

Brandon Tran

Program Notes

Beethoven – An die ferne Geliebte, Op. 98

To the Distant Beloved is the first known song cycle by a prominent composer. Inspired by themes of longing and separation in his earlier composition, *Adelaide*, Beethoven expands on them in this cycle. Each movement compares aspects of nature to love. To represent nature, Beethoven uses motivic ideas found in the “*Pastoral*” *Symphony*, which he had composed 8 years prior. From the distant mountains in the opening phrase to the sound of birds chirping in the fourth movement, it is easy to feel a part of this world. The opening phrase of the first movement returns in the final movement which gives the cycle a sense of completion.

Debussy – Ariettes oubliées, L. 60

Ironically, Debussy’s *Forgotten Songs* is one of the most well-known works within the song repertoire. Although the songs were composed between 1885-1887, it was not until 1903 after several revisions (such as the coda in *Chevaux de bois*) when it was published. This cycle is dedicated to the prominent soprano Mary Garden, who played the first Mélisande in Debussy’s opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The poetry of Paul Verlaine strove for subtlety and refinement which Debussy was able to reflect masterfully in the accompaniment through small harmonic changes. The effects of these changes allowed for motivic ideas to flow seamlessly from one to another. For many years to come, Debussy’s works would contain influences from this cycle.

Britten – On This Island, Op. 11

On This Island is based on poetry from Wystan Hugh Auden's collection of poems titled *Look, Stranger!*. Composed in 1937, during a difficult time in Britten's life, this song cycle reflects on the emotional frustration and oppression that he experienced. The death of his parents within the three years leading up to the publication of this cycle contributed greatly to the stress he was feeling due to his inability to express his homosexuality. This was at a time when it was considered a criminal offence in the United Kingdom. Auden's poetry contains many dark themes. However, the connection with Britten suggests that the text may refer to homosexuality. He juxtaposes the complexity of the text with a simple accompaniment, highlighting the turmoil that the text conveys. As one delves deeper into the poetry, the listener can uncover the complex layers of emotion and distress of the cycle.