worked with a raft of contemporary, living composers — I take it is from this vibrant interest that this feeling of congruence comes?

HLW: I have always felt strongly about programming that which I can truly be an advocate for, music which I sincerely love and want to invest in wholeheartedly. For me, this approach always brings about the most compelling performances. A love for new music was instilled in me by my earlier teachers and continued to grow and expand as I studied at the Peabody Conservatory, where I worked with Robert Sirota on his *Jerusalem Psalms* for two pianos and also met Chen Yi who I would later work with, among many other wonderful experiences such as studying the Elliott Carter Cello Sonata with Samuel Sanders. One experience has led to another in this regard; however I do also play much traditional repertoire (solo, concerto and collaborative) with equal zeal—part of this is simply my personality. When

approaching this wonderful American music, I can't help but feel that my upbringing has contributed to a deep and abiding love for the musical diversity in this country. My parents, both medical professionals but highly trained amateur musicians, exposed me to everything from live symphony and choral concerts to great organists to jazz, Beatles, Stevie Wonder, Scottish bagpipes, great hymns and music of the church, among many other types of music, with equal enthusiasm. I have many relatives in this country and abroad who are involved in music of all kinds, so for me, the vibrancy is genuine, it is in my blood.

Also Heidi you deal with the technical challenges of the fourth of Crozier's Dickinson Poems with great zeal—these parts aren't easy, are they?!

HLW: Indeed the virtuosity required by the music on this album is of the highest order, and in every direction—from control of voicing, nuance, color and direction, to the athletic brilliance needed for many passages. Of course this demand is also true for the voice. I believe in part it is because I am equally devoted to performing solo repertoire that Dan Crozier felt I could be a good fit for this project, since the technical demands for the pianist are often just as great here as for any piano solo work, of any period. When learning Crozier's *Four Poems of Emily Dickinson*, I found I needed to work with equal diligence on each of these songs, in different ways, to achieve the layers of sound, pedalling, and fluidity required. Thankfully, Dan is such a fine pianist who also knows my hands and my strengths so incredibly, and he wrote these in such a way that fits my playing and personality. I do remember, along the way, sending him pictures of fingerings I was particularly proud of finding, as I worked on these! While these parts are the some of the most demanding of any on the album, they also were immensely satisfying to grow into, because of the depth, richness, and profound integrity of Crozier's writing.

Interesting how Harbison's "Seven Poems of Lorine Niedecker" seems to enter a different world, more elusive, and this contrast is perfectly delivered by the pair of you. The fourth poem ("And what you liked/or did - /no matter") seems the perfect exemplar of this.

Mary: Heidi and I were thrilled that Ursula Oppens suggested we include this new cycle on *Vocalisms*. We had already started selecting the other music, which overall is lush, lyrical, and romantic. We love the compact and sparse quality of this cycle, and the challenges presented when both the voice and piano are so exposed.

I'm now officially fascinated with the music of James Primosch! The song "Waltzing the Spheres" is a simply beautiful setting of Susan Scott Thompson, a poem that predates but prefigures the event of that fateful day, 9/11. Immediately there's a sense of interiorization, and some lovely quasi-improvisatory piano passages. Can you tell me something of your association with his music? And have you worked with the composer? Mary, as you've worked with Primosch, can you give some background to his music?

MM: After meeting John Harbison at *SongFest*, he invited me to sing at the Token Creek Music Festival in Wisconsin—where I'm originally from—and it was there that I met James Primosch when his *Three Sacred Songs* were programmed. Thus began the long relationship with both John and Jim that I am incredibly thankful for.

I was raised in the Catholic church, and the tunes in the *Three Sacred Songs* were ones that I knew from my years leading music at mass. Even when I began to learn selections from *Holy the Firm* years ago, Jim's music always resonated with me, because it had such a strong spiritual character—even when he was setting secular poetry. I have a personal musical mission with every performance to help the audience feel something greater than themselves—and if Jim's music makes me feel something greater than me—I know I can be a good messenger.

HLW: Yes indeed, we worked with each composer on all of their repertoire this album contains. Mary has worked closely with Jim Primosch on many other projects; it was my honor to meet and learn from him as we worked through this repertoire. I have since also learned and performed his *Three Sacred Songs* and his chamber work with voice, *Dark the Star*.

The Three Folk Hymns have a pure American charm to them yet include Primosch's character. Mary, you deliver the vocal line with such a feeling of innocence. Again, it is resonance to the performance that is most compelling. How do you approach a piece such as this which references your own heritages?

MM: The *Three Folk Hymns* are sort of companion pieces to the *Three Sacred Songs*. The three hymns were also tunes that I grew up singing in church quite a bit, but Jim's versions were like the musical equivalent of an illuminated manuscript—vibrant, detailed, breathtaking. *How Can I Keep From Singing?* is already one of my favorite songs, as it

hits close to home in the sense that singing has carried me through tough times in my life, and Jim's version allows me to feel and express that more profoundly.

HLW: I have cherished memories my Arkansas-raised grandmother, part Dutch and part Cherokee, humming folk hymns and wonderful African-American spirituals with infectious exuberance, as she worked in the kitchen or in the garden. I also grew up in the church, and was exposed to many hymns in diverse settings—both formal and spontaneous. Personally, I know I bring my own life experiences and love for hymns instilled in me as a child when approaching this music, combining these with my classically trained skills which are necessary to play Jim's difficult arrangements. A true combination of heart and head goes into these.

Heidi, that filigree in the second "Folk Hymn" is remarkable. Is it as much of a joy to play as it is to experience as a listener?

HLW: Absolutely, it is a joy to play, and beautifully pianistic! When Mary and I first coached this song with Jim, I had added generous pedal resonance to this passage creating a rather sensuous, Debussian sound, much like many passages I had recorded in *Holy the Firm*. Jim told me he was nearly 'seduced' by this approach, but then confessed that this was not his original conception. What he imagined was a more sparkling and pure texture, in the style of a chorale prelude, the 'Celtic, fairy-like' piano figuration dancing around the purity of Mary's vocal line. I was so grateful for this insight which transformed my own concept and interpretation.

The third of the "Folk Hymns" seems to probe deeper waters ...

MM: *Wondrous Love* is already an unusual hymn, being in Dorian mode. It's an incredibly haunting melody, but often played quite squarely in church without taking the time to think about the text. The idea that Christ died for the sins of mankind is such an expansive concept to communicate, and in Jim's version, the time to explain and feel the meaning of the text is built in.

Talking of texts, the genesis of "Shadow Memory" is remarkable—the last paragraph of a preface by Susan Orlean for a volume of photos on a Victorian botanical journal and yet in Primosch's setting it takes on unutterable poignancy. This strikes me as one of the many miracles of Lied as a genre ...

MM: Indeed! Your readers may be familiar with Susan Orlean as the author of *The Orchid Thief* and as a writer for *The New Yorker*. As an artist, you are always delighted to find inspiration in unexpected places, and this is one of those instances. The *Shadow Memory* text just begs to be sung, and fits perfectly with Jim's compositional language. The song has an Impressionist spirit to it—and the picture it paints is both vivid and fleeting.

Daniel Crozier's cycle "Songs for the Walters"—could you give a background to this piece? You perform two of the pieces that were originally performed in a particular art space and were inspired by those paintings, right?

HLW: "History's Lamb" and "Byzantium" on texts by Craig A. Bannister, come from a set of songs written on a commission that united a group of poets with a group of composers to create pieces based on the collection of the Walters Art Museum, which sits directly across the street from the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. The poems were written concerning specific works in the gallery to be set by the composers, which were then premiered on a concert in the gallery space. "History's Lamb" was inspired by a very moving Baroque painting by the exceptional, rare woman artist of the time, Josefa de Ayala. This work was of special interest to Dan, who remains fascinated by the Spanish Baroque generally (see his opera, *With Blood, With Ink*), and its painting in particular, for the sharp contrasts of light and dark (chiaroscuro), and what he calls an "almost operatic emotional intensity," that suits his own expression ideally. "Byzantium" celebrates a collection of Byzantine household artifacts of an everyday sort such as kitchen-ware and simple decorative ornaments. The rhythmic and contrapuntal energy are expressed in both the voice and piano parts; I get a particular kick out of those dazzling trills Dan wrote for the piano, which highlight the humor of once every-day household gadgets now behind glass on display as rarified, sparkling treasures.

Can you tell us more about Crozier's Dickinson set?

HLW: According to Dan Crozier, "It can't be summer—that got through" was completed in 2013 for another Wisconsin soprano, Julia Foster, along with another *SongFest* pianist, Susan Gaeddert. Dan said that he had always loved, but always resisted setting the poetry of Emily Dickinson because the austerity of her verse seemed to make the idea of adding music somehow intrusive, and that Aaron Copland and a few others had already negotiated that issue brilliantly. When Julia Foster, a teaching colleague at the time, asked if he had any songs for an all-Dickinson recital, he decided to give it a try. Once he felt free to attempt something entirely different than Copland had, the setting went very well. In fact,

it went so well that he made an additional three settings in 2014. The songs seek opulence rather than austerity, as evidenced by their vocal melismas and expansive, virtuosic piano textures. They explore the psychological states engendered by Dickinson's brief but profound texts, often the half-tints or transitional territory between more discreet emotions. There is also a good deal of direct text painting of the poems' images, most obviously the birds in the first and last songs, but also others: the storm and sea in the first song, the far-flung activities of the angels and desert heat in the second song, and the approaching winter and the fall sunset in the last song. These are extraordinary settings, extravagantly written for both voice and piano—what I call 'hard core' beauty. Even a casual listener will experience this beauty to a limited extent; but for those who really enter in and digest the meaning of both music and text, the beauty just keeps on multiplying. While slender in length, their cumulative power is epic in quite another dimension. We chose this set to conclude the first disc for this reason.

Crozier's sense of sensitivity comes across again in the songs on the second disc, with an almost Impressionistic piano part in "The Rainbow Comes and Goes". Heidi, in another Fanfare interview (around your disc "Drive American": Fanfare 35:4) you say you have a connection to Daniel Crozier from Peabody—could you elaborate?

HLW: I first met Dan when I was still in my undergraduate years and he was pursuing graduate work. He already had many awards and I was quite in awe of him, never imagining that we would one day collaborate professionally. Pianists were many of Dan's closest friends during those school years, many of whom were members of the studio of my teacher, Ann Schein. Dan remembers a story I related to him about the pianist Arthur Rubinstein (one of Ann Schein's teachers) during those Peabody days. Rubinstein, when criticized by young composers of the 1960's for not playing new music, responded by detailing premiere performances of music by Stravinsky, Poulenc, Villa-Lobos, Szymanowski, and many others that he had given. Then he said to those young composers, "Find your own heroes." I am humbled to know that Dan now considers me one of his most important and enthusiastic heroes. But he is just as much a hero to me. I believe this is what has made our work together so special.

Regarding the Rorem, I see you perform the last six of his 19 songs that comprise "Another Sleep," music of unutterable tenderness. You portray the starkness of "The Suicide" viscerally; contrast the beauty of "Death Stands above me". Rorem's output deserves greater currency, despite the high-profile efforts of such as Susan Graham (on an Erato single-composer disc) so it's amazing you are including this. The settings sound so grateful for the voice and the piano—what attracts you to this music?

HLW: While Dan Crozier never studied with Ned Rorem, he was acquainted with him in the context of an annual summer music festival in Massachusetts from a young age. Dan says that he was intimidated by the much older, highly successful artist in those early years, but always fascinated by Rorem's music and his ideas about what it means to be a professional composer. Over the years they developed a regular and lively musical dialogue in the context of that festival. This led us to include these songs, which Rorem asked for, as they had not yet been commercially recorded. Rorem has written many stunningly beautiful things for the piano, solos and instrumental chamber works, so it brought us special joy to include these songs and to coach them with him in person in New York City. In some ways, the leaner textures demand even more sensitivity to shadings, nuance and pacing. Personally, I find his economy of means and its directness especially remarkable. Everything in Rorem's music, including the tune, serves the text—nothing is superfluous or overly sentimentalized. This actually reminds me of great French composers such as Ravel or Poulenc, the latter of whom Rorem knew well as friend and colleague.

MM: We were surprised that *Another Sleep* had never been commercially recorded. It's an incredibly moving memorial to Rorem's partner, Jim Holmes. The theme of death and the afterlife is certainly more present on the second disc of *Vocalisms*. Rorem's approach is much more matter-of-fact, bitter, resigned. Even the final song—*The Waves*—is deceptively melancholy. The piano is so soothing and peaceful; it's easy to let it envelop you. But the text is actually about that one last fight against death's pull. It's overwhelmingly emotional to perform a work that reflects a tragic personal experience of another human being, but I am so grateful that it is part of this recording.

We end on a tender and spiritual note, that of Primosch's cycle "Holy the Firm". This is a selection of texts from various authors—could you elaborate a little on the poetry set in this cycle and how they spoke to you

MM: I learned this cycle over the course of a few years, starting with '*...that passeth all understanding*,' *Every Day is a God*, and *Cinder*. During and after graduate school, I was struggling with my own spiritual journey and feeling very boxed in. I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew I wanted something more—a deeper connection with something

greater than myself. The poems by Denise Levertov, Annie Dillard and Susan Stewart spoke directly to what I so desperately wanted to experience and express at that time, and honestly, helped guide me to a better place.

I learned the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* and *Deathbeds* a few years later when I was preparing to perform the cycle in its entirety. In retrospect, it was good that I had waited. Those two songs depict more personal struggles with spirituality and death and take more emotional strength (and in the case of *Deathbeds*, physical strength) to sing.

Holy the Firm is simultaneously the most satisfying and most intimidating cycle I have ever sung. I love the journey it takes me on, and it's a piece that will continue to grow with me in years to come.

Additionally, I am incredibly proud of the partnership Heidi and I shared making this album. The repertoire on *Vocalisms* not only requires a pianist with vast technical proficiency, but one who is a true collaborator. It was a joy for me and Heidi to create these soundscapes, and the recording captured them beautifully.

HLW: Mary's very personal response to this question is perhaps the most poignant way to describe how these texts have impacted us, and how they impact the listener. The sheer empathy that is communicated through them—empathy with human experience and longing that, in the words of another great author, C.S. Lewis, 'the poets and the mythologies know...we do not want merely to see beauty...we want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it...' (excerpted from *The Weight of Glory*)—this empathy is what drives the music-making to the most profound levels of expression. I am deeply impressed by Jim's choice of texts; he consistently selects those which identify unflinchingly with the depth of human experience and elicit musical settings which reach straight to the heart, disarming all pretense.

Perhaps this is a good place to add how satisfying it has been for Mary and I to come up with a program order for this album. Many of the connections are inspired by the texts, and may only surface on subsequent hearings. The program begins with the power of words, as expressed in *Vocalism*—and we end with famous last words of those entering a realm beyond this life, in *Deathbeds* from *Holy the Firm*. The idea of leaving the earth is introduced in the second selection on the album, *Waltzing the Spheres*—and later is echoed by the *Three Folk Hymns*, another expression of the search for beauty and for something (or someone) greater than oneself. The final folk hymn, *Wondrous Love*, finds its counterpart in *History's Lamb* which follows—another personal contemplation of Christ's ultimate sacrifice—while the tongue-in-cheek *Byzantium* rubs shoulders with a much more serious take on what happens to our memories and recorded experiences in *Shadow Memory*. The *Four Dickinson Poems* again touch the metaphysical and deeply human side of empathy, the unabashed experience of human love expressed in *Song: Summer for Thee*, and finally, bring us to a journey past this life as symbolized in the seasons of Summer moving through Fall into Winter, a symbol of death, in *It Can't be Summer*. This foreshadows the devastating experience Rorem's songs in *Another Sleep* express, communicating, through his own personal loss of someone beloved, a profound sense of hopelessness, despair, emptiness, and bitter defiance. *The Rainbow*, an ancient symbol of redemption, crosses this divide into a renewed journey of hope, which itself is echoed in *After-Song* ("Through Love to Light") and *The Fire of a Wild White Sun*. This brings us to the climax of the album, the spectacular, personal journey of *Holy the Firm*. Mary and I had come up with our own drafts of what we felt the final program order should be for this album, and were amazed to find that on our own we had chosen exactly the same ordering. A true synergy from start to finish.

I'm interested in both of your journeys as to how you got to where you are, musically? Could you both (individually, obviously) perhaps trace your musical histories? I'm sure our readers would appreciate the odd tale or two; I'd also be fascinated not just in a list of teachers and influences but which teachers cast the longest shadows and why? If you were to name one major influence on your musical life (teacher or not), who would they be?

HLW: I started piano lessons at age four, and was very fortunate to always have excellent teachers. At age eleven I auditioned and was accepted into the studio of Ms. Nellie Tholen, who was widely known throughout the Northwest U.S. and beyond. Born in 1903, she knew Ravel, Rachmaninoff, Bartók and many other luminaries. On one of the walls of her waiting room was a plaque which read, 'Toil is the price of excellence.' She taught me the joy of hard work, and the rewards of smart work. I finished out my pre-college years with this teacher, winning numerous prizes and honors throughout the Northwest U.S. She is hugely responsible for my decision to pursue music professionally.

I studied with William Phemister at Wheaton College in Chicago, IL in my early undergraduate years. It was Dr. Phemister, a former student of Leon Fleisher, who introduced me to wonderful American works by Ned Rorem, Charles Ives, and Samuel Barber. I learned and performed the Barber piano concerto during these years. He inspired and enabled

me to develop my love for American music. I met Ann Schein during a summer spent in Aspen; the first piece I played for her was Ravel's *Scarbo*. Incidentally, that same summer I was studying various works of Cage, Crumb's *Vox Balaenae*, and even performed an ensemble work for bowed piano, by composer-in-residence Steven Scott. The following year I transferred to Peabody Conservatory, where I would study with Ms. Schein for the next eight years to complete three degrees. Ms. Schein continued to foster my work with American music, and contemporary music—new works by Rzewski and Bolcom, Messiaen, Berg, Carter, Antheil, and others. I eventually played all of Samuel Barber's solo piano works as well as his cello sonata, and devoted my DMA document to the subject of Barber's piano music. I also coached chamber music intensively with several amazing coaches during those years—Earl Carlyss, Samuel Sanders, and Robert McDonald, among others—and won a number of prizes in collaborative contexts. All of these mentors influenced me deeply, and shaped me into the artist I have become today.

If I had to name one that has cast the longest shadow in my life, it would be Ann Schein. She herself has worked with many great American composers, among them Ned Rorem, Elliott Carter, and John Patitucci; I also will never forget the stunning performance she gave with Peabody colleagues and Phyllis Bryn-Julson, of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. Ann Schein was, and is, a mentor to me in the truest sense of the word. She drew out each student's unique voice and gifts while also instilling into them the timeless principles of great music-making. She always encouraged us to delve into as much chamber music as we could handle, beyond our solo work. Ann Schein liberated my technique, my confidence, and my zeal for music-making in a way that few teachers can, and has been a constant support and confidant to the present day. I'm forever grateful to and for her.

Perhaps one of my favorite stories describing what I learned from Ann Schein comes from a few years ago, when she and her husband, the great violinist Earl Carlyss came to Florida State University, where I presently teach, for an artist residency. I had come to fetch her from a practice session to take her to lunch, and she had been working on Respighi's monumental B minor violin sonata, a piece she has performed numerous times, her music so marked and worn it was practically only legible to her. As I met her gaze she had an almost child-like amazement on her face; she told me that during that practice she had just discovered new harmonies and contrapuntal lines she had never heard before and had decided to re-voice and change her pedalling that night at the concert to bring out her new discoveries. I thought to myself, what profound inspiration! This is the artist I want and need to be: never ceasing to learn, to grow, to reach new heights, to share something new, even in a performance.

MM: I was born into a musical family in Wisconsin. My mother is a professional clarinetist in Madison, my father played trombone as a hobby, my sister is a professional harpist. My grandfather continues to play trumpet to this day at 89 years young! Growing up I went to concerts constantly since my family members were always playing somewhere: the symphony, the opera, chamber music concerts, band concerts in the park ... you name it. I began violin lessons at the age of four, and voice lessons later at 14.

I was fortunate to have private teachers in my younger years who were very demanding but extremely caring: on violin, Miriam Schneider and Vartan Manoogian (University of Wisconsin-Madison); for voice, Bettina Björkstén (University of Wisconsin-Madison). Miriam instilled discipline in how I approached learning and practicing, and that prepared me for my studies with Vartan and Bettina, who would never have let anything slide. (Both Vartan and Bettina had excellent reputations as teachers—but they also weren't shy to throw unprepared students out of lessons. As a high schooler I was appropriately intimidated by that prospect.) My lessons with Vartan and Bettina were collaborative: as long as I was prepared, we were able to troubleshoot together, with the aim of making the best music possible. To have this kind of relationship with your teachers at such an early age is rare, and it set me up to know what I wanted out of a student/teacher relationship throughout my career.

I attended the Cleveland Institute of Music for my undergraduate work and studied with Beverley Rinaldi. Beverley was an excellent technician with a huge heart and was a great teacher for young singers. The training at CIM was quite extensive, but if you embraced every challenge, you left school prepared for anything. Aside from my studies with Beverley, I am so thankful for my extensive music theory training with Richard Nelson, and eurhythmics with David Brown.

My relationship with new music also started at CIM. A classmate of mine, Dan Visconti, had written a piece for soprano and orchestra, and had heard I could learn anything. This was the very first piece of "new music" I learned, and I

loved the challenge of singing something that no one had heard before and putting my stamp on it. That opportunity led to more projects with other student composers and composers on faculty.

I headed to the Manhattan School of Music for grad school and studied with Joan Patenaude-Yarnell. I am thankful for Joan, as she kept my growing voice in good shape. Grad school was difficult for me, as I was trying to find my way in an opera-focused conservatory, and not fitting anywhere. I was terrified of showing an interest in “new music,” as there was this odd belief among the students that new music singers had terrible technique and only sang new music because they couldn’t sing opera, and I did not want to be labeled and discarded. My secret lasted only a semester. This was a blessing, however, as I began to make connections in the new music world, particularly with my composer classmates who have become my colleagues and dear friends.

I had my real identity crisis/epiphany after graduate school. I was taking lots of auditions for opera companies, going broke and getting nowhere. I then auditioned for the Ravinia Steans Institute—a very prestigious Art Song program outside of Chicago. I actually went into the audition thinking “They are not going to accept me. I don’t care, but I’m going to nail these songs.” I did sing very well, but left assuming I didn’t have a chance. I was floored when I got an offer letter.

My experience at Ravinia was really the turning point for me. I was at a place where my musicianship was acknowledged and appreciated, and I am thankful for Brian Zeger’s encouragement. I was especially honored to be asked to come out early to perform Schoenberg’s *String Quartet No. 2* with students at the string program. However, my epiphany moment was in a lesson with baritone, Sanford Sylvan. We were coaching Anne Trulove’s aria from *The Rake’s Progress*. He stopped me at one point and said “Mary! You sound so good! Why don’t you do more opera?” I promptly burst into tears and blathered on about all my frustrations and how I didn’t know what to do. He calmed me down and said “Listen. It doesn’t matter if you sing opera or not. The most important thing is to **sing what you love**, and it will all work out.” I took that advice to heart and never looked back.

A couple years later, pianist Margo Garrett put me in touch with soprano Lucy Shelton. I was somewhat in the wilderness and needed a teacher and a mentor. Lucy is a remarkable musician and human being and I am eternally grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her and have her in my life.

I truly don’t know if I could pick a teacher that cast the longest shadow, because I think if I took even one out of the equation, there would be a huge hole.

Finally, the one musical moment that changed my life is going to come out of left field. I was at CIM, and the White Stripes had been nominated for a Grammy that year. I had always watched the Grammys growing up, but had gotten used to seeing performances that were very good, but very staged—it is live TV after all. When the White Stripes performed, they began with their hit single, *Seven Nation Army*. After the second verse, they abruptly shifted into *Death Letter*—a song they had recorded on earlier album. I didn’t know the song, but I sat on the floor transfixed as Jack White completely let loose with his voice and a guitar solo that seemed kept pushing the limits every few bars. The lighting got so bright my TV screen turned white. When they brought their performance to a rousing finish, my mouth was hanging open. I had never seen a musical performance that laid it all out and doing it at the Grammys seemed even more rebellious. It was in that moment that I knew what I had to aim for every time I performed on stage.

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