

## **“The Woman in the Moon”**

**Olivia Haramis, soprano**

**Ben Kwong, piano**

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Classe de/Class of: Tracy Smith Bessette

These program notes are written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their course. Ces notes de programme sont écrites par l'étudiant-interprète et sont présentées en tant que réalisation partielle des critères de leur cours.

The Silver Aria  
from *The Ballad of Baby Doe* Douglas Moore  
(1893-1969)

The Lake Isle of Innisfree Ben Moore  
(b. 1960)

Interlude  
Nervous Prostration  
from *So Free Am I*

*Songs & Sonnets to Ophelia* Jake Heggie  
Ophelia's Song (b. 1961)  
Women Have Loved Before  
Not in a Silver Casket  
Spring

### *Intermission*

Vaga luna, che inargenti (from *Tre Ariette*) Vincenzo Bellini  
(1801-1835)

An die Nacht Richard Strauss  
Ich wollt ein Sträusslein binden (1864-1949)  
Säusle, liebe Myrthe  
Als mir dein Lied erklang  
Amor  
from *Sechs Lieder*, Op. 68 (“Brentano Lieder”)

Musique Regret	Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
L'heure rose	Augusta Holmès (1847-1903)
Once I Was	Ricki Ian Gordon (b. 1956)

### Program Notes

For the past several years, I have been intrigued by the common association of women, and madwomen in particular, with the night. The night holds connotations of mystery, danger, sexual impropriety, erotic symbolism; but ironically, also of safety. Women can hide – and arguably, live more authentically in the night. The moon, on the other hand, is a beacon of light in that darkness. It is a guide to travellers, it controls the tides, and many believe in its strong influence on the human psyche. For this recital, I have chosen repertoire that is either composed by women, set to poetry by women, has a feminist lens, or alludes to a woman's connection to nature and moonlight.

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#### *The Silver Aria (Douglas Moore)*

In this aria from *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956), Baby Doe stops the chatter of several men discussing the values of gold versus silver, to tell them of the beauty of silver. She compares it to the glow of the moon, to the laugh of an infant, to the “core of dreams”<sup>1</sup>. The many high arpeggios, trills, and falling motives in both the piano and vocal lines are reminiscent of the twinkling of the moon over a river, or of silver reflecting the light of the moon.

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#### *The Lake Isle of Innisfree (Ben Moore)*

In his setting of Yeats' famous Irish poem, Ben Moore paints a stunning picture of a poet yearning for the peace that can only come from solitude in nature. The simple, folk-like melody recalls a childhood spent in the countryside and moonlight glowing on a lake. I imagine a woman, tired of the bustling business of life in the city, yearning for the peace and tranquility of a small cabin on an island far away.

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#### Selections from *So Free Am I (Ben Moore)*

Ben Moore's *So Free Am I* is a song cycle composed entirely on the poetry of women. I begin with “Interlude”, on a poem by Amy Lowell – a rather neutral title, but it is one of the most poignant texts in this cycle. It exposes the boring, mundane, depressing life of a woman

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Moore, “The Silver Aria,” in *Arias for Soprano*, v. 1, ed. Robert L. Larsen (New York: Schirmer, 1991), 194-198.

confined to doing the same household chores everyday — and her escape into a world of moonlight and romance. Notice the shift in the piano from the repetitive eighth notes when she discusses her everyday life, to much fuller, romantic arpeggiation when she shifts to her dream world. The vocal line also becomes higher and more lyrical.<sup>2</sup>

“Nervous Prostration” is set to Anna Wickham’s poetry. It is a sarcastic and comical account of the poet’s experience as the wife of a posh Londoner, surrounded by his dreadfully dull family and friends. The piano hilariously – and tragically – echoes the sarcasm of the singer with non-stop eighth notes in an homage to London Music Hall style.<sup>3</sup>

### *Songs & Sonnets to Ophelia (Jake Heggie)*

To write a song cycle about Ophelia is a daunting task. Shakespeare’s heroine has been depicted in countless works of art in the past four centuries, as well as in many musical settings. Strauss, Brahms, Thomas, Chausson, Quilter, Maconchy, Borg – these are only some of the composers who have written music to Ophelia. The majority of these use Shakespeare’s original text, or a translation thereof. In his *Songs & Sonnets to Ophelia*, Jake Heggie boldly departs from this tradition, using his own poem for the first song and texts by Edna St. Vincent Millay for the other three.

This choice gave him both the freedom to go beyond the contents of *Hamlet* in his interpretation of Ophelia, and the challenge of keeping her recognizable to audiences. The first song, “Ophelia’s Song”, is set in a popular style: with a straightforward melody hinting toward both musical theatre and folk music. However, according to Elizabeth Frazer, a closer look at the piano part reveals the reality of Ophelia’s situation: the arpeggiation spanning a wide range recalls the water in which she drowns; the 3/4 meter in the third verse contrasts the 6/8 meter in the voice, thus hinting towards her instability; and the occasional moments of silence occur when she is momentarily lucid.<sup>4</sup>

The next song, “Women have loved before”, is set to a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay. The heroine recalls legendary women of the past who also perished in love. This text is much more vivid, and depicts a stronger-willed woman than we saw in the last song.<sup>5</sup> There are a number of references to Ophelia’s sexuality, which Heggie mirrors in the piano. The strong emotional and dynamic contrasts, frenetic outbursts, and word painting all heighten the drama of Ophelia’s mental state.<sup>6</sup> He gives her moments of clarity, too, such as the sobering 4/4 section at the end of the song, in which Ophelia compares herself with striking lucidity to the women of the past.

“Not in a Silver Casket” pointedly references Ophelia’s death in love. It features an unsteady sense of rhythm and lots of repetition – thereby mirroring Ophelia’s obsession.<sup>7</sup> I am struck by the moments of honesty in which she declares her love for Hamlet. Frazer notes that these are understood as sincere because of the simplicity of the music in these moments. For me, they illustrate the complexity of Ophelia’s madness, and beyond that, of her womanhood.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Moore, *So Free Am I* (Self-published, 2010), 5-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-18.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Frazer, “Ophelia as Archetype: Jake Heggie’s ‘Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia’” (DMA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2012), 24-28, ProQuest (Order No. 3511044).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Frazer, *Ophelia as Archetype*, 30-33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

The final song, “Spring”, is set to a free-verse text by Millay. The music reflects the random and sporadic way in which Ophelia is now speaking – it is reminiscent of her mad scene in *Hamlet*. Both the piano and the voice interject with random musical outbursts, and both the tempo and the keys change constantly. This indicates to the listener that Ophelia has now completely lost touch with reality.<sup>8</sup> Fraser indicates that Ophelia seems to be lucid when she states that “Not only underground are the brains of men Eaten by maggots”.<sup>9</sup> Listen for the indications in the piano that Ophelia is descending into madness and ultimately, to her death: the descending movement in the left hand reminiscent of a funeral march, the bells, and the downward arpeggiation.<sup>10</sup>

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*Vaga luna, che inargenti – from Tre Ariette (Vincenzo Bellini)*

This beloved song by Bellini features a heartbroken lover who sings to the moon of his lost love. He tells the moon that she is the only witness to his longing, and begs her to pass on this message to his beloved, wherever she may be. Bellini uses a simple, straightforward bel canto melody which highlights the beauty of this sacred moment under the light of the moon.<sup>11</sup> This past winter term, I took Dr. Tracy Smith Bessette’s seminar on ornamentation from Mozart to Bellini, and I gained a great deal of insight regarding historical performance practice of this music. I have therefore ornamented my performance of this Bellini song accordingly.

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*Sechs Lieder, Op. 68 – “Brentano Lieder” (Richard Strauss)*

Strauss’ *Brentano Lieder* is a beloved song cycle for soprano. These songs highlight Strauss’ ability to write beautiful, virtuosic melodies, luscious harmony, as well as expert text-setting. The first song, “An die Nacht”, portrays a sensual scene of two lovers under the moonlight. The music reflects this in the especially poignant third verse, or the second iteration of “Heilige Nacht!” (holy night) – in which both the vocal line and piano press forward with an incessant crescendo until they arrive at a climax at “also fließet in die brünstige Nacht der Tag” (so the day flows into the fervent night).<sup>12</sup>

The second song, “Ich wollt ein Sträusslein binden”, tells the tale of a young lover who wanted to pick flowers for his beloved, but could not find any. When he finally finds a flower to pick, she speaks to him and asks him to spare her life – to which he agrees. In the end, he has no flower, and no lover. Strauss’ word painting and use of tonality in this song makes the text come to life – much like the flower.

In “Säusle, liebe Myrthe”, the poet sings to his beloved as she sleeps under the moonlight and stars, assuring her that they will be together soon. The romantic melody and thick texture in the piano<sup>13</sup> amplify the romantic nature of this song.

The opening line of “Als mir dein Lied erklang” translates to “Your song rang out! I heard it/Soaring through roses to the moon”.<sup>14</sup> As this line is repeated throughout the song, it

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<sup>8</sup> Frazer, *Ophelia as Archetype*, 39-43.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-43.

<sup>11</sup> Vincenzo Bellini, *Vaga luna che inargenti* (Cambridge: Stephen Lawrence, 2023), 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Strauss, *6 Lieder, Op. 68* (Berlin: Adolph Fürstner, 1920), 3-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-19.

<sup>14</sup> Stokes, “Als Mir Dein Lied Erklang!”.

continues to rise in pitch,<sup>15</sup> thus increasing in urgency. This song is reminiscent of the sensual, moonlit love scene in “An die Nacht”: this time though, the lover sings her song to the moon, and the poet remembers it fondly.

“Amor” is the fifth song in this cycle, though it more closely resembles a virtuosic aria for coloratura soprano. In fact, it is almost a “baby Zerbinetta”: the comic foil to Ariadne in Strauss’ opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*. This song is filled with extremely difficult passages of high arpeggios, scales, and trills.<sup>16</sup> It stands out in the art song repertoire, since this type of vocal writing is typically reserved for opera. Strauss’ operatic influence is obvious throughout this cycle, but particularly in this song.

### *Musique and Regret (Claude Debussy)*

Debussy was only 21 and 22 years old when he composed *Musique and Regret*, respectively. These melodies, set to poetry by Paul Bourget, evoke a tenderness and youth that is particular to Debussy’s early works. *Musique* tells the story of a young person reminiscing about a past love. The poet hears a soft violin melody, reminiscent of the voice of a woman, singing of another night lost for the sake of happiness.

*Regret* is a slightly more mature composition, and is thus more musically complex. It also recalls a lost love, but this time, the memory is bittersweet. The poet stands under a summer evening’s sky, remembering a time when she felt love.

### *L’heure rose (Augusta Holmès)*

I first discovered the music of Augusta Holmès on Hélène Guilmette and Martin Dubé’s recording, *L’Heure Rose: Musiques de Femmes*.<sup>17</sup> “L’heure rose”, of course, appears as the title track on the album. This gorgeous mélodie depicts the youth, love, and enthusiasm for life of a young woman. “L’heure rose”, or the pink hour, describes the few hours of the night before sunrise, when the dew falls on the roses, when dreams flourish, when sensuality, youth, and drunkenness live among the sounds of the night.

### *Once I Was (Ricki Ian Gordon)*

The music of Ricki Ian Gordon is heavily influenced by musical theatre. *Once I Was* describes the coming-of-age of a woman: beginning from her early childhood days, into the present as she lives her dream of singing on a big stage. She describes her changing interactions with boys and men, and ultimately, how music continues to guide her through the changing seasons of her life.

<sup>15</sup> Strauss, *6 Lieder*, 20-27.

<sup>16</sup> Strauss, *6 Lieder*, 28-33.

<sup>17</sup> “L’heure rose,” Apple Music, track 3 on Hélène Guilmette and Martin Dubé, *L’Heure Rose: Musiques de Femmes*, Groupe Analekta Inc., 2014.

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