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MARK ADAMO: THE SOLO VOCAL WORKS THROUGH 2006

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MARK ADAMO: THE SOLO VOCAL WORKS THROUGH 2006

By

Scott David Miller

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Major: Music

Under the Supervision of Professor Donna Harler-Smith

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 2006
American composer Mark Adamo enjoyed tremendous success with his first two full-scale operatic works, *Little Women*, and *Lysistrata*. For both of these works, Adamo served not only as composer, but also as his own librettist. Originally eager to pursue a career as a composer of the Broadway musical, his background and training in playwriting, acting, and musical composition provide him with a unique and well-informed perspective on the fundamentals of dramatic and musical form and function which is both simple and ingenious. His gift for setting language to music is extraordinary, and his knowledge of the human singing voice and its expressive capabilities is evidenced by the virtuosic, *bel canto* informed writing that he produces.

Upon seeing and hearing a performance of Adamo’s first opera *Little Women*, the author of this document was inspired to request a commission for a set of songs by Mr. Adamo. The result was the cycle or *solo cantata* *Garland*, music for tenor and piano set to the texts of four poems by Emily Dickinson on themes of death, the loss of a loved one, and the way in which one is either consoled or not by religion and its various agents.
Through the process of commissioning Garland, the author corresponded directly with Mr. Adamo; interviewed him about his craft including compositional style and process, harmonic language, form and function of melody, characteristics of a successful libretto, dodecaphony, role models, composing for genres outside of opera, and related topics.

Mr. Adamo provided the author with heretofore unavailable manuscripts of several unpublished “early” songs, a one scene opera, and a draft of the outline for Little Women.

This document discusses Adamo’s published and unpublished solo vocal works to date, including the operatic works, and solo songs. Discussion focuses on the composer’s own remarks and insights regarding the compositions, and his vocal style in particular. Special attention is given to the song cycle Garland, its genesis, performance notes, and its aesthetic relationship to the operatic works.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document is dedicated to my mother, whose untimely death delayed the initiation of this document, but whose infinite strength, love and support enabled its completion.

An enormous debt of gratitude is owed to Mark Adamo for his willingness to write an elegant and expressive cycle of songs for the author, and for opening his home and heart to a stranger in the interest of sharing his aesthetic views, and to shed light on the genius of his artistic process.

Special thanks, love and appreciation to Professor Donna Harler-Smith for her guidance, sense of humor, wisdom, faith, understanding and encouragement that provided focus and momentum throughout my doctoral program.

And especially to my wife and children without whose patience, love, understanding, generosity and forgiveness, this would not have come to fruition.

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American composer Mark Adamo was born in 1962 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the fourth of five children. His was not a particularly musical family, but Mark had an early interest in writing and theater, and a fascination with music. In his own words from an interview with USOPERAWEB from May, 2001 the composer stated:

There weren’t a lot of musical experiences growing up. I started writing stories when I was seven and started appearing in amateur theater productions when I was twelve. There wasn’t a piano in the house, so at theater rehearsals, I would stand absolutely hypnotized when someone played the piano. Years later I found out that my mother had been a band singer as a young woman.

Even without a piano in the house, Adamo managed to feed and nurture his intrinsic musical interest in practical ways. In the same interview, he recalls the way in which he acquired his first piano, and the unique circumstances:

During my junior year in high school I had a paper route and Friday was collection day. There was a certain woman whose stop on the route I used to save until the very end. I would get there about 8:00 and she would leave me alone to go look for the money. While she was gone I would sit at the piano, improvising. She would be gone for about an hour and then she’d come back and exclaim, “Look! I found it!” It became a running joke, although we never really acknowledged it. One day, she told me she
was getting rid of the piano and asked if I would take it off her hands for 50 dollars. … it was only six octaves and was small enough to fit in the corner of our living room, and it had a quiet, almost celeste-like tone. My father needed to sleep during the day for his work schedule so it couldn’t be too loud. ...So, I got it and started to obsessively teach myself to play.”

Adamo’s love for writing and theater would eventually lead him to pursue studies at New York University. Music was something he felt he needed to know however, in order to become the playwright he aspired to be:

At eighteen I entered the playwriting program….I took what amounted to a double major in music – every elective I took was in music – even though the playwriting program didn’t allow that. I completed most of the playwriting degree [during which time he received an award for outstanding undergraduate achievement in playwriting] and then finished with a composition degree cum laude at Catholic University in Washington. (USOPERAWEB, May 2001)

His compositional gifts were recognized at Catholic University in the same way his playwriting skills had been at New York University. Graduating in 1990, he received the Theodore Presser prize for outstanding undergraduate achievement in composition.

Adamo was still thinking of himself as primarily a “composer of songs,” with his sights being set primarily on following in the footsteps of Stephen Sondheim, and becoming an important composer of Broadway musicals. It seemed like a logical path given his talent for writing, music, and his theatrical background and instincts. Friends and mentors at Catholic University and professional musicians associated with the
National Symphony Orchestra in Washington encouraged him to delve into the realm of concert music, which for Adamo at the time was unchartered territory. Nevertheless, commissions for chorus, chamber ensembles, and mezzo soprano were coming his way. He remembers, “I was distracted…from the piece for mezzo soprano, because a number of friends had died or were dying at that time and all I could think of took the shape of an AIDS memorial, a design for singing voice, speaking voice, and orchestra.” (USOPERAWEB, May 2001) That piece, Late Victorians, would serve not only as a springboard for Adamo’s compositional future, but as musical and poetic material for the song cycle Garland, commissioned by the author and premiered in 2006.

Adamo had been approached by the chamber orchestra of the National Symphony and their conductor, Sylvia Alimena, to write something for their inaugural season. He told them about the piece he had been working on and they asked him to submit it. Still, Adamo was unsure of himself:

> Even then I didn’t take it seriously – I thought Sylvia…was just being polite. But, eventually they called me with a date – at which point I knew they were sincere. That piece, Late Victorians, was very meaningful, both for me and for the orchestra. It was then that I realized there were too many very smart people who believed in my composition for them all to be delusional. So as unlikely as it seemed from my background and history, I finally began to believe that perhaps I did belong in the concert world. (USOPERAWEB, May 2001)

Written and premiered while Adamo was himself a music critic for The Washington Post, Late Victorians, which combines and alternates sung poetry by Emily
Dickinson with spoken text from an essay by Richard Rodriguez was premiered in March, 1995. Adamo was drawn to the piece by Rodriguez because it resonated close to home in a timely and personal way. In an unpublished transcript containing program notes and an outline written by the composer he explains:

….a central image was the Victorian house; the old Victorians that waves of San Franciscans had reclaimed, had refurbished, and were now leaving empty as AIDS swept the city. The once haunted houses were becoming haunted once again. ….We – I and 30 other people from my church, an ad-hoc volunteer hospice had just buried Bob, a man we hardly knew until he fell ill with AIDS. And Don, whom I had just directed in an opera, was failing. The thing that seemed unacceptable to me was how ordinary this was all becoming.

Rodriguez’s article became intertwined with the Dickinson poetry when, to quote Adamo:

I reread Camille Paglia’s Sexual Personae, particularly the chapter on Emily Dickinson. Paglia’s take on Dickinson was violently different from anything I’d ever read before. I saw for the first time an icy glee, the perverse refusal to look away, in a quatrain like:

Ruin is formal, devil’s work
Consecutive and slow,
Fail in an instant no man did;
Slipping is crash’s law. (Notes)
Adamo points out a commonality between Rodriguez and Dickinson that serves as a unifying element in the piece: “There’s a kind of formality…a kind of not looking to move you, that I find even more moving than when someone goes out there and pulls all the strings – tries to consciously engage all your emotions.” (Notes)

One of Adamo’s assignments as a classical music reviewer for The Washington Post also figured in the overall design for Late Victorians. He explains:

That season The Washington Post asked me to review the National Chamber Orchestra’s performance of a famed Haydn symphony, the “Farewell.” In it, Haydn had incorporated a small staging joke. He meant to remind his patron prince that the musicians he was keeping in the country very much wanted – and deserved – to return to town. So Haydn wrote a last movement in which, person by person, section by section, the musicians left the stage; leaving only two violinists to carry on the song, alone in a bare forest of music stands. It played as a joke in 1732. But it seemed very different to me now. (Notes)

Between Rodriguez, Dickinson, and Haydn; Adamo had in his words “found shape” for his piece: “The formal, oblique Rodriguez text would be spoken by a narrator. The Dickinson poems, singing everything the Rodriguez could not say, would be sung by a tenor. And the four movements would be linked by solo cadenzas; written for players from each choir of the orchestra. After these cadenzas, the soloists would leave the stage. They would not return.” (Notes)

Also in his program notes for the piece, Adamo speaks of a corollary between Late Victorians and Christianity and the way in which he views the dramatic progression
of the piece, using the spoken and sung word intertwined with each other and the instrumental *cadenza* movements:

In its final form, *Symphony: Late Victorians* is not unlike the Stations of the Cross. … During Lent, the faithful walk from frieze to frieze; meditate on the image; and move on to the next. They make a living rosary. The images themselves are static; mere panels. … It is the pilgrim who is dynamic, making the journey from image to image, walking the walk. It is in the heart of the pilgrim that the experience builds.

With the commission and performance of *Late Victorians*, Adamo had gained confidence, and a new sense of himself as a composer, but he was not yet aware that the course of his compositional energy was about to change its focus toward the genre of opera. He related this to Jason Serinus in an interview in August of 2001.

“It was really the first time that I began to think of myself, not as a songwriter with orchestral skills, but as a composer in the usual sense. … Perhaps I indeed had something, even though I still never planned to use it anywhere than in the musical theater.”

In an interview with Frank J. Oteri published in February of 2006, Adamo was asked how he managed to begin writing opera immediately after *Late Victorians*, when his primary goal until then had been centered on becoming a composer for Broadway.

Well, it was an accident. What happened was that as the degree neared its conclusion I was beginning to sense that the musical ceiling on Broadway at that point was pretty low. The stuff I grew up loving I now realized was
really not exactly theatre music but sort of a theatre-opera fusion which has always had a certain place on Broadway.

The idea of theatre-opera fusion would continue to play an important role in the artistic development and output of Mark Adamo.
CHAPTER 2

Little Women

Not long after the premiere of Late Victorians, Adamo was approached by a small professional opera company affiliated with Catholic University in Washington D.C. They were interested in having him create an opera based on Louisa May Alcott’s book Little Women. At first he resisted because he didn’t feel that the book was a good candidate for operatic adaptation. As he said in one article, “It was written more as a series of short stories than a novel, under lots of commercial pressure, and with little dramatic structure. Opera needs that structure, so I had to provide my own.” (Forsell)

And in another interview:

I couldn’t find any sense of architecture that could be adapted to the theater, let alone to the opera house. The piece was organized as a series of anecdotes; there was no psychological or dramatic motor. I didn’t know if I could find a way into it as a dramatist and a musician.

(USOPERAWEB, May 2001)

Eventually, after looking at other adaptations of the book, none of which Adamo felt worked particularly well, he came upon the idea of focusing on the life and relationships of the family instead of the collective series of events that they experienced. But not everyone involved with the project would agree with his concept. In his words:

Suddenly I got what the piece was about: Jo trying to maintain her perfectly happy family. …. So, now I get extremely excited about the project. …. It began to take a shape I could hear. The entire first half of the book is condensed into the first scene of the opera, and I’ve cut the
second part of the book. But now, I knew I could write a piece that had its own life—it wouldn’t depend upon the book for its impact—so with great enthusiasm I brought the design back to Washington—and they didn’t want it! They had engaged a librettist, who was not a writer, and wanted something much more nostalgic and episodic… I apologized and said, “I can’t do this”, and withdrew. So having been dragged into it and having transformed it, suddenly I had no opportunity to write it.

(USPERAWEB, May 2001)

Previously, in his position as a music critic for The Washington Post, Adamo had been assigned to cover the premiere of an opera at Houston Grand Opera, where he met composer Carlisle Floyd. When he withdrew from the project with Catholic University, Adamo called upon Floyd for advice.

Carlisle Floyd came to my rescue. .... I had been talking to him as Little Women was evolving. So when it fell apart, I called him and said, “Hello this is Mark Adamo and I’ve just cut my own throat. Please call.”

Carlisle suggested that I offer it to Houston, which had not crossed my mind because I was, obviously, not a composer with a national reputation. .... But Carlisle asked me to send it to him and said he would talk to David Gockley. (USPERAWEB, May 2001)

Adamo remembers what then transpired:

Nothing had happened after five months, and I put it out of my head.

Then I got a call saying they had a spot for a small commission for the Houston Opera Studio. It would be two performances only and if I wanted
to do it under these circumstances; they would love to have the piece.

And then any number of things happened. (USOPERAWEB, May 2001)

Not a note of music had been written yet since Adamo had been spending his time trying to make operatic sense of the drama. His approach to composing the piece reflects his interest and experience as a writer, and in theater, as well as his musical training, and is key to the success his pieces have enjoyed. As librettist and composer, Adamo is extremely detailed in his preparation and methodical in his process.

The first thing I did for Little Women was to write a kind of term paper, if you will, on this piece as a cultural quantity: the novel itself, its major themes, the book’s place in history, of course how it had been adapted, and what was it in the book and our memory of it which made it still meaningful 150 years after it was written? It was a long, prose piece—half historical and half theoretical—almost a program note for an opera that didn’t exist.

I did that because I always do a number of outlines before I write anything large-scale. The essay gave me the widest possible view of what I was doing. Then I wrote what was primarily a libretto outline, although it was musically substantial as well. I pretended I was sitting in the theater, that I was deaf, and that I was trying to write down as best as I understood what was happening on-stage simply from the body language and from the actions of the characters: not from what they were saying, necessarily, but from what they were doing. This is based somewhat on Uta Hagen’s Respect for Acting in which she talks about the beats, or
parts of a scene, and the actions of the character within those beats. These
can either echo or contradict what the character is saying. For instance, I
might be saying “Leave my house” but my actual goal could be either to
expel you or to seduce you, depending on the scene.

I restricted the outline to short sentences with an active verb that
couldn’t be any of the “to say” verbs—“answers, asks, retorts,” etc. At
this point, I wasn’t worrying at all about actual language, its poetic weight
or period quality or what—have—you. I just wanted to identify which
actions could tell the story. I found it amazing how that process organized
my thoughts as to what the scene was about, who belonged in it, how long
it should be, and what the problems were. Also, I started to get the sense
of what musical materials might work motivically, and wrote them in
bold. So, for example the first time Meg says “things change,” I bolded
that because I knew that was going to drive the composition.

Then I took the opposite approach. I asked myself, “If I were blind, did
not speak English, and were sitting in the theater in which this opera is
playing—I can hear the voices, the musical language, but I don’t
understand the text, and I cannot see the actors—what can I learn about
the story? If I’m hearing a theme, what does that theme tell me about the
scene? Are the notes close together, are there great leaps, is it fast or slow,
are there regular meters?” I always thought of that wonderful comic
method of Jungian therapy, when the therapist asks the patient, “How do
you feel?” The patient responds, “I don’t know”: the therapist says, “If you did know, what would you say?” And the patient answers!

I wanted the dramatic design and the musical design to be identical: that what we hear as a symphonic process would play theoretically as almost an Eastern karmic process. You know that Buddhist notion that if you do not learn a lesson the first time, life will present it to you again, in a slightly different form, until you get the point. Certainly I’ve had that in my own life! And so I felt confident using that insight to shape this score.

(USOPERAWEB, May 2001)

The following letter and draft was sent by the composer to David Gockley, then head of Houston Grand Opera. It is a facsimile dated November 11, 1992, and is one of the outlines that Mark Adamo sent to Gockley. Adamo makes mention in the letter of changes he has made from a previous outline. Of particular interest and significance in the outline are the detailed notes on staging, the indication of ensembles, arias, recitative, quartets, tempos, and descriptive language regarding even the texture of the music to be composed. Adamo makes reference to his compositional method within the outline when he states that, “The music will be wrought in such a way, that, even if we never heard a word of the libretto, we’d be able to follow the narrative by noting how the four solo lines in this quartet grow, change, and separate into four developed, individual musical profiles.” Adamo has already begun a list of props, costumes, and indicates the use of a scrim for certain scenes which is clear evidence of the combined theatrical, dramatic, literary, and musical process he employs in creating opera.
Figure 1: Adamo draft of Little Women to Gockley

Mark Adamo
365 West End Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10024

Mr. David Gockley
Houston Grand Opera
510 Preston
Houston, TX 77002-1594

November 11, 1996

Dear David,

Here's the new outline. It includes more musical texture than previous drafts (what's a solo? which are ensembles? &c), and a more detailed sense of how the piece can be staged in the leaner, fitter, more imaginative way we discussed. It also contains an important revision of the first scene. It occurred to me that I'm writing an entire opera about one girls' resistance to the loss of her closeness to her sisters without ever seeing and hearing that closeness embodied. The original first scene set up Mr. March as the center of the evening. This new version pulls from another episode in the book to demonstrate the sisters as a very special quartet before the drama pulls them apart.

I'd like to mention two other possibilities. What if Little Women became Jo and Her Sisters? Readers of the book will immediately recognize the reference; and the new title, freed of that patronizing diminutive, signals immediately to the audience that they're getting a new, more grown-up take on the material. Also, I know we've ruled out an onstage chorus. But I'd be very excited to us a quartet of mostly wordless women's voices in the orchestra, both as sound and as dreamlike analogue to the onstage female personae. Might this be feasible?

Let's talk soon.

All best,

Mark Adamo

(212) 787-5287 (cellphone) // (212) 980-3301 (fax)

II pages altogether: thanks, 

PROPOSAL: DRAFT

Commissioned for the Opera Studio of
Houston Grand Opera
David Gockley, General Director

adapted from the novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott

Music and text by MARK ADAMO

*Jo and Her Sisters*

a comedy for singers in two acts

for premiere March 1998, Houston, TX

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Jo and Her Sisters

Characters

JO, coloratura contralto
MEG, spinto soprano
BETH, lyric soprano
AMY, soubrette coloratura soprano

Mrs. MARCH, lyric contralto
AUNT MARCH, dramatic contralto
Mr MARCH, basso profundo

LAURIE, lyric tenor
John BROOKE, lyric baritone
Friedrich BHAER, basso buffo

Clerk
Porter
(supernumeraries)

The action takes place over 5 years in Concord, Massachusetts, in the 1870s.

Jo and Her Sisters is performed without an intermission.
Jo and Her Sisters

A Note on the Staging

However many visuals are actually employed in the production of Jo and her Sisters, for thematic reasons the piece should look as if it's being staged entirely with four trunks and a scrim—the elements we see in the Prologue. Notice that each large scene carefully alternates with a very simple scene, which could, if need be, be staged downstage in front of a scrim almost without physical settings at all (the path of Scenes 2 and 3A, the glade of scene 5, the porches of Scenes 6A and 8) which alternate with those stage pictures requiring more depth (the garden, the attic, Beth's room, etc.). Even in those large scenes, the trunks of the attic prologue should reappear, (open if possible), transformed into setting elements of the other scenes—Beth's piano, for instance, or benches for Meg's wedding. There's a practical advantage to this; but more importantly, if the production essentially looks like all of Jo's unfinished emotional business is spilling out of these trunks—and it's only at opera's end that she's finally able to close them and go on with her life—then mere scenic economy becomes dramatic elegance.
Prologue

The attic of the March house. Slanting light of a dark New England afternoon. Upstage, glimpsed, as if through a mist, (scrim) four chests, each with the name of a daughter--MEG, JO, BETH, AMY--carved into the lid. JO, 23 but feeling older, collapsed on a sofa (downstage) in a heavy black dress.

JO: Come up, Teddy!

From downstairs, "Teddy" (LAURIE) appears, splendidly suited. In a joyful recitative (with a tense undertone), leading to an (abbreviated--more on this later) solo, LAURIE explains how his love for AMY led both to marriage and, at last, to closure of his long-frustrated love-affair with JO. Jo accepts all of this in a short, curiously hollow-toned solo. (Correct, emptily polite, JO seems to be sleepwalking through this entire scene.) Then, LAURIE asks an earth-shattering question:

LAURIE: So we can go back to the happy old times, when we first knew each other?

The wrong question.

JO wakes up. The orchestra, the lighting changes.

JO: Go back? Back to the way it was?

LAURIE's frozen. It's as if time has stopped. JO leaps off the sofa.

JO: Absolutely! Absolutely!

And LAURIE sings the last of his solo again--backwards—and vanishes down the stairs, like a film running in reverse. The sofa slides offstage; and JO's dress and wig lifts off her body like birds and disappear skyward. In a mad, exuberant, but short solo, JO commands the clock to turn back, declares the last 5 years null and void, and transforms herself and her sisters—and LAURIE too--into the happy and inseparable children they once were. And lo! The mist (scrim) lifts; the chests come into focus, MEG, BETH, AMY, and a younger LAURIE tumble into the attic, and JO crashes into the circle to start

Scene I

The attic, 5 years earlier. The four sisters and LAURIE

In a giddy, busy, exuberant ensemble, the sisters play Rigmarole (see Alcott, "Camp Laurence"); a game in which each sister starts a nonsense story and leaves it off at some particularly thrilling point for the next to continue—in between reporting news of the week, reproaching each other for chores undone, teasing, confiding, and
generally enjoying each other’s company. It’s dramatized exposition; the only plot point made is that LAURIE, at JO’s insistence, is inducted into the circle. But we learn of 16-year old BETH’s physical frailty; that 19-year-old MEG isn’t so appalled at the notion that LAURIE’s tutor John BROOKE may be interested in her (this would be the sisters’ first romance); that LAURIE’s affection for JO is comradely but something else, too; that 15-year-old AMY, in her petulant, still-childish way, has a fascination with LAURIE she cannot understand; and that 18-year-old JO (who sold her longer hair to pay the butcher’s bill, and couldn’t be happier with her new boyish look), is adoring and fiercely protective of her sisters, and hasn’t the smallest sense of humor about the possibility of MEG and BROOKE. (Also has a lurid imagination; her contribution to Rigmarole is by far the most Gothic and elaborate of all of them.)

The core of this ensemble will be the sisters’ quartet. We’ll hear, woven into a contrapuntal web, certain turns of musical phrase which will both individuate the sisters at the outset and serve to trace their evolution throughout the piece. The music will be wrought in such a way that, even if we never heard a word of the libretto, we’d be able to follow the narrative by noting how the four solo lines in this quartet grow, change, and separate into four developed, individual musical profiles.

The scene is formed in two parts; one ensemble, quick, giddy, and contrapuntal, is the game; the next, dreamier and ruminative, is triggered by Laurie’s wondering, “Where do you think we’ll all be in ten years?”

An offstage call from MRS. MARCH for help with dinner ends the ensemble. Three of the sisters—MEG, BETH, and AMY—leave the attic to go downstairs and help. JO agrees to stay behind and clean up. While Jo returns all the props and badges of the club to the trunks where they belong, LAURIE, all but taunts JO in a brief recitative with the certainty that BROOKE is courting MEG, and that marriage is imminent. JO denies it. LAURIE promises she’ll know soon enough. There’s a curious tension in the room as LAURIE leaves and the scene darkens on JO.

**Scene 2**

_The path in front of the March house._ (in front of the scrim) MEG and BROOKE.

MEG teaches BROOKE Rigmarole. (recitative) His story, though, is different from the daft nonsense the sisters have spun; this is the story of a knight bewitched by the lovely face next door (aria)—a too-transparent simile. But before BROOKE can muster up the courage to make his case, LAURIE and JO appear, babbling about New York and writing and grand dreams (recitative)—until they see the couple. In a few lines, LAURIE exults; he told her so! Then Jo crashes into the circle with a presto solo, with interjections: amused (from LAURIE) and all-but-helpless (from MEG and BROOKE.) JO’s terribly sorry to interrupt, but she and MEG are late for
whatever back at the house, and so they must leave BROOKE this instant!
BROOKE, far from clueless about what’s really going on, engages JO in a brief
dialogue, (aria) under which kindly cantilena his firm message sounds clear; grow
up and back off! JO will hear none of it, and to LAURIE’s delight, drives BROOKE
off and all but drags MEG back to the house, which materializes (the scrim lifts) as we
enter

Scene 3

The March living room and its adjoining hall. MRS. MARCH and AMY, working;
BETH, practicing the piano, fading in and out of the conversation. (In the furniture,
we should see the trunks from the Prologue transformed into BETH’s piano, the
sofa, etc.)

In a brief, fiery recitative, JO chases MEG into the room, insisting she promise not to
marry BROOKE. MEG protests, but weakly. JO, her outrage fusing with her delight
in melodrama, decides to coach Meg on how to refuse BROOKE’s proposal if he
should make one. JO plays BROOKE; MEG plays MEG; they enact the scene. The
ensuing, comic-operetta duet itself is, in a certain way, just another game like the
sisters always play; in another way, the stakes are very real. MRS. MARCH, AMY,
and LAURIE comment; their opinions about the possible marriage form a real-
world counterpoint to the fantasy duet. (ensemble) (Unnoticed, BETH, suddenly
weak, leaves off the piano and exits.) All this is interrupted when the doorbell
rings, and MEG leaves the living room to admit BROOKE into the hall.

Now comes a trio; BROOKE, frankly proposing; JO, hissing direction from the
parlor; and MEG, torn between the two. AUNT MARCH, storming in and seeing
all, advises MEG in a graceless solo about the foolishness of marrying anyone as
poor and as without prospects as John Brooke. MEG, incensed, rises to the
occasion, and, in a passionate solo, defends her choice to marry whom she pleases,
and if she chooses John—and she does—that’s the end of that!

AUNT MARCII withdraws; the rest of the family (except JO) congratulates the
couple; BROOKE must return to the Lawrence house and says so, MEG walks him
out the door JO follows; and the living room vanishes as the three walk downstage
to

Scene 3A

The path again; (scrim)

Between MEG and BROOKE, the briefest goodbye (reprise); MEG, on her way back to
the living room, is stopped by JO. (LAURIE and MRS MARCH, unnoticed, may
enter to observe.)

Now comes an extended scena for these two. JO, all defenses down, pleads with
MEG. She feels she's losing her best friend. She feels that something is happening to MEG, some strange inevitable change that's going to separate them forever. MEG feels it too; but she also feels the first stirrings of love for a man, so her loss is tempered somewhat. MEG, in her simplicity, is almost cruel to JO; whereas as moments ago, JO, was playing a parody version of the ardent lover, now MEG is playing a real version of the jilting one—as their music will reflect.

The only consolation MEG can offer JO is that, while right now, she's the one who's changed, one day JO will too. JO, hurt and disgusted, swears otherwise, and escapes into the house. MEG follows her.

Scene 4

Meg's wedding morning, the next year. The March garden. Flowers everywhere. MRS. MARCH, working alone onstage. MEG's trunk is the wedding altar.)

From offstage, the sound of shattering glass, and a scream. AMY rages onstage; careless JO has spilled coffee over AMY's dress! A brief, fiery recitative as the two sisters spat: JO's fury is excessive. MRS. MARCH, commanding, intervenes; consoling AMY, ordering her indoors to change. AMY, brutally insulting JO, complies.

MRS, MARCH commands JO to sit by her: upbraiding her, but gently, she begins a solo, telling the story of "another bold girl's" wedding twenty years ago. She, too, feared leaving her family, resisted womanhood: but, even afraid, she took the leap; and now she'd never turn back. Jo guesses the bold girl's identity; but, sullenly, refuses to agree or disagree. MRS. March doesn't insist; but, in a brief coda, asks JO to respect MEG's desire for a happy day. JO agrees.

The family and friends have assembled. BETH plays, none too accurately, a wedding march; and the wedding scene (ensemble with solos) unfolds. MR. MARCH, the Emersonian celebrant, presides (solo): MEG and BROOKE announce their joyous self-authored vows (duet); and the dancing begins. During the foregoing LAURIE has tried and failed to engage JO's attention (aside); when the dancing begins, JO escapes to a little hillock beyond the garden, pursued by LAURIE...

Scene 5

A glade behind the garden (scrim)

As the dance music continues in the distance, LAURIE makes a passionate plea for JO's hand (solo). He's changed; can't she change as MEG has, and love him as a woman loves a man? No! cries JO (solo), making excuses; they're too incompatible, she's too independent, and besides, marriage is a terrible thing for a woman. LAURIE argues that away; their own relationship would be different, they've
discussed it, why won’t she give it a chance? In the ensuing duet, Jo tries to convince LAURIE that just because she doesn’t want to be his or anyone’s wife doesn’t mean she doesn’t love him; and he argues just the opposite. It ends badly, LAURIE, stung and agonized, storms offstage swearing an end to their friendship (coda); Jo, equally panicked, decides to go after all to New York (a possibility she’d raised and dismissed with LAURIE in Scene 2) When she returns, everything be as it was before! The dance music continues undimmed as Jo flees the stage.

Scene 6

Two years later. JO in a boarding house in New York; the family in their home; LAURIE and then AMY in Vevay, France

Letter sequence (ensemble); Jo in her boarding house in New York, and the family members appearing as they sing. In this we learn that Jo, staying in New York with a friend of her mother’s, is working as a writer and governess; that Meg is pregnant and delighted: that Beth, feigning health, has decided not to go to the seaside with the money Jo sent after all; that Amy is going to Europe as a companion to Aunt March, where she may see Laurie; that Laurie, studying in Europe, is still icy to Jo. In the midst of this, Frederick Bhaer makes his vocal entrance (solo; brief, but longer than the others in this ensemble). He’s a German professor staying at the same boarding house, and news of him crops up rather often in Jo’s letters to everyone except Laurie.

Bhaer confirms via note that he and Jo are attending the opera that night. Jo and Bhaer assume their evening cloaks and exit; the family, concluding the ensemble, fades into blackness and we are in

Scene 6A

Outside the boarding house (scrim) that night. Gaslight; Jo and Bhaer. Jo’s own trunk is their porch bench.

Jo and Bhaer enter, noisily arguing artistic politics (recitative). Bhaer is puzzled by Jo’s talent on the one hand, and her apparent lack of ambition on the other. She explains that while she loves writing, she’s “not a genius, like Keats” loves it mostly for the fun and the benefits it can bring to her family—which remains her first love. Bhaer, besotted, but putting the best face on it, wonders if Jo could possibly see a life outside her birth family; perhaps with the boy back home she keeps discussing? Jo, in a comically ambivalent solo, (with echoes of what she sang to Laurie in Scene 5) denounces marriage for its disruptive effects on families and its trammelement of women—all the while making elaborate exceptions for a marriage between someone like herself and, well, someone like Bhaer, whose sly, pointed interjections both build the piece into a duet and quite totally confuse Jo. The boarding house clerk abruptly enters to deliver a telegram to Jo. A pale Mrs. March appears; in a brief, terrifying reprise (a tragic reiteration of the “letter” material from the previous scene) she reports that Beth is gravely ill, and that Jo
had better return home. BHAER offers to assist her; JO, near-hysterical, declines, and flees.

Scene 7

The living room of the MARCH house. BETH, translucent, enshrined on her couch, (her trunk) ringed by MR. and MRS. MARCH, MEG, and BROOKE

JO crashes into the living room, and in a brief, tense recitative gets the update from the family on BETH’s condition, which is probably terminal. JO reproaches herself for leaving BETH and her family, damning herself as selfish for even entertaining the possibility of a life outside it. (Echoes of BHAER’s music underscore her speech.) Her family doesn’t quite get what she’s talking about. All is interrupted when BETH, waking, calls for JO, and asks to be left alone with her.

The ensuing scena frames an arching aria for BETH. She apologizes to her sister for not ever quite getting to the seaside as they planned, but asks her to pretend that they’re there now. BETH likens herself and her sisters to the seabirds; JO, to the seeking tern, MEG to the dove, AMY to a nightingale, and she, BETH, to a thrush, never flying far from home. Echoing MEG’s and LAURIE’s, BETH sings to JO a music of change; but whereas LAURIE urged change on JO and MEG all but apologized for announcing it, BETH is celebrating her new peace with it, and striving as her last gift to JO to give her peace with it as well. JO resists; she won’t let BETH die; she’ll never leave her side. BETH, sweetly, gently, but inarguably, advises her that there is no alternative; and requests to be left alone to sleep. JO makes her way past her family. “I’m losing you all,” she utters, as the scene closes.

Scene 8.

A year later. The front steps. (scrim)

JO, in black, sweeping: AUNT MARCH, needlepointing, keeping an eye on her. MRS. MARCH, MEG, and BROOKE pop out one at a time to ask questions of her, (recitative) and thus we learn that BETH has already died, that JO understands that BHAER is looking for teaching work, that AMY and LAURIE have married in France and are due home any moment, and that AUNT MARCH has returned early. We also now see the JO of the Prologue; cool, silent, lifeless. Suddenly, AMY appears, splendidly dressed, a clerk toting her luggage from France (among which we see her trunk); LAURIE is having the rest brought in; she, AMY, will greet the family in a moment, but she wanted to see JO first. She sings her aria about how she and LAURIE fell in love; it too is an aria of change; she didn’t expect to feel what she’s felt, and now she’s so grateful; will JO give her blessing? She knows they’ve never been as close as they might have been... JO is irreproachably congratulatory, but we see how changed she is. AMY explodes; will JO never forgive anyone for changing? AUNT MARCH, interrupting, sends AMY on her way, (taking her trunk) and, in a misguided attempt to cheer up JO, applauds her (aria) for becoming
as icy and removed as she herself is; it's the only way to survive. JO joins in the
duet at first; then, when she realizes the full implications of what AUNT MARCH is
saying, rejects her. There has to be some other way.

Scene 9

The attic, with the four trunks, as in the Prologue

JO begins alone a game of Rigmarole (aria); but the exciting point at which she ends
the story--of a woman magician who decreed that time stand still, and failed, having
lost her family and left her one possible suitor--is this very moment in her life.
Then LAURIE calls from downstairs; and we are back in the Prologue. The same
lines, LAURIE's brief solo; but this time, when LAURIE asks, "Can we go back to the
happy old times?" JO says no. In a brief solo, she tells him that the happy times
can't come back, but that they can love each other as adults; then she asks him for a
moment alone, that she'll be down in a moment. He complies.

Alone, Jo sings her climactic aria, in which she realizes that the only way to
happiness and wholeness as a person is to accept that her old life truly is dead; that
the sisters she loved have irrevocably changed, that her childhood can never return,
and that it's time to say goodbye and move on. One by one, she closes the trunks,
congratulating her sisters for having moved on in their various ways. What's next
for her? She doesn't know; it could be loneliness, just her stories and her parents to
keep her company--if only she'd appreciated BHAER when she knew him!—but she
won't waste any more time trying to force the past to come back. Then the attic door
opens, MRS. MARCIJ, downstairs, calls that someone's here to see her, and PROF.
BHAER's head pops up through the attic door. Their eyes meet---

The opera ends.

###
Adamo believes that all music is intrinsically dramatic, which is evidenced by his approach to composing Little Women, and supported by the dramatic detail and psychological insight provided in the aforementioned draft of what was then Jo and Her Sisters. In a separate interview with USOPERAWEB conducted by Kathleen Watt and Robert Wilder Blue he elaborated on the idea.

All good music is theater music. What do the first four notes of the Beethoven “Fifth” mean? No one can tell you exactly, but many of the explanations are implicitly dramatic, from Fate knocking at the door to a simple clearing of the throat. No matter how abstract, think, in Beethoven again, of the last quartets. Think of the “Fifth,” the music seems to embody a dramatic argument that persuades you even if you can’t identify its terms. Remember that the orchestral history of the West begins with moonlighting opera players.

Having done significant background work on how the opera would look, sound, what the primary actions and characters were to be, and having a clear and vivid sense of the overall structure, Adamo proceeded.

Only then did I write the first draft of the libretto, which by that point felt like draft number 25. I think it’s smart to leave actual words and music until as late as possible in the composing process. After all, the structure is how a piece lives or dies. I do not want to be orchestrating the piece and mulling whether the piccolo plays C# or C-natural for a scene that doesn’t work. Who cares? If the scene has not been deeply, thoroughly imagined, neither music nor words matter a damn. That
answers the ancient question of whether the words or the music come first in opera. Well, if you ask me, they both come second to the action. It’s those actions, the psychological processes that give you the structures of both language and the music. Once you find the structure, you can relax and create quite spontaneously when you sit down to write the score or the text, because you know what your shape is.

Writing the libretto was terrific fun. Being trained as a playwright as much as a composer and having written language for more years than I’d written music, and now, having a scaffold, it progressed quite fluently.

(USOPERAWEB, May 2001)

In an interview with the author, Adamo explained why for opera, he prefers to write his own librettos.

I tend to do my own language…not because I resist working with anyone else, but…I do think that from first and second hand experience, it is really hard to find a librettist that really understands the technical demands that an opera makes on a libretto. Because it needs to work as a play, but it also needs to work poetically not to the extent that the language has got to be poetic in the way that Dickinson is poetic, but poetic in a musical sense.

And in response to a comment by the author on the seemingly poetic aspects of Little Women the composer had this to say:

That was almost a luxury. Some of the arias in that piece…are poetic strophically in terms of rhyme and line length. They set up phrase
structure in the music. But if you look at Meg’s *aria*, it’s almost prose. You know the first verse is “Things change, Jo, things change. You’re a babe at the breast, you’re a daughter by the fire, you have all the love you think you could desire. Still, things change.” It’s almost conversation. The reason that it feels poetic is because I worked very hard on the form of it.

Adamo has a gift for unequivocally adhering to accurate word rhythm in his compositions for voice, which creates what he calls “musically poetic” text.

This is what I’m talking about…the difference between poetic technically or musically, and poetic literarily. Because if you compare it to something like Whitman…when you have all of these stylized metaphors, the language is very charged. But formally, it’s just these big run on sentences. So it’s musical, but it’s only musical from a verbal point of view. It’s musical when you speak it, but if you try to get it actually into pitches and rhythms it’s very difficult. It’s like setting prose. That’s the difference between free verse and something like this…a lot of contemporary poetry is formally prose, but literarily poetry in so far as that it is very abstract…and what not…the demands of the libretto are exactly opposite. You want formally, poetically and musically and literarily…as simple as you can get it, because now the music is going to give the richness that you don’t necessarily need in the language. It’s a very tricky thing. It needs to work dramatically…you need to be formally very disciplined to set up the music but you don’t want to fight the music.
You want to allow a space for the music to transform that. In Jo’s *aria*, “Perfect as we are” there’s very little to it that you wouldn’t find in ordinary conversation. But I like to think that setting it up strophically and using certain repetitions and line lengths, having it...flow into the voice, that not only rhythmically in and of itself, but setting up the intervals and harmonies in there, that that completes the poetry. (Author interview)

Adamo was influenced in his way of thinking about sung language by those composers who he grew up listening to and aspired to follow, including Broadway lyricists Oscar Hammerstein and Stephen Sondheim. He elaborated on this point in an interview with the author.

Oscar Hammerstein used to say this, and Sondheim after him. This is where the theater people are very smart. Because if there is a certain characterizing limitation of musical theater; generally on the theater side of it people are extremely intelligent about how to fashion language for acting the music. That’s really what we do. …The theater doesn’t in and of itself stimulate a lot of musical richness, but they are incredibly smart. There’s really no one on the opera side of the aisle contemporarily who is as smart as those lyricists. …If you look at the opening number of *Oklahoma!*; “Oh what a beautiful mornin’, oh what a beautiful day, I got a beautiful feelin’ everything’s goin’ my way,” which is almost like nursery rhyme. I mean, it’s right on the edge of banality, but he knew, given that moment and this folk song simplicity, and the baritone, and Rodgers…But if you look at that lyric on the page, there’s nothing there, except that there
is everything there. There’s the rhythm…the implied rhythm. …It also has to deal with character. …that is why he worked very hard on the verse “all the cattle are standing like statues,” and “the corn is as high as an elephant’s eye.” He wondered, “How am I gonna come up with a language that is a little bit richer?” He wanted the verses to be richer so the refrain really can flower. It can’t all be just a beautiful day or the number never would start! But you can’t have him come out singing like Gerard Manley Hopkins or you’ll tilt into operetta. So there are all these very refined aspects…the weight of words, the rhythm of words, the color of words, but also how they deal with character in time and place and period. (Author interview)

Adamo spoke to the author about how, specifically for Little Women, he came up with the language for the libretto.

With Little Women I needed to get all of the anachronism out. …I wrote the play just as if it were going to be a spoken play from beginning to end. And at that point I didn’t trouble myself about period language. I was just writing a contemporary play. Then…I went back to the novel and any place in the novel from which these scenes drew. For example, “There was a knight once,” Brook’s aria. …I went back to that scene and just wrote down any kind of specifically 19th century locution or word. “Raspy” was one adjective that Jo used to describe herself which was meaning bad-tempered. Or “now you’re beginning to mar m it” in the prologue is pulled from that. I just pulled all those in and said now let me
go through and see if there’s any place in this largely contemporary language where I can kind of stud these little bits of 19th century…almost like cloves on a ham, if you will. I didn’t want to try to fake her [Alcott’s] language because her language is a) 19th century and b) that of a novel. And my language needed to be dramatic. But I wanted a period language of no period, largely neutral. So no 21st century locutions, and only a few 19th century, so they would color it just enough so that you wouldn’t be asking the question “where are we?” And then I took all the metaphors that would go in from there, casting it into verse or quasi-verse.

Adamo cites the influence of Johannes Brahms on the way in which he crafted the thematic material for Little Women. “The piece is built from the conflict of two themes: Jo’s _ana-scherzo_, “Perfect as we are” and Meg’s _aria_ “Things change, Jo.” The way “Things change” mutates into Laurie’s and Beth’s music owes as much to Brahmsian symphonic technique of developing variation as it does to the twists and turns of the libretto. (Staible)

Adamo continues in the article by Staible, citing musical examples from the score of Little Women:

Jo’s “Perfect as we are” theme is confronted by Meg’s “Things change” theme.
Figure 2: "Perfect as we are"
Figure 3: “Things change”

Act I, Scene 2

Aria: “Things change, Jo”

Andante $\frac{3}{4} = 76-80$

Things change, Jo:

poco accel.

Things change. You’re a babe at the breast, you’re a

daughter by the fire, you have all the love you think you could desire,

Still, Things

change, Jo, And, oh, what happens when they do!

Your
Then Laurie, in a completely different situation, sings the “Things change” music to her a second time, when he tells her his feelings for her:

Figure 4: Laurie's "Things change"
Beth's music refers to it as well:

**Figure 5: Beth's "Things change"**

\[ \text{B.} \quad \text{J.} \]

Spring... she's coming home. She never writes me any more. I can't imagine why.

Jel!

With your hot furrowed brow, with your mad, flashing eye, who could

I've written her reams. And Laurie—Regard-less. Anyway, there... you'll

Act II, Scene 3

Over dare do my you, dear? Not!! Still...

be. Running down the path to greet her... No... one dies of scar-let
And Cecilia’s duet, which finally makes Jo realize she can’t go on denying the clock, is quite literally the nightmare transformation of Jo’s “Perfect as we are.”

**Figure 6: Cecilia's "nightmare transformation"**
I loved working like this because it made the music *necessary* to the piece.

It wasn’t just a naturalistic nineteenth-century drama sumptuously
appointed with a twenty piece orchestra. Now you needed the music to
make sense of the drama. (USOPERWEB, May 2001)

Adamo speaks in detail about organizing the piece musically in his interview with
Jason Serinus from 2001:

I tried to make the important musical motives clear by setting them
against a background as different in texture and in harmonic motion as
possible: hence the tonal foreground against a non-tonal background.

Tonal materials are generally more mnemonic, more directional, allowing
you to recognize them more readily than the non-tonal material, which is
why I used them for the developing themes. The non-tonal material is less
effective for that—because the dissonances are so equalized, wherever you
are, there you are! But the very non-directional quality naturally leads the
ear to look for meaning or direction from whatever in the music *isn’t*
harmony—line, vocal register, rhythm, word—which made it ideal for following every nuance of *recitative*. It also widened the coloristic range of the score. The question then became, could I pick the non-tonal materials—the rows that were generating some of those harmonies—and the tonal materials in such a way that they could not only be different but blend together when I needed them to?

The first moments give you an idea of how I formed the piece. There’s a drift of harmony while Jo is in the attic remembering her sisters, to a quote of the Alcott poem, “Four Little Chests all in a Row.” Jo’s first vocal entrance is on the words “The happy, happy band,” and then these celesta and harp chords spill down to a horn solo. In those minutes, all the opera’s materials are exposed. The poem is set to a tonal line, echoes in whole tones: then the horn outlines the row that generates all the *recitative*. 
I wanted the language of the recitative to feel like prose but also to never be far from certain song forms, so that it would sound natural that these heavily structured, strophic pieces would arise naturally out of the dialogue. The arias and the ensembles are heavily rhymed, and it’s to blend with them that the recitative uses off-rhymes and many of its line lengths are symmetrical.

The story is very prosy and narrative, and so the music needed to find a way to make recitative interesting. I wanted the themes, the “Things change,” the “Perfect as we are,” and other themes, which are largely tonal, to really light up through the musical texture. So the recitative is 12-tone. I thought that the contrast between the equalized dissonance of the dodecaphonic harmony and the directional quality of the
tonal harmony would make audible the differences between theme and background. (Serinus)

Adamo was pleased with the result of using 12-tone technique for the recitative.

The singers are constantly leaping elevenths and racing through all their registers. It did make the score more difficult to learn, because the usual harmonic signposts weren’t available to them for large stretches of the scenes. But, once learned, I think it was actually easier to sing Little Women than you might expect, because the music kept all areas of the voice active and agile. (USOPERAWEB, May 2001)

In a separate interview, Adamo speaks in depth about his use of 12-tone technique in Little Women:

When I began Little Women, I hadn’t written 12-tone music since college. I enjoyed it, in a brain-teasing sort of way; dodecaphony is to composition what the acrostic is to literature. But the very consistency of that harmonic palette makes it monotonous to me. If everything’s dissonant, then nothing is. So it’s difficult to make convincing aural shapes from harmonies so liquid and fugitive. But Little Women is a score in which the plot has very little to do with the events. The opera follows a girl learning to stop fighting change, but its episodes describe writing stories, marrying, or moving to New York. …. Much of the libretto fills in the details…but doesn’t support the theme. I needed melodies to rise from and vanish into a neutral background of recitative, but how do you make recitative interesting? That’s when I wondered if
the very neutrality of the dodecaphonic palette, which made it so
unsatisfying as the foreground of a piece, might perfectly support the non-
themetic music of Little Women.

In the past, when I’d listened to Schönberg or Webern, I’d always
concentrate on the timbres or the gestures or the textures, anything but the
harmony. So I thought that painting the recitative from this palette would
similarly highlight the words and the vocal lines, precisely because the
harmony wasn’t leading you much. (Watt and Wilder Blue)
Adamo uses the same row as melodic material in the contrasting *scherzando* sections of “Perfect as we are.”
This use of contrasting material within the framework of an otherwise very tonal feeling *aria* was described by Adamo in his notes to the published Schirmer score. “This long solo [“Perfect as we are”], which portrays Jo’s divided feelings by disrupting her long-lined F major *cantilena* with careening *dodecaphonic* comedy, best exemplifies what I dreamed of for this piece: a music in which even the most unlike materials could fuse into a single music if the ear is sensitive and the design is sound.”

And in an interview with the author he elaborated further:

“Things change” is quite fugitive harmonically. You get this kind of E-ish opening, and then you’re immediately into G, and then it’s D minor or something. But the whole point of that, because of the moment, was to get a sense of key interlocking into key. And to have all these harmonic vistas opening, that’s what the song is about. And one of the reasons that in “Perfect as we are” you keep coming back to F…whenever you hear “Perfect as we are” it is in the *tonic*. It’s what she’s trying to do in those strophes…she’s trying to keep that F major there. And then in the *scherzo* she goes all over the place. Again that sounds rather schematic, but I think you can hear that. If you keep coming back to the same pitches, you’ll hear it. If you do the same interval, but on another pitch level, you can hear that, too. Which is what happens in “Things change.” It starts and you go G#, D#, A. And then B, F#, C. And you hear it move. So you have an idea that gives you a sound. You have a sound that gives you an idea. It’s a question of when all those things line up, then you know what you’re doing. …I guess I don’t hear harmony *per se* up front when I’m
sketching, but I hear relative texture. So [for example]…what you’re hearing is very similar, very pure, very confessional for “I am not my own” [from Lysistrata], you get to sketching it out and it turns out to be pretty pure G major. Or conflicted and low, you find yourself with two or three triads going on at the same time. But it’s not a question of “Now I’m doing my tonal work, and now I’m doing my bi-tonal work.” In a certain way, you are always writing by ear. Everything you learn is to educate your ear.

His synopsis of the dramatic action contains numerous references to dramatic orchestral commentary and musically symbolic characteristics that strengthen the dramatic action and ideas. “Jo claims relief, though a grieving orchestra belies her….” And, “As the girls go, the close harmony of their club-song seems to affirm their intimacy,” and “Jo recognizes Cecilia’s music as a nightmare transformation of her own “Perfect as we are” theme: appalled at this aural vision of her possible future, she rejects her aunt and flees to the attic.” (Schirmer score)

Adamo’s score uses three different types of musical notation for the singer’s lines. Sung lines are notated in the traditional way. There are also musical and rhythmic lines which are spoken and are indicated using familiar Sprechstimme type notation and Adamo uses a square note head to indicate what he terms parlando possibile, with which the author was not familiar and requested clarification from the composer.
Figure 9: Musical notation.

Tempo I \((\mathcal{C} = 63)\)

1. **mf** (spoken, airyly)

   *Ma-jor, mi-nor...*

   Memo

2. First, ev'-ry-one, wel-come our neigh-bor and new-est mem-

   - ber-

3. **mp**

   *Hon-o- ra-ry.*

   **mp** (storny)

4. *Bu-have.*

5. **mf**

   *The es-ti-ma-ble The-o-dore Law-ren-ce, known as Lau-rie-

   - lrie-

   Laurie: **mf** (very courtly)

   *Who de -*
Other times he simply writes out the line to be spoken, without indicating specific rhythm or inflection.

**Figure 10: Notation explanation email.**

Scott Miller

From: "Mark Adamo" <mark.adamo@mac.com>
To: "millersd1" <millersd1@cox.net>
Cc: "Peggy Monastra" <peggy.monastra@schirmer.com>; "Liz Keller-Tripp" <liz.keller-tripp@schirmer.com>
Sent: Tuesday, June 27, 2006 6:39 PM
Subject: Lysistrata, CD: Scott Miller?

Hail, Scott: the square notation was actually a somewhat forced attempt on my part to indicate to the singers when to distinguish timbrally between recitative and thematic elements—so that a line like "Auntie is due any moment" would be given a different vocal color than "Perfect as we are," say, or "Things change, Jo." I should have just marked those sections parlando possible and have had done with it, as I did (and do) want the pitches sung and the composition itself took greater care of the thematic/nonthematic distinction than I expected. Live and learn. I'll copy Peggy and Liz on this--I'm pretty sure they sent the Lysistrata recording out, but let's find out and get it to you posthaste if we can....Cheers, Mark

Perhaps owing to his own theatrical instincts, Adamo’s score contains an abundance of specific, highly descriptive indications for the singers. Intermingled with traditional Italian tempo and expressive indications are character subtext for lines, interpretive dramatic notes that one might expect to find in a script for a play without music, and even detailed, sometimes minute staging directions.

In his own notes contained in the preface to the published score, Adamo reveals not only the obvious themes of the dramatic and musical action, but also shares an enthusiasm for the process that he shares openly with the performers. This is a composer whose understands that the more a performer knows about the creative process behind a work, the more likely he or she will be able to succeed in communicating an authentic and honest performance. There are no secrets kept in him describing his work, the materials and methods that he uses to achieve his musical and dramatic goals, and no
attempt to remain artistically aloof. Mark Adamo wants his music to be understood and experienced on as many levels as possible.

Daniel Felsenfeld remarked while interviewing Adamo for Andante Magazine that had Adamo not told him the recitative in Little Women is dodecaphonic, he would not have noticed. Adamo responded, “Well, that’s my point. It doesn’t have to be this whole political stance where we say, ‘We must use the row, and everything else must be subtracted.’ I’d like to think that what’s most intellectually American about Little Women is the fact that all of these materials are used as materials and not political stances.” (Felsenfeld) And he continues:

In a way, this is counterevidence for the argument that either a piece is going to be progressive and only 10 of the holy elite will appreciate it and force it on everybody else, or the piece is going to be a popular success. My theory, that the general audience will not resist the progressive but the unintelligible has been proven by this piece. They don’t have to identify the row….

All we ever needed from tonality was a sense of direction or a landing point. The journey has always been what’s happened in between. Music has steadily gotten more chromatic for hundreds of years, but still there exists the kind of thinking that seems to indicate that using a triad is akin to writing Latin. The people who are invoking this idea are allegedly the people who are talking up the glamour of science and high intellectual process or are using the glamour of math. I don’t have to tell you that if we are going to call the extremely simple additive and subtractive
procedures with which people shape music in set theory math, then The New York Times crossword puzzle is War and Peace. (Felsenfeld)

In his interview with the author Adamo explained his preference for the female voice, and the mezzo soprano voice in particular.

Well, my home base is the mezzo soprano. I’ll tell you why. Because you’ve got the difference in color between a mezzo’s G and a soprano’s B-flat. A mezzo’s peak and a soprano’s peak, whatever that is, to me seems much less…important than the difference between a mezzo’s chest register, and not having access to that register in the soprano voice. You know you get that whole different color in that fourth or so below [middle] C, and however high she takes it. And then she gets plenty bright when she shifts to her head. And then it’s also better for delivery of the text. Because the higher you get, the closer we get to the peak of the staff, the more…the purity of the vowel becomes a question of slight of ear or negotiation…you know it just gets very difficult to do a short “i” on a high B-flat. …you don’t have that problem with the lower voice. …That said, I think one of the reasons that “Kennst du das Land” happens, [and] is sort of the moment for the baritone that I like to think I set up dramatically…after all that treble singing, suddenly, bass clef. Suddenly…the cello enters. …But I do think you can argue that women’s voices are to strings, what men’s voices are to winds or brass. Precisely because it is a little more highly colored in timbre. It would be like hearing a lot of oboe all the time. After a certain point, the oboe benefits
from rests…So you can hear it again. I just don’t find that in women’s voices. I don’t find my ear tiring of the *timbre*…

USOPERAWEB’s Robert Wilder Blue conducted interviews with several of the cast members of the 2001 *PBS Great Performances* broadcast of *Little Women* and asked them specifically about singing Adamo’s score. Mezzo soprano Joyce Di Donato who sang the role of Meg said:

The music in *Little Women* is incredibly lyrical. But, it’s very challenging rhythmically and musically. When you first look at the piano/vocal score, there’s not a lot of help from the piano part. You’re kind of on your own. There’s a bit of exploitation of the registers and that makes it very difficult to sing well; it was something we all struggled with. But at the same time it’s all done in a lyrical manner. There are several stand-out *arias* that are memorable, and I’m happy to say that one is Meg’s *aria*, “Things change”. …. Mark has set it in a way that is simple but profound at the same time.

Stephanie Novacek sang the role of Jo, although she was originally cast as Meg. She recounted the considerable vocal and dramatic demands of the central character.

The role of Jo was actually written for another Studio member, Joyce Di Donato, but we ended up switching roles because Meg suited Joyce’s voice more and Jo suited mine. The role of Jo is a demanding marathon for the singer: she is onstage singing for most of the opera.

Bits and pieces of the opera came in over the course of several months, so we didn’t have a complete score to work with right off the bat. In that
respect it was a little difficult, but I can imagine how difficult it must have been from a composer’s perspective to put it all together.

It was dramatically challenging and exhausting in a lot of respects. I just did my first Carmen and I had always heard how taxing that role was, being on stage for four acts. But, I think Jo was much more taxing, vocally, physically—because I was running around a lot, intellectually and emotionally. I was really spent after singing Jo.

The music sounds deceptively easy but it is really very difficult, especially the roles of Jo, Meg, Laurie and Brooke. A lot of the writing is very speech-like. It was difficult to learn because Mark would write a chord cluster and you would have to find your pitch in it. Joe covers the whole range—down into the chest voice and up above the staff—it’s very vocally demanding. (Wilder Blue)

Soprano Margaret Lloyd was Amy in the broadcast production. Her thoughts on singing Adamo’s music follow.

Like all new music, when you first sit down and look at the page you think, oh my gosh, how am I going to learn it? But when you put everything together in Little Women, the vocal line with the orchestration, its very singable and it makes tonal sense in your ear when you’re learning it. It was not that difficult to learn. One of the musical challenges of the piece was some very tight quartet singing between the sisters that appears at the beginning and the very end. (Wilder Blue)
Figure 11: Sisters quartet harmony.
Tenor Chad Shelton, who has since performed the role of Laurie numerous times in subsequent productions, created the role and sang in the PBS broadcast. The role is demanding in that it lies high in the tenor range, and demands a very solid technique. Adamo would eventually cast Shelton as the leading tenor in his second opera as well.

Shelton remembers how the opera took shape and working with Adamo:

Mark wanted to hear us all sing before he finished the vocal parts, so the roles were really written for us, which was really cool because it fit our individual traits as singers. It was hard as sin to sing but it fit us well!

The first thing we did was to have a dramatic reading of the libretto. I think that one of the best things about the opera is the libretto. …. Mark’s use of language is really beautiful. Then piece by piece, scene by scene, we got the music and began putting it together.

I think the music is wonderful and very accessible for audiences. All the roles have a massive range. It’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever sung. For the tenor it is really high. It sits around F and G and has high C’s, B’s, tons and tons of B-flats, I can’t even count them. There are a lot of large leaps. It runs the gamut of one’s vocal ability. At that time it was pretty difficult for me, but it’s gotten easier. It’s fun to sing now.

Laurie doesn’t really have any original music, because it’s a flashback basically. Laurie sings themes from Meg’s big aria, “Things change”, to try to convince Jo to fall in love with him. (Wilder Blue)
Katherine Ciesinski is a veteran operatic mezzo soprano with a number of world premieres to her credit. She performed the role of the critical and manipulative Aunt Cecilia and had this to say about the opera:

The music in Little Women is totally text-driven. It’s extraordinarily difficult to sing—it’s very angular writing, high tessitura, low tessitura, it really exploits all the corners of what a singer has to offer. Being very syllabic you’re dealing with the responsibility of carrying the text regardless of where it’s written on the staff.

What’s really amazing about it is that it plays so well. It was performed with such virtuosity in the two HGO (Houston Grand Opera) productions that the audience was really unaware that the vocal writing was so difficult. They were aware of its being characterful and totally appropriate to the moment and of its natural sense of text-setting.

But from the performer’s point of view, it was a matter of a high degree of skill and vocal prowess that can bring that off. It’s not for beginners. Don’t try this at home!

When I open a new score, something I try to do is size up quickly where my work is cut out for me, where the composer has put his own stock. Mark put his stock in a rather delightful, albeit extreme, setting of the text he wrote. I realized that was where I was going to be able to hold on to something. So I worked from a text point of view and began to see how naturally the rhythms were set, even if they were complex in terms of musical notation. They were very true to what one would consider natural
speech or natural reading of the lines. I figured out that the shape of the line had a particular form that I could approximate in speech rhythm—the ups and downs of the reading of the line.

My part was probably more sung and more structured than some of the others. The character was corseted in her mindset and her age which was depicted in the musical writing. (Wilder Blue)

Figure 12: Aunt Cecilia vocal writing.
Christopher Larkin conducted the televised performances and was part of the genesis of the piece while he was an associate conductor at Houston Grand Opera. He shares his thoughts on the process of developing the piece, some advantages and challenges unique to producing a new work, and echoes what the singers have to say regarding the vocal demands of Little Women.

When I found out I would be doing it (Little Women), I turned to the novel, which I had managed never to read. Although, when I finished it, I wondered how Mark was ever going to get all of it into a single evening! But Mark condensed the novel so beautifully into one basic theme of letting go of the past and letting things evolve in one’s life. I think that is why the piece is so successful and so moving for the audience.

The incredible strengths of the piece are the libretto and Mark’s style of writing.

…. It is so wonderful that Little Women began in the sort of rarified and controlled atmosphere of the (Houston Opera) Studio. For at least a year, we were doing workshops with the singers and making adjustments here and there. We were taping sessions for David [Gockley]. We had long discussions after every rehearsal about things we might want to change or adjust questions of tempo, etc. Sometimes Mark would say, “No, this is what I want here, this is the sound that I want.” Other times, I would suggest changes to make it more understandable or vocally a little more singable for the performer. And he would say, “Sure,” and would change it. I really enjoyed that process—it’s a whole different sort of
creative process from doing a piece like *Otello* that is etched in stone and for which there are so many recording available and a whole history that goes with it.

Mark has an eclectic musical style that changes depending on the situation and the characters. Some of the writing is very straightforward—Meg’s *aria*, “Things change,” is fairly tonal. In the family scenes and the wedding scene, where there are three or four conversations going on at the same time, the writing gets very thick and very complex. There are moments for the singers that are vocally very challenging, but certainly not unperformable.
Figure 13: Thick, complex vocal writing.
The piano/vocal score was fairly complete by the time we started rehearsals, although it was not a complete representation of the orchestra parts which became a bit of a problem. Singers get used to hearing or not hearing certain things, and getting the pitches accordingly. When we got into an orchestral situation there were considerable differences. Mark took quite a bit of time orchestrating the piece and was behind schedule. I didn’t get the completed score until a week before the opening. That made me a little bit crazy—I needed to have the score for my own sake—to
learn it. There were a lot of sleepless nights before the opening. (Wilder Blue)

*Little Women* was a huge critical success, and has received numerous performances, nearing 40 productions as of this writing, in the United States and abroad since its premiere. The familiarity of the book upon which it is based, the compact dramatic action and the clear thematic elements, musical and dramatic, which are so readily apparent in Adamo’s score have enabled the opera to enjoy almost constant presence on the stage since its opening night. The sheer beauty of the melodic writing, the masterful blending of the *dodecaphonic recitative* into the set numbers combined with Adamo’s compact, brilliant and easily understood libretto sung to challenging but naturally nuanced and inflected operatic vocal lines make *Little Women* an opera that will likely remain in the main repertory, and in every respect, an example of successful contemporary, and uniquely American operatic style.
CHAPTER 3

Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess

Mark Adamo’s second major operatic work, Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess, was commissioned by Houston Grand Opera in 1999. The subject matter is entirely different from that of Little Women. It is based upon the play by Aristophanes, however, in his program notes to the piece on the G. Schirmer website Adamo says, “The Nude Goddess is not your mother’s Lysistrata. It’s not even the one by Aristophanes.”

As he had done with Alcott’s Little Women, Adamo adapted the play for the operatic stage and in so doing needed to make cuts, additions, and adjustments to make it function. He initially rejected the idea based upon what he felt was lacking dramatically, but he:

…. heard its music so strongly: hyper-rhythmic, brilliantly colored, sly and purring, now bursting with energy, that I knew I had to find, or create, the richer drama it demanded. I wondered: could one compose a Lysistrata principally fascinated by the war between men and women; two radically different kinds of human beings damned by fate and desire to love without complete understanding? Could you make an opera that used the civic conflict to illuminate the erotic discord, not vice versa? …What magnetizes Eros and Thanatos? …This was all too interesting to resist. Lysistrata it was. I cut all but three scenes of the play, created new male characters, changed the war, omitted the choruses and invented a wrangling romance between the Lysistrata figure and the Athenian leader Nico. The text of Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess now imagines a
woman who fakes political convictions to wreak on her lover an erotic revenge: only later must she ask herself, to whom does she belong, herself or her people? (Schirmer)

Originally planned for March of 2002, the opera did not premiere until March of 2005 due in part to the success of Little Women, Adamo’s participation in and supervision of subsequent productions of that opera, and also as a result of the economic impact of 9/11. He recounted the circumstances to Frank J. Oteri in an interview for New Music Box.

The libretto was done in 2000. …Eerily, a year to the week before 9/11. The only reason I know that is because it was due the Tuesday after Labor Day, and I was late. The thing that was interesting for me was that right before I sent it off I said, “I love what I’ve done with this psychologically; I believe in the whole big shape of this. I guess the big question is if anyone is going to care because we only really do this play when we’re at war, and we’re not at war.” …It was late because I went to a whole bunch of Little Women productions, and I didn’t realize how much it would throw my writing off. So then it was ’03, but in between premiere date one and premiere date two 9/11 happened and everybody crashed. David (Gockley) called me and said, “I don’t know when I can do the premiere of this piece because I’m trying not to fire people.” They were still recovering from hurricane Allison, which had devastated the physical plant in Houston.
Adamo spoke with the author about the difference between writing the libretto for *Little Women* and writing the libretto for *Lysistrata*:

All of the Greek comedies, if you translate them, translate more or less into contemporary English diction…with the exception of the choruses, all of which I cut…because I didn’t need them. So…I could…do contemporary English that was spiked intermittently with some locutions for the love music and for the elegiac music. For example, there are occasional phrases of Sappho that found themselves into the love duet. So, “your wrists slim like the wild rose” is not mine, it’s Sappho’s. But it became a part of the big duet in Act I. And there was one wonderful phrase…I don’t remember the poem now…“Eros will break us all over again,” which I thought was perfect.

And regarding orchestration and the specific ideas he had for *Lysistrata* he told the author:

Well, that is part of your sketching as well. With both of these shows, it was going to be a small orchestra. So that’s part of your practicality. You just need to know…What’s the basic color of the show? What’s your palette? And with *Lysistrata*…I wanted a contemporary orchestra with a…primitive but sophisticated sound at the same time, that didn’t sound too hot house. Sounded kind of robust and it sounded like the language, but I didn’t want to do ethnic Greek…because that’s not what the show is. …And where this orchestra came from was…particularly Gabriella Ortiz [who] did a percussion *concerto* of very similar orchestration. She had an
oboé and a saxophone. It was a percussion concerto with extended
players, like 6 players, with a lot of low marimba. And I just thought,
there’s something about the idea of the saxophone in a largely chamber
context, and the low marimba giving me a kind of key. On the one hand a
kind of cool, sophisticated sound, but also has a kind of percussive, vivid,
physical sound. I thought…you want something sophisticated and
something sexual at the same time. There was something kind of archaic
and yet something very sophisticated about marimba. Particularly the
lower registers. And I thought this would also be my keyboard. So, [there
are] certain things that occurred to me that I didn’t want before it occurred
to me that I did want them. I didn’t want any piano. I didn’t want
anything electronic. And I didn’t want the oboe. Because the oboe to me
sounds a little too perfumed, a little northern…I wanted the southern
sound. And that was really quite intuitive. I thought if it is essentially a
chamber timbre, I know I’m going to need my high trumpet for some of
my god music. So I started hearing that. And then the saxophone and the
marimba, and then the rest…and I thought that’s going to give me those
colors. The clarinet is quite malleable… The timbre of the flute, the
horn…all those other instruments you can get a lot of character out of
them. The oboe always shows up as the oboe. And it was the wrong
character! So…the saxophone idea, particularly when it occurred to me
that I could double the alto and baritone…with that and the marimba on
Lampito’s entrance with the ponticello celli, I get this sort of low Aztec-like buzz. And…this is my orchestration.

Eventually Houston would recover and Houston Grand Opera would present the premiere. Adamo is clear about not writing the piece as an anti-war opera.

I’m glad that it did not go up in ’02 because it would have been too soon. This is a pretty balanced, dispassionate look at people on all sides of the spectrum, and I just think that it would have been impossible to hear that soon after 9/11. I’m delighted it’s happening now, because whatever else the piece is, it is not propaganda. … I made the war a completely secondhand phenomenon, by which I mean you were not given as an audience any firsthand information about who’s right. All you get are competing versions. …. No one shows up…and says, “I was there and this is actually what happened.” The whole point would be; if you do not have access to firsthand data and you have to make decisions based on secondhand data, how do you then behave? Because the villain I could really get behind was not pro-war people or pro-peace people, it was received thinking. (Oteri)

Adamo points out in the program notes for the premiere of Lysistrata that the delay meant an entirely different set of circumstances for the opening of his war opera, because now it was premiering post 9/11, and the United States was at war in Iraq.

Things change: an opera begun in peacetime finds itself, today, scaldingly topical. No artwork can presume to resolve any political argument. But I would love to think The Nude Goddess could, in some small way, reframe
our current argument—that hearing these passions and positions voiced and embodied by closely imagined personalities might help clarify our thinking and heighten our sympathy for those with whom we disagree. We all want peace, just as we all want love. The question is, love on whose terms? The question is as urgent for lovers as for leaders; and it is a question—I hope—that brightens the language, drives the rhythms, sharpens the comedy, and deepens the compassion of this new singing Lysistrata.

Adamo explained his concept of deliberately juxtaposing the dramatic setting and the time, and avoiding for all intensive purposes authentic Greek musical sounds for his new opera in this way:

One of the very conscious decisions I made in this piece is that there is no accented 7/8, and there is nothing that attempts to be ethnically or historically Greek at all. If you look at the libretto, and I stole this description from Bert Shevelove’s adaptation of The Frogs when he did that piece in ’74 with Sondheim for Yale, “the time is now, the place is ancient Greece.” It’s a very slangy libretto, and it’s a very hyper-rhythmic contemporary score. I don’t think there is any sense of period at all if I did it correctly. (Oteri, Feb. 2006)

As in Little Women, the drama and the music feed off of each other and highlight and mirror each other in ways that intensify the drama while lending deeper significance to thematic musical material. Adamo’s compositional, theatrical and linguistic approach provides an economy of means that speaks to the audience clearly and in familiar but
constantly changing levels and attitudes, both dramatic and musical. Adamo explains this musical-dramatic, dramatic-musical process in a USOPERWEB interview from 2005, and again in a separate interview with Frank J. Oteri:

I’ve always interpreted things both by ear and by word: an utterance expresses as much to me by its rhythm or dynamic as by whatever words are being spoken. …. When dreaming an opera, I need only to find that dramatic gesture, the fulcrum which words, as well as sound can express, and then shape both music and words to embody that gesture. This was true even when, as a student playwright, I wanted a line of dialogue to rise and fall just so, or wanting it shorter, or more percussive, or somehow “warmer”. Playwrights frequently describe the need to make their dialogue musical. My need was just more urgent and more literal. (Watt and Wilder Blue)

And as explained to Frank J. Oteri:

When I write language, so much in my head is the rhythm of the language or the relative vocal registration. I hear a sentence and I’m already hearing intervals or dynamics, so I really don’t know if the dynamic got (into my ear) a split second ahead, and maybe that’s why I need this low “schwa” with a soft consonant at the end of it to accommodate the pianissimo. It’s very intermixed.

In his interview with the author, Adamo spoke again of employing the “silent movie outline” approach to constructing an opera with Lysistrata, just as he had done with Little Women:
It is extremely useful to me. It keeps me from too soon getting attached to actual language or actual musical material. …I’d much rather edit the structure when I’m not attached to it and get that right because then you can write ever more fluently without having to feel like you’ve done a beautiful scene in Act III which unfortunately does not work at all. And so…when I did the first version of that outline [for Lysistrata], it occurred to me very early that because each of these characters on the one hand are very linked, ….on the other hand [they are] on opposing sides, that that phrase is like a melody in a hall of mirrors. That you have this very complex and constant variation form where you get a verbal or musical strophe that you associate with one character or one situation or one action, and be able to use it to show completely opposite sides of it, so that at the end when the god and goddesses come down saying “Each of you will tell the truth, and none of you will agree,” it’s like you can actually hear that, if I write the score correctly.

In interviewing the composer, the author asked if there were people whose advice he sought during his creative process, or during specific stages of developing a new piece, or if he relies entirely upon his own judgment:

…I send preliminary drafts of things to every smart person who will take my calls. Because then it takes away the feeling of being in a vacuum. And of course with an opera, at all points along the way people are weighing in. David Gockley, who has been my principal producer, is very smart and very critical with an outline. …It’s a lovely balance of being
critical to the point of view that he wants to make sure that he knows that
you know that it will work. …John [Corigliano], while not being a writer,
is a brilliant reader of writing for structure. The libretto of Lysistrata, if
you read it without the music, can actually seem a lot lighter in tone than it
ends up being. Because it’s so rhymed and there’s a fair amount of
comedy in it, you see a certain kind of glittery verbal form, and you think
it’s going to be operetta. When I sent the libretto around without the
score…if anyone didn’t get it, they didn’t get it in that way. They said, “It
seems so light in the first Act, then it goes someplace else.” I’d say, “OK,
now trust me on this because a) once you put the acoustic voice under this,
a certain sparkle is going to wear off…because there’s an earnestness
about that timbre that is going to keep it from sounding like operetta, b)
wait ‘til you hear the music.” …Generally, what I do is send it around and
say “Now tell me the story you think I have told.”

Adamo has stated that opera must not just serve as a vocal showcase, but
that the dramatic elements are equally important. He elaborated on this point in
an interview with the author, using Lysistrata as an example.

I was really talking about the way opera is produced…Which is the idea
that you get this year’s new international mezzo and do Carmen, and
somehow that’s supposed to be news…And it isn’t news, because we
know Carmen. …There’s a limit to really how much Carmen can tell us
as a theatrical event anymore. And the idea that opera is going to be
principally a showcase of past masterpieces, and the only thing that is
going to be new is who the performer is… Well, America was the only place where that audience ever existed. It was a contemporary theatrical form in 19th century Italy and 18th century Austria. It was always repertory and then singers thereafter. If you got to be the leading singers, one of the reasons that other people realized that is that you got to commission people. …Here, if a big singer consents to do a world premiere, “Oh wow!”…And so that I think is the mistake. Of course, the problem now is we need the groundswell of writing. We can’t all decide by fiat a hundred years on, after we have done repertory over and over again, now suddenly we’re going to become a contemporary theater. [As if to say] “Well, now all the composers we’ve ignored for a hundred years…appear! With complete skills…knowing exactly how to write for the opera house, write us a bunch of pieces so that we can change the paradigm.” …Conversely though…when I say it cannot be principally a showcase for vocal performances, it needs to be at least as much a vehicle for vocal performance as it is to make dramatic points. …From a vocal point of view, an opera is a concerto with 11 soloists, as well as a play that you sing. …The case in point that I try to do in Lysistrata, “You are not my own”, that big tantrum cabaletta, “Others stand around and watch you leave…and another and another and another,” high C and all of that. …If you look at that as a piece of dramatic writing, she’s not particularly enchanting. …On the other hand, at the end of that number, if you know nothing else, you know she can sing. So one of the things I try to do there,
is that even as the number is not particularly attractive, I want to get you interested in her musically so you’ll follow her…so that when she comes to “I am not my own,” which is the same music completely transformed, you’ll get…an aural trace of …the same moment but now just from a different point of view. That’s where vocal display is a tool of the playwright. The cabaletta from Act I develops into the aria of Act II and from my point of view, it’s a variation form that is making a dramatic point. But from a vocal point of view, it’s how a cabaletta evolves into an aria and the charismatic gestures in both pieces. …It presents [the performer], but it also presents her as a character.

A major difference between the two scores is that Adorno did not employ 12-tone technique for Lysistrata. Just as strongly as the background information and recitative for Little Women called for something musically less primary than the main thematic material; the dramatic action of Lysistrata begins immediately without the need to preface the action. The answer to the dramatic differences between the stories then determined the musical treatment:

Lysistrata…is a very different piece. There’s almost no exposition—character is action—so it didn’t need the same background as Little Women did. Lysistrata starts from the observation that the bitterest conflicts between people don’t start in mere dislike. They begin with both combatants claiming, “I am the true type (the native, the believer) of which you are the false (the occupier, the heretic).” It’s a thrilling premise for music, because you can write the score and the libretto in audible
counterpoint to each other. The libretto may be describing what seem to be very different things. For example, a woman lighting the lamps for her lover while a battalion drills outside the walls. But the music asks you to consider whether both of these behaviors aren’t variations of the same impulse. So you have very little non-thematic material in this score; it’s almost all melody, varying and refracting as you listen. (Watt/Wilder Blue)

And compared with Little Women, Adamo describes the music of Lysistrata to Barry Paris in an article for Opera News as “juicily polytonal, in a turbo-charged Stravinskian way. Little Women was very much about interiors… Lysistrata is a raucous outdoor piece, very erotic and public….”

If the aria “Things change” is central to the drama and music of Little Women, then Lysia’s aria “I am not my own” is its counterpart in Lysistrata. “The entire score grew outward from… “I am not my own,” in which she chooses her city over herself—by which choice no one is more surprised than she. It crystallizes the question of the opera, which—if the question of Little Women was “why must things change?” —is, in this piece, “Am I my sister’s keeper?” Whose needs come first, yours or the world’s?” (Watt/Wilder Blue)
No. 70: I Am Not My Own

Stately, aggrieved $J = 69$

Fl.
Cl.
in B.
En.
Hn.
in F.
Perc. 2
Vibraphone, bowed, motor off.
Hp.
Hp. solo
Lyras

I am not my own.

Vn. 1
Vn. 2

I

Stately, aggrieved $J = 69$

Vn. 1
Vn. 2

I

Lyras

love you more than wind or sky, but I am not my own. Nor-- a ny more.
Melodic material from both of these arias and others is repeated and infused with new meaning and irony in the respective operas. In addition to identifying character, situation, or recalling past events; Adamo stresses melody and its function in the overall structure of an opera, and the way in which audiences perceive it as part of the compositional whole:

Melody, not ideology (such as dodecaphony), stimulates the musical mind. Melody is nothing more nor less than a line you can recognize that builds a structure you can hear. It takes intelligence both to make and to hear such a structure. The audience at Lysistrata’s premiere was so attentive to the melodic writing that, forty minutes into Act One, they laughed at a theme’s ironic return. Why? Because they were paying attention. And they were paying attention not because I bullied them into it ideologically but because I’d convinced them, with the clarity of the writing, that my musical process would reward their attention. I gave them the best of my intelligence, and they responded with the best of their attention. This is how music thrives. (Watt Wilder Blue)

The vocal writing in Lysistrata is virtuosic. As in Little Women, Adamo exploits the full vocal resources of the principal singers by writing wide-ranging, expressive music which demands technical mastery of the voice in all registers, and at all dynamic levels. The role of Lysia was written for American soprano Emily Pulley, a change from Little Women where the leading role of Jo is a mezzo soprano. The vocal writing for both operas, and the leading roles in particular is heavily influenced by the bel canto tradition in that it runs the gamut from lyrical to dramatic, and requires stamina, technical
prowess throughout all registers and range, as well as flexibility. Note the extreme range and demanding fioratura for Lysia in her first Act aria “You are not my own.”

In the interview for Opera News, Adamo describes his writing for the role of Lysia as “a lirico-spinto soprano whose texture at the beginning is all fiery fioratura, but whose line becomes purer and more sustained as the character matures,” and explains that her Act I aria “You are not my own,” “sheds its coloratura manners to become an aria of self-sacrifice [“I am not my own”]” in Act II.

The role of Nico, written for tenor Chad Shelton, who also created the role of Laurie in Little Women, is lyrical, wide-ranging in pitch and dramatic demands, and similarly bel canto in style. “Nico’s credo” from Act II, is an excellent example of the way in which Adamo varies the melodic range, the expressive dynamic, and does not hesitate to let the voice sing by itself with no orchestra beneath it, or to allow the
orchestra to simply sustain chords beneath the voice. He also uses the orchestra to double the vocal line, or providing orchestral “comment” on the situation as needed. The setting of text ranges from syllabic to melismatic in both operas, and never ceases to be easily understood by the listener.

Figure 15: "Nico's Credo"

Secondary principal roles are also written with considerable vocal demands. In Lysistrata Adamo writes long, lyrical lines for the role of Leonidas, and for the role of Myrrhine he requires a soprano to sing for extended phrases in the passaggio while rendering a range of dynamics and articulation.

The role of Kleonike is also challenging and Adamo describes it as “firebrand virtuoso… . . .I don’t think you’ll miss the two-octave glissando with which she closes her first scene.” (Paris)

There are more roles to be cast for Lysistrata than for Little Women, and although their relative importance to the story may be less significant, Adamo writes the roles so that they all require an operatic voice and technique. There are no “bit” parts per se in his two major operas to date.
Humor plays an important role in both operas, from the mocking “whinnying” in Little Women to the more brazen and bawdy style of Lysistrata, whose comic moments are too numerous to mention but which include contemporary phrases such as the lewd “Wham, bam, thank you mam!” as well as operatic tongue in cheek references like “Hojo—toho!” Adamo goes so far as to write the lyrics of the Spartan’s in an unexpected and hilarious “accent,” which has them singing lines that are written into the score in dialect, such as “I, Lampito, vife to Leonidas, zpeaking faw Zparta’s daughtawz and vives, gweet you, O noblest Athenianz.” Adamo draws vivid human characterizations of the roles he writes which demands experienced actors as well as singers to fill them. Because of his gift for balancing and juxtaposing the musical and the dramatic elements of his characters, one must be able to command the stage as an actor to successfully sing and communicate the roles in both Little Women and Lysistrata.

Adamo uses the soloists creatively in ensemble pieces in the traditional operatic sense, but also as a chorus in both operas, which is evident in the opening and closing scenes of Little Women where the sisters sing in close harmony, and more frequently in Lysistrata where he employs a trio of Furies in Act I in a “quasi-gospel” trio to herald the beginning of the dramatic action; and perhaps most effectively and prominently at the finale of Act Two when the final “Hymnos” is sung in acapella choral style reminiscent of the ending of Bernstein’s Candide, writing the chorus for tutti cast as a huge crescendo to the end of the piece.
In addition to being a creative use of resources, this multi-use approach to writing for soloists also places additional demands upon the singers. Adamo requires his singers to perform in a variety of contexts and styles: from soloist to chorister, from full voice to falsetto, accompanied by full orchestra or nothing at all.
The librettos are radically different in the way that they sound and in the language that Adamo chooses for the respective operas, but similarly concise and expertly set in
terms of inflection, natural rise and fall and rhythmic flow of the language, and economy of means. He also manages to be poetic and very structured without having the libretto call attention to itself. Adamo explained why he felt freer to contemporize the language for Lysistrata in a way that he did not for Little Women. Of Little Women he said, “The trick was trying to give it a 19th-century manner while actually discussing contemporary manners.” (Oteri) And because Lysistrata is set in ancient Greece, “…except we have no compelling memory of how the Greeks spoke, thought, moved, or sounded,” (Oteri) he was free to improvise. But, the libretto for Lysistrata also presented unique challenges for Adamo, and his training as a playwright would play an important role in solving the problem. He related the specific challenges to Molly Sheridan in an interview for New Music Box in October of 2001.

If Little Women was all character and no narrative, this (Lysistrata) was narrative and no character. If the Alcott is five wonderful people bundled at the back of a limousine with no engine, then this is an empty Porsche. And so it was a scarier challenge because in opera, your main character is really what you live and die by and I was going to essentially write new characters, which I ended up doing. I changed Lysistrata quite radically and then made up an entire new set of male characters.

The following excerpt from a review by Fred Cohn in Opera News in May of 2005 of the premiere of Lysistrata seems to indicate that Adamo’s goals with Lysistrata were largely fulfilled.

The opera’s texture is skillfully varied, alternating rapid-fire comic numbers with passages of beguiling lyricism. In the women’s ensembles,
he weaves seemingly disjointed fragments of melody into cohesive musical statements. He makes good use of repetition: the motifs have sufficient contour to be comprehensible at first hearing, and they work to bind the musical continuity. In the opera’s most vivid demonstration of the women’s embargo, Myrrhine, a young Athenian wife, inflames her husband, Kinesias, with a reprise of Nico’s Act I seduction aria, “My lips, like so.” The number is the most beautiful thing in the opera, so its reappearance is welcome, and it clarifies the dramatic parallel between the two situations. In the Houston performance, directed by Michael Kahn, nearly every bit of text was audible, even in ensemble; a tribute to Adamo’s skill at word-setting, to the canniness of his writing for the twenty-six piece orchestra and to the diction of the premiere’s cast.

And in New Yorker, critic Alex Ross had this to say:

In Aristophanes, the women of Athens and Sparta go on strike against the men of those two belligerent city-states, demanding that their endless war end. The “sex strike” still happens in Adamo’s version, but it becomes the backdrop for the central drama of a relationship; the one between Lysia and Athenian general Nico (a character that Adamo invented for the occasion). A brittle antiwar satire becomes a sumptuous love story, poised between comedy and heartbreak.

And it works. I can imagine a roomful of European progressives snarling at Adamo’s bourgeois sensibility, but I relaxed a minute after the music began, knowing that I was in the hands of a brilliant theatre
composer. …. Each strand of the vocal line is punctuated by some perfect short gesture: cello *pizzicatos* and a smattering of harp; a four-note horn solo; a vaguely Balinese rustling of mallet percussion and string *glissandos*. The orchestral writing is often little more, or nothing less, than a play of light around the voices. ...Slow dotted rhythms, reminiscent of Britten in his ceremonial mode, give the music a sudden grandeur. At the end….The orchestra constructs a huge *passacaglia* based on intertwining downward scales, and the chorus gathers for one last chant of “Evoe!” It’s almost shocking how deep this seemingly lighthearted opera goes.
CHAPTER 4

**Avow: An Opera in One Scene**

In 1999, The Society for Ethical Culture in New York City premiered *Avow*, an opera in once scene with music and libretto by Mark Adamo. The manuscript copy cover page written in Adamo’s own hand is “for Jonathan Sheffer, with respect and gratitude. [And] Commissioned for Eos Music: Jonathan Sheffer, Artistic Director.” Although the piece remains unpublished, it is included here because the author was granted permission by Mr. Adamo to examine his pre-*Little Women* unpublished works for solo voice in an attempt to gain an all encompassing view of his work. In an email to the author on October 31 of 2006, Adamo recalls the circumstances surrounding the commission of the piece:

….Avow fulfilled a commission from EOS for a ten-minute opera to serve as the finale to an evening of six such scores: it was my idea to make it a wedding-morning scene, and then to make it something of a sequel to *A Hand of Bridge*, Samuel Barber’s ten-minute piece to a libretto by Menotti. In my score, the nervous groom is the son of the disgruntled baritone in the Barber, and two lines of his solo (from “twenty naked girls…” to “the Sultan of America”) are quoted from that earlier piece.
The piece is written for five characters: Mother (soprano), Bride (mezzo soprano), Groom (baritone), Groom’s Father (bass) and Celebrant (tenor). The action takes place the day of the wedding and involves the comic, but realistic internal and external thoughts of the bride and groom. Both are having misgivings about what they are about to undertake; each for their own reasons. The bride’s overbearing mother is reading the wedding announcement in the newspaper and among other things, momentarily can’t remember the groom’s name. Once the bride and groom have determined how each of them will tell the other that they’ve changed their minds, which is expressed in the scherzo/duet “I’ll simply tell her/him,” the Celebrant arrives to perform the ceremony. He addresses those present by invoking over sustained chords, “Friends, family, aggrieved mothers, relieved fathers, incredulous exes of various sexes: Let us pray.” The action then stops as the bride sings the arietta “Why? Why this?” in which she questions the premise
of marriage by asking “Can you really capture love, contain it in a vow? Will the vow make it last? Wed the future to the past? Really? Tell me how?” The Celebrant then continues with the service and is interrupted by an aria sung by the groom. The groom expresses anger and regret toward his own father for failing to set a good marital example, and voices his own anxiety about whether or not he is committed to the idea of marriage in the aria “Dad, why did you stay?.” Both of the arias are bittersweet in the midst of what began as a comic situation, and as such are highlighted by the contrast that precedes them. The somber mood continues with an aria for the groom’s father, “It wasn’t perfect” in which he eloquently explains to his son that he stayed because “She was, you were, home.” This is followed by the continuation of the ceremony and the final duet/quintet/finale “Also love” in which the bride and groom proclaim “Let us not repeat the past. Let us learn to make it last. Let us teach each other how. This we avow.” The mother, Celebrant, and groom’s father round out the second half of the finale which ends with a pianissimo “Bless our vow” before the mother gets the last word: “Reception to follow,” ending the piece on a comic note.

Adamo’s skill at combining concise, compact, lyrical language with singable, challenging, accessible music is evident in this short piece. The vocal demands of Avow do not approach the virtuosic technical characteristics of either Little Women or Lysistrata, but they exhibit the same type of flawless word rhythm, clarity and inflective nuance that Adamo produced for the two major operas, as evidenced in “Why, why this?”.
Adamo also employs the quintet of singers as a chorus near the end of the finale, writing *homophonic* material to reinforce the thematic and textual material and to build a musical *crescendo* to the end. The *pianissimo* ending, because of its contrast with the *fortissimo crescendo* immediately preceding it, serves as a musical and emotional exclamation point to the piece.

As a predecessor to *Little Women* and *Lysistrata*, *Avow* is a valuable resource for examining in miniature what lay on the horizon with Adamo’s subsequent operatic efforts. His understanding of and command of writing for the human voice, although not fully developed to the extent in *Avow* that it is in the two full length operas, along with his gift for literary and musical expression and humor, and his uniquely American tonal palette are all evidenced in this opera. His idea to make the opera a sequel to Barber’s *A Hand of Bridge*, and to recall what is commonly known as the traditional “bridal march”
in his score highlight what he describes as writing “comprehendible” music when speaking of his compositional technique, and his knowledge of and belief in the role and function of repetition within individual pieces, and from piece to piece.

Figure 20: "Bridal March"
CHAPTER 5

Garland: Song cycle for tenor.

The song cycle Garland was commissioned by the author following performances of Little Women by Opera Omaha in the Spring of 2002. The libretto of Little Women was easily understandable in the large Orpheum Theater in Omaha, Nebraska, and the opera made an artistic and dramatic impact upon first seeing and hearing it. The vocal writing was demanding but beautifully expressive. The score was operatic in the best sense: the music heightens and enhances text and at the same time provides the listener with technically challenging vocal lines that impress with their melodic beauty as well as their exploitation of the human voice without interrupting the natural flow of word rhythm or distorting meaning. The musical language was rewarding to the listener and served the form of the piece as much as it served the dramatic action. Recitative, aria, and ensemble melded one into the other almost seamlessly. Human beings experiencing humor and heartache in what seemed like, except for the operatic vocal writing and the complex harmonic palette and classically oriented orchestration and musical style, a musical for the Broadway stage. There seemed to be nothing extra or unnecessary about the score or the dramatic action. The opera was extremely compact and efficient without cheating the story and all the elements of the production seemed to serve to enrich the whole. It was not clear exactly how this was being done, but it was clear that this composer and librettist had found the right combination of dramatic, linguistic, and musical elements to adapt Alcott’s novel to the operatic stage in a concise, meaningful way.
An email to the composer complimenting him on *Little Women* and inquiring about the possibility of commissioning a set of songs for tenor and piano was met with an affirmative response.

The project began without any idea of subject matter, and took several turns before finally settling on poems of Emily Dickinson and music taken from Adamo’s first symphonic work, *Late Victorians*.

Initially, Adamo had considered completing a set of songs for tenor set to texts by Gerard Manley Hopkins. But at the time he was orchestrating *Lysistrata*, which inclined him in another direction. In an email to the author on December 3, 2004 he stated:

> Actually, Scott, I’m wondering if we can’t change this project somewhat: for *Lysistrata* I’ve been working with a remarkable collection of Greek lyric poetry from the 5th Century—Brooks Haxton translated and collected them in a marvelous little volume called *Dances for Flute and Thunder*—and I think they might be a richer source for this set. Is that all right? I can send you the poems when they’re decided, and you can research from there.

In June of 2005, the topic was finalized and Adamo was inquiring specifically about vocal resources.
By August of 2005, *Little Women* performances were taking a lot of Adamo’s time, since he was either supervising or directing them, and the premiere of *Lysistrata* was looming. The songs were nearing completion.

Adamo would be delayed one more time due to the death of his father. The completed cycle arrived in Omaha in December of 2005, and was premiered in August of 2006 by the author, accompanied by pianist/conductor Hal France. A choral arrangement of *Garland* for treble voices has also been published by G. Schirmer, and is dedicated to the memory of Michael Patterson, a close personal friend of the composer, and the tenor who sang the performances of *Late Victorians* from which the song cycle derived.
In an interview with the author, Adamo recalls being drawn to the Dickinson poetry again for Garland:

What was strange was that within a year, that my father…whose first piece of anything of mine he had heard this was, and the friend of mine who sang these poems in the premiere performance [of Late Victorians], they both died. So…it seemed like the right moment to revisit them. You [the author] eventually, had of course a loss of your own. There were too many points not to close the circle with.

The musical shape of Garland is that of a wreath, or circle. The title is reflective of both the musical shape and the intent of the piece: the solo cycle being dedicated to his father.

Figure 23: Garland form.
The outer movements mirror each other. The cycle opens with *acapella* humming, the melody of which is later repeated with accompaniment during the final sung section of the piece. The cortege, or funeral procession music played as a kind of overture by the piano immediately following the humming at the beginning, reverses position with it and closes the piece.

In an interview with the author, Adamo referred to *Garland* as a “solo cantata,” which is reflective of his dramatic approach to composition. The manuscript score commissioned by the author is included with this document for reference at the end of this chapter, and contains notes given to the author on interpretation and performance by the composer in a private coaching prior to the premiere. In his program notes for the choral version on the G. Schirmer website, Adamo sheds considerable insight into the piece and its individual movements which also apply directly to the solo cycle.

I lost my father in September and a friend in December. I found myself returning to four Emily Dickinson poems that had figured in a symphony I’d composed—a symphony on which I and my friend had collaborated for the last time.

They’re dark poems: poems about a kind of double abandonment. The first abandonment is the one you feel when a loved one leaves. The second is when you look at the things people say will console you—God, church, heaven—and realize they don’t console you much: not really; not at all.

….So I imagined *Garland* as what might go through your mind as you were attending the funeral of someone you loved.
The music begins in humming a soothing melody, but there are no words yet: it’s longing for a comfort it hasn’t yet found. Then the piano plays a short, solemn overture. (The humming, maybe, is inside the person’s head; the piano overture, maybe, is the actual funeral.)

The opening humming section was vocally challenging to perform as softly as needed for the author because of where the upper pitches lie in the tenor range: largely in or around the *secondo passaggio*. During the coaching, Adamo suggested using *falsetto* for the opening section, which was at first a daunting technical task in trying to wed the *falsetto* to the middle register without disturbing the *legato*. The task was made considerably easier by Adamo’s suggestion to make the intention of the *falsetto* primary, and the technical manipulation of it secondary. He suggested that the *falsetto* registration lent a “fragility” and “vulnerability” to the voice that communicated the “intimate” inward quality and “warm vocal color” that he wanted to convey. This non-vocal approach to a vocal technique was extremely successful, and ultimately resulted not only in achieving the desired effect vocally and dramatically, but in immediately arresting the attention of the audience in performance.

The piano “overture” as Adamo calls it, is reminiscent of the music of Britten, Copland, Bernstein, and perhaps Sondheim, all of whom were influential to some degree to Adamo’s musical language. The author commented upon Adamo’s use of the Scottish snap rhythm in this section, his use of it in both *Little Women* and *Lysistrata*, and asked whether it had any special significance. Adamo’s response gave insight into his compositional process:
Funny that you should mention that…I’m a little ambivalent about this being right on the edge of becoming a mannerism. It is showing up a lot. I had forgotten that it figured so prominently in the overture to Garland. Because it’s in the god music [in Lysistrata]…And where is it in Little Women? It’s in the parent’s duet. This is what I would call the difference between style and technique. I did not choose that, but it felt right. …If on the one hand there’s style and technique, on the other is style and mannerism. You don’t want to use a device because you use a device. It is a useful exercise for a composer to say, OK, if this is a moment that you use a dotted rhythm, is there any other way? Any other thing that you would use rather than this Scottish snap that you use over and over again? At the end of which, if there’s nothing better, then I’ll use the Scottish snap. The risk of that is that it becomes a habit in a bad sense.

The author pointed out that the use of the Scottish snap rhythm in Garland worked very well in creating rhythmic tension in the music. Adamo continued:

It’s very formal. …Although it works for exuberance in the parent’s duet in Little Women. And it works…as a kind of regality in the god music in Lysistrata. Yes, I would argue that it really should feel like cortege in Garland. And arguably…oh gosh, now I’m hearing it everywhere. It’s in the first act finale of Lysistrata…it’s in the scherzo of…oh Christmas! Ahhh! It’s everywhere. I use one rhythm! No, it’s in “Perfect as we are,” right? In the scherzo of…yeah, it’s everywhere. But, it’s also a useful thing…Oh well. File under mannerism. But the reason I’m more
encouraged by this is that it is a pretty versatile technique, actually. It’s not blocked into one emotional color. That said: I’ll still try to watch myself.

Adamo continues with his analysis of the cycle in the Schirmer program notes: “The first poem, “Is Heaven a Physician?” in a polite, pointed way, notes the difference between how people describe God and death and how it feels to the ones left behind.”

This section of the cycle with it’s subtle ostinato ground bass accompaniment brings to mind “Simple Song” from Bernstein’s Mass in the first few measures, but unlike the Bernstein, the melodic motion is interrupted by intermittent measures of recitative when the poet makes the main points of her argument, “But, medicine, posthumous medicine is unavailable” and “But that negotiation, I’m not a party to.”

Adamo’s musical treatment of those lines serves to highlight them not by elaboration or ornamentation, but by reducing the accompaniment to a single sustained chord.

This section also requires falsetto singing, or an exceptionally easy pianissimo upper range from the solo tenor, specifically in measures 44 and 55. Adamo stressed the importance of an “inward, agile, interrogative” quality to those measures so that as repeated text they are heard and intended as ruminations and not exclamations. During the coaching and the interview Adamo emphasized the dramatic elements in approaching the music rather than the technical, and the need for each to serve the other in art song, but also on the operatic stage. The importance of the rests for example, which are “space between utterances,” should be “dramatically charged.” He expounded on this topic during the interview when he spoke of the dangers of relying too much on technique, and “beginners mind.”
There is something that the Buddhists call beginners mind. It’s terrifying, but it’s also a very open place. It’s also a very humble place. And it’s a place open to be very open to possibility. And a place where you get off your strength, you get off your sense of who you are as a person, and you let something else come in. Because the reality is that you are always going to be who you are, whether you like it or not. And it doesn’t do a whole lot of good to underline it. What you want to do is get it to expand who you are. You want to make contact with who you’re not, what you don’t know, what you can’t do. And in the attempting to, the learning to do…you learn other things.

It’s also why people come and hear us. It’s a little about what we were talking about with the upper register [falsetto]. I mean you want to see somebody in process, vulnerable, working. The more technically gleaming it becomes, there’s a way in which it becomes a little less personable. And yet, it’s always balanced. One of the lines in the play Master Class…about Maria Callas…she said to her student, “It’s not a B-flat, it’s a scream of pain.” Well, the reality is, if it’s the fifth of an E-flat major triad, it also needs to be a B-flat. But the point is, you need both. You need the technique so that it’s honoring a certain form because form can tell a certain amount of the truth, but not all of it. So if B-flat is mastery, scream of pain is beginners mind. Scream of pain is vulnerability, scream of pain is personal. …The very precision that allows us to do a large range of complicated things, can be its own armor.
Actors, for example…all of their language is about the opposite. It’s about trying to get that personal communication…but the stress in music is not always on that. …The theater composers that I’ve talked to in building a number, the written page is kind of a skeleton. And frequently, what will end up as the published version of that written page will owe as much to rehearsals and improvisations and the variations that the performer had done in developing the characterization as anything the composer came up with to begin with. …As a composer…I feel like I kind of do want the notes as written, but I want the feeling or the spontaneity in performance that they [actors] get in that process. So that’s our challenge. To make sure that the writing presupposes that kind of spontaneity and that in it working together, you get that spontaneity and precision. And I suppose the challenge theatrically would be that once you get something that loose—that it feels precise—then you feel precisely about rewriting. …But you can understand why if you do more of the work on the page, you’ll be on our [operatic] side of the aisle, and then you’ll have the other challenge of trying to get that vividness where the mezzo comes on and she’s singing exactly what you’ve written, but it feels like she’s making it all up…which was Callas’ great gift. People used to think of Callas as a much less scrupulous musician than she actually was because she was so dramatically intense. Yes, she made up a certain amount, but she was pretty come scritto for the most part. That was the thing that was really exciting…that she would take all those
Donizetti pieces that could seem on the page like a lot of F major arpeggios, and every note would be affected. And you can get that. You can get all of it. You can get this compositional architecture in which…an actor is doing such vividly precise and emotionally grounded things that it feels like she’s making it up and yet she is and she isn’t. She’s making up a performance, but the composition remains.

In addition to the dramatic intentions and how they interlace with the musical demands specific to Garland, Adamo spoke of using “four different vocal colors” for the respective songs. If the opening humming was “inward and reflective,” then the first poem should have “a folk song quality” to the voice.

The connective musical material between the first and second poem consists of only six measures. The repetitive bass figures and thematic material of the first poem are interrupted with a change from 4/4 meter to 3/4 and a tempo change from the quarter note equaling 46 in the first poem to 69 for the second poem, “Crumbling is not an instant’s act.”

Adamo’s interpretation of the second poem is stated in his program notes as follows:

The second…is crazier. It tries to describe what happens when you’re seeing something so awful—someone dying, little by little—that your feelings switch off. You observe everything in minute detail, because it’s easier to describe it as from a great distance than as if it were happening to you or to someone you love. The music crashes to a halt [measure 136-
The soothing melody from the opening begins in the piano, but the chords crash over it before it can go on.

While coaching this second song of the cycle, which the composer calls “the scherzo,” Adamo stressed that “the consonants should be percussive in their fury,” and that the underlying emotion was that of “suppressed rage.” He was very detailed in describing the *subito piano* in measure 73 as “a whisper,” and “brittle.” Measure 77 through 80 should be “more sinister,” and *crescendo* to a “fierce” *forte* in measure 80. Clarity of diction was emphasized in the entire piece, but especially so in the second poem where it serves the percussive rhythmic idea of the composer.

The author asked Adamo about dramatic action in art song and how his approach to operatic material overlapped with his dramatic approach to art song. Was Adamo imagining staging when working on art song, or was the model different for this genre?

I don’t really mean staging, I mean intention. What are you doing with the line? [In] “Is heaven a physician?” you shorten the end of a phrase because you’re asking that question rather than the blunter question that you want to ask… I mean the whole dramatic set up of that poem is that you’re asking delicate, polite questions instead of questions that you really want to ask, which is “Why does this person have to die? Why am I being reft like this?” Well, you’re not going to ask that question. But you’re going to instead question the conventional wisdom of comfort. You say, “Alright, I understand that this person had to die, on the other hand, this is about saying, heaven can heal. Well then…how meaningful is that if the person is going to die anyway because…posthumous medicine doesn’t
exist.” So…the intention is, “I’m going to ask this other question and try to convince you that that is the only question I’m asking.” But that doesn’t have anything to do with staging. You can do that singing in a chair. It just gives the actor something to do with the musical material and the setting, and something to do with the relationship of the vocal line and…setting. So that there is an intention to it. And the same thing with the scherzo. This kind of savage detailing of these details as if you’re taking formal delight in the elegant process of dying, where, of course, it’s horrifying and rageous at the moment. So, you’re using the formality of the vocal line to almost keep the rage of the orchestral paragraph at bay. So, it’s still a dramatic conception, but it’s not a drama. It’s not like the audience is going to get a story out of that, but they are going to get a character out of that. They’re going to get an emotional process out of that. And that, to me is the point of overlap between art song and drama. There’s always some kind of acting going on, but in the art song the acting is this sort of narrative, whereas in opera it’s got to be both. So, there’s the over plot in Lysistrata of the women’s sex strike and there’s the character plot of Lysia realizing that she has to realize that she is part of a community and that sometimes her needs are not all there is. That’s her character plot, and to a certain extent that is also the point of the show. But the over plot is that a woman’s love is not available. The art song doesn’t necessarily have that. You have the general. The plot of Garland
is, “How do you deal with loss?” Which isn’t very specific. But it’s enough of a plot that you can use as a singing actor.

The second part of the second poem, beginning in measure 88 is set at a tempo of 88 to the quarter note and labeled “swift, dry, blithe” in the score. As if to try to mask what lies ahead, the introductory B-flat major feeling of the section is contrary in nature to the horrible description of death that is to be sung, but the thematic material in the bass (measure 90-97) which echoes the opening statement of “Crumbling is not an instant’s act” communicates unrest, creating dramatic tension. This second section of the second poem leads to the climax of the cycle and Adamo sets it up beautifully with a musical, poetic, and dramatic crescendo from measure 91 to 111 where the singer suddenly changes dynamic from fortissimo to piano on the line “Ruin is formal” in an attempt to “feign elegance.” Adamo then uses what he calls a “Mozart parody” for the word “formal,” setting it in formal dotted melismatic lines with a trill into a forte continuation of the text on “devil’s work.” This technique allows Adamo to emphasize the horror of the poem by juxtaposing it with the irony of formal, almost polite musical material describing human decline. At this point the piece reaches an almost unmanageable emotional peak, which Adamo brings out with melodic text painting on the words “consecutive,” “slow,” and “slipping,” reinforcing them respectively in the accompaniment with doubled rhythm (measure 118), static arpeggiated harmony (measure 120-124), and a dramatically descending bass line (measure 128-131).

Vocal coaching from the composer included using an “exaggerated” subito piano in measure 111 to highlight the irony and to indicate the “savage mockery” of the setting. Adamo wanted an audible lift between the repeated syllable “sec” in measure 118 for
diction, rhythmic and dramatic purposes, and indicated the use of *portamenti* on descending pitches for the word “slow” (measure 120-123), as well as on the word “slipping” in measure 130 only. Measures 124-132, although somewhat low in the range, remain *forte* up to the *fortissimo* in measure 133.

This section of the cycle is perhaps the most demanding vocally and dramatically due to the extreme dynamic and emotional contrasts indicated musically and poetically. The vocal range in this section ranges from low B to high A with considerable *forte* singing in the middle and low registers, requiring stamina and a fullness of tone. The articulation in this section also varies from light, flexible, melismatic singing to long sustained phrases over a rhythmically active and sonorous accompaniment.

Prior to meeting with and coaching the cycle with the composer, the author discovered a discrepancy between one word Adamo had set of Dickinson’s, and what was published in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and published by Little Brown and Company. Adamo had set “Fall in an instant, no man did,” and the Johnson edition (463) had “Fail in an instant…” The author contacted Mr. Adamo to inquire regarding the inconsistency, for which the composer was both grateful and surprised. In an email dated July 5, 2006 he responded: “…Heavens: if the word is actually “fail” rather than “fall,” we must change it immediately…under no circumstances would I consciously change a word of a poem…”

“We cover thee, sweet face” is the third poem of the cycle, and is an example of the way in which Adamo is capable of achieving an economy of means in his music for solo voice that still manages to impact the listener. The accompaniment is little more than sustained repeated D minor chords over a *pedal point* C to begin, and this continues
throughout the song with intermittent echoes of the vocal melody repeated in the
accompaniment. The constant quarter note rhythm lends a sense of calm and formality to
this section which is befitting for what Adamo describes in his program notes as:

…Guilty, regretful—says goodbye for the last time. A line or two of the
first poem “Is Heaven a Physician?” flashes through the music like a
fleeting thought [measure 175-176]. The piano takes over the music of the
third poem, and brings it to a very high pitch of grief [measure 179-185].
I think of this as the moment when you hit a kind of wall of sadness. You
literally can’t hurt anymore than you do now.

The composer stressed the articulation of the short notes as important to the
underlying sentiment of “repressed emotion” in this song. As an example, he indicated a
staccato rendering of the word “sweet” in measure 149, and wanted the quarter note on
the word “thee” in measure 152 to release precisely on time to convey the “want to
continue, but [you] can’t.” For the text “as thou flee” in measure 159-161, Adamo
prefers no crescendo until the final two beats of “flee,” and then only slightly. After
experimenting with several different vocal approaches, he preferred the word “flee”
beginning with a straight tone and letting it relax gradually into a free, vibrant sound,
which also seems to fit the with the “harmonic subtext” that he provides and the dramatic
picture he intended. The sustained D-flat in the voice over the augmented chord creates a
“harmonic subtext,” suggesting that although the spirit is fleeing, it is not sudden and
may be in an indeterminate state. In measure 174 the word “sweet” should again be
short, and the text and rhythm in measure 178 should continue to move forward and not
slow down even though it occurs over a sustained chord.
This section of the cycle is in dramatic contrast to the previous section and requires less in the way of dynamic and vocal range, but equally as much vocal and textual nuance. The vocal weight in this section is similar to that of the first poem, however the dramatic situation is not one of questioning as it was in the first poem, but one of address, so whatever similarity there may be in vocal weight should be differentiated with vocal color, or as Adamo states it, “intention.” There is a greater presence of vulnerability indicated in the text of this poem, and grief is realized in full. If in the first poem there is a sense of distance between the questioner and the listener; there is an exposed baring of the soul evident in the third.

Once more there would be an inconsistency between the Johnson edition of the Dickinson poetry and the song. Almost a month after the coaching with the composer, the author discovered in the third poem, the word that Adamo had set as “flee” was actually “go” in the poem. Adamo, in the midst of writing his harp *concerto* for the National Symphony had more important things to consider at the time and responded in an email dated August 19 that: “…I’ll have to research it. (Or I’ll say I went with her [Dickinson’s] fourth draft, rather than her third.)” Whether or not the composer chooses to change the word from “flee” to “go” in the published edition of the cycle remains to be seen, but it is clear that Adamo values the poetry as much as he values the music in his settings, and if there are discrepancies, they are unintentional.

The third poem represents the height of grief and leads to the fourth of which Adamo says in his notes:

That’s [when you can’t hurt anymore than you do now] often the moment when you begin to see a way through the pain. And so, when the piano
gives up [measure 92], the music from the beginning comes back: but with words and harmonies this time. It sings a fourth poem, “The life we have is very great,” which answers the first poem. It says that stories of heaven and infinity are all very well, but that you don’t need those stories to love someone, or miss him, or to heal from the pain of losing her and going on. The human heart is everything.

In coaching the fourth poem of Garland, the composer stressed that it is not “an emotional reprise of the opening” acapella humming section. It is instead a realization that “What has been offered as consolation was found wanting…but what remains is enough…human love.” The first two sung lines are acapella and should be sung as indicated, “simply” and not in strict meter. There is a slow and gradual feeling of forward motion and crescendo from measure 195 to measure 208, which is “the beginning of getting over it.” Measure 207 begins mezzo piano and crescendos to mezzo forte on the word “shown.” Measure 208 should be sung mezzo forte, the next phrase “less forte.” The voice should gradually diminuendo to a piano dynamic for the final phrase “Reduces it to none” and the voice should “extend two beats into the piano postlude.” The composer stressed that throughout the piece, and particularly in the final poem there should not be a sense of rubato. This is in keeping with Adamo’s intuitive sensibility of word rhythm and stress in all of his vocal writing, and also a musical caution for the over-indulgent singer who may be tempted to exaggerate the tempo indications, thus distorting the composer’s intentions.
Adamo describes the ending of the piece, and what serves as the rounding out of the *Garland* in his program notes: “The funeral music returns in the piano. It doesn’t end happily—it’s too soon for that—but it ends.”

In an interview with the author Adamo explained how he chooses poetry for art song:

Well this goes into a bit of a bigger question. What is the difference between poetry and lyric? And if Ned Rorem were here, he’d be saying the exact opposite thing that I will say to you. You see his feeling is that you are attracted to complete poetry. And what you try to do with your musical setting is to try to present and preserve them absolutely to the extent that is possible. The music should almost vanish and only the presentation of the poem should remain. I don’t believe that. Simply because I think the difference between a poem that is read aloud and poem that is sung is that once you add the sheer physical fact…of the acoustic voice and piano…the poem as a read experience, as a verbal experience, pretty much vanishes. And now it’s a lyric for good or ill, and now it is part of, possibly the controlling part of, but nonetheless only a part of a musical experience, and frankly, a lot of people are going to find the musical experience primary. …So what I tend to look for in poetry, or that which I am drawn to is something that feels evocatively incomplete. There is something that exists in and of itself either satisfactorily or somewhat less so, but there’s a kind of distinct something missing that calls for the music to complete or transform it into something else.
And specifically with regard to the second poem of Garland:

…with the scherzo, “Crumbling is not an instant’s act”…if you read it on the page, it’s clear that there is a kind of savage black humor implicit in it, but she is still using the same rather limited…very contained verse form, and it is not overt. But, I’m thinking that is something that you can pull out and then it becomes not the poem, because the poem remains the poem, but it becomes and experience in which her themes are developed in a way that music can and language cannot.

The author asked Adamo about his use of repetition and variation in music as it relates to Garland, and the operatic works:

The two basic modes of transmitting time are variety and repetition. Unlike a painting, where you can sit it front of the painting and you can take as much time as you need to make sense of the symmetries of various references, music is like trying to make sense of a series of paintings painted on the side of a speeding train, from which you can only see one panel at a time. And if the train moves slow…you have more time to do it, and if it moves fast, god help you! If you really want your audience to have a foreground musical experience, but which I mean not that they’re just letting it wash over them and, “oh, what a lovely oboe moment.” If you want them to be engaged dramatically…in the way you could be engaged in hearing a sonata form unfold, you need to be very, very careful about balancing that sense of journeying on. So the thing with this piece, but also with Lysistrata...there are ways of using repetition, varied
repetition, that can really give you a lot of meanings. Like…as we did last night [coaching Garland]. I think the experience, the exact same pitches with the exception of words…the experience of this lonely, solitary, wordless hum, and “The life we have is very great” is night and day. I’ll bet there will be certain people who will not recognize it. Truly, there will be people saying, “That was the same? Oh my gosh, it was.”

The musical style of Garland as well as that of Little Women, Lysistrata and Avow is uniquely American and eclectic. Adamo offered some specific traits that help to describe his particular style and also what he terms the difference between “approximate” and “precise” music in his interview with the author. The author had commented upon the multiple layers of music and meaning in the composer’s music for solo voice:

Well, that’s what you want to do. …Bernstein…said, it’s not really useful to talk about serious music…or popular music, serious or light, or classical or popular or any of that but you can talk, really, substantially about the difference between approximate music and precise music. Whatever else you are going to say about that which is done in the opera house and the concert hall, it is precise. It is written more. It is not writing a big band chart for then having the players improvise. …Another way of looking at it is…single layered music or multi-layered music. I do think…this is something that is not stressed quite enough. …Every piece of music, whether it is Britney Spears or Beethoven, there has to be that initial dramatically engaging level that is going to make some kind of sense to an audience at first hear. On the other hand, what you want to do as a
composer, or maybe not; but what I would like to do as a composer, is that you want that layer and then you want that layer to be translucent to layer 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or one hundred. So that every time you come back there is more to get [from the music]. Which is not the same as writing the piece that is quite intricately formed that you can explain if need be, but that doesn’t really project anything of its order to the listener the first time out. Which is sometimes the prejudice that we have inculcated on our side of the aisle of “Well, OK, I know you don’t get it. Well, you should listen to it six or seven times.” But what if it is boring the first time?

Adamo’s own dramatic and linguistic approach to composition has been described in detail. The author asked him specifically about his own harmonic language in an attempt to define the distinctly American sound that he produces.

…I do find myself drawn to certain kinds of harmony more than not. It’s kind of a French harmonic ear, by which I mean… I hear a lot of implied or explicit multi-tonality. I’m doing sort of poly-triads. I did a bit of that in Little Women; I did a whole lot of it here [Lysistrata]. It does seem to be a very fruitful matrix to me…and I seem to be doing a lot with the whole tone scale of late…it just seems to be showing up. This goes into the difference between style and technique, which John (Corigliano) was very eloquent on…I’ll quote him... “Style is the unconscious series of choices the composer makes that defines what he does. As opposed to the conscious choices”, which he defines as “techniques.” …For example, the dodecaphonic recitative in Little Women was a very conscious choice to
solve a formal problem. …Lysistrata was done more rhythmically. The formal organization of it was a technique. Using simple triads is a technique. Using a row is a technique. On the other hand…I wanted very much the harmonies of “I am not my own” to be bone simple as compared to something rather denser, more fugitive like “You are not my own.” I wanted you to really feel a winnowing down to something quite pure and triadic there. With that said…it’s more chromatic than not. The thing you lead with is theme. To me, harmony, the aural illusion that I want when I write an opera, is that the vocal line is generating everything you hear around it. The meaning of the vocal line, whatever that singer is singing is generating the harmony, the texture, the orchestration, the rhythm, the tempo, all of it. It’s all coming from that, rather than coming from the orchestra and the singer sort of a suspended free obbligato on top of it. Because then you don’t have an opera. You have a symphony with sort of a real time program note. …I tend to hear cadence more than key area. I tend to think cadentially more than “Oh, I have to get back to…G.” In Lysistrata…things tend to begin and end in the same key, but that simply is to feel more organized, because the middle goes everywhere.

Since Adamo uses dodecaphony for the recitative in Little Women for the purpose of setting it apart from the more tonal, melodic material, but had spoken in published interviews against the strictness of 12-tone technique citing Schönberg’s Moses und Aron, the author asked him about his specific thoughts regarding dodecaphony and Schönberg in particular. His answer shed light on his philosophical
ideas and personal experience regarding the power of music, and his own perspective on the progression of music into the 20th century.

Yes, well this actually goes back to ideology. The thing that really sticks in my head about that opera [Moses und Aron] is the libretto. The premise of the libretto is that if it can be apprehended through the senses, it is false. That which is true is by definition unintelligible. That is the message of Moses und Aron. Moses says, “I know the truth, but I cannot communicate it.” Aron who can communicate it, communicates the golden calf. Which is rather convenient for someone who is setting himself up as the high priest of modernism. Which is what Schönberg was doing. [Speaking as Schönberg] “You may not be able to hear this. On the other hand, it’s true.” It was like Wagner with half the fat and calories. It was all a kind of megalomania without the kind of overwhelming sensual overload. Because whatever else you’re going to say about Wagner, you do get it. You may resist it, or not. He is not unintelligible. He’s really long, but he’s not unintelligible. Schönberg is like “No, we’re gonna keep all that whole address, that rather top down, domineering artistic persona. But we’re going to do it with completely different means.” And my feeling is, there’s something deeply dishonest about that. …That’s my objection to Schönberg’s thinking. Because any indication that I have had of the existence of the sublime has come through the senses that I have. And the idea of him trying to cut off an audience…of music, and music does this really well…the idea of an order that you can
sense, an argument by which you can be convinced even if you can’t identify its terms, that’s the thing that’s the most gorgeous about music. And he says, “No. If you can hear it, it’s not true.” Hnnng!, as my mother would say! That’s my problem. The sounds are pretty. They’re aimless. But they’re pretty. But the book is toxic.

Well, of course... you have to be sympathetic... from a personal point of view; you have to be very sympathetic. ... All of Europe was trying to deal with Wagner in some way. So... I suppose that is a little harsh. Except that so many people took that viewpoint uncritically... If you look at modernism within the context of German music and late 19th, early 20th century music, then you get it completely, and you can be quite sympathetic. The problem is, for so many years, people thought that German thought was world thought. The Germans were the great peak in the 18th and 19th centuries. Really, for a long time, German music was world music. But then it wasn’t. ... I will argue it was really the French, the Russians, the Americans in the late 19th, early 20th centuries that gave rise to so much of what we’re doing now. ... Stravinsky, the impressionists... to be fair it was really French harmony and Russian rhythm. And then we came along and did our own thing. ... That was another way into the 20th century as opposed to that kind of modernism. And I think it was a more fruitful path.
Figure 24: "Garland" manuscript.
Delicate: $j = 46$

"Is Heaven a physician?"

They say that He can heal;

But medicine, post-humous medicine is unavailable;

vainable.

Is He a ven... an ex-che-queue?
They speak of what we owe;

We owe, we owe,

They speak of what we owe;

But that, that, that...
more urgent: \( \dot{q} = 54 \)

Savage, elegant: \( \dot{q} = 69 \)

"Crumbling is not an instant's act"

Brittle

not an instantaneous

A fundamental pause
fist a cobweb, a cobweb on the soul.

a ca-nicle of dust;
Freely: catching breath  
"We cover thee, sweet face"

Freely: catching breath

Tender, formal: \( j = 52 \)

Pno.

Short notes expressed emotion 1st met.

We cover thee, sweet face,

Pno.

Not that we tire of thee,
But that thyself fitigate of us;
Re-member,
And then, reluctant, turn a way,
To con the o'er and o'er, And

blame the scanty love we were content to show.
Augmented.

Augmented sweet a hundred-fold, a hundred-fold,
"The life we have is very great"

The life we have is very great; The life we are to a bit faster; $d = 44$

see Sur-passes it sur-passes it, because we know It is in-

fi-ni-ty. But when all space has been be-held, And all do-min-ion

$J = 50$
Solemn, contained: \( \text{\textit{\textbf{Z} = 60}} \)
CHAPTER 6

The Unpublished Songs

Mark Adamo wrote several unpublished songs prior to Symphony: Late Victorians, the operatic works and Garland. They are mentioned here as examples of his early “student” works and for their historical significance. Portions of the songs are included as examples of the composer’s early experimentation with the art song genre. One can draw their own conclusions from the music and the manuscript regarding the degree to which they predict the dramatic impulse behind Adamo’s writing for the voice, his attention to musical and dramatic detail, his knowledge of the voice as an instrument, his choice of poetic material, and his early harmonic language. Regarding these early songs, the composer had this to say in an email upon sending them to the author: “The three song cycles are quite early, so expect a bit of Poulenc in the last of the Williams songs, and perhaps a bit too much blues comedy in “Sentimental Poem” from Remembering Him.” Clearly, Adamo does not consider these to be representative of his professional output, but historically they represent a stage in an important young composer’s development and are interesting and relevant from a scholarly and historical perspective.

Adamo commented on his choice of texts by Tennessee Williams and Gerard Manley Hopkins for two of the early cycles and how they are dissimilar. He was speaking of how he now prefers poetry with “a distinct something missing,” or that is “evocatively incomplete.”

…because the Tennessee Williams poems are very plainly underwritten. I was drawn to those. The Hopkins is a kind of counter-example. And I
don’t know if I would be setting that now, because I set that in college. It was sort of the first time I had set poetry at all. But the Hopkins is so rich, like Shakespeare, really. Metaphor upon metaphor upon metaphor. And…it seems to me…that the best thing to do with something like that is to stretch out, thin out, the texture, so you’ve got a chance to aurally and visually get those images. Because he just packs them in. It’s really quite baroque in its texture.

Of the three early cycles, Adamo is fondest of Remembering Him, as he related to the author:

…there’s a set that I do very much like called Remembering Him. It’s funny. It turned out one of the few moments where a form happened without me really looking for it. I just found these four poems and I thought they were just lovely. And it turns out all four of the poets were American female [Linda Pastan, Marge Piercy, Louise Gluck, Mary Oliver], which didn’t mean a lot but made it convenient for programming sometimes. I had switched the order of one of them…actually it’s funny you ask this because as it turns out, it is also another memorial piece. I never thought of that before. …It [contains] a rather comic poem by Marge Piercy called Sentimental Poem. “[The text is]…You are such a good cook; I am such a good cook. If we get involved we’ll both get fat, then nobody else will have us.” It’s a delicious little thing. That’s the second piece. And then the first is called Jump Cabling. It’s another funny thing where apparently her car gets stalled along the side of the
road. And whoever stops and starts her battery suggests “well, we could travel the rest of the way together.” And then the third piece is called The Racer’s Widow. What it turned out to be was kind of a romance of a woman and there was, except for the last piece, sort of an automotive imagery in a lot of them. So it turned out to be for mezzo soprano, viola and piano. And the first one you do a lot of bowing behind the bridge which gives you the rather scratching sound of the car turning over and the battery resuming.

The author inquired as to whether Adamo enjoyed composing art song and if the composer plans to compose for the genre in the future, and the composer remarked that, “I’m just not doing a lot of songs quite simply because I’m doing opera.” When asked which genre he enjoyed composing for most, and in light of his current commission from the National Symphony for a harp concerto, Adamo did not hesitate in his response:

Oh, opera. Because it uses every part of my brain. You know the harp concerto [Four Angels] is going up next June…and I’m very much enjoying doing it. But I’m enjoying it from the challenge of “can I compose with…one hand tied behind my back?” as it were, because there’s a limit to how much you can personalize an instrument, without recourse to making up a story and planting it. Because one thing I did not want to do is say actually, “Alright, I’m going to do this four scene opera in which the harp is the leading person, and I’ll just take out all the words.” I just thought…I’d actually like to make a musical shape that is dramatic in symphonic terms, but is not dramatic to the extent that it is
coming off an acting design from which then I am removing text. And, I’m enjoying it, but I don’t know. It’s hard to want to do just that when I don’t feel that all of the dramatic thinking or the verbal and acting thinking comes into play. …It’s like once you’ve had an experience where you’re in opera, a full 2 hours of sets, costumes and the whole deal. There’s such a charge to that. …At the same time it is very interesting because I work so overwhelmingly off of the words, I’m actually loving the idea of saying, “Let’s just…work with this.” So, on the other hand it’s developing other muscles, which I rather like. But it’s not as intense. Because I do feel like my center line is where sound and acting join. It’s just my fulcrum, as it were.
Figure 25: "God's Grandeur" excerpt. Gerard Manley Hopkins, poet.
Figure 26: "Unfinished" excerpt. Gerard Manley Hopkins, poet.
Figure 27: "Across the Space" excerpt. Tennessee Williams, poet.
Figure 28: "Towns Become Jewels" excerpt. Tennessee Williams, poet.
Figure 29: "Jump Cabling" excerpt. Linda Pastan, poet.
Figure 30: "Sentimental Poem" excerpt. Marge Piercy, poet.
Figure 31: "The Racer's Widow" excerpt. Louise Gluck, poet.
Figure 32: "Music at Night" excerpt. Mary Oliver, poet.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

Mark Adamo is emerging as one of America’s most important composers for the lyric stage. An examination of his works to date and in depth personal interviews have revealed an artist with unusual depth of knowledge and talent not only in musical composition, but stage craft, acting, playwriting, and linguistics. His early interest in writing and theater, his fascination with the American musical theater augmented by his extensive knowledge of poetic and classical literature, and his formal training in dramatic writing and musical composition rank him among the elite of well-versed composer/librettists writing today.

One need look no farther than the success of his first two operas, and *Little Women* in particular, to recognize that his gifts are unique and extraordinary. Many, if not most great opera composers of the past have not enjoyed the same kind of immediate success and critical praise from which Mr. Adamo has benefited so early in his career.

Adamo’s writing for the voice in opera and art song is virtuosic, expressive, idiomatic, and sparkles with linguistic clarity and nuance. He understands and manages the balance between vocal display and dramatic action in his operas so that they are vocally operatic and dramatically coherent. His musical language employs melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic repetition and variation in a multitude of ways to serve the overall dramatic form of his works to the audience in a comprehensible way without resorting to musical device.

His uniquely American sound can be traced to what he calls a “*pan-chromatic*” palette, which to the listener may sound more “*pan-diatonic*” than *chromatic* because of
the way in which he masterfully melds even dodecaphonic segments into more tonal sections of compositions. Yet, his harmonic language and technique defies simple description. The eclectic, adventurous nature of his varied styles and his fearless use of and reference to existing literature (both literary and musical) is reflective of the American spirit, and also those that have influenced him including Bernstein, Sondheim, Corigliano, Stravinsky, and Barber.

Adamo’s rare combination of talent and intellectual brilliance has caught the attention of influential operatic producers, critics, and important opera companies which continue to commission new works.

Performers are eager to perform his works and study his dramatic instincts because of his ability to help them discover and explore new and expanded artistic vistas within his music and within themselves. His willingness to openly discuss his craft and artistic views in a document such as this one is a testament to his love for his art and concern for its well-being. A perusal of his operatic scores and art songs reveals a sensitive, detailed dramatic artist who, wanting to ensure that all aspects of a production function as one, is not shy about writing dramatic intention and subtext into not only vocal scores, but orchestral parts as well.

Garland is only an example of the quality of art song composition that Adamo is capable of producing, and although his efforts remain focused primarily upon works for the operatic stage, one can hope that this radiant American composer will find time to compose more works for this genre.
Whatever genres Mark Adamo continues to write for will no doubt be infused with great depth of artistic and intellectual wisdom, and will communicate in a way to remind us and reconnect us with, in his words, “an existence of the sublime.”
The following interview was held on July 21, 2006 in New York City, at the Manhattan home of Mark Adamo and John Corigliano.

**SCOTT MILLER (SM):**

When we first communicated about the songs project, we discussed several poetic sources, and at the time, I think you were working on *Lysistrata*, and you were talking about some ancient Greek poetry. And then I lost a friend which delayed the project a little bit, and also (lost) my mother. Then you lost your father. How does all that go into what you decided to do for *Garland*?

**MARK ADAMO (MA):**

Well, it’s you know, sometimes you write the piece that’s in front of you. The Greek poetry, which was lovely, actually ended up informing a lot of the libretto of *Lysistrata*. It inclines towards the aphoristic. They are very short pieces, that is just how that was… …the big narrative poems like Homer were more performance, really more theatrical than poetry. The poetry was there almost as a pneumonic device. We remember these long epics. But actual lyric poetry tends to be quite short, and I just didn’t feel like I wanted 5 little, sort of shining pebbles. I wanted something richer. Something that was going to make a big shape. I had known, uh, these poems sort of tend to crop up in my life actually, strangely around themes of loss. They had figured in a symphony that I wrote called *Late Victorians*. It was the Dickinson poems and the essay of Richard Rodriguez…in kind of the form of the Haydn *Farewell Symphony* for solos in between.
There are three *cadenzas* for four players on the stage. What was strange was that within a year, that my father…whose first piece of anything of mine he had heard this was, and the friend of mine who sang these poems in the premiere performance, they both died. So it was kind of, it seemed, like the right moment to revisit them. You (Scott) eventually, had of course, a loss of your own. There were too many points not to close the circle with.

**SM:**

Being a gifted writer yourself, and a playwright, is it difficult for you to find material written by other people that you are drawn to? And since you had used the Dickinson before with *Late Victorians*, well, other than Dickinson, are there other people that you have set before? Or anyone else that you are thinking of or drawn to for future projects?

**MA:**

I’ve set a couple poems of Tennessee Williams. I’ve set the poetry of Mary Oliver, and Linda Pastan, and Marge Piercy for a set. I’ve been drawn to Gerard Manley Hopkins. I think the short answer to your question is...well this goes into a bit of a bigger question. What is the difference between poetry and lyric? And if Ned Rorem were here, he’d be saying the exact opposite thing that I will say to you. You see his feeling is that you are attracted to complete poetry. And what you try to do with your musical setting is to try to present and preserve them absolutely to the extent that is possible. The music should almost vanish and only the presentation of the poem should remain. I don’t believe that. Simply because I think the difference between a poem that is read aloud and a poem that is sung is that once you add the sheer physical fact, you know, of the acoustic voice and piano and what not, the poem as a read experience, as a verbal experience, pretty much
vanishes. And now it’s a lyric, for good or ill, and now it is part of, possibly the controlling part of, but none the less only a part of, a musical experience, and frankly a lot of people are going to find the musical experience primary. It’s not like you will have a series of readings, with one of those readings sung, it will happen in a musical context. So what I tend to look for in poetry, or that which I am drawn to is something that feels evocatively incomplete. There is something that exists in and of itself either satisfactorily or somewhat less so, but there’s a kind of a distinct something missing that calls for the music to complete or to transform it into something else. Some of the things we were talking about with the scherzo, “Crumbling is not an instant’s act” piece last night,…if you read it on the page, it’s clear that there is a kind of savage black humor implicit in it, but she is still using the same rather limited…it’s very contained verse form and it is not overt. But I’m thinking that is something that you can pull out and then it becomes not the poem, because the poem remains the poem, but it becomes an experience in which her themes are developed in a way that music can and language cannot. I mean with the Tennessee Williams; because the Tennessee Williams poems are very plainly underwritten. I was drawn to those. The Hopkins is kind of a counter-example. And I don’t know if I would be setting that now, because I set that in college. It was sort of the first time I had set poetry, at all. But the Hopkins is so rich. Like Shakespeare, really, metaphor upon metaphor upon metaphor. And one of the things that it seems to me is that the best thing to do with something like that is to stretch out, thin out the texture, so you’ve got a chance to aurally and visually get those images. Because he just packs them in. It’s really quite baroque in its texture. So, that’s a question of just like singing
language from performance. The reason that I tend not to is…. I’m just not doing a lot of songs quite simply because I’m doing opera. Because I do my own libretto…

I’m so…. I tend to do my own language there not because I resist working with anyone else but that if…. I do think that from first and second hand experience, it is really hard to find a librettist that really understands the technical demands that an opera makes on a libretto. Because it needs to work as a play, but it also needs to work poetically not to the extent that the language has got to be poetic in the way that Dickinson is poetic, but poetic in the musical sense.

SM:
And yet, you are very poetic in *Little Women*.

MA:
That was almost a luxury. Some of the *arias* in that piece seem more poetic…they are poetic strophically in terms of rhyme and line length. They set up phrase structure in the music. But if you look at Meg’s signal *aria*, it’s almost prose. You know the first verse is “Things change, Jo, things change…you’re a babe at the breast….you’re a daughter by the fire….you have all the love you think you could desire, still, things change.” It’s almost conversation.

SM:
It’s very poetic.

MA:
The reason that it feels poetic is because I worked very hard on the form of it.

SM:
And part of it, to me, is the rhythm.
MA:
Right!

SM:
Because the way you just said it is the way you set it, musically and rhythmically.

MA:
Well, see, yes. This is what I’m talking about the difference between poetic technically or musically, and poetic literarily. Because if you compare it to something like Whitman….when you have all of these stylized metaphors; the language is very charged. But formally it’s just these big run on sentences. So it’s musical, but it’s only musical from a verbal point of view. It’s musical when you speak it, but if you try to get it actually into pitches and rhythms, it’s very difficult….it’s like setting prose. That’s the difference between free verse and something like this. So I would argue that a lot of contemporary poetry is formally prose, but literarily poetry in so far as that it is very abstract and innergistic and what not….the demands of the libretto are exactly opposite. You want formally, poetically and musically and literarily pretty much as simple as you can get it, because now the music is going to give the richness that you don’t necessarily need in the language. It’s a very tricky thing. It needs to work dramatically. I imagine if you were just a writer, it would be very frustrating because, you set up the scene, and right at the moment where you want it to flower, …or if you are Tennessee Williams, you write the big monologue for Blanche, …that is the moment you need to pull back. You need to be formally very disciplined to set up the music but you don’t want to fight the music. You want to allow a space for the music to transform that. In Jo’s aria, “Perfect as we are,” there’s very little to it that you wouldn’t find in ordinary conversation. But I
like to think that setting it up strophically and using certain repetitions and line lengths, having it sort of flow into the voice, that not only rhythmically in and of itself, but setting up the intervals and harmonies in there, that that completes the poetry.

**SM:**

Is there something or someone that you can point to as a model for this?

**MA:**

Oscar Hammerstein used to say this, and Sondheim after him. This is where the theater people are very smart. Because if there is a certain characterizing limitation of musical theater; generally on the theater side of it; people are extremely intelligent about how to fashion language for acting the music. That’s really what we do. The musical ceiling…. it can bring a certain amount of musical richness to it, or it can bring six chords! The theater doesn’t in and of itself stimulate a lot of musical richness, but they are incredibly smart. There’s really no one on the opera side of the aisle, contemporarily, who is as smart as those lyricists.

I mean look at “Oh what a beautiful morning.” If you look at the opening strophe of the opening number of *Oklahoma*, “Oh what a beautiful mornin’, oh what a beautiful day, I got a wonderful feelin’ everything’s goin’ my way,” which is almost like nursery rhyme. I mean it’s right on the edge of banality. But he knew, given that moment and this folk song simplicity, and the baritone, and Rodgers… He actually wrote a very funny story, about how he worked a week and a half on the lyric to the opening of that, and Rodgers wrote it in a day, because he was just that…well, because he was Rodgers. But if you look at that lyric on the page, there’s nothing there, except that there is everything there. There’s the rhythm…the implied rhythm. It also has to deal with the character. You are
not going to have a cowboy come out there as…. I mean that is why he worked very hard on the verse “all the cattle were standing like statues, and the corn is as high as an elephant’s eye.” He wondered, “How am I gonna come up with language that is a little bit richer?” He wanted the verses to be richer so the refrain really can flower. It can’t all be just a beautiful day or the number never would start! But you can’t have him come out singing like Gerard Manley Hopkins or you’ll tilt into operetta. So there are all these very refined aspects of that… the weight of words, the rhythm of words, the color of words, but also how they deal with character in time and place and period.

SM:
Right, and you did that so well in *Lysistrata*, as well.

MA:
Well it was freer in *Lysistrata*. We don’t remember Greekness, you know.

SM:
And you talk about fleshing out the characters more in other interviews for that, and you do a beautiful job of that, for instance, in the conversation between Nico and the other General. To me, you bring across this intellectual difference beautifully...

MA:
Thank you. You know, I’m very proud of that scene. Because that scene is nowhere in the original. Because, at that point in the life of Athens, everyone was sick of the war. There was not a single person left living in Athens that thought the war was a good idea. Which you get historically, but at the time that I started it… well actually it’s a bit ironic as I started before the current war and we’re also getting to that point now. But I started looking at that dramatically and I thought this is pretty flat. There’s no drama here if
only one of the people is right and the only process of the show is for us to wait until they win. So I wanted to come up with two kinds of male viewpoints that are credibly opposite.

**SM:**

It’s almost like the cadet versus the enlisted man.

**MA:**

Yes. Thank you. That is exactly the image I had in my head. So what was easier in that show is, because if you look… Tragedy has its own poetic diction and more of that language survives. All of the Greek comedies, if you translate them, translate more or less into contemporary English diction because with the exception of the choruses, all of which I cut, you know, because I didn’t need them, so with that I could pretty much do a contemporary English that was spiked intermittently with some locutions for the love music and for the elegiac music. For example, there are the occasional phrases of Sappho that found themselves into the love duet. So “your wrists slim like the wild rose” is not mine, it’s Sappho’s. But it became a part of the big duet in Act I. And there was one wonderful phrase, I don’t remember the poem now, the phrase was “Eros will break us all over again.” Which I thought was perfect. Because one of the problems in that scene was, how do you establish that the scene is going to be principally about their erotic connection? It was a premise of the show. It needs to be the reverse of the Myrrhine and Kinesius scene. That scene is in the original. My scene between Lysia and Nico was made up. It needed to be principally sexual in aspect, but I wanted to get a point across that wasn’t just sexual. But at that particular point in their relationship when their connection was so incendiary, that they felt, “my god, if I feel this way about your body
and your eyes, then there must be a god!” I was trying to get that across, and in one line I
found that, and I felt, “thank you that is exactly what I need!” That is the peak of the
duet. And I will build everything else around it.

SM:

And then you do a beautiful job of reinforcing that later, the way you mirror situations in
the same musical language.

MA:

Yes, but see, that was in the outline. And this is the thing that I do whenever I’m doing
this with a new piece now, is try to do a scaffold of the piece. It’s ten pages long, just
prose, there’s no music and there’s no actual language. It’s what I call the silent movie
outline. If the opera were done, and I were watching it, and I didn’t speak the language
and I were deaf…but still they were being staged in front of me and the characters are
coming on stage, and just from their body language, I’m getting what the story is. What
would the story be? Write down what you see. It is extremely useful to me. It keeps me
from too soon getting attached to actual language or actual musical material. Because
you don’t want to write something, fall in love with it, then have to cut it because it is
wrong. I’d much rather edit the structure when I’m not attached to it and get that right
because then you can write ever more fluently without having to feel like you’ve done a
beautiful scene in Act III which unfortunately does not work, at all. And so that’s why,
when I did the first version of that outline, it occurred to me very early that because each
of these characters on the one hand are very linked, and on the other hand on opposing
sides, that that phrase is like a melody in a hall of mirrors. That you have this very
complex and constant variation form where you get a verbal or musical strophe that you
associate with one character or one situation or one action and be able to use it to show completely opposite sides of it, so that at the end when the god and goddesses come down saying “Each of you will tell the truth, and none of you will agree,” it’s like you can actually hear that if I write the score correctly.

SM:
And the way you do it, there are mirrors on a lot of different levels. Musical mirrors, also there’s a lot of irony…

MA:
It’s a wonderful premise. Not bad for the play, but the play itself is a very fruitful premise for this kind of thing. So I took the premise and the title, and three scenes, and I apologized to Aristophanes’ lawyer and cut the other 60 percent, and I just made up the rest of it.

SM:
I asked Houston Grand Opera to send me whatever they had on the Little Women premiere, and one of the things they sent me is a letter that you had sent to David Gockley with one of these outlines in it for Little Women, which I found fascinating.

MA:
Oh! The original outline of Little Women? Can I get a copy of that? I don’t think I have my Little Women outline anymore. And people ask me for it all the time and I don’t know where it is. Would you send that to me? People ask me for that in master classes and things. I have the Lysistrata material, but not the Little Women material. I’ve got the big essay, but not the silent movie outline. But see, that was very useful. And coming back to your diction point, it was actually harder with Little Women than with
With *Little Women*, I needed to get all the anachronism out. I mean, once I got the outline done, refined and rewritten, and I was able to start the show, I wrote the play just as if it were going to be a spoken play from beginning to end. And at that point I didn’t trouble myself about period language. I was just writing a contemporary play. Then what I went through, once I got those scenes, you know the play was done. I went back to the novel and any place in the novel from which these scenes drew. For example, “There was a knight once,” Brook’s *aria*. In my show, it happens on the porch right before the parlor scene. Actually in the novel it’s in Laurie’s summer house. I don’t know if it’s on the lawn, anyway it’s in the midst of a gazillion people. But still I went back to that scene and just wrote down any kind of specifically nineteenth century locution or word. “Raspy” was one adjective that Jo used to describe herself which was meaning bad-tempered. Or “now you’re beginning to marm it” in the prologue is pulled from that. I just pulled all those in and said, now let me go through and see if there’s any place in this largely contemporary language where I can kind of stud these little bits of nineteenth century…almost like cloves on a ham if you will. I didn’t want to try to fake her language because her language is a) 19th century, and b) that of a novel. And my language needed to be dramatic. But I wanted it to be a period language of no period, largely neutral. So no 21st century locutions, and only a few 19th century, so they would color it just enough so that you wouldn’t be asking the question, where are we? And then I took all the metaphors that would go in from there, casting it into verse or quasi verse, because you see, in *Lysistrata* it’s all song form into song form into song form. It’s all very tight; it’s like a two hour *fugue*. *Little Women* is a little looser, but even the *recitative*, it’s not too far from song form, so that when one gets into these rather tight
strophen, it’s more condensation of a texture that’s already there, rather than just prose, prose, prose and then “Lo! A number!” because I didn’t want it to be that jarring, but it is a very naturalistic piece, it’s a very prosy piece. So it really couldn’t take the kind of treatment that Lysistrata could take. If you notice, Lysistrata has very little exposition. We have to know, in Little Women, that Beth isn’t sick and that she may get sick again, and who Laurie is and who Brook is and oh, Aunt Cecelia is due. There is all this data. You just need to know. It’s not terribly musically evocative. But unless you know, you can’t make sense of the show. Which led to one kind of musical solution that was the dodecaphonic recitative which allowed just the vocal color to carry the moment and then it would condense to the E major of something like “Things change.” Lysia comes on and all you need to know is she’s a woman in love. That’s all you need to know. She doesn’t have a family, she doesn’t have a last name, and she doesn’t have a job. Nothing. Which on one hand was very freeing. Because it allowed the music to move much more fleetly. On the other hand it posed the problem in the libretto of who are these people, what is at stake for them as characters? Because Aristophanes doesn’t solve them. He gives you form, but no content. Whereas Alcott gave you all content and no form. Which was fun, you know. Everything you do is like, let’s address this other thing. Let’s do this thing you haven’t done before and figure out how to do this seemingly impossible thing.

SM:

The other songs that you have set, are they also cycles or are they individual pieces?
MA:

Some of them are early. There’s a set of three songs set to poetry of Tennessee Williams. And I only really like one of them. Then there’s a set that I do very much like called Remembering Him. It’s funny; it turned out, one of the few moments where a form happened without me really looking for it. I just found these 4 poems and I thought they were just lovely. And it turns out all four of the poets were American female. Which didn’t mean a lot, but made it convenient for programming sometimes. I had switched the order of one of them, and it turns out there’s this one, it’s a, umm, god, actually it’s funny that you ask this because as it turns out, it is also another memorial piece. I never thought of that before. Well the Williams piece isn’t. The Williams piece is a love set. Death, death, it’s everywhere. It’s more the story of a romance. It begins with a rather comic poem by Marge Piercy called Sentimental Poem. (The text is) “You are such a good cook; I am such a good cook. If we get involved, we’ll both get fat, then nobody else will have us.” It’s a delicious little thing. That’s the second piece. And then the first is called Jump Cabling. It’s another funny thing where apparently her car gets stalled along the side of the road. And whoever stops and starts her battery suggests “well, we could travel the rest of the way together.” And then the third piece is called The Racer’s Widow. What it turned out to be was kind of a romance of a woman and there was, except for the last piece, sort of an automotive imagery in a lot of them. So it turned out to be for a mezzo-soprano, viola and a piano. And the first one you do a lot of bowing behind the bridge which gives you the rather scratching sound of the car turning over and the battery resuming. Anyway, that is a cycle, the Williams set is a cycle, and the Hopkins is half a cycle. Again, I like two of them, but they’re not quite…
SM:
Are these published?

MA:
No. I’ve been sort of lazy about it. It’s one of the projects this summer, I’m trying to get them all in some kind of form and present them to Schirmer and see if they’d be interested in looking at them.

SM:
I’d bet the world would be interested in seeing them.

MA:
Well, I like a lot of them. There are one or two, I have a feeling that maybe the Williams and that some of these songs may come together and be another kind of set. Because there are one or two that I am just not mad about.

SM:
Do you think of the art song, as being, sort of in terms of what Wolf did, in terms of you know, almost a miniature operatic portrait…on a smaller scale, or how do the genres compare?

MA:
Well that’s the thing. **Racers Widow** is really a monodrama. I mean that cycle is a monodrama. Obviously **Garland** is a, it’s a *solo cantata* in the way the Haydn **Ariana** is. I think that is a rather baroque form. I sort of bring that with me in whatever I do. The harp *concerto* is kind of a dramatic piece. And to an extent, that a *concerto* is instrumental drama, you could argue that it is a cantata for an instrumental protagonist and orchestral chorus.
SM:

In one of your interviews, you used protagonist/antagonist…

MA:

It’s *sonata allegro* form.

SM:

I wish when I was an undergraduate in music theory someone had presented it that way. Because it is so right on.

MA:

You see, you mentioned that you were talking about do you approach something from a theory point of view? And I was thinking about that at some length, because that’s worth going over. The term music theory is very tricky. Because it’s really only been 20th century German modernism in which… it’s the only musical development in which theory was to precede and guide practice. And that is now the way we think of music theory, but I don’t think that is quite accurate. When we talk about music theory, what we really should be talking about is something between music history and music technique. Because if you look at any number of forms, you could look at *sonata allegro* form as a way of organizing material in a dramatic way. And that would work most effectively in a period when the actual musical tutors were really quite transparent. When the relationship between the *tonic* and the *dominant* and the *subdominant* it’s all …they’re clean, clean triads and they work together in very formulaic ways. And one of the things the formula does is that it makes the small areas very readily intelligible. You hear that particular cell or formula going on, so you can hear a big shape like *sonata*
allegro form. And then you hear somebody like Beethoven saying, “All right let me kind of push that and make the coda of the symphonies do another kind of formal thing.”

Or then you hear someone like Debussy say, “Why does the dominant seventh always have to serve as functional harmony? Why can’t I just linger here?” So in both of these cases what you’re dealing with on the one hand; materials, the dominant seventh chord, in this particular arrangement of intervals, and then certain ideas that have to do with forms. The sonata allegro form is presuming that the audience is going to follow something dramatically. Bernstein made the very interesting case that both the form of the fugue and the timbre of the organ went into decline right about the time of the nineteenth century when people started to get very skeptical about the existence of God. Which makes a rather interesting point to me. Because, if you think about it, he made the point that in fugue, the audience is put in this rather god-like position… There are all these seemingly independent lines, and yet there is a design. If you back up and can see it from that distance. But that doesn’t mean that somebody came up with this idea and then came up with fugue to exemplify it. Counterpoint was always there and then it came to a certain pitch. Fugue really did come to a certain pitch in the glory days of Christianity in Europe. So that, I think, is the way music theory should be taught. You teach these particular techniques and you teach these ideas, but the idea of saying “Well I’m going to approach it from the materials, and the materials are going to give me the idea” is...well, not necessarily. The only time that ever worked, the only time it was ever tried, was Schönberg. Schönberg said, “OK, we are going to liberate music from the tyranny of “do.” From the tyranny of the scale. And I’m going to make up this row. And that’s what we’re going to do. Here is the material and here’s how you can use it. Go.” It was
the most authoritarian…Not that there hadn’t been authoritarian music dogma in the past; the idea of the tritone as the devil’s interval, so there will be no augmented chords in the Catholic church. That’s pretty authoritarian. It was really not this crypto-scientific …

SM:
So what we should be teaching, really, now in the conservatories, is the philosophy of music theory. Rather than…

MA:
What we need to do is teach the history of ideas. That’s really what it needs to be. It needs to be done, not so much as…I think that we want to nudge it towards algebra because that’s easier to teach. On the one hand you want to…I think that people would resist saying “Why can I not use the parallel fifth, Debussy did?” I think people would resist that less when they were in Baroque counterpoint, if there were more of the history of the Baroque period around it. So you can say to the kids, “Look, I know this is not necessarily how you hear. This is an exercise to develop your ear for how certain intervals seem more independent than others. Which is why, arbitrarily, from a 21st century point of view, we are going to ask that you avoid parallel fifths. So we don’t get the sense of moving gongs. We want to hear independently moving voices. And incidentally, if you want to know why that happened, here’s the history of the tempered scale. Here is what was happening around Lutheran Germany when these ideas became so compelling, that we thought, no, no parallel fifths, not ever.” If you just say, “Do this because I say so” or “Do this because this is what concert music is,” they will say, “No it isn’t, I live in the world.”
SM:

Yes, what’s artistic about that?

MA:

Right! And then when you get to Debussy you see at that point that he is doing something different, but of course there is much more happening at any given vertical moment, you know. I mean in Baroque harmony, if you get two or three lines, a parallel fifth really matters. Parallel fifths in a two part invention means that you don’t hear any independent motion. Parallel fifths when you have 18 pitches going on at the same time into the halls, well now it is a very different world. But that is an historical thing, not a theoretical thing. It’s the difference between the early 20th century French orchestra and the Baroque keyboard. And I think if that was brought to bear, number one, it would be more accurate. It would take a sort of, to my mind, a false scientific template off of it. Music is the product of musicians and audiences. And ideas, they intersect with it, but music gives rise to ideas just as much as ideas give rise to music. And so the idea of get this theoretical template in your brain and go from there, I think it is counterproductive.

SM:

With Garland in particular, I find myself, in working on it, looking up a lot of your (musical) terms because of the way you indicate musical ideas…words like “lithe”…which I think I know but maybe not previously in a musical sense, and I want to make sure because they are very precise. And also, I wondered if the title itself, “Garland” was meant in terms of, since it is dedicated to your father, is it meant as a trophy or a wreath?
MA:

It’s a wreath.

SM:

But is it also a *liederkreis* in terms of that too? And I wondered if that goes back to the Schumannesque idea of a circle or wreath of songs?

MA:

I had the cycle idea; I didn’t have the *liederkreis* idea.

The two basic modes of transmitting time are variety and repetition. Unlike a painting, where you can sit in front of the painting and you can take as much time as you need to make sense of its symmetries or various references. Music is like trying to make sense of a series of paintings painted on the side of a speeding train, from which you can only see one panel at a time. And if the train moves slow, well then you have more time to do it. And if it moves fast, god help you! If you really want your audience to have a foreground musical experience, by which I mean not that they’re just letting it wash over them and “Oh what a lovely oboe moment.” If you really want them to be engaged dramatically, in like what we’re talking about, in the way you could be engaged in hearing a sonata form unfold, you do need to be very, very careful about balancing that sense of journeying on. Do you know? So the thing with this piece particularly, but also with *Lysistrata*, there are ways of using repetition, varied repetition, that can really give you a lot of meanings. Like…as we did last night. I think the experience, the exact same pitches with the exception of the words…but the experience of this lonely, solitary, wordless hum, and “The life we have is very great” is night and day. I’ll bet there will be
certain people who will not recognize it. Truly, there will be people saying, “That was the same? Oh my gosh, it was.”

**SM:**

I find that in listening to both of the operas, I am finding way more, listening without the score. At first when I was following the score, I think I was missing most of the aural effect. That kind of ties in to your comment about panels on a moving train…

**MA:**

There’s a lot to an opera, with the costumes, and lights, and “Oh she has a beautiful high A and I can’t think of anything else.” And we love that, you know. You have to be aware of that.

**SM:**

I think that with most great theatrical or literary experiences…that when you go back to them you keep finding these new layers. And I find that so true of both of your operatic pieces.

**MA:**

Well, that’s what you want to do. You know, Bernstein’s distinction….He said, “It’s not really useful to talk about serious music, or you know, popular music, serious or light or classical or popular or any of that but you can talk, really, substantially about the difference between approximate music and precise music. What ever else you are going to say about that which is done in the opera house and the concert hall, it is precise. It is written more. It is not writing a big band chart for then having the players improvise. It will be lovely, but it is not this. Another way of looking at it is…I don’t want to say shallow because that is more pejorative than I mean but…the single layered music or
multi-layered music. I do think, and I think this is something that is not stressed quite enough. I think, in composition, every piece of music, whether it is Britney Spears or Beethoven, there has to be that initial dramatically engaging level that is going to make some kind of sense to an audience at first hear. On the other hand, what you want to do as a composer, or maybe not; but what I would like to do as a composer, is that you want that layer and then you want that layer to be translucent to layer 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or one hundred. So that every time you go back there is more to get. Which is not the same as writing the piece that is quite intricately formed that you can explain if need be, but that doesn’t really project anything of its order to the listener the first time out. Which is sometimes the prejudice that we have inculcated on our side of the aisles of “Well, OK, I know you don’t get it. Well, you should listen to it six or seven times.” But what if it is boring the first time? What if I’m hearing something so random, so little engaging…?

SM:
Or that I don’t know what to listen to? You mentioned in one of your interviews listening to Moses und Aron…

MA:
And Moses und Aron, in a good performance, sounds very pretty.

SM:
Yes, but in that piece, I sometimes find myself wondering what I should be listening to…

MA:
Don’t get me started on this!!!

SM:
But that is what’s so beautiful about the way you write, is that it…
MA:

Yes, well this actually goes back to ideology. The thing that really sticks in my head about that opera is the libretto. The premise of the libretto is that if it can be apprehended through the senses, it is false. That which is true is by definition is unintelligible. That is the message of Moses und Aron. Moses says, “I know the truth, but I cannot communicate it.” Aron, who can communicate it, communicates the golden calf. Which is a rather convenient thing for someone who is setting himself up as the high priest of modernism. Which is what Schönberg was doing. “You may not be able to hear this. On the other hand. It’s true.” It was like Wagner, with half the fat and calories. It was all a kind of megalomania without the kind of overwhelming sensual overload. Because whatever else you’re going to say about Wagner, you do get it. You may resist it, or not. He is not unintelligible. He’s really LONG, but he is not unintelligible. Schoenberg is like “No, we’re gonna keep all that whole address, that rather top down, domineering artistic persona. But we’re going to do it with completely different means.” And my feeling is, there’s something deeply dishonest about that. Because that means that if you were ever, looking over the ocean, and you see the sunset and you see a line of ants, for example, I was in Ecuador on a jungle tour. Not a lot of animal life, but the insect life was unbelievable. Someone said, “Oh look here’s that particular colony of ants.” And I promise you Scott, they’re about the size of carpenter ants all carrying bits of leaves. There were maybe 20 of us. The last person way in the back of the line still saw them, all going in a single file, carrying little bits of things, and going up a tree to build this nest. The mystery of that kind of collective intelligence! It’s one of those moments where the evidence of your senses, the evidence of an order which you can apprehend, even if you
can’t necessarily identify (it), which is another way of describing musical theme, is
giving you an indication of something that lies beyond the earthly. That’s my objection
to Schönberg’s thinking. Because any indication that I have had of the existence of the
sublime, has come through the senses that I have. And the idea of him trying to cut off
an audience, an audience of music, and music does this really well, the idea of an order
that you can sense, an argument by which you can be convinced, even if you can’t
identify its terms, that’s the thing that’s the most gorgeous about music. And he says,
“No. If you can hear it, it’s not true.” “Hnngg!” as my mother would say! That’s my
problem. The sounds are pretty. They’re aimless. But they’re pretty. But the book is
toxic.

SM:
It’s a hopeless view, really, isn’t it?

MA:
Well, of course, again, you have to be sympathetic, because where is he coming from?
He’s coming from Germany imploding, between the world wars, blah blah blah. So from
a personal point of view, you have to be very sympathetic.

SM:
And perhaps he was trying to get out from under Wagner’s shadow?

MA:
Sure, of course, they all did. All of Europe was trying to deal with Wagner in some way.
So I mean again, I suppose that is a little harsh. Except that so many people took that
view point uncritically. And they did not put it in the exact historical viewpoint in the
terms that you are putting it. If you look at modernism within the context of German
music and late 19th, early 20th century music, then you get it completely, and you can be quite sympathetic. The problem is, for so many years, people thought that German thought was world thought. The Germans were the great peak in the 18th and 19th centuries. Really, for a long time, German music was world music. But then it wasn’t. It was really sort of time to wake that up. I mean I will argue it was really the French, the Russians, the Americans in the late 19th, early 20th centuries, that gave rise to so much of what we’re doing now. I mean, Stravinsky, the impressionists, I mean a couple of them were really following in the footsteps. I mean, to be fair it was really French harmony and Russian rhythm. And then we came along and did our own thing. We’re doing rather well now. That was another way into the 20th century as opposed to that kind of modernism. And I think it was a more fruitful path.

SM:

In terms of the different genres: songs, symphonic, opera; is one more satisfying to you?

MA:

Oh. Opera. Because it uses every part of my brain. You know, the harp concerto is going up next June, which I will finish. And I’m very much enjoying doing it. But I’m enjoying it from the challenge of “can I compose with sort of one hand tied behind my back?”, as it were, because there’s a limit to how much you can personalize an instrument, without recourse, to making up a kind of story, and planting it. Because one thing I did not want to do is say actually, “Alright, I’m going to do this four scene opera in which the harp is the leading person, and I’ll just take out all the words.” I just thought that’s not…. I’d actually like to make a musical shape that is dramatic in symphonic terms, but is not dramatic to the extent that it is coming off an acting design from which
then I am then removing the text. And, I’m enjoying it, but I don’t know. It’s hard to want to do just that when I don’t feel that all of the dramatic thinking or the verbal and acting thinking comes into play. It generally makes the symphonic thinking better. I don’t feel limited by it when I go to compose. The only thing that one feels limited by is the orchestration… it depends on whether you are doing a concerto too, unless you’re doing a concerto for a trumpet, which can ring out over everybody, you still have to deal with balance problems. I have to make sure I don’t cover the harp in the same way that I don’t cover the mezzo in her lower register. It’s almost like heroin. It’s like once you’ve had an experience where you’re IN opera, a full 2 hours of sets, costumes and the whole deal. There’s such a charge to that. That the idea of sort of going back and doing sort of a 25 minute piece in a program with three other things. I mean, it’s charming, but you’re asking me quite candidly like well, yea, OK. We’re talking again, but I’m my own librettist. Other composers might say, “Oh god, it’s such hell I have to live with the playwright and the leading lady, blah blah blah.” But I’ve had a very happy time in the opera house. Because I know all those problems going in, I’m not a composer who is suddenly bewildered by a director saying, “But I need 8 more bars to change the set.” Or, “This scene doesn’t work,” and the composer says, “Yes, but it is a beautiful number.” And they say “Yeah, but it doesn’t work.” And the composer blinks.

SM:

So, you feel you’re not using all your resources?
MA:

Well, yeah. I think, although it’s…. At the same time it is very interesting because I work so overwhelmingly off of the words, I’m actually loving the idea of saying, “Let’s just, work just with this.” So, on the other hand it’s developing other muscles, which I rather like. But it’s not as intense. Because I do feel like my center line is where sound and acting join. It’s just my fulcrum, as it were. If I were just writing a play, I’d write it the same way. Although I’d feel, oh gosh, it was good to write this, but I can’t set this…. But it could sing like this, well I’ll just do piano, or do songs, you know. But, at the same time, we’ll see. I’ll be very interested to see what happens with the concerto. I’m very proud of these three movements so far. The fourth movement is not quite complete. But, who knows, I mean I may be saying very different things to you next year, “Oh gosh, it’s so pure, just music!” It’s just such a different thing. And wouldn’t it be lovely to have these options? I mean, what I certainly would like at the end of the harp concerto is for people to want something else. I wouldn’t want people to say, “That was great. Go home. You need to go back to like, the singers.”

SM:

You’ve said that you prefer the female voice overall to listen to.

MA:

Oh god, the heat I’ve taken on that line! The baritones who’ve come up to me and said, “Say it ain’t so.”

SM:

Do you prefer, among the female voices, one type over the other? Soprano or mezzo?
MA:

Well, my home base is the mezzo soprano. I’ll tell you why. Because you’ve got the difference in color between a mezzo’s G and a soprano’s B-flat. A mezzo’s peak and a soprano’s peak, whatever that is, to me seems much less, you know, important, than the difference between a mezzo’s chest register, and not having access to that chest register in the soprano voice. You know you get that whole different kind of color in that fourth or so below the (middle) C, and however high she takes it. And then she gets plenty bright when she shifts to her head. And then it’s also better for the delivery of text. Because the higher you get, the closer we get to the peak of the staff, the more you know the purity of vowel becomes a question of slight of ear or negotiation, you know it just gets very difficult to do a short “i” on a high B-flat. You know, you can do it, but it’s, “nnnnggh.” Where you don’t have that problem with the lower voice. And I think it’s just because they tend to be slightly more… lighter, obviously, and because there’s more color in it, I’d rather listen to Suor Angelica than Billy Budd. Billy Budd is a wonderful piece. There just seems to be less variation in color. That said, I think one of the reasons that “Kennst du das land” happens, (and) is sort of the moment for the baritone that I like to think I set up dramatically; I think that is something quite dramatic, after all that treble singing, suddenly, bass clef. Suddenly, like, the cello enters. You know it’s a very funny story; in Costa Mesa, a beautiful baritone sings this piece. And an excellent, excellent mezzo soprano singing Jo. But you know that part, I mean, Jo comes on at 8:05 and she sings high and she sings low and she’s comedy and tragedy and she whinnies like a horse. It’s a tour de force role. And the baritone comes on in the second act. He sings a number in German. He sings it again in English. He has the curtain line and he walks off
immediately. And the audience goes nuts. That happened there. And Jo, affectionately, when the curtain came down, Jo looked at Bhaer and said, “you know some of us have been here since 8 o’clock.” What can you say? I feel bad about that particular remark. But I do think that you can argue that women’s voices are to strings, what men’s voices are to winds or brass. Precisely because it is a little more highly colored timbre. It would be like hearing a lot of oboe all the time. After a certain point, the oboe benefits from rests. So you can hear it again. I just don’t find that in women’s voices. I don’t find my ear tiring of the timbre in a way you can…

SM:
You also have said that opera cannot exist principally as a showcase for vocal technique.

MA:
Right, not principally.

SM:
And that it needs to be more than a coat hanger on which a great performance hangs. That being said, are there people who you would say are models of that style of performance? That are masters of the voice, but also…

MA:
Well, then actually, I was really talking about that more from a writing point of view rather than a repertory point of view. Because that was less a criticism of performers, because these days particularly, we have very…I mean that whole idea of, you know, “If you want me to act, you don’t get my high C,” I mean that’s pretty much vanished throughout current opera. I was really talking about the way opera is produced…Which is the idea that you get this year’s new international mezzo and do Carmen, and somehow
that’s supposed to be news in some way. And it isn’t news, because we know Carmen. Carmen’s a great piece, but it’s not a contemporary piece, I mean enough already. There’s a limit really to how much Carmen can tell us as a theatrical event anymore. And the idea that opera is going to be principally a showcase of past masterpieces, and the only thing that is going to be new is who the performer is, that audience...Well, America was the only place where that audience ever existed. It was a contemporary theatrical form in nineteenth century Italy, and eighteenth century Austria. It was always repertory and then singers thereafter. If you got to be the leading singers, one of the reasons that other people realized that, is that you got to commission people. Do you know? Who am I thinking of? Maria Malabran, and who’s her sister? Pauline’s the mezzo. I think once you became Maria Malabran, then you commissioned. You had things written for you because you are a star. Here, if a big singer consents to do a world premiere, “Oh wow! Hallelujah Jesus!” And so that I think is the mistake. Of course, the problem is now we need the groundswell of writing. We can’t all decide by fiat a hundred years on, after we have done repertory over and over again, now suddenly we’re going to become a contemporary theater...“Well now all the composers we’ve ignored for a hundred years, well, appear! With complete skills, appear knowing exactly how to write for the opera house, write us a bunch of pieces so that we can change the paradigm.” Well, no. Although it’s changing pretty quickly. And yet there are so many new operas happening. Conversely though, I mean this goes back to one of the things I tell composers, is that, when I say it cannot be principally a showcase for vocal performances, it needs to be at least as much a vehicle for vocal performance as it is to make dramatic points. And the thing I always come back to is the period in which the star singers would show up and if
the material that had been written for them for that particular opera was not sufficiently showy, they threw it out, and “Bring me something from my trunk!” It would be lovely if it had something to do with what was going on onstage, but if it didn’t, it really didn’t matter. Because it was mostly about the trills. And Verdi, it DID matter to Verdi. And so, the deal that he struck…As you know in that period, the *aria* and the *cabaletta*, you know this little thing and then…That was the big display piece. And his deal was, “Okay, I get it. I get that you have a following and they want to hear you do your big swell legato and all of your coloratura. I understand that completely. I’m going to make you a deal. I’m going to write you the slowest slow and the fastest fast. It will be a display piece of such fire and virtuosity that it will leave everything else in your trunk…it will turn to ash. Here’s the bad news. You’ve got to sing every note. And you gotta act it, because it’s going to be a piece of playwriting.” I have no problem whatsoever with the idea of vocal display. I love vocal display, too. But, you’ve got to sing what is written. It’s not going to be, “And now here I am at 9:30, throwing off my character and essentially doing a Vegas floor show.” And composers don’t always know that. Composers feel like, you know, I’m just writing the orchestral aspects, and the vocal line will just hang there. Which, among other things, makes the piece less characterized because you follow the voice. From a vocal point of view, an opera is a *concerto* with 11 soloists, as well as a play that you sing. But you want to make vocal paragraphs that not only display the singer’s charisma, so you can hook the audience to follow him. The case in point that I try to do, in *Lysistrata*, “You are not my own,” that big tantrum *cabaletta*, “Others stand around and watch you leave…and another and another and another,” high C and all that. Well if you look at that as a piece of dramatic writing, she’s not
particularly enchanting. At that point she’s saying, “You’re not being what I want and so the hell with you.” Now she’s frustrated, and she’s also blinkered. I mean she’s not a demon from hell, but this is a woman that at this point is pretty limited in her world view. And she’s furious. On the other hand, at the end of that number, if you know nothing else, you know she can sing. And so that one of the things I try to do there, is that even as the number is not particularly attractive, I want to get you interested in her musically so you’ll follow her as she goes through whatever she goes through, so that when she comes to “I am not my own,” which is the same music completely transformed, you’ll get sort of an aural trace of here’s the same moment but now just from a different point of view. That’s where vocal display is a tool of the playwright. The cabaletta in Act I develops into the aria of Act 2 and from my point of view, it’s a variation form that is making a dramatic point. But from a vocal point of view it’s how a cabaletta evolves into an aria and the charismatic gestures in both pieces.

There’s the pianissimo A at the end of it, and all that fire up front. It presents Emily (Pulley) but it also presents her as a character. If you think about it enough, there doesn’t have to be a conflict. I love the idea, and I would love it if this piece is thought of as a coat hanger for vocal performance. Because look at “Sempre libera” now. At the time that show was so controversial that they made him backdate it. That was going to be a contemporary piece and they said, “You are not putting a 19th century Italian courtesan on a 19th century Italian stage. You’re just not. So put her in France, put her in Spain, I don’t care what you do, but change it.” Does that matter now? No, the only question now is, “Did she take the high E flat? Well, what’s her name didn’t take it, but Sutherland took it.” Fine. Great. If 50 years from now, Little Women is still hanging around, and
no one is thinking of it as saying anything about how you deal with changes in a human
being… instead, “Oh God, is she doing that on purpose? She won’t take the low F’s.
She’ll take the ossia high B and I’ll make a bet she won’t take a low F” …Fine. Great.
At that point we’ll know that Little Women has ceased to mean anything to anyone at all.
As a theatrical experience it will be a played card, but wouldn’t it be lovely if it remains a
vehicle for vocal display? But at that time I’ll be dead. And that really is the life cycle of
operas. And I don’t think Carmen disturbs anybody in particular. But look at all those
great tunes. I don’t resent that. I just resent that being most of what we do. Great, bring
back Carmen. There is one…. Mary Jane Phillips Matz’ biography of Verdi, I love this
detail…the same season that La Traviata opened there were one or two other pieces of
his. There were four or six operas by recent contemporary-time composers, and the big
news was that they had dusted off this archaic novelty. It was going to be heard for the
first time in a long time. It was Norma, which was 40 years old. That was like “the old
piece”… exhumed Norma. If we do Die Tote Stadt, that’s considered our new piece
from 1930. That’s how things have changed. So that is really what I meant here. There
are any number of lovely singers now. I’m crazy about the people that I’ve worked with.
I mean Chad (Shelton) is brilliant, and of course Lauren Flanigan…definitive
singer/actress, and Joyce DiDonato apparently is doing brilliantly of late. I just got her
Hercules videos. I heard the performances just ate the world. But there are a lot of really
good singing actors out there.

SM:
Do you feel now that you are so established because of the two operas especially, in the
operatic world, do you feel pressured at all by that? I know you’re working on Dracula.
How do you keep from becoming self conscious when so much is being written and said about your work? Or as a former critic, does that…

**MA:**

That helps, having done it from that side. A couple of things have helped. One is that it happened relatively late in my life. I was over 30 when all this went on, so I have a feeling that if it had happened in my 20’s, the risk of staggering egomania would’ve been really high. I would have been quite intolerable. Or blocked. But at the time that it happened, I really didn’t know. I’d kind of made peace with the possibility that nothing would really ever happen in my career. And that doing music was still worth doing even if didn’t happen on the sort of national scale that I had always dreamed of. I had been blocked as an artist for a while. It is a long involved story. But the point was that I had gotten a very sort of fast start as a kid...and then was blocked for seven years. By the time I got through it, I really didn’t know what was going to happen. There was a period in which I thought, if it never leads to anything really major, is it still worth doing? And I said, “Sure.” And ironically, about a year and a half later, I had something, you know. *Little Women* happened. So it almost felt like, um, it didn’t feel so much like the culmination of a dream, although that is exactly what it was. As you give up the idea of that and all of a sudden, it comes to you. I felt a strange…I felt enormous gratitude, but it was a strange disconnect for me. I’ll tell you the thing that has been the greatest gift of that whole experience. Which was that it took away the nagging question that we all have: if you ever have the opportunity to do something on a major scale…would you make something of it? Because particularly for a writer, I mean people can say that you are talented or we’re going to do your stuff, but you never really know...until you know.
And the opening night of *Little Women*, even before the reviews came out or all of that, but when it was what I thought it would be; all the singers were able to do it at full strength, and a full production, and all of that. It took away the nagging fear that if I thought I was talented, I might be delusional. And then all these fabulous things happened to it after that. Part of it is that as a writer, you’re not really competing with anybody, by definition, because you’re all doing different things.

SM:

Then how do you view criticism? I mean not as a critic, but now, you’ve been one, but obviously there have been thousands of reviews of your work. Do you read them?

MA:

Oh yeah. Partly it’s been made rather easier by the fact that I’ve generally been treated very well. But partly cause I’m kind of a critical thinker to begin with. And having done it, you know, there’s not a lot of mystery about the profession of criticism. I kind of read them and I evaluate the criticism as a critic, you know. I’ve had bad reviews that have been well written, or negative reviews that were well written, and I’ve had good reviews that were not terribly intelligent, but they were positive. Stephen Sondheim said to me once, “To succeed in this little corner of the culture, is to have a lifetime of mixed reviews.” Which is just the truth of it. In Verdi’s time the smart money was on Meyerbeer. Verdi was considered, “Well, he can certainly hold the stage, even though …there was not a whole lot going on.” This goes back. Everybody got bad reviews. I presume they got good reviews too. But in the end, Mozart was too difficult. Brahms was too conservative. You know, blah blah blah blah blah. *Butterfly* flopped. *Carmen* flopped. *Porgy and Bess* was scoffed at. My feeling is, did they come? Did it run?
Here’s my old journalist hat…The Times review of Lysistrata, at the premiere, not the New York review, it was on the front page of the arts section above the fold, big photo. I thought, “Great. This tree did not fall in the forest and make no sound.” And past that, to be in the room, to be in the conversation, that’s what you want as an artist. You want to take part in the cultural conversation of your time. You want to add something. And if you can do that, well there are always going to be people who hate it, and always going to be people who love it. So it would be nice to know if they understand it more than they don’t. And again, I’ve largely been fortunate in that way.

SM:

As an artist, and I think this is true for performers as well, I’ve struggled with it too.

MA:

See for performers, I can imagine it would be harder, because it’s your body out there. I mean, I’ve written this thing.

SM:

Part of the crisis for performers too, is who do I believe? My teacher, the person who is directing me in this, the coach? You get mixed messages, and then you think you’re on track and you get a bad review or something.

MA:

Right.

SM:

But for you, that’s not a factor?
MA:

Well, that’s one of the things, hmmm. It’s one of the reasons that I send preliminary drafts of things to every smart person who will take my calls. Because then it takes away the feeling of being in a vacuum. And of course with an opera, at all points along the way people are weighing in. David Gockley, who has been my principal producer, is very smart and very critical with an outline. If he’s got a question, he’ll ask it. He won’t necessarily insist that you agree with his idea of the answer, if he indeed has one, he just needs to know that you have an answer. It’s a lovely balance of being critical to the point of view that he wants to make sure that he knows that you know that it will work. But he doesn’t try to write the piece for you. It’s lovely. John (Corigliano), while not being a writer, is a brilliant reader of writing for structure. The libretto of Lysistrata, if you read it without the music, can actually seem a lot lighter in tone than it ends up being. Because it’s so rhymed and there’s a fair amount of comedy in it, you see a certain kind of glittery verbal form, and you think it’s going to be operetta. When I sent the libretto around without the score, there hadn’t been music written yet; if anyone didn’t get it, they didn’t get it in that way. They said, “It seems so light in the first act, then it goes someplace else.” I’d say, “Okay, now trust me on this because, a) once you put the acoustic voice under this, a certain sparkle is going to wear off, number 1, because there’s an earnestness about that timbre that is going to keep it from sounding like operetta. b) Wait ‘til you hear the music.”

SM:

Right, the mirror, the mirror effect keeps it from going someplace else.
MA:

The opening number, you know, “Peace Now,” which is really pretty hell-for-leather musically; but if you read just a line like “We’re ‘reft of our own, we’re left alone, gracious but there’s no one to embrace us,” it’d be quite arched and languid, except that you get that (sound effect) “clttltlttcktlttr” under it, and that’s when you get the sense that they are trying to be light about something that is really driving them nuts. But that was a moment where the language is doing one level and the music is doing something else. But John got it. John read it. He was the only person who got to the end of the show and cried. You know…felt where that was going. So he’s very smart. And you know there are directors and other writers and all that guild. Generally, what I do is send it around and say, “Now tell me the story that you think I have told.” And then once you get to music, at that point most of the criticism is more practical than anything else. I’m happy to report at this point I don’t get a lot of that either. I do seem to know a little of what I’m doing at this point. So, yeah, who do I listen to? With this piece, Lysistrata, I mean, there was a much wider range of response. They were largely positive. There were a couple of swats. There were a handful of raves. But the interesting thing is that the pieces in the middle which were qualified positive all thought that, “Well, there’s something that doesn’t quite work”, but nobody could agree on what it was. There were people who said, “Well the comedy works, but the serious stuff is too heavy.” There were people who said “The heavy stuff was really substantial, but the comic stuff is too arched. The show is great, the production is bad. The production is real good, the show…eh. The score is overwritten. The score is underwritten.” THAT was funny. We got two reviews in one day. “The score was so grotesquely overwritten I just wanted to
“rake away half the notes.” The same day, somebody said “the score is so underwritten that it felt like there was a string quartet in the pit.” I thought, well, OK. It was the blind man and the elephant! At that point, that bugs me. Not to be grandiose, but Sweeney Todd got those reviews. Giovanni got those reviews. Cosi still gets those reviews. Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy? What is it? And that, to me, means that you’ve given them a lot to chew on. And they’re trying to put it together. It’s hard to resent that. Because you feel, OK, you’ve stirred up something.

SM:

People are thinking.

MA:

Right. Precisely. Nothing makes me happier than the idea of people going down the aisle arguing about it. Cause I enjoy doing that. I enjoy leaving the theater and thinking.

SM:

Then you know you contributed something that doesn’t fit into any one box.

MA:

RIGHT! Right! Right.

SM:

And speaking of fitting into boxes, if you were doing a guest lecture at a university to maybe a theory class or a composition class, how would you describe your harmonic language? We’ve talked a little about this already and we’ve talked in terms of the way theory should be taught. Do you think about having a harmonic language? Or are the sounds a part of the dramatic process…since you have really a two part process, the musical and the dramatic? You talk about writing the libretto, and when that’s written
you really have the first draft of the score already. Are you thinking in terms of
resources, too?

MA:

It’s kind of yes, and yes. By which I mean, that I’ve come to note, the more I write…. I
do find myself drawn to certain kinds of harmony more than not. It’s kind of a French
harmonic ear, by which I mean it seems to…. I hear a lot of implied or explicit multi-
tonality. I’m doing sort of poly-triads. I did a bit of that in Little Women; I did a whole
lot of it here. It does seem to be a very fruitful matrix to me. That, and I seem to be
doing a lot with the whole tone scale of late. I know not why. It just seems to be
showing up. This goes into the difference between style and technique, which John
(Corigliano) was very eloquent on. I’ll go to quote him, because I can’t think of a better
way of doing it. He calls it…, “style is the unconscious series of choices the composer
makes that defines what he does, as opposed to the conscious choices which he defines as
techniques.” And that goes to your second question about whether it comes from a
dramatic viewpoint. For example, the dodecaphonic recitative in Little Women was a
very conscious choice to solve a formal problem. It was “How do I neutralize this
recitative so that when E major comes in, it really rings?” And then that led to coming
up with a row that actually had enough melodic content so that it could segue into the
tonal stuff without a huge jolt. So that horn solo, (sings) “dee da dee da deee, dee da
dee”…that’s the row in the prologue. And all the chords are built on that. So that was a
technique. I didn’t suddenly feel 12-tone, it’s too gridded. And it isn’t very strict; I mean
sometimes I sort of cheat the row. Because the point was not to do this grid. The point
was to chromaticize that so that F major could light up aurally when it came in.
Lysistrata was done more rhythmically. The formal organization of it was a technique. Using simple triads is a technique. Using a row is a technique. On the other hand, the fact that a lot of these…I know for example, that I wanted very much the harmonies of “I am not my own” to seem bone simple as compared to something rather denser, more fugitive than “You are not my own.” I wanted you to really feel a winnowing down to something quite pure and triadic there. With that said, I do tend to, these days, to verge…It’s more chromatic than not.

SM:

Would you say it’s more thematic, than harmonic?

MA:

Yes! Yes. The thing that you lead with is theme. To me, harmony, the aural illusion that I want when I write opera, is that the vocal line is generating everything you hear around it. The meaning of the vocal line, what ever that singer is singing, is generating the harmony, the texture, the orchestration, the rhythm, the tempo, all of it. It’s all coming from that, rather than it coming from the orchestra, and the singer sort of a suspended free obbligato on top of it. Because then you don’t have an opera. You have a symphony with sort of a real time program note.

SM:

As an example in the Garland cycle, I’ve been trying to do some analysis of it for this paper. In the opening overture for the piano after the humming section, I’ve been going back and forth with a couple of colleagues about whether we’re hearing F major or D minor, because of the D pedal. I know there’s a D in the bass, and I hear minor, but
friend said, “no, there’s F major because”… and I said, “well maybe it doesn’t matter. The effect and the movement…”

MA:

But the tone, the opening sonority is clearly minor. I mean you modulate to the major pretty clearly. Again, not that it matters, but I would vote minor with sort of a lift. See now that level is…here’s a …there is something… I tend to hear cadence more than key area. I tend to think cadentically more than “Oh I have to get back to, you know, G.” In Lysistrata, actually, things tend to begin and end in the same key, but that simply is to feel more organized, because the middle goes everywhere. Whereas “Things change,” for example, you really should hear. “Things change” is quite fugitive harmonically. You get this kind of E-ish opening, and then you’re immediately into G, and then it’s D minor or something. But the whole point of that, because of the moment, was to get a sense of key interlocking into key. And to have all these harmonic vistas openings, that’s what the song is about. And one of the reasons that, in “Perfect as we are,” you keep coming back to F…, whenever you hear “Perfect as we are,” it is in the tonic. It’s what she’s trying to do in those strophes... she’s trying to keep that F major there. And then in the scherzo she goes all over the place. Again that sounds rather schematic, but I think you can hear that. If you keep coming back to the same pitches, you’ll hear it. If you do the same interval, but on another pitch level, you can hear that, too. Which is what happens in “Things change.” It starts and you go G #, D#, A. And then B, F#, C. And you hear it move. So, you have an idea that gives you a sound. You have a sound that gives you an idea. It’s a question of when all those things line up, then you know what you’re doing. And I guess a lot of my…I guess I don’t hear harmony per se, up front
when I’m sketching, but I hear relative texture. So, you know, what you’re hearing is very similar, very pure, very confessional, for “I am not my own,” you get to sketching it out and it turns out to be pretty pure G major. Or conflicted and low, you find yourself with two or three triads going on at the same time. But it’s not a question of “Now I’m doing my tonal work, and now I’m doing my bi-tonal work.” In a certain way, you are always writing by ear. Everything you learn is to educate your ear.

SM:

And so, orchestration. Does that come in from the beginning, or later? I mean in hearing this, did you hear the difference (between Little Women and Lysistrata)? For instance, you use the saxophone beautifully in Lysistrata. Did you know that up front?

MA:

Well, that is part of your sketching as well. With both of those shows, it was going to be a small orchestra. So that’s part of your practicality. You just need to know, “How am I going to get this into those players?” But the other thing, is “What’s the basic color of the show? What’s your palette?” And with Lysistrata, one thing I didn’t want…. It goes back to diction, the equivalent of a contemporary piece with Greek poetry inflecting. I wanted a contemporary orchestra with a kind of, sort of primitive but sophisticated sound at the same time, that didn’t sound too hot house. Sounded kind of robust and it sounded like the language, but I didn’t want to do ethnic Greek, you know, bouzouki, accented 7-8, all those Greek folk song tropes, because that’s not what the show is. And it bores me. And I was just sort of listening around, and where this orchestra came from, was actually out of some of the contemporary Mexican composers. Who, particularly Gabriella Ortiz, did a percussion concerto, of very similar orchestration. She had an oboe and a
saxophone; it was a percussion *concerto*, with extended players, like 6 players, with a lot of low marimba. And I just thought, there’s something about the idea of the saxophone in a largely chamber context, and the low marimba giving me a kind of key. On the one hand a kind of cool, sophisticated sound, but also has a kind of percussive, vivid, physical sound. I thought that to me, you want something sophisticated and something sexual at the same time.

**SM:**

You also have the ancient and the modern.

**MA:**

Right! There was something kind of archaic and yet something very sophisticated about marimba. Particularly the lower registers. And I thought this would also be my keyboard. So, there are certain things that occurred to me that I didn’t want before it occurred to me that I did want them. I didn’t want any piano. I didn’t want anything electronic. And I didn’t want the oboe. Because the oboe to me sounds a little too perfumed, a little too northern, you know. I wanted the southern sound. And that was really quite intuitive. I thought if it is essentially a chamber *timbre*, I know I’m going to need my high trumpet for some of my god music. So I started hearing that. And then the saxophone and the marimba, and then the rest of the…. And I thought that’s going to give me those colors. Because I’d already had, for example, the 5/4 of the love duet. And I wanted that to be almost a *bolero*. And the idea of the marimba and the timpani doing that (rhythmic) “dun ka di ki ka dun.” That moment, I thought…that’ll be lovely. Then if I could have the sax along with the other things. The clarinet is quite malleable. The *timbre* of the flute, the horn … all those other instruments you can get a lot of
character out of them. The oboe always shows up as the oboe. And it was the wrong character! So I thought, no, not that. So when the saxophone idea, particularly when it occurred to me that I could double the alto and baritone, because I love the baritone saxophone, it gives me a kind of…. With that and the marimba on Lampito’s entrance with the ponticello celli, I get this sort of low Aztec-like buzz. And oh, this is my orchestration.

SM:

Again, what I’m hearing…. This confirms what I thought I was hearing, and what the conductor friend of mine commented on as well, that the personalities of the instruments come out in your orchestrations. He said, “You know the brilliant thing about this orchestration?” we didn’t have the score, we were just listening to Lysistrata, and he said, “You know the brilliant thing about this is just from the orchestration alone you get a sense of the ancient, but that it is going to be told in modern terms. We’re updating this but we’re going to be two places at once.” And it is. That’s what I’m hearing. The oboe does, personality wise, have a more formal sound and doesn’t really belong.

MA:

I mean for me… Some other artist might have been able to do something quite different and it would have been effective. But I cringed, you know. And you just kind of…. You want the thing to work from every conceivable point of view. If you didn’t understand the language, you would understand it simply from the vocal writing and the orchestral color. Even as you know that your libretto is going to do whatever, and the singers and all of those things. I think of any given element, it’s very useful to think, if this were the
only element that were telling the story, how could you get what you’re now getting into
the text of the duet, how can you get it into this choice of instrumentation?
It’s just a useful exercise. The more specific answers you find to those questions, from
an individual point of view, the more you find that they all work together. And then it
becomes fun. Because you feel that it’s all coordinated.

SM:
Does the short-long rhythm…. Is that a favorite of yours?

MA:
Oh the…. I…. Funny that you should mention that.

SM:
You know, the (short-long “Scottish snap” rhythm) ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

MA:
You know that seems to…. I’m a little ambivalent about this being right on the edge of
becoming a mannerism. It is showing up a lot. I had forgotten that it had figured so
prominently in the overture to Garland. Because it’s in the god music,

SM:
“e-ver, e-ver”

MA:
Yes, that. And where is it in Little Women? Oh, “e-ver, e-ver”, you just said that. It’s in
the parents’ duet. This is what I would call a difference between style and technique. I
did not choose that. But it felt right.

SM:
It is right.
MA:

This is where… John (Corigliano) has a very funny story about this. There was an identical figure in Fantasia on an Ostinato and Etude Fantasy, two big piano pieces. One was drawn from the ostinato of Beethoven’s seventh. And the other was drawn from…. It’s a big 5 movement piece, but it’s all drawn from certain pianist’s techniques; 5ths and 3rds, melody, the left hand alone, all of that. And a composer colleague of his pointed out the identical phrase in both pieces, and John looked and blinked. Because, the one had been derived from a completely different process from the other, and yet it was the same music. Of course now that I mention this I feel very self-conscious about using it. I had no idea. Because one thing you do is…. If on the one hand there’s style and technique, on the other is style and mannerism. You don’t want to use a device because you use a device. It is a useful exercise for a composer to say, OK, if this is a moment that you use a dotted rhythm, is there any other way? Any other thing that you would use rather than this Scottish snap that you use over and over again? At the end of which, if there’s nothing better, then I’ll use the Scottish snap. The risk of that is that it becomes a habit in a bad sense.

SM:

Yea, but, in the case of Garland, for fun, once we took it out (in rehearsal, as an experiment). I said, “what would it be like if it were just (even eighth notes) daah-da, daah-da, instead of (short-long) da-dumm, ba-dumm?” It’s wrong that way.

MA:

Oh yes. I would take the figure out and just do it in halves.
SM:

And I said, “I don’t know, I can’t say what it is, but there’s something about the (short-long) bee-dumm, ba-dumm that is just right.”

MA:

It’s very formal.

SM:

But it’s also, it’s a little…there’s a tension in that.

MA:

Right.

SM:

You feel, right away, just because of that rhythm, I think, you feel it’s not quite comfortable. There’s something being dealt with.

MA:

Yeah. Although it works for exuberance in the parent’s duet in Little Women. And it works, I think as a kind of regality in the god music in Lysistrata. Yes, I would argue that it really should feel like cortege in Garland, and yet it is not really used in those other ways. And arguably, it’s in the, oh gosh, now I’m hearing it everywhere, it’s in the first act finale in Lysistrata, the ga-da, ga-da, ga-da, it’s in the scherzo of … oh Christmas! Ahhh! It’s everywhere. I use one rhythm! No, it’s in “Perfect as we are,” right? In the scherzo of (runs through some lines and rhythms…) yeah, it’s everywhere. But also, it’s a useful thing. In Lysistrata, in the “let him cry from the depths of his, da-da, da-da, da-da, di, da, da.” Oh, well. File under mannerism. But the reason I’m sort of more
encouraged by this is that it is a pretty versatile technique, actually. It’s not like blocked into one emotional color. That said; I’ll still try to watch myself.

SM:
When you said the acting comes first, and knowing how you’ll play the scene, etcetera. When you’re doing something then, say an art song. Since you don’t have staging to consider, do you start with something else? Or is there still a play going on inside your compositional process?

MA:
I don’t really mean staging, I mean intention. What are you doing with the line? I mean it’s a little of what we were talking about last night in the intro to Garland. “Is heaven a physician?” you shorten the end of the phrase because you’re asking that question instead of the rather blunter question that you want to ask, you know. I mean the whole dramatic set up of that poem is that you’re asking delicate, polite questions instead of questions that you really want to ask, which is “Why does this person have to die? Why am I being reft like this?” Well, you’re not going to ask that question. But you’re going to instead question the conventional wisdom of comfort. You say, “Alright I understand that this person had to die, on the other hand, this is about saying, heaven can heal. Well then why, how meaningful is that if the person is going to die anyway because, you know, posthumous medicine doesn’t exist.” So the tension there, the intension is, “I’m going to ask this other question and try to convince you that that is the only question I’m asking.” But that doesn’t have anything to do with staging. You can do that singing in a chair. It just gives the actor something to do with the musical material and the setting, and something to do with the relationship of vocal line and orchestral setting. So that there is
an intention to it. And the same thing with the *scherzo*. This kind of savage, this savage detailing of all these details as if you’re taking formal delight in the elegant process of dying, where, of course, it’s horrifying and rageous at the moment. So, you’re using the formality of the vocal line to almost keep the rage of the orchestral paragraph at bay. So, it’s still a dramatic conception but it’s not a drama. It’s not like the audience is going to get a story out of that, but they’re going to get a character out of that. They’re going to get an emotional process out of that. And that, to me, is the point of overlap between art song and drama. There’s always some kind of acting going on, but in the art song the acting is this sort of narrative, whereas in opera it’s got to be both. It’s got to tell a narrative that you understand and also tell the parallel story of the character developing within that narrative. So there’s the over plot in *Lysistrata* of the women’s sex strike and there’s the character plot of Lysia realizing that she has to realize that she is part of a community and that sometimes her needs are not all there is. That’s her character plot, and to a certain extent that is also the point of the show. But the over plot is that a woman’s love is not available. The art song doesn’t necessarily have that. You have the general. The plot of *Garland* is, "How do you deal with loss?" Which isn’t very specific, but it’s enough of a plot that you can use as a singing actor.

**SM:**

Dickinson wrote a lot of poems about death. How did you come up with those four out of the 1700 or so poems that she wrote? Was this a response to something?

**MA:**

Well, one of the things that struck me: Camille Paglia had written an essay on Dickinson, in *Sexual Personae* at the time, too. The book is really inspired. It’s really different
reading. She said you should look at her for her savage humor as well as her “Oh, the butterfly, oh, the bee” poems that we all know and go “mmm.” I mean, it’s a lot more sophisticated than a lot of people read her. And it was in that that some of these poems really struck me, leapt out at me. So I can’t say, other than the richness of them, the fact they were unusually good, to me, and they had that interesting something missing. That I thought, I can add something here. Something to either add or to develop that is implicit in this language. So the music wouldn’t be redundant. There is such a thing as a portrait that is so perfect that it really doesn’t need anything. Tom Ades came into a certain amount of heat, you know, he did an opera on The Tempest for Covent Garden a couple of years ago. Apparently he had a librettist who took the language and really pared it down. Took the Shakespeare and did a kind of Shakespeare-light. And people sort of blinked on the assumption that “Why on earth are you setting Shakespeare?” I don’t know if that was done well or badly, but I kind of get it. Because Shakespeare himself, because the language is so dense, and frequently so brilliant, there is a feeling of, “And I am adding what to this exactly?” But of course, you listen to A Midsummer’s Night Dream, which is genius, and say, “there’s room if you’re Britten.”

SM:

I’m not familiar with Late Victorians, but is the music similar?

MA:

The music is similar, but it’s invented in a big symphonic argument. Because there’s the singing voice, there’s the speaking voice. The other element of Late Victorians is by Richard Rodriguez that appeared in his memoirs. And there’s a movement that is
missing from this that is actually a setting of Rodriguez that goes back and forth. So these are rather like little pools within the whole.

**SM:**

I’ve read the libretto.

**MA:**

It’s beautiful.

**SM:**

Yes it is. Has it been recorded?

**MA:**

That, I believe, is going to be recorded, knock on wood, this coming May. That’ll be the first recording of it. It’ll be the full thing with narration and what not. I’m able to advise that. Yeah, it worked rather differently. It was almost a dialogue between Richard and Ms. Dickinson. The texture is rather different. But here it’s its own shape.

**SM:**

And it’s orchestrated?

**MA:**

Right.

**SM:**

Is there anything else that I haven’t touched on that you would like to share about Garland or the creative process having to do with it?

You said that at one point in your career, maybe a transitional time, you thought of yourself as a “songwriter with certain compositional skills.” Is there a specific time or moment when you felt like, OK, I’m no longer…
MA:

Oh the premiere of Late Victorians. I mean truly, even through my composition degree, and I was doing all the things that composers do, and actually loved my counterpoint and my orchestration and all that. I guess coming to it as late as I have, I thought, well surely if I were a composer, I would have written my first piano concerto when I was ten. So really it was insecurity or something.

SM:

Was that part of the block that you overcame?

MA:

No. That was something quite else, my critical sense got so…. Partly it was that as a kid I had been so fast at things that when it came time in my development that I actually had to work at something…And if the first draft was not perfect, you know…I was so not set up for that second logically, that I thought well, either all these people are wrong, or I’m not a complete fraud. I had never had to persist at anything, truly, until I was 20 years old. And it just totally threw me. I left the degree, a huge deal.

SM:

So it was self-criticism.

MA:

Oh. Yes. I was doing very beautifully in school. I just thought that if the scene was not perfect on its first draft….

SM:

You failed….
MA:

Yes. I just had no mechanism for it. Because I had been this prodigy kid.

Anyway, so I got through that.

SM:

Do you mind me asking you? What clicked that got you through that?

MA:

Actually I was working in the church one evening. I was in therapy for years and I was working in the community…. I don’t know if you know the…. It was kind of a weird isotope, kind of a Midwestern science of minding thing. But the minister was quite maddeningly Socratic. It was wonderfully mixed; black and white, gay and straight, young and old. There were socialites from Capitol Hill, and people just released from jail, but the one thing they all had in common was that something in their lives was not working. They were in 12 step programs, or they were divorced, or something and they were trying to put together a different viewpoint, a different mind set to make progress in their lives, to break out. And certainly at that point it was a just a habit of mine, thinking that I could not…. That I would not be able to write a good piece because I could not bring myself to risk writing that piece. So we were all working on the same things at the same time and the lovely thing about that community was that, it was the language that was used to describe the congregants was “students of truth.” So it was religious, but it was not dogmatic. It came principally from a Judeo-Christian standpoint, but there were Buddhist texts and other texts, and sometimes the choir would do a little Duruflé, and they’d do Broadway. On its worst day it’d be something between a self help meeting and a high school musical. I’m being critically gauche. And on its best day, you got this
incredibly eclectic synchronistic, creative way of trying to do, to make a better life. And it was a lovely couple of years there. And it was during that time that I started first writing for that choir. I began to say, “I’ll write my first pieces. It’d be lovely if they were good, but the important thing is that I finish something.” I was doing that, then I started my degree, and that was the whole period when I started to unblock.

SM:

Your music degree.

MA:

Right. And the weird thing during that was that I started meeting concert musicians who really believed in me as a concert musician, when I didn’t. I was just trying to not shoot myself in the foot at every opportunity. But it was during the degree that I met members of the orchestra, working singers, and they started commissioning songs. Then I did this chamber piece. Late Victorians was an orchestral commission for this conductor who had offered me that fully a year before, and I had thought that she was being polite. Surely she can’t actually think I’m a composer. I mean she’s heard my music, yes, I’ve done this chamber piece and all that, but she’s in the national symphony, she plays Mahler, surely she can see the difference. It was really Sylvia, who will be recording it, it was Sylvia who commissioned that and it was after that piece went up that something turned in my head and said, “Look. As unlikely as this may seem, a) I suppose it may be entirely possible to learn these skills even though you have not started composing again. And the reality is that you do think in these terms. Once you get past the block in your head that says “Oh, the composer is this thing, and you are not that thing, because you didn’t grow up being that thing. Once you get that out of your head,
the reality is you live here. You really do. You wrote a symphony. You just heard it.”

It was really that experience and I thought that it, to tell the truth about it, it was one of those moments where you feel like you may think of yourself in one limited way. And I thought of myself as a failed songwriter period. And at that point, I kind of, whatever force there is, said, “No, actually, think broader.”

SM:

And you were able to take the self judgment out of it then? To do it, is that right?

MA:

Little by little, by little by little. And you want to criticize your own material, but you don’t want to block yourself so completely. It’s balance, you know. You don’t want to be one of those folks who think that every note they write is golden, it can’t be improved. Because, that leads to another kind of problem. But you also don’t want to squeeze the artery so much that nothing gets through. So that has been a continual challenge for me. How do you keep those two things in balance? So there are moments that you say, I mean, what’s been very useful as both composer and librettist, is saying, “OK I’m just going to write something like this, I’m not writing this exactly, but I need something for this music that has this kind of aspect to it.” And that gets past your internal sensor in order to get something onto the page. Then once you have something out onto the page, and it’s outside, then you can play with it. And very frequently it doesn’t need as much tweaking as you think it does. Maybe one change. But it’s very useful not to say, I’m writing this scene.” Then my perfectionism gets involved and it gets tricky. So the phrase, “something like this, not this exactly, but something like this,” has been very helpful to kind of get past and through it.
SM:
Actually that’s helpful to me. This isn’t an actual part of the formal interview if…

MA:
No, no, no.

SM:
After my mom died I went into a horrible depression. That’s one of the reasons that I didn’t get to these songs. I couldn’t really sing.

MA:
Oh God Scott, I don’t blame you.

SM:
And I really couldn’t get out of it. And it kind of went into this thing that you’re talking about where I felt like …you made an analogy which really hit home with me… you said that you were afraid of trying to compose a good piece…

MA:
But I couldn’t compose a good piece because I wasn’t willing to compose a bad piece.

SM:
That’s how I was feeling for a while.

MA:
I’m not going to sing any B-flat at all because it isn’t going to be pretty. On the other hand, if you don’t get a certain amount of very ugly B-flats out you’ll never learn to sing really beautiful B-flats. It’s just non-negotiable.
SM:
And I’m not sure what triggered that. I can think back to my younger days when I was so naïve that, now in hindsight it was totally a benefit.

MA:
Sure. That can be a great blessing. And in adulthood you have to recreate that. But you have to be willing. I was taking ballet for a while, don’t laugh, at this dance studio down the block, because I had always loved it. And I was simply taking it for fitness. Two things that happened… I actually would love to have it, schedule it, again this fall. But there were two things happening. One was that I just loved the process of it. Here you are making music without sound in 3 dimensions with gross muscle groups. It’s not like playing an instrument, it’s not like singing. But you are doing something musical. I’ve been mistaken for a dancer all my life for some reason, I don’t know why. So I wonder, had I started earlier if that might not have happened? The reality is now, going in, I am absolutely the slowest kid in the class. I am not coming to that with any strength at all. There’s something wonderfully freeing in that, you know. About coming in and being a beginner. And saying, “Yep, I don’t know anything about this.” Particularly as you get…. Because I do feel like I know something about what I’m doing now, as a composer and librettist, and that’s terrific, but it’s hard to recreate the feeling of I’m going to, I’m starting from scratch, coming from nothing. It’s one of the reasons why it’s kind of lovely to have done Lysistrata after Little Women. Because very little of Little Women helped with Lysistrata, it’s a very different show. And Dracula is going to be a completely different other thing. And one of the things that the differences among those three projects have given me is the idea that the fear, but also the excitement of saying, “I
have NNOOoo idea how I’m going to come up with the appropriate tone for this libretto, ‘cause it doesn’t have a lot to do with either of these other pieces. There is something that the Buddhists call beginners mind. It’s terrifying, but it’s also a very open place. It’s also a very humble place. And it’s a place to be very open to possibility. And a place where you get off your strength, you get off your sense of who you are as a person, and you let something else come in. Because the reality is that you always are going to be who you are, whether you like it or not. And it doesn’t do a whole lot of good to underline it. What you want to do is to get it to expand who you are. You want to make contact with who you’re not, what you don’t know, what you can’t do. And in the attempting to, the learning to do, that you learn other things.

SM:
That’s something that’s very important to remember in the arts, isn’t it?

MA:
It’s also why people come and hear us. It’s a little about what we were talking about with the upper register. I mean you want to see somebody, in process, vulnerable, working. The more technically gleaming it becomes, there’s a way in which it becomes a little less personable. And yet, but, it’s always balanced. One of the lines in the play Master Class, Terrence McNally wrote about Marie Callas…. And she said a line to her student, “It’s not a B-flat. It’s a scream of pain.” Well the reality is, if it’s the fifth of an E-flat major triad, it also needs to be a B-flat. But the point is, you need both. You need the technique so that it’s honoring a certain form because form can tell a certain amount of the truth. But, not all of it. So if B-flat is mastery, scream of pain is beginners mind. Scream of pain is vulnerability, scream of pain is personal. And I think that is true in
writing as well. You don’t want the piece to be so schematic… Who was I talking to? Or reading… Oh, a British composer, he’s doing opera in Great Britain. I don’t remember the name of it. But he was talking about various other composers and he did say that he found Britten, Benjamin Britten, excessively tidy. Which I think is a little harsh, but I get what he means. Because I do feel there are moments in Britten where he gets a hair technical. The ending of *Turn of the Screw* always disappoints me. The end of *The Turn of the Screw*, I feel like all of a sudden we get the passacaglia. It’s a very formal, very kind of remote technique. Exactly at the moment where you really need to get the governess’ extremis. It’s still a wonderful moment, but I feel him pulling back a little bit. Maybe he felt a little fearful of the material, or he already felt plenty exposed, that he didn’t want to be any more exposed than he was. And I don’t bring this up to criticize Britten, I just wanted to bring up the point that, even writers as well, there’s a question of “are you going to take refuge in form, are you going to do the safe things?”

Thus this notion of the *falsetto* and for that matter, the Scottish snap rhythm, that’s one of the reasons I kicked that back in. You want to make sure that doesn’t become the safe thing. The thing that you do because it always works, or the thing that you know how to make work in various contexts. You want to expand formally so that, in the music, if it’s audible, you get the same kind of transparency or personal exposure that you get when you risk that very fragile *timbre*. Because that’s the kind of communication that makes what we do live.

**SM:**

What’s really neat about what happened last night, for me, was that what initially for me was a terrifying moment was when you asked me to do that (*falsetto*), and I thought, I
have not even tried to sing it that way, yet, it turns out to be much more valuable to me now, because of that, and the way it happened, and because we discussed it, than if you had written “falsetto” in the music. Do you see what I mean? Because then it would have been a technical demand.

**MA:**

Right. You see, I think all of us in concert music…. The very precision that allows us to do a large range of complicated things, can be its own armor. And the trap is, to be…. Actors for example, if you deal with singing actors, all of their language is about the opposite. It’s about trying to get that personal communication. And actors can be very technical and sophisticated in certain things, but the stress in music, is not always on that. I mean the theater composers that I’ve talked to in building a number; the written page is kind of a skeleton. And frequently, what will end up as the published version of that written page will owe as much to rehearsals and improvisations and the variations that the performer has done in developing the characterization as anything the composer came up with to begin with. Which is terrific. As a composer, actually, I feel like I kind of do want the notes as written, but I want the feeling or the spontaneity in performance that they get in that process. So that’s our challenge. To make sure that the writing presupposes that kind of spontaneity and that in it working together, you get that spontaneity and precision. And I suppose the challenge theatrically would be that once you get something that loose that it feels precise, then you feel precisely about rewriting. But in a way, even as that would probably irritate me even more than what’s happening now, I get what that’s about.
SM:
To me, it’s the difference between what you said earlier, the two kinds of music….

MA:
Precise and approximate.

SM:
Yes. If you go outside that boundary then suddenly, it’s not….

MA:
That doesn’t make it good or bad.

SM:
If you’re *ad libbing* beyond the boundaries….

MA:
You see, and that does go a long way toward explaining why the relative palettes between say theater music and operatic music, that there’s such a difference between them.

Because a lot of theater singers don’t read. They’ll learn by rote, or they’ll learn …. The voice teacher I was talking to, they’re preparing a singer for a new musical. He’s very right for the part, has a terrific voice, but he doesn’t read and he doesn’t really learn. So every time he comes in, the number, it’s a different number. The composer would like it to be the one she wrote, at some point. She’s not angry or anything. He’s cast for other things. Which are valid theatrically, but you can understand why if you do more of the work on the page, you’ll be on our side of the aisle, and then you’ll have the other challenge of trying to get that kind of vividness where the mezzo comes on and she’s singing exactly what you’ve written, but it feels like she’s making it all up. That’s what you want. Which was Callas’ great gift. People used to think of Callas as a much less
scrupulous musician than she actually was because she was so dramatically intense. Yes, she made up a certain amount, but she was pretty *come scritto* for the most part. That was the thing that was really exciting, you know, that she would take all those Donizetti pieces that could seem on the page like a lot of F major *arpeggios*, and every note would be affected. And you can get that. You can get all of it. You can get this compositional architecture in which, you know, an actor is doing such vividly precise and emotionally grounded things that it feels like she’s making it up and yet she is and she isn’t. She’s making up a performance, but the composition remains.

**SM:**

Well we need to get to City Opera for *Lysistrata*, don’t we?
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