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## Fields of Wonder: Exploring the Langston Hughes Song Cycles of Robert Owens

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***FIELDS OF WONDER:***  
**EXPLORING THE LANGSTON HUGHES SONG CYCLES**  
**OF ROBERT OWENS**  
**(AN INTRODUCTORY ANALYSIS AND PERFORMANCE GUIDE)**

*TEARLESS, OP. 9*  
*SILVER RAIN, OP. 11*  
*DESIRE, OP. 13*  
*HEART ON THE WALL, OP. 14*  
*BORDER LINE, OP. 24*  
*MORTAL STORM, OP. 29*

By  
Jamie Michelle Reimer

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Major: Music

Under the Supervision of Professor Donna Harler-Smith

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2008

***FIELDS OF WONDER:***  
**EXPLORING THE LANGSTON HUGHES SONG CYCLES**  
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Jamie Michelle Reimer, D.M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2008

Advisor: Donna Harler-Smith

Composer Robert Owens (b. 1925) is relatively unknown in the realm of American art song. Though a few of Owens' songs have been published in two anthologies of songs by African-American composers, the majority of the Langston Hughes songs by Robert Owens are undiscovered gems in the art song repertory. It is the author's hope that through the presentation of this research, singers and teachers are inspired to explore Owens' catalog of works and to find the essential commitment to poetry that is so necessary in the performance of all art songs.

Trained as a concert pianist, Owens has spent his life creating innovative, intelligent and beautiful pieces of music which are widely heard in Europe, particularly in his current country of residence, Germany, though they were written for performance by American singers. In 1958, Owens was introduced to the writer Langston Hughes at Hughes' home in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. At that meeting, Hughes presented Owens with *Fields of Wonder*, a collection of his lyrical poetry, to set to music and "see what he could do with it."

The results of Owens' diligence are 46 songs in six cycles to the poems of Langston Hughes. In this document, the author will demonstrate how Owens created a unique musical atmosphere through his use of intervallic relationships, accompaniment figures and harmonic development. Of special interest is Owens' compositional process that blossoms out of an understanding of the poem and its musical "environment," and how he translates that understanding into sound.

The document includes a biography of Robert Owens, as told by the composer himself in interviews with the author. Currently, only brief biographical sketches are available in online and published sources. This information will be significant to any student or performer of Owens' songs, as the details of his life figure prominently in his compositional purpose and process.

## PREFACE

I was introduced to the songs of Robert Owens in June 2006 when I was given a copy of *Heart on the Wall* at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Intern Program. I didn't look closely at the scores until November of the same year, when I was searching for a set of English-language songs to complete a recital program of twentieth century compositions. At once I was taken in by the beautiful melodies and mesmerizing accompaniment figures, and I decided immediately to include them in my recital. However, when I attempted to locate information about this expatriate American composer, I found precious little available.

Thanks to the assistance of Glendower Jones at Classical Vocal Reprints and Dr. Darryl Taylor of the University of California – Irvine, I was able to contact Mr. Owens at his residence in Munich, Germany. When I inquired about traveling to Germany to study his music and conduct interviews, Mr. Owens offered to come to the United States for a brief residency at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. Through the generous support of Dr. John Richmond at the School of Music and Dr. Ellen Weissinger in the Department of Graduate Studies, I was able to arrange a 10-day residency and UNL during which time I personally interviewed and observed Mr. Owens at work for ten days in September 2007.

This document is a result of that visit. My time with Mr. Owens revealed that the performance of his songs – particularly those in the cycles based on Langston Hughes' poetry – is a complex and intricate endeavor, and that not all musical indications are as simple as they may seem. In an attempt to communicate Mr. Owens' wishes to future performers and teachers of his songs, I have adapted the format used by Pierre Bernac in

his book *The Interpretation of French Song*. I hope that as a result of this document, singers will discover the beauty and truth present in the music of Robert Owens, and that they will be inspired by his suggestions for the performance of his songs.

Jamie Reimer, September 2007

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks to

Sam, my steadying force in this unpredictable and adventuresome process;

Evan, the greatest gift I have ever been given;

My dear family, for supporting many ideas and endeavors;

Donna Harler-Smith, for being a source of strength, encouragement, reason and faith;

Chip Smith, for realizing my path in life before I did;

Darryl Taylor, for being the first to support this project;

Glendower Jones, for recognizing musical greatness; and

the incomparable Robert Owens, for his gifts of friendship, music and humanity.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Robert Lee Owens – Before And After Langston Hughes

Robert Lee Owens III was born on September 19, 1925 in Denison, Texas, to Alpharetta Helm-Owens and Robert Lee Owens II. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to Berkeley, California, where Owens would spend his formative years. Owens' mother, Alpharetta Helm-Owens, was an excellent pianist, and earned extra money playing at piano bars around the Bay Area in the evenings. As a result, the young Owens grew up around a piano, and seemed to have a natural affinity for the instrument:

I remember we had a visit from Aunt Sally, and I was crawling around on the floor, and I would go to the piano, play a little, get back on the floor. And tough Aunt Sally said, "What is he doing down there?" And my mother said, "He's listening to Lily Ruth" – she lived on the first floor – 'he's listening to what she's playing, what she's practicing, and he gets on the piano and plays it.'" "What? He's talented! Get him some lessons!"<sup>1</sup>

As a result of Aunt Sally's visit, Owens had his first piano lesson at the age of four, just down Woolsey Street from his childhood home.

When Owens was eight years old, his mother contracted tuberculosis and was committed to a sanatorium in the California countryside. The highly infectious nature of the disease prevented the young Owens from visiting his mother, but he would sit in the car as his father went inside to see her. Four years later, Alpharetta tired of the sanatorium and returned home to Berkeley. Owens recalled a Christmas when she gave him SHEET music to play, but he did not see her often due to the contagious nature of the disease. Nonetheless, Alpharetta's impact on her son's life was significant:

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Owens, interview by author, September 12, 2007, Lincoln, Nebraska, digital recording.

One afternoon I was sitting in some class in junior high school, and the teacher came to me and said that I should go home because my mother was dying. I could leave that class and go home. I went home, it was a walk about 15 minutes, and I got home and my mother was dying. My father was working as a waiter on the ferry boats in the bay (the Bay Bridge was not there yet) and he was working the ferry going from Oakland to San Francisco, and he wasn't there. But they had phoned to tell him that my mother was dying. And I came and she was lying in her bedroom. I went in, and she was lying there, and I went over to the bed, and she looked at me and took my hand, and said, "I know you will be a great musician." And then she sort of raised up, and there was a sort of light in her face when she told me that, and then she sank and she died... So after my mother had died, that was... I saw what was happening, but I didn't cry, not even at the funeral. But I remembered what she had told me and took it seriously.<sup>2</sup>

When Owens was in junior high school he composed his first piano concerto, and it was premiered by the Berkeley Young People's Symphony. He was fifteen years old.

That was a big sensation. And I remember going to Miss Ellis at the library – she always suggested which books that I should read, and I should do this and do that – along the way there have been so many nice people that take an interest in me, give me advice, Miss Ellis was one of these people. The first time I visited her after this concert, she said, Oh, Robert, that was such a marvelous concert, if you never do another thing in your life, you have done that! But my reaction was, (laugh) that's not enough – what could I do, just sit down and enjoy, talk about that concert? But that was a big concert. That she should say that, you know. I was only 15, you know? But I remember Miss Ellis... the world could not have been that good.<sup>3</sup>

Owens began work at the San Francisco Civil Service Commission in 1940 where he worked as a typist in the front office. At the same time, he attended night school to

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<sup>2</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

train as a flying cadet, and ultimately planned to join the army. When he was seventeen, Owens received a letter from the United States government instructing him to stop by the San Francisco Army office, which he did one day on his way home from work. He was immediately drafted, and realized that he should have read the letter more closely: “Of course, I should have read that. I hadn’t taken it seriously at all because I knew I was going to be a cadet! I hadn’t finished!”<sup>4</sup> So Owens joined the army without telling his father where he had gone. The new soldiers were taken to training camp, and Owens was completely unprepared. He called his father from Fresno, asking him to send a toothbrush.

He was drafted into the US Army and thanks to his cadet training was placed at the training camp for the Tuskegee airmen in Mississippi. Owens related that “word got around there that they had enough Black pilots in Tuskegee for the whole army, and they were beginning to flunk out as soon as possible the new ones.”<sup>5</sup> Owens saw this as his opportunity to get back to California and reported his allergy problems to his commanding officer. After a battery of allergy tests, all with positive results, Owens submitted his resignation from the cadets and received what he believed to be transfer papers to a base in California.

Unbeknownst to Owens, he was being sent to a camp in Stuttgart, Arkansas for the remainder of the war. Thanks to his ability to read and to type, Owens was placed in the front office doing official paperwork for the commanding officers. He soon discovered that the Lieutenant in charge was a Southerner near his age, raised in the ways of racism. “He had been in the army all this time. In the South, in the army, that means pure prejudice all the time. Nothing to be done. And when I heard that, then I said, I am going

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<sup>4</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

to make it my duty to convert him, he can't be much older than I. One on one, I can do this. You can't work with crowds, you know. I had that as my duty. If I was going to be there, I was going to do this."<sup>6</sup> Owens was successful in befriending the Lieutenant, and remained his assistant when the officer was promoted to Captain and commanding officer of the camp.

Owens' company – "Company C, for colored" – was located on the outskirts of camp, near the area where German prisoners of war were held.<sup>7</sup>

That was my luck, because not only did I have David [the Lieutenant] to convert, I had the prisoners over there. And there were about six of them exactly my age, and they had been taken in Africa. Kids, just my age. They were behind a barbed wire fence there, but their mess was right opposite from our mess. But I could go down from the dispensary along the barbed wire and we could talk. And the guy in the watchtower couldn't see us. And they had never seen a person of color before, and it was purely forbidden.<sup>8</sup>

In exchange for Owens bringing to them books and other small items, the prisoners taught Owens how to speak German.

Following his Army experience, Owens took advantage of the GI Bill to travel to Europe in 1946. The United States government would not pay for Owens to study in Germany due to the heavy war damage, but they would pay for study in Paris. According to Owens, "That was the beginning, well, the beginning of my life, so to speak."<sup>9</sup>

Owens arrived in Paris with no place to live, as he had not yet been accepted to the Conservatoire. He soon found a room to rent at Cité Universit  , and experienced the worst

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<sup>6</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

of post-war France: little food, no heat, all in the dead of winter. "...But there was music. And all these people from everywhere. All these musicians, these pianists from all over the world trying to get into the Conservatory. And I looked around and thought, my God, I will really have to start practicing - all these fantastic pianists – what I had been doing was really “dilettante-ish”, you know?”<sup>10</sup>

Though life in Paris was difficult, Owens had arrived in France at a time of great artistic exploration and creativity: “That was the beginning of the existentialism in those days – Piaf, Cocteau, Simone Signoret, they all began in these small little theatres, and I would see all these people in the theatres and at these concerts. That was when I said, my god, I’m beginning to live! And that was the beginning of my studies and actually the beginning of seeing what life was really about...”<sup>11</sup> Owens was not accepted at the Conservatoire, but one of the examiners also taught at Paris’ Ecole Normale de Musique and agreed to take Owens as a student there.

Thus Owens began his study with Jules Gentil and the renowned pianist Alfred Cortot. Owens’ course of study was focused on piano performance, in addition to standard harmony and counterpoint classes. His debut as a concert pianist took place in Copenhagen in 1952, and the next four years were dedicated to additional study, this time in Vienna under Professor Grete Hinterhofer.

Owens returned to the United States in 1957 with a contract to teach at Albany State College in Albany, Georgia. It was here that for the first time in his life, Owens truly experienced segregation and racism. The racially-divided culture made itself known even before his arrival in Georgia with the news that the school had been burned. A fellow

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<sup>10</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

teacher, Samuel Leslie Green, informed him of the situation upon Owens' arrival in New York from Vienna: "He didn't say hello, didn't say anything except 'They burned the school down.' He had told me there had never been any racial problems – he had been there for thirteen years before – there had never been any problems. This had gone around the world. I had gotten a telegraph from my friend in Copenhagen; he had heard about it."<sup>12</sup>

Owens was not easily deterred. He had his contract, was determined to fulfill his obligation to the school, and convinced Green to travel with him from New York to Albany, Georgia. John Chadwell, the chair of the music department at Albany State College, met them at the school with news that they planned to reopen in another week.

Owens remembered what he saw first at the school:

They burned the school down...there had been a new building made for the kindergarten children, completely wood. And they had burned that completely down. And the assembly hall, they burned the curtains, the organ, and in the back were the rooms where I was supposed to be teaching music... Well, some people had seen white men running away with kerosene cans, but the police said that they had left the lights on in the assembly hall and they had caught fire on the curtains.<sup>13</sup>

In a week, the school reopened and Owens began to teach. He soon discovered that teaching in Albany was not at all what he had expected it would be. Because of the poor education system for Black students, Owens delayed teaching music, and began teaching his students proper English instead. Owens' interest in his students' backgrounds proved challenging to the community's standards for college faculty.

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<sup>12</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

The first year I went a couple of times to see what my students were doing in the evening. I went to a couple of these bars – and I got a call: “Mr. Owens, it has been noticed that you and the students... you are an instructor. You don’t do that here; you don’t associate with the students.” Well, what’s behind them? Why can’t they talk? “Well if you do, please put on some jeans, don’t dress up.” How old was I at that time? 36? But the students thought I was one of them! So that was the first thought about I’m not supposed to do that, I’m not supposed to do that...<sup>14</sup>

Owens recalled that “the first year that I was there, I was living quite dangerously, because I was ignoring all these rules.”<sup>15</sup> He soon learned that he could bend the unspoken rules of Black society if he operated under the guise of an outsider from Europe. Mistakes and indiscretions were acceptable “as long as I wasn’t from *there*.”<sup>16</sup>

Owens was fortunate, as most of the college community believed he was French. As an African American who had previously lived outside the constraints of segregation, he was in many ways ignorant of the restrictions placed on the black community in 1950s Georgia. Owens recounted a story of how he came to understand the challenges faced by blacks in the South:

[Albany] opened my eyes to black society. But I saw that they had the same structure that they had got from the Americans, the whites. There were the doctors, the instructors, and they were one level, and then there were the poor. My grandmother was still living – my father’s mother – was still living in Denison, Texas. I wrote to her and told her where I was. And she wrote that I should meet this lady who was a good friend of hers, her son, that I should go by and say hello for her. So I went to the main street, and I went to the back, to this garage, and there was this fellow, and he said “will you hold this needle for me?” He was just going to put this needle in his arm. And

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<sup>14</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

then I said hello to him and I left. About a week later, one of my students said, Mr. Owens, I see you are taking the needle? What? They watch everything you are doing. But all these things happened you know? And then you realize that this is a whole little community. We are the thinking people, and we have to think of that.<sup>17</sup>

Owens struggled with isolation his first year in Georgia. He spent most of his free time practicing, and occasionally joined Chadwell and his wife for dinner at their home. “When I got to Albany, Georgia, it was like going to a foreign country. My father told me a couple times things, but you know... And then I came to Albany State College there, and it was like one world black, one world white, and they did not come together at all. And I was quite shocked – well, not shocked, I was quite amazed, this can’t be true.”<sup>18</sup> Even as a newly-arrived “European”, Owens could not completely erase the racial lines that bisected the community in which he lived.

His presence at the school made a deep impression on the students. “I was there until the end of the term – summer of 1958 – and I was going home for the first time in all these years, and I was saying goodbye. And there were these pupils, some of them were 40 years old – 15 to 40 years old – and they came and they cried. Of course, I could not say no. They were so glad I was there, so then I said I will stay one more year.”<sup>19</sup>

In the summer of 1958, Owens presented a homecoming concert for friends and family in Berkeley, California. An old family acquaintance was in attendance, and she suggested that the poet Langston Hughes may be interested in having Owens set some of his poetry to music. At the time, Owens “didn’t know who Langston Hughes was!”<sup>20</sup> She

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<sup>17</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.



provided Robert with a letter of introduction, and suggested he make an appointment with Hughes the next time he was in New York.

On his way back to Georgia, Owens stopped in New York to visit some friends, and called for an appointment with Hughes:

(Hughes) said I should come up, which I did, and I went to his home. So I got there and rang the doorbell and this little bowed lady came to the door. And I went up the stairs and there was Langston Hughes with a friend of his and his secretary, and I gave him my letter of introduction, and the first thing he said after I presented him with the letter of introduction was “Do you want a lemon vodka?” and I had never had a lemon vodka – “Yes, of course” – so then he got me a lemon vodka and motioned me on over to his library. He wandered over to his bookshelf and pulled out this little thing, *Fields of Wonder*, lyrical poems, wrote a little dedication to me, and said, “See what you can do with it.”<sup>21</sup>

Owens returned to Georgia that fall and began composing music for Hughes’ poems. The first cycle was *Silver Rain* for tenor, dedicated to John and Richardine Chadwell. John Chadwell premiered *Silver Rain* at the college’s Lyceum concert in 1958. Owens was working on the second cycle, *Tearless*, at the same time.

Owens’ tenure in Georgia ended as racial tensions were reaching a boiling point. Several of his students were arrested for their participation in street marches, as were several instructors from the college. Owens suggested that Caldwell and his family return to their hometown of Chicago, but Caldwell declined, saying that they could accept it for the good living he was making at the college. It was then that Owens read the small print at the bottom of his teaching contract, and realized that by signing it, he had unknowingly agreed to abide by the laws of segregation in Georgia.

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<sup>21</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

When Owens left Georgia in the spring of 1959, he returned to New York and phoned Hughes to inform him about the two completed cycles. Hughes indicated that he would like to hear them, and had a friend who could sing both tenor and baritone. Owens was invited back to Hughes' home and played both cycles for the poet: "I went up and played these songs for him, and he sat there when we had completed it all and said, 'Are those my words?' And I said, 'They certainly are, Mr. Hughes,' and he said, 'My God, they just sound so much more beautiful with music.' So that was his reaction to my music."<sup>22</sup>

Owens and Hughes discussed the cycles after the performance:

[Hughes asked] "In this one, in *Tearless*, [you] repeat the beginning at the end – why did you put this here?" And I said, "That's how you wrote it." And then I had a couple of questions. "What did you mean when you wrote..." And he looked at me rather blankly and said, "Really, I don't know." He couldn't remember why he had written that, so nobody knows. He wrote so many things.<sup>23</sup>

Years later, Hughes sent Owens a letter saying that "he should sing 'our songs' because [in the United States] they aren't interested in publishing anything unless it is a musical or something. So you don't have to worry – just have people perform them."<sup>24</sup> Hughes and Owens would have little other contact in the years following 1959, except for a few letters and one brief visit in 1965. "He visited me in Germany, took a picture of us about two years before he died. He was a sweet man – but as I say, I only met him a

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<sup>22</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

couple of times, and I didn't really get to get into him; it was because I wrote his music.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1959, Owens finally achieved his lifelong dream of living in Germany. “I wanted to go to Europe, to Germany. Because my favorites were Schumann, Schubert, because of the messages they had. And the beauty that touched me, reached me. I remember telling my father when I was 8 years old, when I grow up I am going to Germany.”<sup>26</sup>

He landed first in Hamburg, “where I first realized that my career as a pianist – not as a composer, I hadn't thought about that yet – I wasn't going to be able to do it.”<sup>27</sup> Owens' experiences in Paris had not prepared him for the complexity and expense of life as an independent performing artist. He contacted a management agency at the suggestion of representative he had met during his time in Georgia, and soon realized he was not fiscally prepared for life as a concert pianist. “So then I realized the idea that I had that when you have an agent, they pay for everything... it's not like that in Germany or in Europe at all, unless you get one of these big managers in America that arrange everything for you. Tough start, you know? So I said, this is going to be a little more difficult than I thought. But I've always been very flexible, and I said, well we'll see what happens here.”<sup>28</sup>

Owens' flexibility served him well, and through some gentlemen from whom he was renting a room, he had his first opportunity as a film actor.

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<sup>25</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

One thing always leads to another, I say in life. One must always say yes to things – Can you do this? Yes, of course I can. Can you do that? Yes. And only now and then (laugh), it gets a little difficult. But usually it works, and you see that you can do many things better than other people who you think they should be able to do that better. There is a certain talent one has as a pianist, a certain gift that prepares you with concentration, impact that prepares you for these other things in life. Very... disciplined – and it can be used for many, many things. Memory of course – how can you remember all those lines? When I started acting I said, o God, as a pianist you always play from memory – this is nothing... but I realized that you can do different things in life.<sup>29</sup>

Owens spent four years in Hamburg, exploring his acting abilities and supplementing those jobs with concert appearances and composition. He soon found that his musical abilities were useful in the theatre for more than performance reasons. “I began also composing for a couple of people up there. The songs of Emily Brontë for a contralto that was there, and she began giving me, for my accompanying her, she gave me breathing lessons for acting – of course that’s important, you know. So she performed these, and performed some other things which I wrote for her and I had three concerts there.”<sup>30</sup>

Owens developed a reputation for his command of the German theatrical language and was soon invited to obtain a manager in Munich. He kept an apartment in Hamburg for a year, though his popularity in Munich theatres prevented him from visiting very often. In 1964, Munich became his permanent residence.

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<sup>29</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

The relocation to Munich did not stifle Owens' compositional career. "So then when I got to Europe, there were a lot of singers, American singers, in Munich."<sup>31</sup> As a result, Owens was in demand both as an actor and as a composer for the American singers touring Germany in the 1960s, performing as a solo pianist and accompanist as time permitted. Several of his song cycles were composed as commissions for these singers, and Owens found himself collaborating frequently with American singers including Felicia Weathers, Rhea Jackson and Thomas Carey.

Owens' life in Munich since that time has involved several theatrical appearances around Germany and Austria, with leading roles in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Ionescu's *The Lesson* and Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy* most frequently performed. His first opera, *Kultur! Kultur!* was produced at the Ulm Opera House in 1970 to great critical acclaim. In more recent years, Owens has collaborated with musicians both at home and abroad in concert, coaching and commission capacities.

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<sup>31</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

## CHAPTER 2

### Owens' Compositional Style

Owens' compositional style is a reaction to the classical training he received in Paris and Vienna. "I didn't study composition. I studied the things that one does as a musician – harmony, structure, those things, but as far as going to classes by this professor, that professor, they wanted me to do that in Vienna, too. But they always wanted you to sound like their sound."<sup>32</sup> His knowledge of the evolution of Western music allows him to understand formal compositional rules and at the same time conceive of ways on how to break them:

"I break all the rules for successive fifths, parallel chords, and all that. But I have found a style – melody, clarity, and having every sound is important. Like the orchestra – every instrument. It's something that makes my music a little difficult, and different, because it's *simple* but that's the most difficult because it has to be *right*, because you will hear everything that is not fitting in there. I have a great affinity for Bach, the old masters, and I have some of that in my music also. So yes, I have developed a style. I didn't know it then, but I can look back and I can see what I've done..."<sup>33</sup>

Owens' approach to composition is comprised of four specific elements: interest in creating a musical atmosphere for poetry in the piano accompaniment; use of modulation as an expressive tool, rooted in a moving bass line; development of unique formal structures; and avoidance of thirds, both in the melodic sense and through avoidance of simple triads in accompaniment figures, focusing instead on seconds, fourths and sevenths of varying qualities. Owens claims that he did not consciously seek to develop the "Owens method of composition," but instead

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<sup>32</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

...[I] was trying to find something that I don't hear. Something in the classical – I studied the classics – something that expresses for me a continuation of my classical feelings and what make sense to me. And I want to express something that I find beautiful, what I have to say, in my classical way of expressing myself. With the training I have had classically, and putting that in action with my own thoughts and own feelings. And that's the big difference – I listen to jazz and I like certain things, and I have grown up with it, I know it – but when I want to express something myself, it's the classical line I'm trying to go into other regions with what I am doing. And this is the direction that I take. And you've studied the forms, heard the forms, now what do I want to do? How can I do something that I feel is good? I have taken my inspiration from what I have inside me because I have a lot of imagination and I want things to sound like *this*, or the things I am looking for I can express in a different way, but I have something to say. That's why I was looking for something else.<sup>34</sup>

Owens' song composition is closely tied to his love and understanding of language, and the underlying emotional power present in poetry. He is particularly fond of composing song cycles because of their multi-faceted emotional character, and suggests:

[I] have written these song cycles as such, because the authors have written the poems as cycles. My reason for writing so many cycles is because, I am challenging singers to discover the many different possibilities of their singing voice material in that they sing a number of different songs and poems of different subjects within one performance. Just singing one song is not enough to really delve into the possibilities of getting close to what may be considered as art! It takes a lot of know-how to sing a complete cycle.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Personal correspondence with Owens, March 16, 2008.

It is through his understanding of the emotional intent found in each poem that Owens' discovers the compositional seed from which the entire song will blossom:

I read these poems before I set them to music. And I read them many times, and not right away, you know. I read the text very often, I try to get into what has been said, to get the feel of the words. Everything I write has to do with words. I first choose the words and try to see the beauty of what is being said, or the message of what is being said, and I get that into my system, and then I go into the actual writing which is usually – no, always is – to get the atmosphere of the accompaniment for the words.<sup>36</sup>

Unique to Owens' process is the order in which he composes elements of the song. Rather than beginning with the melodic line through which the text will be delivered, Owens turns first to the piano. It is through the accompaniment that he believes the essence of the poem will be understood.

Once I get an atmosphere, I can begin with the basic tempos and the rhythms – my things are always, I will say, rhythmically interesting. It is very important to be exact with the rhythms. The rhythms build up the atmosphere. And off that, then my spirit goes, and it is according to whatever happens then that is like my inspiration. I have a gift for melody... I can spin a melody off a telephone book (laugh) or any words. When you go into different spheres with the ideas, then my imagination, it turns loose and you can go into all these different worlds. And that is what one must understand when one sings my things. It's all well and good to sing the notes and whatnot, but it's always more to it than meets the eye. There's much more than meets the eye.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.



Embedded in his accompaniment figures are elements that will inform the melodic line, such as rhythm and harmony, though sometimes the melodic line appears to relate little to the accompaniment: “It is always a new experience, according to what the words waken in me – the emotions, or the point of view of the message, or the point of view of the atmosphere, like “Circles”, how it starts like a swirl. And that is based upon the rhythm in the accompaniment. And the accompaniment becomes something on its own, and the voice goes its way, and then it is a collaboration of several things.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the “several things” that shape Owens’ songs is his use of harmony. Modulation is of primary importance in his music, and he cautions that all interpreters of his songs make careful note of the points at which modulation occurs, and how those moments reflect the emotional intensity of the text.<sup>39</sup> “In my music, it is very important to be aware of continuous modulation, going from one key to the other, because it colors the expression of the words, thoughts and feelings.”<sup>40</sup>

In part, the modulatory passages occur when Owens is thinking about the sounds and colors present in the orchestra, and attempting to write those sounds into piano accompaniment: “One has to think of orchestras, rather than just voices, they are all important. This makes it more complicated for the pianist because of the modulations – these are all nuances...”<sup>41</sup> Because of this careful attention to modulating harmony, it is not advised to transpose Owens’ songs: “I don’t believe too much in transposing. I don’t

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<sup>38</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Owens, September 15, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

do transposing myself. I choose these keys, the keys I've chosen, and I've just left it at that."<sup>42</sup>

Several of Owens' songs have distinct sections, though few may be considered to adhere to strict formal constraints. He develops the form of each song independently, concentrating on the development of the emotional journey through the poem. "I have studied form, but I don't use these [form] rules. I have a very free style – but I am aware of form. If you have a short piece, it's just one thought, so you have to repeat for the sake of the song structure. But in these cycles, you can have just one thought, one sentence."<sup>43</sup> Owens criticizes much contemporary music for its lack of attention to form and melody, though he appreciates the effort to communicate through new works: "There is no form, no melody in this [modern] music – I don't appreciate – usually – these modern things. They are reaching, saying things to people, but it is not what interests me."<sup>44</sup>

Without the constraints of a formal structure, Owens is free to compose melodic lines that serve solely the poetic text and the emotional purpose behind the text. As previously mentioned, Owens' first concern is the musical environment via the accompaniment, which can be sculpted around the need to sustain a particular pitch or syllable, or to repeat a section of the text. "Sometimes after they've been performed, sometimes before they've been performed, when I see... Sometimes when you write something and you don't get it performed right away, but you get it performed sometime or other, looking at it again, you say oh I need to do this again, I need to repeat this. I don't change the structure, but often I repeat a couple of measures or an idea."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Owens, September 15, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

Owens' melodies are often beautifully lyrical – his melodies have been compared to those of Schubert – but if the text requires, they can be angular and appear awkward to sing, particularly those of the Hughes settings.<sup>46</sup> In order to express the raw emotion of some of Hughes' poems, Owens opts for striking intervals such as augmented fourths and minor sevenths. While these melodies may appear daunting at first glance, they become more organic and easy to sing when the poetic intent is clearly understood: “– these words, the adjectives, they express something and it has to be expressed in the voice, otherwise you could just be saying anything. And therefore, to color these, sometimes it's in the interval, sometimes it's in the harmony, but it has to be in the voice also. And there where you start tasting your words, when the words are tasted, then it becomes part of the voice.”<sup>47</sup>

The complexity of Owens' songs may lead one to believe that he spends great amounts of time laboring over the harmonic colors and rhythmic effects in order to perfect his communication of the text. In reality, his greatest amount of compositional time is spent understanding the poem's intent, and the rest is inspiration: “Once I get the accompaniment going, it comes right out of that. It takes time later to write it all down, copy it out.”<sup>48</sup> Owens rarely edits his songs once they are on paper. He feels that the artistic impulse is the truest form of composition, and chooses to trust that the inspiration to put his pen to paper will result in the creation of the sound he wants to hear: “So I then realized this is the inspiration that one has at the moment. You put it down, whether it be words, music. If you have this inspiration, you put it down. If you don't do it in that

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<sup>46</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Owens, September 15, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

moment, you forget it.”<sup>49</sup> As if they were kindred spirits, Langston Hughes’ comments about writing poetry agree with Owens’ assessment of composition: “I did not consciously compose this poem. It came to me, and I simply wrote it down, and wondered where it came from, and liked it. Possibly I liked it because it was not contrived, inception having been outside myself.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Earlene D. Garber, “Form as a Complement to Content in Three of Langston Hughes’ Poems.” *Negro American Literature Forum* 5 (1971): 137-8.

### CHAPTER 3

#### The Langston Hughes Cycles

While Langston Hughes' literary and cultural reputation was relatively unknown to Owens at the time he was composing the *Fields of Wonder* cycles, it is necessary to place Hughes in his proper context in American literary history. Widely recognized for his social and political commentary on the situation of the African American in the United States, Langston Hughes was hailed as one of the strongest representatives of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and an influence on generations of African American artists. According to Hughes scholar Stephen Tracy in his book *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*,

Langston Hughes was perhaps the most wide-ranging and persistent black American writer in the twentieth century. From the Harlem Renaissance of the early twenties, to the Black Arts reorientations of the sixties, his short stories, novels, dramas, translations and seminal anthologies of the works of others at home and abroad helped unify peoples in the African Diaspora. He helped nurture, in other words, so profoundly the generations after him... In many ways he crafted, better perhaps than any poet since Walt Whitman, whom he celebrated and eventually became skeptical of, the noblest visions of what America could be.<sup>51</sup>

*Fields of Wonder*, published in 1947, represented a dramatic departure from Hughes' highly opinionated and socially motivated poems and essays. "Inspired by his work on the *Street Scene* lyrics, the new collection would be called *Fields of Wonder* and contain only "lyric" poems – verse without reference to race and politics... He continued

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<sup>51</sup> Steven C. Tracy, *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23-24.

to think of the volume as ‘my first more or less completely lyric book.’ And the word later appeared on the dust jacket of the volume.”<sup>52</sup>

The critical response to Hughes’ foray away from political commentary resulted in mixed reviews. Hughes biographer Arnold Rampersad believes that “in spite of its lyric ambitions, *Fields of Wonder* negatively endorses the poetic power of Hughes’ racial and political sense, which endowed him with also his entire distinction as a poet.”<sup>53</sup> The 1947 *New York Times* review of *Fields of Wonder* by Hubert Creekmore “charged the poems were largely derivative of Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crance, and E. A. Robinson. Although the poems have a certain appeal, they lack the unique quality Hughes projected in his Harlem verse.”<sup>54</sup>

Hughes acknowledged that lyric poetry was not his primary genre for writing, although he found the exercise interesting: “Beauty and lyricism are really related to another world, to ivory towers, to your head in the clouds, feet floating off the earth. Unfortunately, having been born poor – and also colored – in Missouri, I was stuck in the mud from the beginning. Try as I might to float off into the clouds, poverty and Jim Crow would grab me by the heels, and right back on earth I would land. A third floor finished room is the nearest thing I have ever had to an ivory tower.”<sup>55</sup> As a result, he focused the majority of his attention on making known the plight and injustices suffered by African Americans in early twentieth century America.

The African American community, however, embraced Hughes’ new approach to poetry. In response to *Fields of Wonder*, “J. Saunders Redding, who had published a

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<sup>52</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II: 1941-1967*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120.

<sup>53</sup> Rampersad, p. 133.

<sup>54</sup> Donald C. Dickinson, *A Bio-bibliography of Langston Hughes*. (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967), 87.

<sup>55</sup> Dickinson, p. 87.

column in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, declared that Hughes had ‘rediscovered himself.’ He had ‘come back to the importance of emotional insight’ and the power of ‘simple, colloquial idiom.’”<sup>56</sup> Other mainstream publications also reviewed Hughes’ fresh approach in a favorable light, including the *Christian Science Monitor*: “[Hughes is] penetrating, compassionate, mellow in his cynicism, with the most skillful and practiced hand, and an unerring poetic insight.”<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps the most astute of the *Fields of Wonder* reviews was penned by Cecil Boykin in the *Detroit Tribune*, April 1947:

Langston Hughes, modern poet of our times, has scored again in a collection of lyric poetry that stimulates the imagination and challenges the powers of understanding.

Short, apparently simple and direct, most of the verses call for a second reading to properly appreciate them. They are filled with a quality and depth of thought that is apt to be missed in a casual reading.

Such writing comes only after an author has lived an experienced fully, and the result is a delightful philosophical bit of reading.<sup>58</sup>

While the lyric and nature-infused poetry of *Fields of Wonder* appeared to be a departure for Hughes, “the volume contained several poems from Hughes’ early years as a poet... “Heart” and “For dead mimes” were written in 1922 and 1923, and “A House in Taos” in 1925.”<sup>59</sup> Early in his career Hughes was already experimenting with the power of nature to highlight the pathos of human life. Rampersad suggests that in his attempts to paint emotion through natural elements, instead “anxiety has penetrated all aspects of

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<sup>56</sup> Rampersad, p. 130.

<sup>57</sup> Rampersad, p. 130.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Jerome Rogers, “Robert Owens Sets Langston Hughes: A Pedagogical Study of Three Song Cycles for Baritone and Piano Collaboration” (D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana –Champaign, 2000), 131.

<sup>59</sup> Rampersad, p. 131.

[Hughes'] poetry, and is in fact reinforced by wind and rain, mountain and ocean, so that an expansive 'lyric' utterance is itself impossible."<sup>60</sup>

Owens' interest in these words stemmed from the depth of emotion Hughes invested in each group of poems, unhappy or despairing though they may be. Very few poems in *Fields of Wonder* deal with bright, light topics, but instead focus on "the sometimes deeply pessimistic, even nihilistic sections, [such as] 'Border Line,' 'Desire,' and 'Tearless' which emphasize the inherent loneliness of life."<sup>61</sup> It was the raw honesty of these poems, the economy of words and the efficiency of purpose that provided fertile ground from which Owens could cultivate his songs: "I was interested in the lyrical things, because I am interested in something that goes into another world."<sup>62</sup>

It is important to consider Owens' compositional process when studying or performing one of his songs. Owens' greatest concern is for the poetry and the accurate communication of Hughes' texts. He "lived with" the poem for as long as it took him to understand the emotional and dramatic context of the piece. This could be days, weeks or months spent reading the poem, speaking it aloud, and thinking about what Hughes' words were trying to convey. When he was sure he understood the underlying human emotion, Owens would begin to think about a musical environment for the text. Unlike some composers who begin with the composition of the melody, Owens begins with the accompaniment, trying to establish fertile ground from which the melody and rhythm will spring.

From the accompaniment figure – which remains fairly constant for the duration of each song – the melody is derived. Owens repeatedly said that his music is difficult to

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<sup>60</sup> Rampersad, p. 132.

<sup>61</sup> Rampersad, p. 131.

<sup>62</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.



sing, particularly because he does not think about what is easy or friendly to the voice, but rather what he finds beautiful. The result is sometimes angular melodies or uncommon intervals for the melodies, such as fourths and sevenths that combine to convey the essence of the human drama present in the text.

### ***TEARLESS, Op. 9***

The first cycle Owens composed after meeting Langston Hughes was *Tearless*, for tenor and piano. The poetry reveals stories of the desperate, those without hope of ever improving their situations in life, and should be sung from that point of view. Philip Jerome Rogers, in his pedagogical study of *Tearless*, suggests that this group of poems depicts the “lives of working class Negro persons in the early twentieth century whose hopes had...been dashed as a result of racial oppression in America.”<sup>63</sup> There is little concrete information found in these texts or in Hughes’ writings about *Tearless* to support this claim; however, one may choose to approach the interpretation of these songs from that perspective quite successfully.

These poems are some of the shortest Hughes texts Owens has set to music, but contain a profundity of pain and anguish that exceeds most others in these cycles. “Tearless – that is exactly the sort of thing I am talking about... ‘We are the tearless, who cannot weep’ – it’s from their perspective. And the whole cycle is based on this sort of thing.”<sup>64</sup> John W. Parker’s 1947 review of *Fields of Wonder* in the *Journal of Negro Education* concurs: “By and large the most powerful from the point of view of penetrating analysis is... *Tearless*. It is in this section that the author touches upon the familiar topic

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<sup>63</sup> Rogers, p. 108.

<sup>64</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007,

of what it means to the totality of one's personality to be... exploited, to move with the 'have nots' in a land of plenty."<sup>65</sup>

Owens incorporates musical silence in this cycle to heighten the drama of Hughes' poetry. Rogers proposes that "when the silence of the Robert Owens composition is juxtaposed with the silence inside the listener, there is a 'tangible... razor-sharp [moment that is] utterly inaccessible and can remain so for what seems like minutes, hours, days.'"<sup>66</sup>

**"Vagabonds"**

We are the desperate  
Who do not care,  
The hungry,  
Who have nowhere to eat,  
No place to sleep,  
The tearless,  
Who cannot  
Weep.

Owens begins the cycle with two measures of introduction in A flat major, but manages immediately to include the "seventh" element, a G, in the first chord. The accompaniment is solidly in duple meter with four steady quarter note chords per measure. The vocal line enters in measure three with a triplet figure juxtaposed against the duple figures in the accompaniment. This choice creates the effect of the "vagabonds" as detached from the established norm of the duple rhythm. The vocal line is diatonic but features wide leaps that at times create suspended dissonance over the accompaniment chords. Of particular note is the vocal melody as it is composed over the accompaniment in measure four for the word "desperate." The accompaniment presents a simple quarter

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<sup>65</sup> Rogers, p. 108

<sup>66</sup> Rogers, p. 66

note A flat triad in root position, but the voice sings a B flat against it with a dotted eighth note. Just as the voice resolves upward to C, a member of the A flat triad, the accompaniment shifts away to an E flat major seventh chord, to which the C does not belong (see Figure 1). It is as if Owens is constantly reminding listeners that no matter how hard he tries, this vagabond will always be one step behind.

Figure 1. “Vagabonds,” measure 4.



The end of the first section concludes with a large fermata over the vocal rest in measure 8. The accompaniment adopts the vocal triplet figure in the right hand but its rhythmic power is diffused with Owens' instruction of *meno mosso* on the second triplet statement.

The second section is very brief and appears to serve as a transition to the next complete section of the song. Owens makes a sudden modulation to G flat with the addition of accidentals F, G and C flat in measure 7 (see Figure 2). Combined with the dotted figure that appears on beat three of measure 7, the environment is now one monotonous and down-trodden. Owens suggests that punctuated rhythms (particularly

the dotted eighth – sixteenth figure) should always be accented.<sup>67</sup> He builds the drama of this brief section by stating the figure a second time, in this statement *più forte*, followed by a final statement at *piano*. The final note of the figure, F flat, is suspended with a fermata and a clean break in sound before moving to the *a tempo* at measure nine.

Figure 2. “Vagabonds,” measures 7-8.



Owens offsets what he feels to be the most significant statement of the poem in this new tonality of G flat: “No place to sleep, the tearless who cannot weep.” In a mere three measures, he summarizes the emotional state of desperation felt by the poet. He incorporates extensive use of piercing half steps in measures nine and ten, finally resting on C in measure 11. The downward leap of a diminished seventh from D flat to E natural at “sleep” provides an aural sensation of the weariness present in the poetry.

The entire song is repeated, with a few notable exceptions. The first is how Owens gets back to the original key and melodic line. In measure nine, he used an ascending chordal figure in G flat, through a second inversion E flat ninth chord to arrive at a surprising first inversion G major chord under “sleep,” which also creates a striking dissonance with the singer’s C above it. Then in measure ten, Owens gives the vocal line

<sup>67</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

essentially the same melodic figure as in measure three, altering the triplet pitches on beat four from C – A flat – B flat to B flat – G – G. The most remarkable compositional element is Owens’ incorporation of the original accompaniment figures from measure one under this melody. The accompaniment in measure 11 is very similar to that of measure two, though the first A flat seventh chord is revoiced in the right hand, and Owens incorporates the dotted eighth – sixteenth note figure in the right hand instead of the left. The effect is that while the voice is still dwelling on the idea of “the tearless who cannot weep,” the accompaniment has again moved on without him.

Owens, at times, will choose to repeat portions of or an entire text if he feels it will serve the communication of the poetry more effectively, and he does just that in “Vagabonds.” The vocal line features only one change: In measure 13, Owens rescores the vocal line up one octave in beats one through three, adding further pain and drama to the discordant figures discussed in measure four. Beat four is recomposed in the same tessitura but with altered pitches before returning to the original melody for this text in measure 15. The final change occurs in measure 20, before the final cadence in measure 21. In the last beat of measure 20, Owens rescores the vocal line from the octave Gs found in the first statement of the poem to the C – A flat – B flat, all with fermata and tenuto markings over a sustained E flat ninth chord. The dramatic drop in tessitura draws the listener in, and makes poignantly apparent the desperation that the poet feels as he tells of his inability to weep for the state of his life. The song ends quietly and without overt drama.

**“Luck”**

Sometimes a few scraps fall  
From the tables of joy.  
Sometimes a bone  
Is flung.

According to Owens, “Luck” should be sung “as if from the top of a mountain,” and he provides all the necessary musical conditions for fulfilling his request.<sup>68</sup> From the quiet state at the end of “Vagabonds,” “Luck” bursts onto the scene in a bold E flat major with majestic octaves in the left hand and oscillating eighth note thirds in the right. The bass line melody is not easily overlooked, and will appear in various forms throughout the song.

Following two complete repetitions of the opening theme, the voice enters on a “bitter” *forte* B flat and repeats “Sometimes” twice before continuing the poem.<sup>69</sup> Owens’ suggestion of bitterness appears to be in contrast with the majesty of the accompaniment figure until one considers that the accompaniment is the environment to which the poetry is responding. The composer instructs that the performance should be a “combination of speaking, singing and telling a message.”<sup>70</sup>

Owens’ treatment of the bass movement in “Luck” is a broad interpretation of the “scraps” falling from the table. Following eight measures of E flat triads in the bass line, he lowers the harmony by a major third to C flat (see Figure 3). The same melodic figure stated in measures one and two appear in this lowered harmonic center, including the appropriate accidentals to preserve the original intervallic relationships. He lowers the

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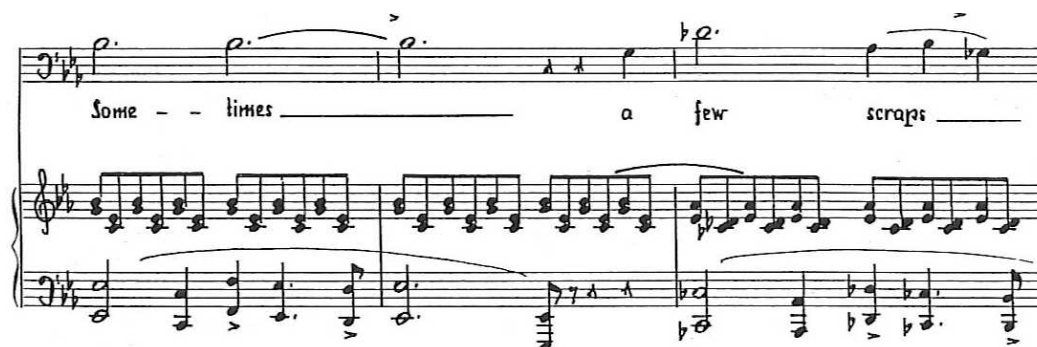
<sup>68</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

bass line by a minor third to A flat in measure 13, and again states the original melodic figure at this pitch, until he begins to move upward again at measure 17.

Figure 3. “Luck,” measures 7-9.



For the first time, the bass melody stops under the word “joy” and alternates left hand octaves between C flat and A flat or G flat, almost as if the bass is leaping upward to meet the vocal line’s D flat. The leaps are in vain, however, and the poet never reaches the height of “joy”, settling on A flat in measure 19 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. “Luck,” measures 17-18.



An exact restatement of measures one and two begin after a caesura at the end of measure 21. The vocal line appears to enter just as before, only to quickly move to a descending stepwise vocal line on “sometimes a bone is flung.” Owens inserts a quarter

rest between “bone” and “is” in measure 24 which further offsets “is flung” and prepares the singer for the ascending octave B flat leap, which should be performed in a very legato manner, almost as an upward slide. “Flung” is restated five times in the remaining ten measures of the song. The first two statements move upward in a “flinging” gesture, but the middle two statements feature a descent from D flat to low B flat, almost as if the singer returns to the lesser station and receives the falling scraps. The final “is flung” inverts the interval and the voice ascends from D flat to the upper B flat, defiant to the end.

### **“Exits”**

The sea is deep,  
A knife is sharp,  
And a poison acid burns –  
But they all bring rest,  
They all bring peace  
For which the tired  
Soul yearns.  
They all bring rest  
In a nothingness  
From where  
No soul returns.

“These are the different ways of committing suicide,” according to Owens’ interpretation of Hughes’ poem.<sup>71</sup> In order to convey the aimless despair felt by the poet, Owens creates an atmosphere that is misty, wistful and watery in A flat minor. This fluid eighth note figure accompanies the first four measures, completely unchanged, as if there is no emotional progress for the poet as he speaks of the deep sea. This first sentence, “The sea is deep,” is rather vague in its intent until combined with “A knife is sharp.” The listener then begins to sense that something sinister and dark is being communicated.

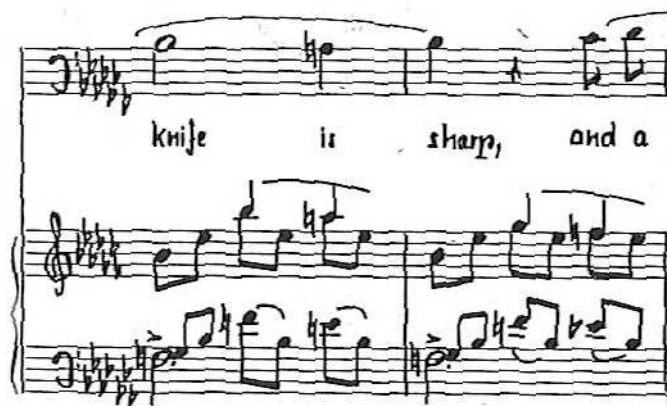
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<sup>71</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.



Owens feeds this suspicion through the half step down to A between the B flats of measures six and seven (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. "Exits," measures 6-7.



The watery accompaniment changes abruptly in measure 12 to a syncopated, yet strangely restful, series of blocked seventh chords. Here the poet speaks for the first time of "rest" and "peace," and Owens' accompaniment nearly lulls one to sleep. He again incorporates the half step motive in measure 14 for the words "bring peace" and "soul yearns" (see Figures 6 and 7). The ascent of a perfect fifth during the sustained "yearns" implies a striving for something just out of one's reach.

Figure 6. "Exits," measures 14-15.



Figure 6. "Exits," measures 17-18.



Owens again modifies the accompaniment in measure 20, nearly stopping all forward motion with a dense F flat major chord as the vocal line descends gracefully via steady quarter notes to a low B double flat on “rest.” This pitch comes to represent rest for the remainder of the song and is used a second time for “rest,” as well as for the end of “nothingness” in measure 31. It is a perfect enharmonic spelling of the A natural that forms the third of the F major chord below it.

The fourth and final accompaniment figure employed by Owens in “Exits” is the dry, menacing two eighth note pattern followed by two quarter rests. This figure appears twice, both in two measure groups, both voiced in E flat diminished triads. Owens saves this figure for the text “where no soul returns.” The vocal line above this figure outlines a descending A flat minor triad, but seems empty after the statement of the blocked chords. The watery, arpeggiated accompaniment finally returns for the conclusion of “Exits,” which suggests that after examining the ways of leaving this life, the poet has not come any closer to his final decision.

#### **“Walls”**

Four walls can hold  
So much pain,  
Four walls that shield  
From the wind and rain.

Four walls can shelter  
So much sorrow  
Garnered from yesterday,  
And held for tomorrow.

“Walls” opens with an accompaniment figure that Owens calls the “wall motif.”<sup>72</sup> This quarter note – eighth note – eighth rest figure is stated in its original form ten times before the harmonic content is altered. The rhythmic treatment remains constant until measure 17, where the second eighth note is augmented to a full quarter note (see Figure 8). In measure 19, Owens scores a quarter note with a fermata, and the two quarter note figures return in the last three measures.

Figure 8. “Walls,” measures 17-19.



The significance of this figure functions both musically and interpretively. Owens’ interpretation of Hughes’ poem suggests the power of walls, both in a protective and a pejorative sense; they may shield one from the harsh elements, but one may also find pain and resentment in their shadow. Musically, Owens has made the unwavering attribute of the walls into a musical figure, i.e. the “wall motif.” No matter how the vocal line is composed above it, or how emotional the text becomes, the wall remains unchanged – until the poet speaks of “so much sorrow,” and the music is brought to a standstill.

<sup>72</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Owens uses a generally declamatory approach to the vocal line with very little embellishment. The melody for this song “comes out of the rhythm of the words, the syllables.”<sup>73</sup> He chooses to highlight particular words, such as “pain” and “rain” with thirty-second note turns on beat two of their respective measures, as if the voice is trying to break free of the constrictive nature of the walls. Just when the singer appears to succumb to the overbearing nature of the walls, Owens inserts a “free” measure and indicates that the melodic line be delivered with great *rubato* over a sustained A flat eleventh chord. He allows the voice one moment of freedom, and explores wandering triplet figures before settling on an E flat quarter note with a fermata at “held” (see Figure 9). It appears that the singer does not know how to really escape the confines of the walls – or the pain he is harboring – and surrounds the final pitch both below (D flat) and above (E flat) before finally relenting his pursuit of freedom, coming to rest on D natural, the same pitch on which the song began, over the same harmony.

Figure 9. “Walls,” measure 18.

The musical score for Figure 9, "Walls," measure 18, consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major/D minor). It begins with a *rubato* marking and a *Tempo primo* marking. The lyrics are "Garnered from yesterday, and held for to -- morrow." The piano accompaniment is written in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of one flat. It also features a *rubato* marking and a *Tempo primo* marking. The music ends with a double bar line.

<sup>73</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

### “Chippy”

Rose of neon darkness,  
 Rose of the sharp-thorned stem  
 And the rouge-bright petals,  
 Rose of nothing but yesterdays  
 Too bitter to remember –  
 Little dollar rose  
 Of the bar stools  
 Facing a two-bit  
 December.

The environment of “Walls” is seen in a new form in the second two beats of the accompaniment that appears in Chippy’s environment (see Figures 10a and 10b). Perhaps “Chippy” is the one suffering under the pain of the walls? While neither Owens nor Hughes ever explicitly says so, there is musical evidence for the idea that *Tearless* is really about “Chippy” and her world.

Figure 10a. “Walls,” measures.1-2.



Figure 10b. “Chippy,” measures 1-2.



As mentioned above, the initial musical environment is unrestrained, almost with a sense of recklessness, due in large part to the tempo marking – *Fuocoso ma moderato* (fiery but moderate) – scored by Owens. When the voice enters in measure three, one realizes that this is the world in which “Chippy” lives, one of little stability and little beauty. Hers is a world of “darkness,” and “yesterdays too bitter to remember.”

At measure 20, the accompaniment finally careens out of control and the stable alternating dotted quarter notes crash downward in dotted eighth note figures into silence in measure 22. It is as if “Chippy” cannot bear the memories any longer. Owens responds with musical pity, resuming the original rhythmic accompaniment figure, but this time, the half steps move upward from F to G flat on beats 2 and 3, and explore a minor third of F to A flat on beats 5 and 6. According to Rogers’ analysis of “Chippy,” “this three measure passage for ‘Little dollar rose of the bar stools’ depicts an altered innocence with its descriptive music box sonority” (see Figure 10).<sup>74</sup> Owens, however, suggests that it may be viewed as something of a lullaby, to be sung “with love.”<sup>75</sup> A liberal amount of legato singing should be employed here, and the approach should be “more intense, slower.”<sup>76</sup>

Figure 11. “Chippy,” measures 23-25.



Measure 26 reveals Chippy’s fate: The “little dollar rose” is ultimately “facing a two-bit December.” Life will not improve for her. Music box accompaniment of any kind is now absent, replaced by a cold F minor eleventh chord. The tempo is *lento*, the vocal instruction *amaro* (harshly). Owens concludes the scene with a “bitter” statement of

<sup>74</sup> Rogers, p. 124.

<sup>75</sup> Owens, September 17, 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Owens, September 17, 2007.

“December” by the baritone, requiring an edgy, raw tone at the descent to the final B flats, and the original chaotic music box reappears under the voice, indicating that Chippy’s fate is sealed.<sup>77</sup>

**“Dancers”**

Stealing from the night  
A few  
Desperate hours  
Of pleasure.

Stealing from death  
A few  
Desperate days of life.

When one sees the title “Dancers,” it might be expected to hear a swirling, joyous introduction. Hughes’ view of the dancers, however, is one of sorrow and despondency. Owens recognized this emotional theme, yet still managed to incorporate a dance-like element, one that he calls a “music box winding down.”<sup>78</sup> This theme is found in the right hand of the first measure of “Dancers” when Owens scores a descending sixteenth note passage resulting in two beats of alternating sixteenth notes (see Figure 12.). They seem to have no purpose or direction per se, but instead are clinging to the small bit of life they have remaining. Each stretch upward of a sixth is another attempt to stay alive. Owens reveals that this effort is futile through his downward progression of keys – he uses three key signatures in the first three measures of the song. This accompaniment figure is present in 7 of the song’s 12 measures.

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<sup>77</sup> Owens, September 17, 2007,

<sup>78</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Figure 12. “Dancers,” measures 1-2.

*Andantino cantabile, P. 104*

The vocal line adopts and modifies this accompaniment theme throughout the song. The first vocal entrance in measure three attempts to reach the leap of a sixth demonstrated in the accompaniment, but instead only arrives at a perfect fifth. A second attempt arrives at the same result. Of particular note is measure five, where the voice doubles exactly the accompaniment figure's descending sixteenth note line on "desperate hours of pleasure" (see Figure 13). The desperation is both heard and felt as the voice tumbles downward in apparent exhaustion.

Figure 13. “Dancers,” measure 5.



Following a measure of rest, the voice enters again with the second stanza of the poem, this time audibly struggling against the low rumblings of death below. The second



figure employed by Owens features the same bass line as the music box figure, but the right hand incorporates undulating sixteenth notes in thirds (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. “Dancers,” measures 8-10.



When this figure is present, it appears that the music is dying and will not rise again. The text parallels this impression: “Stealing from death a few desperate days of life.” Again, the voice tries to achieve the initial leap upward of the sixth, but falls even further short, only accomplishing a perfect fourth at the repeated “of life.” The accompaniment makes one last valiant effort but, as before, tumbles downward to rest at the final cadence.

### “Grief”

Eyes  
That are frozen  
From not crying.

Heart  
That knows  
No way of dying.

“Grief” is unique in this cycle for two reasons: First, it is by far the shortest song in the cycle, comprising only six brief measures. Second, Owens omits a piano

introduction, dropping the singer and the listener into this world of anesthetized sadness, not so unlike the shock that accompanies grief in real life.

Even without his traditional establishment of a musical environment, Owens manages to portray the emotional scene of the poem in a very effective way. The vocal line incorporates only three pitches in the entire song (F, C and E flat). The voice begins on F (“Eyes”) then immediately drops to C, and remains there on static, even eighth notes for “that are frozen from not.” Only at “crying” does the voice leap upward to the F, but sinks to the E flat, incorporating a Baroque-infused “sigh.” A similar approach is used for the second stanza, but instead of the E flat on the second syllable of “dying,” Owens returns to the C.

The accompaniment is vivid in its representation of a clock ticking in the background. Very subtly, Owens alternates the F and C in ostinato eighth notes in the right hand over steady quarter note chords in the left hand. The harmony vacillates by measure between F major and E flat, though the F and C “clock” figure remains unchanged (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. “Grief,” measures. 1-3.

The musical score for measures 1-3 of "Grief" is presented in a three-staff format. The top staff is the vocal line, the middle staff is the right-hand piano accompaniment, and the bottom staff is the left-hand piano accompaniment. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line begins with a half note on F4 ("Eyes"), followed by eighth notes on C4 for "that are frozen from not", a half note on F4 for "cry", and eighth notes on E-flat4 for "ing". The right-hand piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern alternating between F4 and C4. The left-hand piano accompaniment consists of steady quarter-note chords. Dynamics are marked as *p* (piano) and *mp* (mezzo-piano).

Eyes that are fro-zen from not cry — ing Heart that knows no way of

**“Prayer”**

Gather up  
In the arms of your pity  
The sick, the depraved,  
The desperate, the tired,  
All the scum  
Of our weary city.  
Gather up  
In the arms of your pity.  
Gather up  
In the arms of your love –  
Those who expect  
No love from above.

Of all the Langston Hughes cycles, *Tearless* is the most cyclic in nature, due in large part to Owens’ treatment of the last song of the cycle, “Prayer.” He restates exactly the accompaniment figure that opened “Vagabonds,” uniting those who suffer and those who are pitied in one musical idea. He omits the second measure of the original accompaniment, and moves directly to measure three, a repeat of measure one (see Figures 16a and 16b).

**Figure 14a. “Vagabonds,” measures. 1-3.**

Adagio,  $\text{♩} = 46$

We — are, — we are the

Figure 16b. “Prayer,” measures. 1-3.



As illustrated above, even the vocal line closely resembles that of “Vagabonds,” though Owens adjusts the rhythmic structure to accommodate the new text. In measure five, he modifies the melodic line, inserting dramatic appoggiaturas that lead toward the high D flat “scum” in measure six (see Figure 17).

Figure 15. “Prayer,” measures 5-6.

Owens modifies the measure of vocal rest found in “Vagabonds” in order to immediately restate the poet’s plea for pity in measures seven and eight. The restatement is scored at a very slow tempo, *lento*, which highlights the sincerity of “Gather up in the arms of your pity / Gather up in the arms of your love.” The new tempo, combined with the significantly higher tessitura, summarizes the pathos of those vagabonds described throughout the cycle. It is as close to a vocal cry as Owens composes in this cycle. He

underscores “Gather up in the arms of your love” with the same figure that previously accompanied “No place to sleep,” a choice that offers rest to the weary (see Figure 18).

Figure 16. “Prayer,” measure 10.



The cycle concludes with a yet slower tempo indicated by the *meno mosso* in measure 11, and dramatic fermatas above each syllable of “no love from a –”, finally coming to rest on an E flat, just as in “Vagabonds,” to close the song. Owens modifies the accompaniment in the last two measures slightly to provide a greater finality to the last song of *Tearless*, but overall, the result is haunting, familiar and thought-provoking.

### *SILVER RAIN, OP. 11*

The cycle *Silver Rain* tells the story of two lovers from the wonder of their initial realization (“In time of silver rain”) to the quiet time at the end of life (“Sleep”).

**“In time of silver rain”**

In time of silver rain  
 The earth  
 Puts forth new life again,  
 Green grasses grow  
 And flowers lift their heads,  
 And over all the plain  
 The wonder spreads  
     Of life,  
     Of life!  
     Of life!

In time of silver rain  
 The butterflies  
 Lift silken wings  
 To catch a rainbow cry,  
 And trees put forth  
 New leaves to sing  
 In joy beneath the sky  
 As down the roadway  
 Passing boys and girls  
 Go singing, too,  
 In time of silver rain  
 In time of silver rain  
     When spring  
     And life  
     Are new.

This is the rain of new life, wiping clean the dust from the soil and revealing new life on the earth below. Owens begins with crystalline sixteenth note arpeggiated patterns in the right and left hands that unquestionably represent the rain falling lightly to the ground (see Figure 19). The sixteenth notes, though in varying patterns, persist for the duration of “In time of silver rain,” creating a sparkling, magical environment in which Hughes’ story is told.

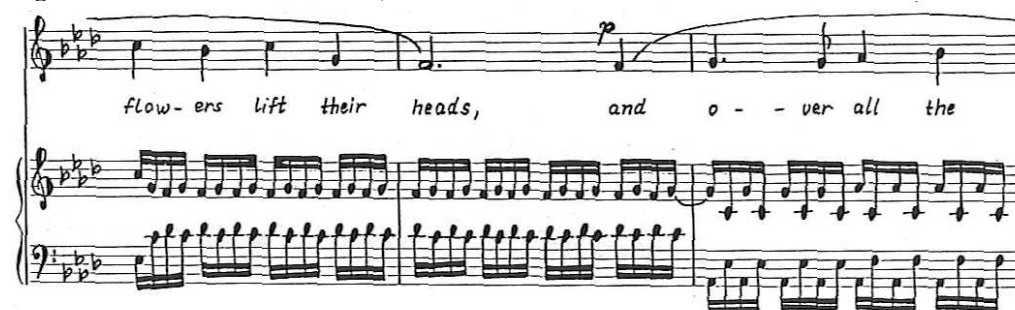
Figure 19. “In time of silver rain,” measures 1-2.



When the voice enters in measure three, it is with some of Owens' most lyrical and beautiful writing. The line is composed in the middle of the tenor voice, providing a natural warmth and ease to accompany Hughes' first lines of text: "In time of silver rain the earth puts forth new life again." A new urgency is felt in measure six as the harmony changes from alternating A flat and F minor seventh chords under "Green grasses grow." Here Owens is musically demonstrating the examples of new life springing up as a result of this magical rain.

To further intensify the text, Owens modifies the arpeggiated accompaniment patterns to repetitive minor seconds in the right hand and minor sixths in the left hand which soon compress to parallel the right hand figure (see Figure 20). It is almost as if the earth is about to bubble over with the anticipation of what is to come next. Owens returns to a similar figure – intervals of a second in the right hand paired with thirds in the left hand – three more times during this song.

Figure 20. “In time of silver rain,” measures 8-10.



The vocal line is primarily conjunct, contributing to the lyricism and ease of delivery, and incorporates unhurried but interestingly syncopated rhythms to deliver the text. It is clear when Owens feels a new intensity in the text, as he modifies the rhythmic content of the vocal melody to signal this change. In measure 24, Owens represents the movement of the butterfly with eighth note triplets on beat four, repeating the same pattern on beat four in measure 25 (see Figure 21). For a moment, the audience is swept away on the wings of the butterfly.

Figure 21. “In time of silver rain,” measures 24-25.



Owens dramatically lowers the tessitura when the text speaks of “trees [putting] forth new leaves to sing in joy beneath the sky,” and he draws the listener closer with hushed excitement and wonder. Throughout “In time of silver rain,” Owens reinforces the



beautiful legato line so important in his compositions by writing out each phrase marking. He is very explicit about where the breaths should occur, and that a seamless vocal line is preserved in between breaths. Adherence to this request results in an ethereal, delicate sound ideal for this musical environment. The simplicity of “In time of silver rain” speaks directly to the innocence and hope of a new love, and proves a charming entry into the world of Owens’ *Silver Rain* cycle.

**“Fulfillment”**

The earth-meaning  
Like the sky-meaning  
Was fulfilled.

We got up  
And went to the river,  
Touched silver water,  
Laughed and bathed  
In the sunshine.

Day  
Became a bright ball of light  
For us to play with,  
Sunset  
A yellow curtain,  
Night,  
A velvet screen.

The moon,  
Like an old grandmother,  
Blessed us with a kiss,  
And sleep  
Took us both in  
Laughing.

The sparkling environment of “Silver Rain” succumbs to an earthy, grounded environment in “Fulfillment.” According to Owens, the poem – and subsequently, the

music – is about “a boy and girl getting into the glory of the world.”<sup>79</sup> The opening three measures establish the accompaniment figure for the first section of the song: “The earth-meaning/Like the sky-meaning/Was fulfilled.” Representative of an ancient proclamation, Owens creates a heavy, and purposeful, left hand figure that evokes the era of the mythical Titans. The low tessitura of the left hand octaves further enhances this primal sensibility. The vocal line parallels this majestic setting in arpeggiated B minor triads, adding to the archaic sense of the music (see Figure 22).

Figure 22. “Fulfillment,” measures 5-6.



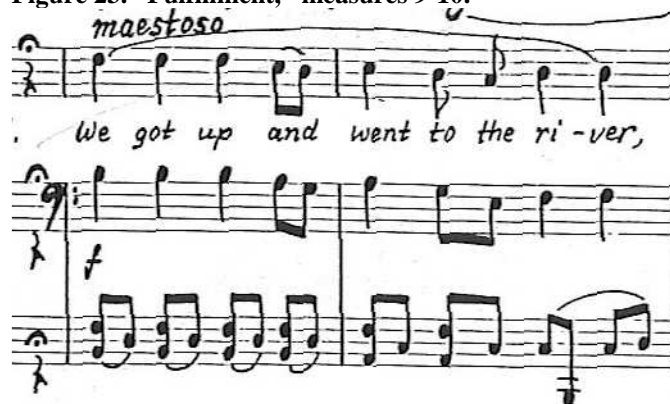
As if by some cosmic magic, the vocal line spins out a melismatic passage over a G7 chord on the word “fulfilled.” Owens suggests that the singer should “enjoy – don’t rush – the sixteenth notes.”<sup>80</sup> The melisma comes to a rest on F sharp, which provides a stable half cadence, as if the prophecy had indeed been fulfilled. The end of the section is marked with fermatas over the piano and vocal lines, indicating a clean break prior to the start of section two.

<sup>79</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

<sup>80</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

Owens indicates *maestoso* at the onset of the new section, and instructs that it should be interpreted in a very legato and joyful manner.<sup>81</sup> As the boy and girl explore the world, the eighth note accompaniment propels them forward under a fairly static vocal line (see Figure 23). Owens creates a duet between the piano and voice in measures 9 – 15, further reinforcing the closely entwined relationship between the boy and the girl. This element is particularly significant, as Owens rarely creates a direct parallel between the melodies of piano and voice.

Figure 23. “Fulfillment,” measures 9-10.



The third section begins in measure 16 with a key change to G major and an evolution of the eighth note walking figure into bustling sixteenth notes. The vocal rhythm speeds as well with shorter note values, though Owens cautions that the tempo does not change.<sup>82</sup> A hushed excitement is present, pulling both the piano and the voice forward through measure seventeen. The singer should take care not to interrupt the forward motion by lengthening the notes with *tenuto* markings in measure 16; they should be accented, not longer.<sup>83</sup> By doing this, Owens ensures the continuation of the legato line which is of great importance in all of his songs: “A heightened attention to the legato line

<sup>81</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

is fundamental to the performance of many of [Owens'] songs. Sustained vocalism requires a concentrated legato melody that is unbroken in its sense of focus, motion, and energy. Although a breath may be required in the midst of that melodic line, its sense of energy is upheld to maintain the poignancy of the text.”<sup>84</sup>

Owens deliberately slows the motion with a large *ritardando* in measure 18, though the accompaniment figure remains the same (see Figure 24). He indicates *meno mosso* in measure 19 as the vocal line relaxes from excited eighth notes to a more calm series of quarter notes, and finally, a dotted half note.

Figure 24. “Fulfillment,” measures 17-19.



The excitement has overwhelmed and exhausted the boy and girl, and they sink to rest under the “velvet screen.” Owens smoothly transitions back to the original accompaniment figure and key of B minor as the singer sustains “moon.” The vocal line is marked *rubato*, and each sixteenth note of “like an old grandmother” is given *tenuto* markings, and finally, fermatas on the last two syllables. Sleep swirls around the boy and girl as the “prophecy” is restated under them.

As the singer releases the consummate F sharp at “kiss,” the accompaniment returns to the primal figure in its original tempo, propelling the song to its end. Owens

<sup>84</sup> Rogers, p. 68.

notes that an appoggiatura on the high D should be sung before resolving to the final syllable.<sup>85</sup>

It is possible that one could interpret this song as primal, innocent lovemaking, complete with seduction, climax, release and subsequent desire. Owens did not describe it that way but this author suggests that if one is viewing *Silver Rain* as a cycle dealing with the evolution of a human relationship, “Fulfillment” could be the moment at which the relationship is consummated in the most personal and passionate of ways.

**“Night song”**

In the dark  
Before the tall  
Moon came,  
Little short  
Dusk  
Was walking  
Along.

In the dark  
Before the tall  
Moon came,  
Little short  
Dusk  
Was singing  
A song.

In the dark  
Before the tall  
Moon came,  
A lady named  
Day  
Fainted away  
In the  
Dark.

“Night song” begins with a two measure introduction in a B minor tonality that previews the melodic line. This is one of the few times that Owens shares a melodic

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<sup>85</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

figure from piano to voice (see Figure 25). The voice then adopts this melody and sings it three times, each slightly modified to suit the text underlay. When the voice enters in measure three, the accompaniment retreats to a sedate two measure rhythmic *ostinato*: two half notes plus one whole note. The harmonic progression is a variation on the descending G – F – E pattern; Owens calls this his “walking theme.”<sup>86</sup> This “theme” seems to be traveling nowhere until Owens finally lowers the bass line via stepwise motion to C in measure 15.

Figure 25. “Night Song,” measures 1-4.



It is at this point that the singer is sustaining the last word of the poem – “dark” – and seems reluctant to succumb to the movement of the bass line away from the established pattern. Again Owens gives melodic material to the piano, restating the last six notes of the initial melodic statement from measures one and two, as a reminder that night is not completely gone. Owens calls it “leaving the things open, leaving... that it doesn’t sound... music that doesn’t stop, but goes on and on and on...”<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

**“Silence”**

I catch the pattern  
Of your silence  
Before you speak.

I do not need  
To hear a word.

In your silence  
Every tone I seek  
Is heard.

“These are the wonderful things I think about – it is someone who *really* understands you.”<sup>88</sup> Owens communicates the idea of “silence” in a completely opposite way, creating a musical environment that is dominated by the *forte* of the poet’s passion. The accompaniment begins with *sforzando* accented grace notes that settle in F-sharp major whole note chords. Owens does this three times, allowing the voice to enter on the second half of beat one following an eighth rest with a fermata for dramatic suspense. The voice enters at a *piano* dynamic and is given the rhythmic flexibility of a *rubato* marking. Once again, Owens has set a very short poem in a very dramatic way. Following the first stanza, he indicates a *crescendo poco a poco*, building the voice to *forte* in four measures. He contrasts the word “silence” with a *forte* dynamic for the last two phrases of the song, adding a final crescendo to “is heard” (see Figure 26).

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<sup>88</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Figure 26. "Silence," measures 9-11.



The bass line expands the scope of the powerful silence as it descends stepwise from F sharp in measures one through four to an octave lower in measure 11 as a first inversion D major chord (see Figure 27).

Figure 27. "Silence," measures 3-6.



Owens places great importance on this figure: "I think it's always very important, the bass line, the fundament of all things. You must hear this. This is also a kind of falling. And in the bass part you are continually changing the key – this is the fullness of the harmony."<sup>89</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.



**“Carolina Cabin”**

There's hanging moss  
 And holly  
 And tall straight pine  
 About this little cabin  
 In the wood.

Inside  
 A crackling fire,  
 Warm red wine,  
 And youth and life  
 And laughter  
 That is good.

Outside  
 The world is gloomy,  
 The winds of winter cold,  
 As down the road  
 A wandering poet  
 Must roam.

But here there's peace  
 And laughter  
 And love's old story told  
 Where two people  
 Make a home.

“Carolina Cabin” is a “taste of the South.”<sup>90</sup> It is composed in a distinct three-part form delineated by harmonic and melodic elements. The first section is from the “outside”: the singer is in nature, apart from the activity of the cabin, and quietly observes his environment. Owens incorporates a folk feeling with the four “hm” figures in measures three through six, giving the impression of a casual stroll through the woods (see Figure 28). The accompaniment figure is relatively simple, alternating eighth notes between the right and left hands of the piano. The same harmony is present in each measure which creates a timeless and static quality while the vocal line unfurls above it.

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<sup>90</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Figure 28. “Carolina Cabin,” measures 4-6.



Owens notes that the middle section in G major is filled with the tragedy of an outsider with no home. He highlights the solitude of the wanderer by scoring the vocal tessitura a third higher than in the first section and incorporates a broad *meno mosso* at the discussion of the gloomy world. Of particular importance, says Owens, is the half step from G to F-sharp on the word “cold.” The *molto ritardando* in measure 21 should be strictly observed before the return to E major. The accompaniment figure remains essentially unchanged, indicating that the wanderer will not stop at the cabin long.

Following his observation of the two lovers inside, the poet returns to the “hm” figure as he wanders onward. A sense of comfort is present in the third section of “Carolina Cabin,” when the poet speaks of “But here there’s peace and laughter and love’s old story.” It is as if simply seeing that happiness does exist is enough to give him the hope to walk on.

**“Songs”**

I sat there singing her  
Songs in the dark.

She said,  
*I do not understand*  
*The words.*

I said,  
*There are*  
*No words.*

Owens uses a mere nine measures for “Songs.” He “doesn’t believe in [using] too many notes” and sought for a “Greek clarity” in the setting of this poem.<sup>91</sup> Simplicity is certainly achieved as he returns to the fundamentals of Western harmony and begins with a simple A flat triad in the whole note accompaniment figure. The translucent accompaniment allows the text to prevail, and when the voice enters on beat two, the melody is lyrical and devoid of chromaticism (see Figure 29).

Figure 29. “Songs,” measures 1-3.

*Andantino* (♩ = 72) **Songs**

*mf*

*I sat there sing-ing- her songs in the dark.*

<sup>91</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

When the woman speaks, she tries to change the key from A flat to C major. Her words are sung at *sotto voce*, and it is as if she does not even understand herself: “I do not understand the words.” She abruptly reorients the tessitura of the vocal line to further emphasize her point (see Figure 30).

Figure 30. “Songs,” measures 5-6.



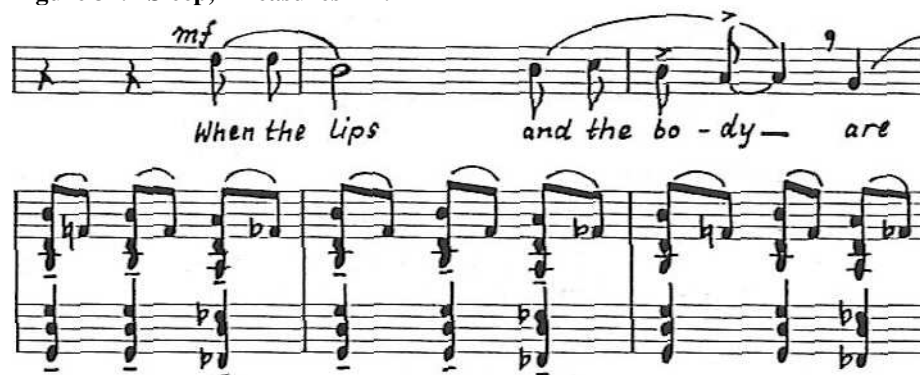
Owens captures beautifully the relationship between the two lovers, particularly that the man knows the woman better than she knows herself. Instead of jolting them backward into A flat, the man adopts the G from her half cadence at “words,” and finds a place of harmonic compromise in the middle, coming to rest on a G major triad at the final cadence.

### “Sleep”

When the lips  
And the body  
Are done  
She seeks your hand,  
Touches it,  
And sleep comes  
Without wonder  
And without dreams.  
When the lips  
And the body  
Are done.

“Sleep” is the final song in *Silver Rain*, and provides a satisfying and elegant ending to the story of these two lovers. They are past the prime of life, as the drooping eighth note pattern and descending bass line reveal a gentle weariness (see Figure 31). The vocal line moves in a similar downward direction through measure six.

Figure 31. “Sleep,” measures 2-4.



The comfort of sleeping next to a partner and lover is displayed as Owens sustains “hand” on a D flat and crescendos to the next measure. The intensity is maintained to the high A flat on the second syllable of “without,” as if sleep is now a respite rather than a place of magic and awe. It is as if the dreams are exhausted at this point in life. A small fermata is hidden among the eighth notes of the accompaniment over the second half of beat three to accompany the sustained F on “dreams.”

Following the fermata, the voice and accompaniment enter with a final statement of “when the lips and the body are done” that parallels the first statement. Owens changes the first pitch from a D to a high G in order to facilitate an easier aural shift downward, and uses quarter notes instead of eighth notes at “and the.” The voice sustains “done” on a tied whole note which becomes the seventh of the E flat major seventh chord at the final

cadence. It sounds complete and contented, much as the two lovers appear to be as their story comes to an end.

### ***DESIRE*, Op. 13**

*Desire* deals with the relationship between a man and woman, though in a dramatically different way than in *Silver Rain*. While *Silver Rain* tells a love story, *Desire* unfolds in moments of time, and most of them are less than pleasurable. In this cycle, Hughes and Owens explore themes of sexual contact without emotional intimacy, shattered dreams, unfulfilled promises and the unwanted wisdom of maturity.

#### **“Desire”**

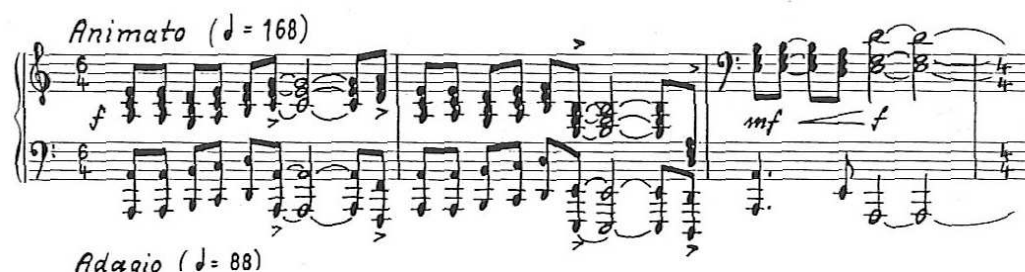
Desire to us  
Was like a double death,  
Swift dying  
Of our mingled breath,  
Evaporation  
Of an unknown strange perfume  
Between us quickly  
In a naked  
Room.

According to Owens, “Desire” tells the story of “two people – they have met, and are having unbelievable sexual contact; almost something brutal.”<sup>92</sup> Just as he describes, the song opens with a rather brutal accompaniment figure (see Figure 32). The piano enters violently at a very brisk tempo ( $\text{♩} = 168$ ) with pounding eighth note chords in A minor.

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<sup>92</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Figure 32. "Desire," measures 1-3.



The piano wanders roughly, settling briefly on an A minor seventh chord, but soon leaps away again before resting on an E minor seventh chord. The effect is quite startling, particularly if one is unfamiliar with the song. In measure three, the bass line descends again to a low A in the left hand. Owens layers an E minor seventh chord over the pedal A and creates a feeling of uneasiness that is sustained while the voice enters on beat four of measure four. The voice sings firmly in E minor, creating further tension with the bass line. Only in measure eight does the bass line and harmonic underlay change to a first inversion D minor chord. The vocal line is primarily conjunct and could be appreciated as quite sensuous, except for the troubled accompaniment beneath it.

Owens gives the impression that there is no commitment between the two participants in this act. At times the song appears to occur in vivid flashbacks, with the eighth note figures returning to the time of the encounter and the sustained accompaniment taking place in the present while one participant reflects on the event.

Measure 17 introduces a new accompaniment figure paired with a much less conjunct vocal line. There is breathlessness in the syncopation of the accompaniment, and the dramatic leap of a major sixth at "desperation" gives urgency to the text (see Figure 33). Owens undermines the E flat seventh chords by inserting pitches of F and C on weak

beats. This figure only lasts for six measures, as if to represent the brief primal fervor of the moment, only to return to the “brutal” figure again in measure 24.

Figure 33. “Desire,” measures 20-23.



Following three empty beats of rest, the voice reenters above the figure introduced in measure one, reliving the sexual encounter. Interestingly, Owens does not dwell for more than an eighth note on the word “us,” as if there really is no “us” between the two people. More significant to the poet is the encounter itself – as evidenced by the “strange perfume” – which took place “quickly in a naked room.” Like the act it describes, “Desire” ends as quickly as it began.



### “Dream”

Last night I dreamt  
this most strange dream,  
And everywhere I saw  
What did not seem could ever be:

*You were not there with me!*

Awake,  
I turned  
And touched you  
Asleep,  
Face to the wall.

I said,  
How dreams  
Can lie!

*But you were not there at all!*

“Dream” is less of a dream than it is a nightmare. Owens accelerates a rocking lullaby-like figure in D minor into an uneasy exploration of the things that happen in the mind while one sleeps. The persistent and unsettling D minor remains present and unchanged through measure 12 (see Figure 34).

Figure 34. “Dream,” measures 9-13.



Of particular interest is the dissonance intentionally created by Owens in measures five and six, when the voice is singing “most strange dream” on repeated E flats against the D minor harmony. This use of a minor second between the two musical forces further illustrates the unsettling nature of the dream for the dreamer.

In measure 13, the accompaniment moves to D flat as a transition into the next accompaniment figure of oscillating eighth notes in the left hand and a melodic duet in the right hand (see Figure 35). The duet between the right hand of the piano and the voice highlights the pathos and surprise of “You were not there with me!” Owens uses a hollow-sounding perfect fourth interval for the four measure D flat duet. The indication of *sotto voce* adds an ethereal and disbelieving quality to the vocal line.

Figure 35. “Dream,” measures 15-18.



The rocking figure returns in measure 21, but this time with a tonal center of C. The figure is modified slightly with the addition of D flat, creating a minor second dissonance on the third eighth note of the measure. The vocal line returns after three and a half measures of rest with a more agitated line including sixteenth note pickups as well as the introduction of D flat against the bass line C. As the section progresses, the poet

becomes more and more distressed with shortened phrases marked by frequent breaths, dotted rhythms and wavering sixteenth note melismas, finally coming to rest on a D flat fermata in measure 32 over a B flat ninth chord.

Measure 33 interrupts the fermata with an accented quarter note in the previous A minor tonality. The voice adopts A minor again in a heavily accented line: “I said how dreams can lie!” sung *a cappella*. The effect is one of disbelief and bewilderment. Owens again introduces *sotto voce* in measure 36, and suggests the singer “use falsetto sound in last two measures” as the song concludes “But you were not there at all!”<sup>93</sup> Each word is set with a fermata, as if the poet cannot easily comprehend the reality of his situation. Owens concludes “Dream” on a C half diminished seventh chord, far away from the A minor tonality in which he began.

**“Juliet”**

There are wonder  
And pain  
And terror,  
And sick silly songs  
Of sorrow,  
And the marrow  
Of the bone  
Of life  
Smeared across  
Her mouth.

The road  
From Verona  
To Mantova  
Is dusty  
With the drought.

In “Juliet,” Hughes and Owens present their interpretation of Shakespeare’s star-crossed lovers. Theirs, however, is told from a unique perspective, that of Friar Laurence

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<sup>93</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

who is hurriedly riding on horseback to get to Romeo before he finds Juliet “dead.”<sup>94</sup> The poem presupposes familiarity with the story, as the two main characters are never directly mentioned, though the listener is expected to know the “her” that is referenced, as well as the importance of Verona and Mantova in the original story.

The music of “Juliet” divides the poetry into three sections – the first is Friar Laurence singing about generalities of life, the second is about Romeo and Juliet’s situation in particular, and the last an observation of his current surroundings. Owens captures these three distinct sections through the use of introduction and interlude.

The first introduction is jolly and buoyant in a bright E major and reveals the nature of Friar Laurence’s character (see Figure 36). The vocal line that enters in measure nine is lyrical and sweeping, as one might sing to himself as he travels. Owens employs chromaticism to illustrate Laurence’s emotional connection to the words he is speaking: “pain” is presented in the interval of a minor third, “terror” with a minor second, and “sorrow” with a minor seventh.

Figure 36. “Juliet,” measures 1-5.



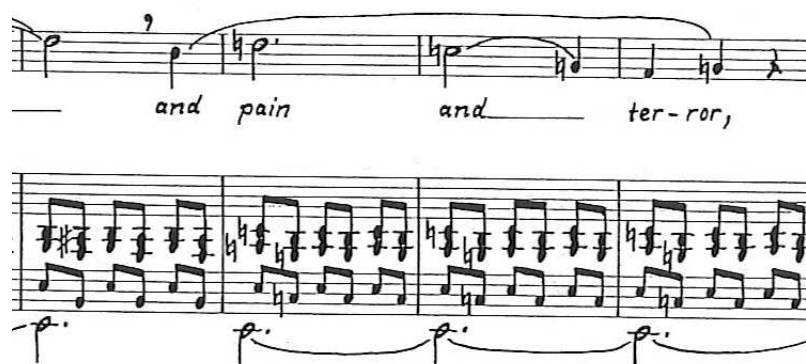
Owens introduces the “Verona” theme in the accompaniment underneath the vocal entrance in measure nine (see Figure 37).<sup>95</sup> This theme incorporates an E pedal over which alternating eighth note triads propel the song – and Laurence’s horse – forward

<sup>94</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

<sup>95</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

toward his destination. The pedal tone features prominently in “Juliet,” as Owens uses a sustained E as pedal until measure 20, when he moves to A.

Figure 37. “Juliet,” measures 13-16.



The transition to the second section modulates to C major in measure 29; the unusual progression seems jolting and illustrates the Friar’s concern for Romeo and Juliet’s situation. Again Owens employs the minor second interval at words of particular significance, such as the E – F – E scored for “smeared.” Though in C major, Owens emphasizes the pitch of E in the vocal line and pedal tone. He begins the section with a C natural pedal, a shift of a minor third from the previous A, then moves to up a third to E in measure 33. In measure 35 he moves again to an A pedal, over which he layers an E major triad. This creates an easy path of return to E major for the third section beginning in measure 42.

The third section closely parallels the first, again preceded by the original introduction. Again the pedal functions importantly, though the long-breathed pedal tones are more active in this section and incorporate different pitches. Following the interlude, Owens begins on an E pedal, as he did in section one, and in measure 54 moves to A. The A pitch is sustained for four measures until measure 57 when it moves to F. The pedal

shift is misaligned with the vocal phrase by one measure, the voice having started a new phrase in measure 56.

The duration of the pedals become shorter; the F natural pedal lasts for only two measures, followed by two measures of D pedal. As the voice sings “drought” on D sharp, Owens returns to the E pedal tone to conclude the song. The D sharp is sustained for seven measures against the E pedal, and acts as the seventh of the final cadence above an E major triad.

### **“Man”**

I was a boy then.  
I did not understand –  
I thought that friendship lay  
In the grip of hand to hand.  
I thought that love must be  
Her body close to mine.  
I thought that drunkenness  
Was real –  
In wine.

But I was a boy then,  
I didn't understand  
The things a young lad  
Learns so soon  
When he's  
A man.

Owens calls “Man” a “plaintive sort of confession.”<sup>96</sup> The poet reveals what he has learned from his past relationships, and his disillusionment with the things that truly define intimacy. Owens’ setting is simple and transparent, and he instructs that the rhythms must be exact for accurate communication of the text.<sup>97</sup> The song is brief – just 30 measures in length – but incorporates three distinct sections in its brevity. Each section

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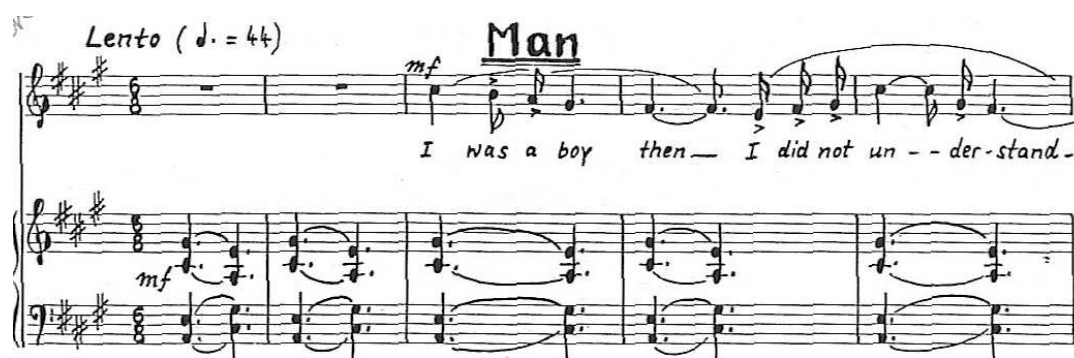
<sup>96</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>97</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

reveals things that the “man” has learned, and are reflected in the thrice-repeated “a man” motive at the conclusion of the song.

The song begins with two measures of introduction in a lilting, wistful 6/8 meter in A major. The piano is very exact, like breathing.<sup>98</sup> The vocal line is conjunct and unhurried as the poet reflects on his youth: “I was a boy then, I did not understand” (see Figure 38).

Figure 38. “Man,” measures 1-5.



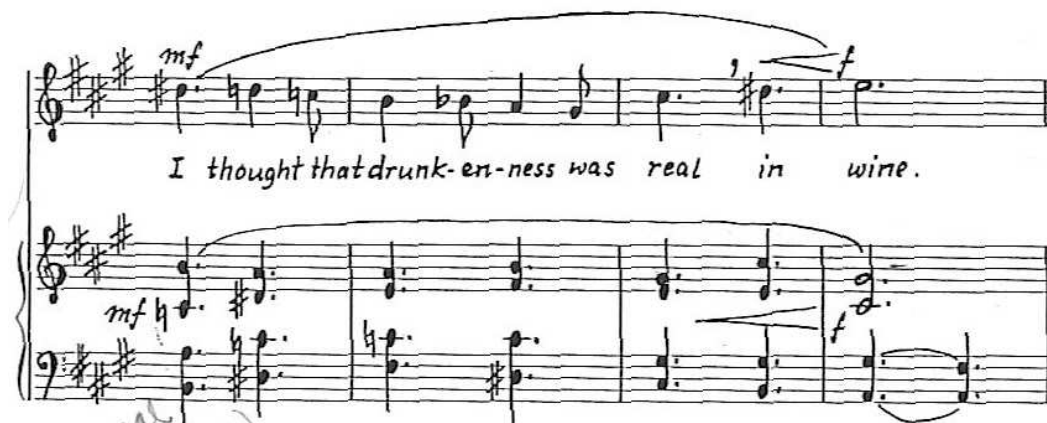
Owens maintains the A major accompaniment figures until measure 7, when a dramatic leap of a minor seventh occurs on “friendship,” as if the idea is now bittersweet to the poet upon reflection. The dissonance between the singer’s E natural and the bass F sharp illustrate the bitterness of this memory. The first section concludes with another progression to a B7 chord, the voice also settling on a B in measure 10.

Section two reveals a new type of vocal line, one that is more static and pensive: “I thought that love must be her body close to mine” surrounds the pitches of G and A while the accompaniment figure begins in A major and becomes more chromatically active with each beat. By measure 12, the accompaniment has shifted to an A sharp seventh chord and moves to a B9 chord in measure 14. Owens plays with the minor

<sup>98</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

second interval in the vocal line, highlighting the frustration and pain realized in this maturation from adolescence to adulthood (see Figure 39).

Figure 39. “Man,” measures 14-17.



The third and final section is prefaced with one measure of vocal rest. When the voice enters again in measure 19, it is in C sharp minor, the relative minor to the original key of A major. The innocence of youth is lost: “I was a boy then.” Owens saves the highest pitch of the cycle – G sharp – for the word “things” of “the things a young lad learns so soon.” This is fitting, as “Man” is the culmination of the experiences gathered in *Desire*, and provides a momentary summary of this man’s relationships.

Owens maintains the C sharp tonality for the remainder of the song, and repeats “a man” three times at the end, alternating between the lowered seventh scale degree B natural and the new tonic, C sharp. Owens’ choice of a major second interval is revealing, as his usual descriptive interval of a minor second now bears the weight of maturity and sinks the additional half step.

Owens notes that the repeat signs around measure 29 are optional and may be omitted at the discretion of the singer.



***HEART ON THE WALL, Op. 14***

*Heart on the Wall* is comprised of five songs for soprano and piano: “Heart”, “Remembrance”, “Havana Dreams”, “Girl”, and “For dead mimes.” The cycle was written for American coloratura soprano Mattiwilda Dobbs, at her request, but she never performed it. *Heart on the Wall* was premiered by soprano Rhea Jackson in Hamburg, 1961, with the composer at the piano, and was subsequently orchestrated for Felicia Weathers. According to Dr. Darryl Taylor of the University of California-Irvine and a frequent collaborator with Robert Owens, this cycle is the most commonly performed of all Owens’ works for voice.

**“Heart”**

Pierrot  
Took his heart  
And hung it  
On a wayside wall.  
He said,  
"Look, Passers-by,  
Here is my heart!"

But no one was curious.  
No one cared at all  
That there hung  
Pierrot's heart  
On the public wall.

So Pierrot  
Took his heart  
And hid it  
Far away.

Now people wonder  
Where his heart is  
Today.

“Heart” is the first in the cycle, and retells the story of Pierrot, the beloved harlequin from the *commedia dell’arte* tradition. Hughes describes the pathetic scene of

Pierrot displaying his heart on the town wall, only to have it ignored by the townsfolk. Shamed, he hid his heart away from the world forever.

While the Hughes' poem tells a sad story, Owens reminds the singer that this is the story of a doll, not a human, and should not be sung as if the situation were reality. He suggested that the accompaniment figure is "one of giddy joy and (the vocal line) should be sung with love, as lightly as possible."<sup>99</sup>

The ascending, syncopated right hand of the piano seems to bubble over with Pierrot's excitement at sharing his love with the townsfolk (Figure 40). When the voice enters in the third measure, it is with similar joy and effervescence.

Figure 40. "Heart," measures 1-2.



The second section which details the public's ignorance of Pierrot's most personal gift is more "monotonous and menacing in tone."<sup>100</sup> Owens has modulated from a bright C major in the opening to a pathetic A minor, highlighting Pierrot's disappointment and heartbreak (see Figure 41).

<sup>99</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

<sup>100</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

Figure 41. “Heart,” measures 18-20.

According to the composer, “modulations are very important in the telling of the story” and must be carefully observed by the singer and the pianist.<sup>101</sup> At the point of modulation, the vocal color must be darkened, incorporating “a little more realism, expressionism.”<sup>102</sup>

A return to the original accompaniment figure and key reminds us that though the story is sad, it is about a doll, much like a child’s fairy tale. The high A in measure 32 should be sung as an “echo”, as if one is hearing the distant beat of Pierrot’s heart.<sup>103</sup> Owens urges caution in learning the correct intervals in the final two phrases of the song as he rarely uses a “pure” third in the vocal line, preferring the color of seconds and fourths.<sup>104</sup> The conclusion of the song features Hughes’ moral – “Now people wonder where his heart is today” – enhanced with the highest tessitura of the song, floating over the buoyant accompaniment as it evaporates into Pierrot’s imaginary world.

<sup>101</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

<sup>102</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

<sup>103</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

<sup>104</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

### “Remembrance”

To wander through this living world  
And leave uncut the roses  
Is to remember fragrance where  
The flower no scent encloses.

“Remembrance” contrasts the imaginary world of Pierrot with the weighty realism of humanity. From the bright C major Owens abruptly transitions to a dark C minor, heavy and plodding as befits the serious nature of the poetry (see Figure 42).

Figure 42. “Remembrance,” measures. 1-2.



As is typical of Owens’ compositions, the initial accompaniment figure is maintained through the first half of the song, providing a weighty, solemn environment for the vocal line.

Owens suggests that the singer put “a little bit of weight on each note.”<sup>105</sup> He is very concerned with clear enunciation of the text, even in a rather high soprano tessitura. He repeats the opening text twice in the first section before stating the whole poem in the second section.

<sup>105</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

The first section of “Remembrance” is an excellent example of Owens’ gift for unconscious text painting. (Owens claims that he does not concentrate on highlighting particular words as he composes the vocal line, but instead writes a melody that he finds beautiful over the accompaniment environment.) However, the use of triplet figures on “wander” and the descending sixteenth note scale figure on “through this” suggest a feeling of drifting through the world, not noticing the beauty that surrounds us. He saves the highest, longest pitches (G and A) for the word “roses” in each of the two sections, as if their beauty is the pinnacle of the life experience.

The original vocal melody, slightly modified, begins the second section, this time accompanied by a rolling triplet accompaniment figure (see Figure 43).

Figure 437. “Remembrance,” measures 11-12.

The urgency of this section is enhanced by Owens’ suggestion of *poco più mosso* at the third statement of “To wander through this living world,” building toward the climax “roses” on a high A natural – a major seventh above the bass B-flat.

Owens develops a new melody for the final thought of the poem: “Is to remember fragrance where the flower no scent encloses.” It sits in a precarious area of the soprano voice – the *secondo passaggio* – and features narrow half-steps and a dramatic tritone at

“encloses” (see Figure 44). This compositional choice results in a sense of urgency and intensity, and highlights the poignancy of beauty missed and opportunity lost.

Figure 44. “Remembrance,” measures 15-18.



Even the final resolution of a downward perfect fifth to D results in dissonance over a C minor seventh chord which then resolves to a B-flat major seventh chord. Though rather unexpected, the final chord provides stability to the song, almost implying that Hughes' advice has been heard and heeded.

### “Havana Dreams”

The dream is a cocktail at Sloppy Joe's –  
(Maybe – nobody knows.)

The dream is the road to Batabano –  
(But nobody knows if that is so.)

Perhaps the dream is only her face –  
Perhaps it's a fan of silver lace –  
Or maybe the dream's a Vedado rose –  
(Quien sabe? Who really knows?)

A “rough and raucous sort of thing” is how Owens describes the third song of this cycle, “Havana Dreams.”<sup>106</sup> The somber nature of “Remembrance” is immediately jolted into the flamenco-inspired world of Havana, Cuba, with its seedy bars and sultry flirtation. Owens establishes this environment at the onset of the song with driving triplet eighth note figures and a heavily-accented vocal line (see Figure 45).

Figure 45. “Havana Dreams,” measures. 1-2.



He suggests that the vocal performance be “quite hard and realistic – the flamenco is not so beautiful,” conveying an underlying desperation in the search for this “Havana dream.”<sup>107</sup> The accented duple figure in the vocal line further emphasizes the harsh reality of these worldly dreams.

The “ahs” are a vocal representation of the swirling flamenco and finally succumb to the seductive triplet figures, obscuring the reality of poverty and despair. The accompaniment and voice align in lush chords at each statement of “Maybe – nobody knows.” “Knows” is extended with a fermata on a high G, the seventh of the A7 chord below it, resisting the inevitable return to the flamenco rhythm. The second “ah” begins like the first, but then hangs unaccompanied as the flamenco underpinning falters below it.

<sup>106</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

Owens then introduces a “very seductive and sensual” environment for the second half of the song.<sup>108</sup> This statement of “But nobody knows if that is so” is surrounded by blocked triad and seventh chords built on a descending bass line, leading into a lilting waltz, devoid of the frenzy present in the initial flamenco figures (see Figure 46).

Figure 46. “Havana Dreams,” measures 36-39.



Here, the images are those of beautiful things – a woman’s face, a silver lace fan, a Vedado rose – and graceful eighth note triplets tied to half note chords create an otherworldly feeling. Each of the phrases ends with a languorous fermata, clinging to the beautiful images, suspended over minor seventh and ninth chords.

Hughes then asks the question – “who knows?” – in the language of Havana, Spanish: “Quien sabe?” which Owens scores on insistent E-flats, a sudden leap of a minor seventh from the previous pitch. The attempted return to reality is subverted, however, by the return of “ah” on the highest pitches of the cycle, sung in a “joyous” way, with blatant disregard for the dismal reality of the first half of the song. The final “Who really knows” is deliberate – each syllable is scored with a fermata – and “knows” hangs triumphant over the return of the flamenco figure.

<sup>108</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.



**“Girl”**

She lived in sinful happiness  
And died in pain.  
She danced in sunshine  
And laughed in rain.

She went one summer morning  
When the flowers spread the plain,  
But she told everybody  
She was coming back again.

Folks made a coffin  
And hid her deep in earth.  
Seems like she said:  
My body  
Brings new birth.

For sure there grew flowers  
And tall young trees.  
And sturdy weeds and grasses  
To sway in the breeze.

And sure she lived  
In growing things  
With no pain  
To laugh in sunshine  
And dance in rain.

In order to communicate the light, airy feeling of the poem, Owens chose a waltz figure for the accompaniment in this song. Throughout the “prologue” of the story, he still incorporates seventh chords, but they take on a fresh feeling in the waltz format. Though the poem tells of the girl’s unfortunate death, the listener seems to know that this story will not end sadly. A preview of the girl’s bright spirit is evident at the “ah” figure in measures 34-38.

When the story of the girl’s death is revealed, Owens leaves the waltz figure for a persistent, rolling eighth note pattern, propelling the story forward (see Figure 47). A lyrical vocal line tells of the girl’s tragic demise and burial. Her voice seems to rise from

the tomb in measure 66, floating above the accompaniment, hovering around D and E as she speaks confidently of her rebirth. The waltz theme returns in recollection of her laughter at measure 74 with the “ah” figure. Another example of Owens’ unintentional text painting occurs in measures 95-97 as the ascending and descending eighth notes illuminate “sway in the breeze.”

Figure 47. “Girl,” measures 40-43.

The musical score for measures 40-43 of the song "Girl" is presented in a grand staff. The vocal line is in the treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is in the grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The time signature is 3/4. The vocal line begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The piano accompaniment begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a *non legato* marking. The lyrics are written below the vocal line, with English and German versions provided.

Measure	Vocal Line (English)	Vocal Line (German)
40	She	Sie
41	went	schied
42	one	sehr
43	sum - - mer mor - ning	früh im Som - mer,

While this is the longest song of the cycle by far, “Girl” is the most accessible of the songs for the audience. Its spirit of hope and rebirth, combined with the lilting waltz figure, makes this song both a joy to sing and to hear.

**“For Dead Mimes”**

O white-faced mimes,  
May rose leaves  
Cover you  
Like crimson  
Snow.

And may Pierrette,  
The faithful,  
Rest forever  
With Pierrot.

For the conclusion of *Heart on the Wall*, Hughes returns to the story of Pierrot; rather, the end of his story. Here are Owens’ and Hughes’ dramatic skills at their finest. Hughes’ text is an elegy for the dead Pierrot and his companion Pierrette, drawn in striking detail: covered by “crimson snow.” Hughes wishes that they rest forever together, undisturbed by the world that shunned them.

Owens’ music is comparably dramatic, opening with an accented blocked D minor chord, a sharp contrast to the bright A tonality that preceded it. The tempo marking *Grave* enhances the drama, and Owens suggests that the performance be “Turandot-esque” in color and weight.<sup>109</sup> Owens offsets each phrase with a rest on the downbeat, opening space for the dirge-like blocked chords (see Figure 48). The drama builds with the increasing dynamic level, beginning at mezzo-forte, the second section at forte, and concluding with the final statement at fortissimo as Pierrot’s name is proclaimed.

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<sup>109</sup> Owens, September 13, 2007.

Figure 48. “For dead mimes,” measures 7-9.

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is a vocal line with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains three measures of music. The lyrics are: "And may Pi - er - rette, the faith-ful, / Und mög' Pi - er - ret-te, die treue,". The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a key signature of one flat. It contains three measures of music. The first measure has a chord of F major. The second measure has a chord of C minor. The third measure has a chord of F major. The piano part includes a pedal point (Ped.) in the bass line.

A deceptively simply-constructed song, the weight of each chord combined with the high tessitura creates a theatrical and striking conclusion to *Heart on the Wall*.

### ***BORDER LINE*, Op. 24**

*Border Line* is Owens’ longest cycle, 16 songs for baritone and piano. Of all the Hughes song cycles, this one incorporates best Owens’ gift of brevity and his ability to immediately capture the essence of Hughes’ words in an economy of musical measures. This approach, then, also requires that the singer be able to summon and communicate the emotional shifts just as quickly, for Owens provides precious little time in the way of song introductions or interludes. According to Philip Rogers’ pedagogical study of the cycle, “The succinct introductions for each song, therefore, set the tone immediately and thus require the singer to quickly shift from one philosophical perspective to another. The songs in this cycle are compositionally concise, direct, and sometimes conspicuous.”<sup>110</sup>

“*Border Line* is a very example good of [Owens’ need to completely understand the poetry prior to composition] because these “exits” – until I understood what he was

<sup>110</sup> Rogers, p. 131.

saying... the suicide, whether you drown, you have different choices in how you exit but they all bring peace, you know?”<sup>111</sup> The sense of peace appears periodically within the cycle, but the pervasive feeling is one of desperation to leave this cruel life. For each of Hughes’ proposed “exits,” Owens manages to find a unique aural environment that encapsulates the essence of the poetry and its underlying emotion.

**“Border Line”**

I used to wonder  
About living and dying –  
I think the difference lies  
Between tears and crying.

I used to wonder  
About here and there –  
I think the difference is nowhere.

This poem was one of Langston Hughes’ favorites from *Fields of Wonder*. He suggested that this poem “seems to carry within itself a melody which I can hear although I cannot sing a note. Since this poem is like a song, its sound conditioned its saying.”<sup>112</sup> Hughes included a reading of “Border Line” at the National Poetry Festival in October 24, 1962. “‘A poem, I think,’ he told the audience, ‘should be the distilled essence of an emotion – the shorter the better.’”<sup>113</sup> This assessment applies well to all of the poems in this collection.

Owens accommodates Hughes’ desire for “distilled essence” with his typical economy of notes and measures. A two measure introduction establishes a tumultuous emotional situation, as the poet contemplates the difference between life and death (see

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<sup>111</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

<sup>112</sup> Rogers, p. 132.

<sup>113</sup> Rogers, p. 132.

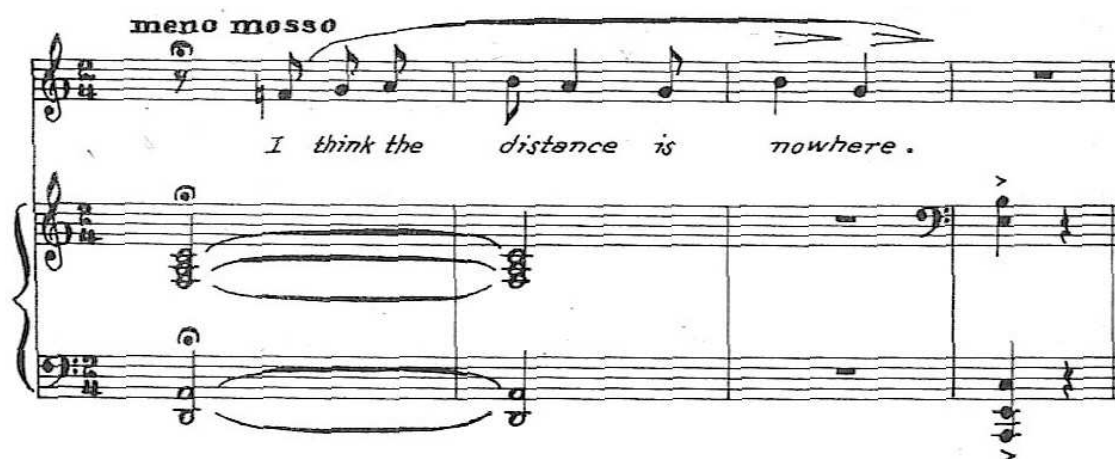
Figure 49). The arpeggiated D minor ninth chord establishes a sense of unease, multiplied by the sounding of a blocked chord on beat two of measure one. The voice enters at mezzo piano in measure three, the final piece of the troubled environment.

Figure 49. “Border Line,” measures 1-3.

The musical score for measures 1-3 of "Border Line" is presented. The tempo is marked "Allegro con moto". The key signature is D minor (three flats). The time signature is 6/8. The voice part enters in measure 3 with the lyrics "I used to". The piano accompaniment consists of a blocked chord in the right hand and an arpeggiated D minor ninth chord in the left hand. The dynamic marking *p* (piano) is indicated for the piano part.

Throughout “Border Line,” the voice hovers above the accompaniment, frequently singing the fifth or eleventh scale degree of the arpeggiated chord below it. The effect is one of being detached from the environment and creates a lack of stability that is disconcerting both the singer and listener. Owens prolongs this effect unchanged until measure 19, just four measures from the song’s end, when he gives the voice the minor third of the D minor seventh chord (see Figure 50).

Figure 50. "Border Line," measures 19-22.



This adjustment, combined with the starkness of a single sustained chord after 18 measures of frenetic arpeggiation beautifully highlights the poet's answer to his own question: "I think the difference is nowhere." Owens goes one step further and completely divorces the poet from his environment by eliminating the piano altogether under the word "nowhere." Reinforcing the idea that there is no real difference between the living and the dead, Owens returns the voice to the seventh of the A minor ninth chord, much like it began. It is as if the poet has achieved his goal to remove himself from the world as he finds his answer.

### **"Night: Four Songs"**

Night of the two moons  
 And the seventeen stars,  
 Night of the day before yesterday  
 And the day after tomorrow,  
 Night of the four songs unsung:  
     Sorrow! Sorrow!  
     Sorrow! Sorrow!

"Night: Four Songs" has a declamatory and assertive character. It is as if the poet has chosen to announce his intentions to leave the world, and calls upon the night to

accompany him on his journey. Owens accomplishes this task with a stark, heavily accented one measure introduction paired with an equally spare vocal line (see Figure 51).

Figure 51. “Night: Four Songs,” measures 1-2.



As the song progresses, the poet invokes not only the night in which he lives, but nights of the past and future, and a mysterious “night of four songs unsung,” giving an air of the supernatural to his invocation. In complement, Owens complicates the accompaniment with the use of a chromatic quarter note triplet figure against the vocal eighth note triplet in measure five, followed by the insertion of a 2/4 measure, before returning to the original common time meter and accompaniment figure derived from the original figure in measures one and two (see Figure 52).

Figure 52. “Night: Four Songs,” measures 5-7.

The image shows measures 5-7 of the song. The vocal line (treble clef) has lyrics "and the day after tomorrow," and "Night of the four songs unsung:". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) is more complex, featuring multiple triplet figures (indicated by a '3' over the notes) and changes in meter. The right hand of the piano part includes a chromatic quarter note triplet. The dynamic remains *mf*. The score shows a mix of common time and 2/4 time signatures.



The four statements of “sorrow” are accompanied by an echo, as if the night is responding to the poet’s call. The final statement in measures nine and ten are drawn out over five beats, incorporating a fermata over the first syllable, an A against a C minor seventh chord. Only on the last note of the song do the voice and accompaniment align in an F major triad, implying that the poet will not be alone in his journey.

### “Dustbowl”

The land  
Wants me to come back  
To a handful of dust in autumn,  
To a raindrop  
In the palm of my hand  
In spring.

The land  
Wants me to come back  
To a broken song in October,  
To a snowbird on the wing.

The land  
Wants me  
To come back.

“Dustbowl” is the most lyrical of the *Border Line* cycle. Owens calls it a “real song with a beginning and an end.”<sup>114</sup> The beginning of “Dustbowl” is some of Owens’ most hauntingly beautiful writing, featuring an extended introduction with a sweeping right hand melody played in octaves over an extended arpeggio in the left hand. This right hand rhythmic figure – ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ – serves as the “land” motive in “Dustbowl,” and will be seen again later in the song. The effect is one of bittersweet melancholy (see Figure 54).

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<sup>114</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Rogers suggests that the countermelodies in the left and right hands should “depict the strong swirling effect of the wind on the dust of the plain.”<sup>115</sup>

Figure 54. “Dustbowl,” measures 1-3.



The voice enters subtly in measure five, joining the right hand melody in a duet. Owens loosely maintains the duet through measure eighteen as the text unfolds. The images of autumn and spring appear to be remembered fondly, given the stepwise, flowing vocal line.

October, however, seems to stir different feelings: “to a broken song in October” appears as the flowing accompaniment comes to an abrupt halt in measure nineteen. Owens trills an A minor seventh chord under a weighty vocal line that resolves to an E half diminished seventh chord over a scrambling, chromatic eighth note scale (see Figure 55).

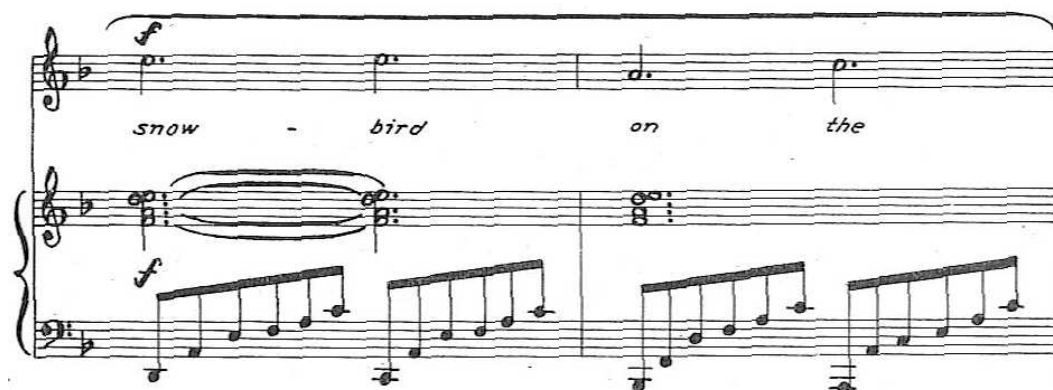
<sup>115</sup> Rogers, p.138.

Figure 55. “Dustbowl,” measures 18-20.



A variant of the original accompaniment appears in measure 21. The upward-sweeping left hand has been modified from quarter notes to eighth notes, paired with sustained seventh chords in the right hand. The vocal line rises to its highest point – an E – in measure 21 as the text tells of “a snowbird on the wing” (see Figure 56).

Figure 56. “Dustbowl,” measures 21-22.



A *molto ritardando* decelerates the tempo dramatically in measure 24 and the left hand accompaniment tumbles downward to a variant of the original accompaniment figure in measure 25. The “land” theme returns in the right hand, coaxing the poet homeward.

**“Burden”**

It is not weariness  
That bows me down,  
But sudden nearness  
To song without sound.

“Burden” is a study in contrast. The song juxtaposes descending and ascending lines, spare and full textures, and chromatic versus diatonic phrases. According to Rogers, “Owens refers to this poem as possessing worlds of philosophical implications. His interpretation of these implications is manifest in his use of chromaticism and contrasting rhythms in the melodic vocal line and his forward and reverse motion in the ostinato accompaniment.”<sup>116</sup> The prospect of the poet coming face to face with real vulnerability, real beauty, is almost too terrifying for him to comprehend. This becomes evident in the second half of “Burden.”

The song opens with a spare, chromatic accompaniment. In the first two measures it is evident that there is hesitancy in this character, and a calculating, careful approach to life. The right and left hands play independently of one another, demonstrating distrust and self-protectiveness (see Figure 57). The vocal line is equally as cautious, wavering by half-step on either side of the consonant pitch, such as the appoggiatura A natural in measure 4 that finally resolves to G on the fourth sixteenth note of beat one. Owens further disconnects the vocal line from the accompaniment through the incorporation of triple versus duple rhythms.

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<sup>116</sup> Rogers, p. 140.

Figure 57. "Burden," measures 3-4.

Figure 57 shows measures 3 and 4 of the song "Burden." The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It begins with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The lyrics are "It is not wea - ri - ness that". The melody consists of a half note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, a quarter note B-flat4, and a quarter note C5. The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). It features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand, including some sixteenth-note patterns. The overall texture is light and delicate.

The hesitancy of the first section of "Burden" is relieved somewhat at measure 10, "But sudden nearness." The vocal line adopts an ascending sixteenth note line that seems eager to move forward. In complement, the right and left hands of the accompaniment finally play together in lush E flat seventh chords. Owens heightens the excitement with a *crescendo poco a poco* (see Figure 58).

Figure 58. "Burden," measures 11-12.

Figure 58 shows measures 11 and 12 of the song "Burden." The vocal line continues with the lyrics "sud - den - nearness, But sud - den - nearness to". It features a more active melody with ascending sixteenth notes, marked with an accent (>) and a *pizz* (pizzicato) marking. The piano accompaniment is in grand staff and features lush E-flat seventh chords in the right hand, sustained by long notes. The left hand provides a steady eighth-note accompaniment. A *cresc. poco a poco* (crescendo poco a poco) marking is present in the piano part, indicating a gradual increase in volume. The texture is richer and more sustained than in the previous measures.

The hope is still tinged with hesitancy, as Owens returns to the vocal line's original tendency of approaching the consonant pitch from a half step below. While the accompaniment sustains the E flat seventh chord, Owens scores "sound" on an A natural eighth note downbeat that resolves to a B flat. He does this three times as the song

concludes, once per measure, finally augmenting the final statement to a half note A natural on a double forte. The effect is a hopeful one, as the final consonance gives evidence that the poet may indeed have the courage to be vulnerable at last.

**“One”**

Lonely  
As the wind  
On the Lincoln  
Prairies.

Lonely  
As a bottle of likker  
On a table  
All by itself.

In “One,” Owens creates a simple, unadorned environment that evokes a quiet breeze blowing through the curtains of an open window. The effect is solitary, but not sad. Though written in 3/4, the effect is like a lilting 6/4, rocking in response to the breeze. The voice enters in measure four following two complete statements of the lilting accompaniment figure, but the rhythmic accents move in opposition to the accompaniment, falling on one and three (see Figure 59).

Figure 59. “One,” measures 6-10.



The vocal line is very limited, with the tessitura remaining primarily in the interval of a fourth (E to B), with brief forays down to D and C. Rogers suggests that the “dynamic markings and rests are vital to the interpretation of the text.”<sup>117</sup> The aural space Owens incorporates into the vocal line suggests a disconnection from the continual movement of the accompaniment, enhancing the poet’s loneliness. Owens successfully combines all compositional elements at his disposal to create an aural painting of this solitary room where the poet lingers alone.

**“Beale Street”**

The dream is vague  
And all confused  
With dice and women  
And jazz and booze.

The dream is vague,  
Without a name,  
Yet warm and wavering  
And sharp as flame.

The loss  
Of the dream  
Leaves nothing  
The same.

In the composition of “Beale Street,” Owens “felt a French Quarter inspiration as he thought of a real street in Louisiana. The song is harsh, tough, rough.”<sup>118</sup> The opening accompaniment figure is a hiccupping waltz-like accompaniment, giving the impression of a piano bar late at night (see Figure 60).

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<sup>117</sup> Rogers, p. 143.

<sup>118</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Figure 60. “Beale Street,” measures 3-5.



Each note is heavily accented, as if the pianist and singer must concentrate very hard to remain clear-headed through drunken drowsiness. This approach suits the text well, as the poet reveals “The dream is vague and all confused.”

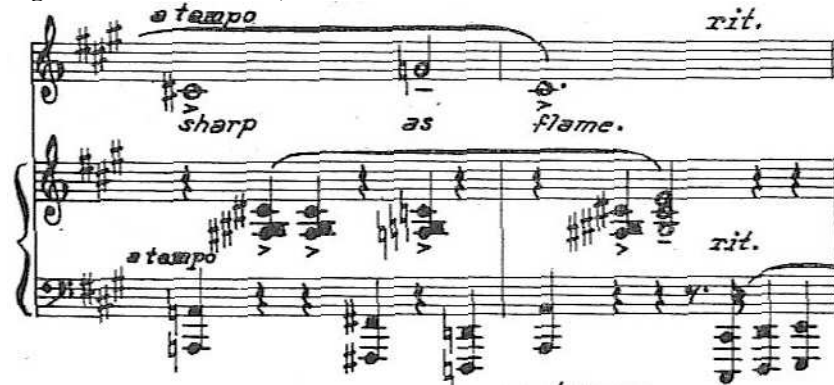
Rogers suggests that “‘Beale Street’ must be vocally interpreted with what Owens calls a nasty, dirty, steel-like quality of tone.”<sup>119</sup> Owens assists the singer with this effect by scoring short, rather low pitched phrases that accommodate a brassy, bright tone. The result is a further demonstration of the environment that Owens must have envisioned for his Beale Street – dark, seedy and edgy.

In measure 17, however, Owens suggests a different idea, one of remembrance and clarity, if just for a moment, as the drunkenness clears and reveals something comforting: “yet warm and wavering.” The piano-bar accompaniment is suspended into two dotted half note chords for two measures under a *legatissimo* vocal line filled with *rubato*. The moment passes as quickly as it came, returning to the drunken waltz with a striking use of a repeated augmented fourth to the words “sharp as flame” (see Figure 61).

<sup>119</sup> Rogers, p. 145.



Figure 61. “Beale Street,” measures 19-20.



Owens lowers the vocal line dramatically in measure 22 for “the loss of the dream.” Clearly, the poet feels regret for this dream that slipped from his grasp, and Owens shows a moment of remorse in the fermata over the D minor ninth chord. Choosing to ignore his sorrow, the waltz accompaniment returns with the *a tempo* in measure 24 to the end of the song. As a final moment of reflection, Owens scores a fermata over the last beat of the final measure of the song before launching forward into “Gifts.”

#### “Gifts”

To some people  
Love is given.  
To others –  
Only heaven.

“Gifts” begins in F sharp minor, the second of three songs in a row scored with a three-sharp key signature. This connection implies that Owens sees “Beale Street,” “Gifts” and “Circles” as a mini-cycle unto themselves. The text and character do seem to present a natural evolution of this single character as he contemplates the state of his life from a drunken night in a bar to the realization of his solitude, and the futility of his life’s direction.

Approached in this way, the five measures of “Gifts” acts as a revelation for the poet, as he recognizes that there is no love for him on this earth, and though he has the promise of heaven, he certainly has not seen it in this lifetime. Owens fittingly scores a very spare accompaniment of a single sustained triad per measure in measures one through three. Each chord moves downward by step around the common tone of C sharp in the left hand (see Figure 62).

Figure 62. “Gifts,” measures 1-5.

In measure four, Owens releases the C sharp and replaces it with a descending eighth note A major scale surrounded by an implied B minor triad. The bright scale is in stark contrast to the minor tonality of the established environment, yet it does not provide hope, but rather a callous reminder of the heaven that is not yet achieved. When “heaven” is finally sung in measure five, the voice begins on an A, the third of the F sharp minor triad, but in contrast with the E major chord beneath it. In an attempt to realize “heaven,” the voice moves down a half step to G sharp, the major third above E, only to find that the

chord below has moved as well – to F sharp minor – and heaven has eluded him once again.

**“Circles”**

The circles spin round  
And the circles spin round  
And meet their own tail.

Seasons come, seasons go,  
The years build their bars  
Till we’re in jail.

Like a squirrel in a cage –  
For the jail is round –  
We sometimes find  
Ourselves upside down.

“Circles” is the third song in the three-sharp series. It summarizes the thoughts in “Beale Street” and “Gifts” about the futility of life when there is no purpose for living. As a result, life becomes a series of events with no progress forward. In order to communicate this idea, “Owens created a frenzied sense of wonderment... in his arpeggiated introduction [that] possesses the spinning character of a rapidly rotating wheel epitomizing expended energy, but metaphorically going nowhere as a result” (see Figure 63).<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Rogers, p. 149.

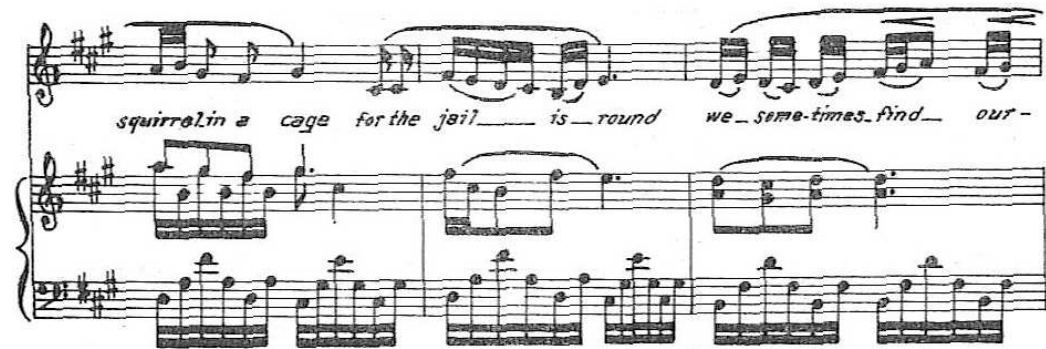
Figure 63. "Circles," measures 1-3.



Owens' vocal line tries to resist the whirlwind of the accompaniment as it enters in measure two. The singer is successful for the first two stanzas of the poem, maintaining a steady eighth note pulse over the swirling sixteenth note figures. The second stanza begins in measure nine with the vocal line lowered by a perfect fifth. The dramatically lowered pitch gives the impression of frustration and disappointment from the singer, and accurately represents Hughes' sentiments: "Seasons come, seasons go, the years build their bars till we're in jail." The defeat is palpable.

It is in measure 16 that the singer succumbs to the squirrel's wheel when the vocal line adopts first two sixteenth notes, and then six in measure 17, and finally a full measure of oscillating sixteenth notes in measure 18 as he is absorbed into the wheel (see Figure 64). Owens composes a clever aural reversal for the final statement of "Circles" when the voice sings an upward leap of an augmented fifth on "upside down."

Figure 64. "Circles," measures 16-18.



### "Grave Yard"

Here is that sleeping place,  
 Long, long resting place,  
 No stretching place,  
 That never-get-up-no-more  
 Place  
 Is here.

"Grave Yard" is composed around two themes: the low descending eighth notes on beats two and four of each measure, representing the grave yard itself, and the high, clustered C sharp and D sharp representing the spirit (see Figure 65). Here, according to Owens, "the border has been passed – the person is dead."<sup>121</sup> Though the tempo marking is *Grave*, Owens tends to perform the song at a faster tempo, providing almost a constant striking of sound in the accompaniment in different registers of the piano, almost as if church bells were ringing for the dead.

<sup>121</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Figure 65. "Grave Yard," measures 1-3.

Figure 65 shows the musical score for measures 1-3 of "Grave Yard." The score is written for voice and piano. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is common time (C). The vocal line (treble clef) begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The lyrics are: "Here is that sleeping place, — Long, — long". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand (treble clef) plays a series of chords, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

The vocal line incorporates increasing degrees of mournful moaning, beginning with the passing tone B natural in measure three. Owens indicates a very legato line by inserting phrase marks, but highlights words that should receive additional weight with accent marks. The accents should in no way interrupt the sustained line, however.

The "grave" and "spirit" themes disappear in measure six as the text speaks of the things that the dead will not be able to do ever again: "no stretching place, that never-get-up-no-more place." The accompaniment incorporates a dry, rhythmic and almost punitive quality to provide contrast to the flowing bell-like accompaniment of the first section (see Figure 66).

Figure 66. "Grave Yard," measures 7-9.

Figure 66 shows the musical score for measures 7-9 of "Grave Yard." The score is written for voice and piano. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is common time (C). The vocal line (treble clef) begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The lyrics are: "never-get-up - no-more Place is — here, —". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand (treble clef) plays a series of chords, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

The “grave” and “spirit” themes reappear in measure nine, following the moaning quality of “place is” in the vocal line of measure eight. A descending G sharp to C sharp at the word “here” infuses the vocal line with mournful sorrow. Owens maintains this idea in measure 10 a step lower. The final two measures of “Grave Yard” involve an ascending line as the voice sings “here,” a mirror reflection of the descending interval that was sung at the first statement of that word in measure nine. The impression is one of the “spirit” rising to heaven as the “grave” theme tolls one last chime on a low C sharp below.

**“Convent”**

Tell me,  
Is there peace  
Behind your high stone walls –  
Peace  
Where no worldly duty calls –  
Or does some strange  
Insistence beckon  
With a challenge  
That appalls?

“In “Convent,” there is this which one has to explain the meaning to people. In the convent, the innocence and the temptation, that comes right in the beginning. Menacing and evil – the people don’t go far enough. They have to realize what that is, and when they realize it, they can do something with their voices.”<sup>122</sup> Owens’ summary of “Convent” is readily apparent in his composition. The theme of “innocence” (the rolled C sharp seventh chords) is juxtaposed dramatically with the “temptation” theme (the descending sixteenth note B to quarter note C sharp) in the left hand. The contrast between registers pervades the accompaniment through the entirety of “Convent” (see Figure 67).

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<sup>122</sup> Owens, September 16, 2007.

Figure 67. “Convent,” measures 1-4.



“Convent” is the only song of the Langston Hughes cycles that is composed in a traditional ABA form, marked clearly by a *dal segno* after measure 15. Owens’ obvious demarcation of each section indicates a dramatic character change required of the singer at the onset of the B section in measure 10. Owens felt that the poetic intent would be more accurately communicated if he repeated the first five lines of Hughes’ poem.

The first section, measures one through nine, are inquisitive and searching. The poet is seeking peace behind the protection of a convent’s walls, though he is disbelieving that it will relieve him of worldly trials. Owens’ ascending motive of G-sharp – A – B at each statement of “peace” reveals a hopeful questioning that seeks the much-desired respite. Whereas the song began with the “innocence” theme on beats one and two, in measure four, “innocence” and “temptation” trade places, demonstrating the poet’s desire to leave temptation behind for the peace of the sanctuary.

Section two begins in measure ten with a stark C sharp ninth chord. The repeated E at the vocal entrance reveal the poet’s desperate need to know, almost pleading for an answer to his question. Owens further intensifies this plea with narrowly wandering sixteenth notes at “insistence” in measure 11 (see Figure 68).



Figure 68. “Convent,” measure 11.



Following the B section, the question “Is there peace behind your high stone walls?” seems to be more wretched than before, and one hopes that the poet finds the answer he so desperately seeks.

### “Poppy Flower”

A wild poppy-flower  
Withered and died.

The day people laughed –  
But the night people cried.

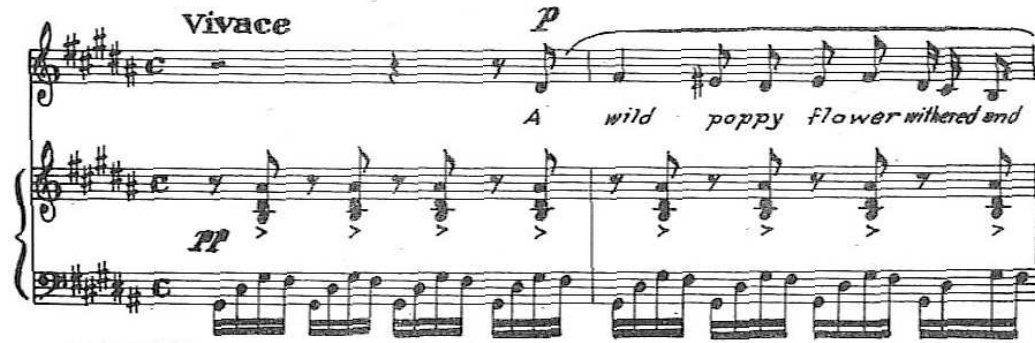
A wild poppy-flower  
Withered and died.

Owens interprets the “poppy flower” as representative of its derivative drug, opium.<sup>123</sup> The low, rumbling sixteenth note arpeggiated accompaniment and pianissimo dynamic create a secretive, hushed environment worthy of such an illegal and addictive habit. In his pedagogical study of *Border Line*, Rogers suggests that “the accompaniment represents perhaps the hyperactivity of one under the influence of a stimulant” (see Figure 69).<sup>124</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

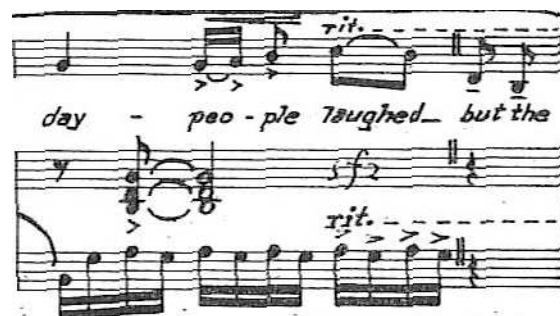
<sup>124</sup> Rogers, p. 155.

Figure 69. "Poppy Flower," measures 1-2.



Owens' gift for contrast is appropriate and apparent in measure six when he employs a dramatic caesura after "the day people laughed." To further illustrate the contrast between the dark underbelly of the night and the harsh light of day, Owens raises the pitch an octave from the opening of "Poppy Flower," revealing the garish laughter of the day people. A *ritardando* prolongs the discomfort of the moment (see Figure 70). After a brief but complete silence, the music begins again with "but the night people cried" in the original octave of the song. Owens further slows the pace with a *meno mosso* and *molto ritardando* before placing a fermata over the low G sharp of "cried."

Figure 70. "Poppy Flower," measure 6.



The final statement of "A wild poppy flower withered and died" is a deflated version of the original statement. The frenzied eighth notes of measure two are replaced

by woeful half and quarter notes, ending on a wilting whole step descent to D sharp in the last measure on “died.”

### “Gypsy Melodies”

Songs that break  
And scatter  
Out of the moon:  
Rockets of joy  
Dimmed too soon.

“Gypsy Melodies” is a weighty, rhythmic song. Owens begins with a heavily accented introduction of alternating sixteenth note chords which is juxtaposed against a very legato, Spanish-influenced vocal line (see Figure 71). According to Rogers, “The ostinato accompaniment of measures one through six establishes the character of ‘Gypsy Melodies’ with its A minor to F major [harmonic] progression.”<sup>125</sup> The effect is haunting and magical, creating an otherworldly feeling underneath the vocal line.

Figure 71. “Gypsy melodies,” measures 3-6.



Owens’ alternation of 3/8 and 6/8 meters obscures the natural lilt of each of these meters, and he further challenges the rhythmic tendencies of the accompanist by regularly

<sup>125</sup> Rogers, p. 157.

placing accents on beats four and five of the measure. The result is a somewhat jolting sensation, perhaps representing the gypsy's wagon wheels bouncing along the road as they sing.

The thirty second note decorative figures appear at the end of each short phrase on the words “break,” “scatter,” “joy” and “soon.” It is from these figures that the Iberian influence is felt. Careful attention to the text in the second half of the song – “Rockets of joy dimmed too soon” – will provide an ample opportunity to juxtapose the sparkling nature of the gypsy song with the regret that it will soon disappear.

**“Montmartre”**

Pigalle:  
A neon rose  
In a champagne bottle.  
At dawn  
The petals  
Fall.

According to Owens, “Montmartre” is “pure Paris.”<sup>126</sup> It is a beautiful, simple respite after the heavy accents of “Gypsy Melodies.” Owens selects F minor for “Montmartre,” and again chooses a 6/8 meter, this time employing the natural rocking tendency of the meter as if it were a gently singing carousel melody (see Figure 72). The entrance of the voice at the end of measure three appears as a trancelike melody on the third of the F major chord at a dreamy *mezzo piano*.

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<sup>126</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Figure 72. "Montmartre," measures 1-4.



It is fitting that Owens employs the essence of a memory in the composition of "Montmartre," as "Pigalle" has particular significance in Langston Hughes' history: "[Hughes] was employed by... the tiny nightclub and café Palace Pigalle in Montmartre. The marquee above the entrance of the club was a neon sign designed as a rose inside a champagne bottle... Hughes metaphorically equates the turning off of the sign at dawn with the falling of the rose petals."<sup>127</sup> As dawn arises over Paris, the nightclub carousel music winds down and the neon lights fade. Owens captures this beautifully as the voice slips upward to B natural and the accompaniment discards the F major tonality for a brighter C major seventh chord.

### "Fragments"

Whispers  
Of springtime.

Death in the night.

A song  
With too many  
Tunes.

The subtle beauty of "Montmartre" disintegrates into the unsettled environment of "Fragments." The song is divided into three brief sections of seven measures each with a

<sup>127</sup> Rogers, p. 158.

three measure introduction. Rogers suggests that “Fragments” should be sung with an air of mystery; it is breathing and restless.”<sup>128</sup> The restlessness is evident in the explicit use of chromaticism in both the vocal and accompaniment lines. Owens selected the key of B flat minor, but begins decisively with an F minor seventh chord, imparting a sense of instability as he inserts G natural and alternates between D natural and D flat in the accompaniment (see Figure 73).

Figure 73.



The inclusions of a B double flat and C flat in measure eight imparts an ominous quality to the second “fragment” of an idea presented by Hughes. Owens obscures any feeling of stability that might have been present in the repetitive nature of measures one through seven.

The second statement of “Whispers, whispers” begins in measure eleven, scored a minor third above the original statement. The intensity increases buy another degree, and the dynamic is increased to mezzo piano. The third and final statement in measure 18 is again raised, this time by a step, and leads to the third idea in this poem: “a song with too many tunes.” Finally, the poet has been able to shake the inconclusive ideas that have

<sup>128</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

been swirling in his head and comes to a weighty, concrete idea in measures 27-28. The relief of this statement is evidenced in the significantly higher tessitura of a sustained E flat on “songs” paired with a fermata over measure 26, and the descending eighth note scale from D flat to low C in the last two measures. The weariness and desperation of the poet is evident in Owens’ instruction of a caesura for the voice before beginning the descending scale, combined with the instruction *appassionato sempre forte* as the song concludes.

**“Desert”**

Anybody  
Better than  
Nobody.

In the barren dusk  
Even the snake  
That spirals  
Terror on the sand.

Better than nobody  
In this lonely  
Land.

The accompaniment to “Desert” features a spiraling accompaniment that vividly paints the images the poet sees in the sand. Owens calls the accompaniment “dervish-like” and encourages the singer to “build the story” leading to this song.<sup>129</sup> Owens’ combination of octave plus leaps in the bass line and the repetitive blocked thirds in the right hand of the accompaniment create a swirling and bleak environment for the vocal entrance in measure three (see Figure 74).

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<sup>129</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

Figure 74. "Desert," measures 3-4.



The vocal line returns frequently to A, the pitch on which it began, demonstrating disconnection from the established G minor below which serves to enhance the idea of solitude in his environment. Owens beautifully conveys the undulation of the snake in measure ten, surrounding the ever-present A natural with the more dissonant A flat (see Figure 75).

Figure 75. "Desert," measure 10.



At the end of "Desert," the poet sinks into a despair from which he cannot be rescued. Owens begins the descent on the pervasive A natural, and sinks by step lower and lower, until finally the voice comes to rest on a sustained low G, the lowest note of the cycle. He inserts one last stinging A flat on the second syllable of "lonely" in measure



12 to create a D half diminished seventh chord before letting the voice fall to its end in measure 13.

**“The End”**

There are  
No clocks on the wall,  
And no time,  
No shadows that move  
From dawn to dusk  
Across the floor.

There is neither light  
Nor dark  
Outside the door.

There is no door!

Owens sees the final song of this cycle as “the end of everything.”<sup>130</sup> He responds intuitively to Hughes’ picture of a timeless, empty environment that leads to nowhere as each measure unfolds with rolled chords, expanding and contracting in the void. The steady, unchanging quarter notes of the accompaniment suggest an endlessly ticking clock (see Figure 76).<sup>131</sup> Rogers suggests that “The End” begins with a partial measure that “is used to signal the continuation of the previous song after its fermata and, also, the conclusion of the matter of border line issues.”<sup>132</sup>

Figure 76. “The End,” measures 1-2.



<sup>130</sup> Owens, September 20, 2007.

<sup>131</sup> Rogers, p. 163

<sup>132</sup> Rogers, p. 163.

The vocal line struggles against the confines of Owens' ticking clock quarter notes, trying multiple note values and rhythmic configurations to escape, including triplet figures, double dotted eighth note – thirty second note combinations and strings of sixteenth notes. None of these attempts release the singer from the ticking clock of eternity, and through this effect, Owens allows the listener to know what is on the other side of the border line.

***MORTAL STORM, Op. 29***

According to Owens, *Mortal Storm* tells the stories of “the storms we as mortals face.”<sup>133</sup> From the authentic rain and thunder in “A House in Taos” to the emotional storm in “Genius Child,” *Mortal Storm* encompasses the turbulence of simply being human.

**“A House in Taos”**

*Rain*

Thunder of the Rain God:

And we three  
Smitten by beauty.

Thunder of the Rain God:

And we three  
Weary, weary.

Thunder of the Rain God:

And you, she, and I  
Waiting for nothingness.

Do you understand the stillness

Of this house  
In Taos

Under the thunder of the Rain God?

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<sup>133</sup> Owens, September 19, 2007.

*Sun*

That there should be a barren garden  
 About this house in Taos  
 Is not so strange.  
 But that there should be three barren hearts  
 In this one house in Taos –  
 Who carries ugly things to show the sun?

*Moon*

Did you ask for the beaten brass of the moon?  
 We can buy lovely things with money,  
 You, she, and I,  
 Yet you seek,  
 As though you could keep,  
 This unbought loveliness of moon.

*Wind*

Touch our bodies, wind.  
 Our bodies are separate, individual things.  
 Touch our bodies wind,  
 But blow quickly  
 Through the red, white, yellow skins  
 Of our bodies  
 To the terrible snarl.  
 Not mine,  
 Not yours,  
 Not hers,  
 But all one snarl of souls.  
 Blow quickly wind,  
 Before we run back  
 Into the windlessness –  
 With our bodies –  
 Into the windlessness  
 Of our house in Taos.

“A House in Taos” is the longest of all of Owens’ Hughes songs. According to Rogers, “Owens interprets “A House in Taos” in aria-like fashion, as a dramatic vocal-piano *tour de force* opener for the *Mortal Storm* song cycle.”<sup>134</sup> As Rogers suggests, the scope and breadth of the song requires the dramatic sense of an aria to communicate the

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<sup>134</sup> Rogers, p. 78.

very passionate, real story of these three people. The defining elements in this song are the multiple examples of text illustration in accompaniment: rain, sun, moon and wind. The stormy accompaniment serves to highlight different facets of storm as those elements represent the emotions experienced by each of the characters.

The first section of “A House in Taos” takes place in an environment of thunder and rain. Owens begins the song with octave triplets in the left hand and a series of descending, blocked chords in the right hand of the accompaniment figure, representing the crash of thunder (see Figure 77). The dramatically low alternating octave A, C and E firmly establish a tonal center of A, though Owens indicates a key signature of one sharp and represent the driving rain.

Figure 77. “A House in Taos,” measures 1-4.



The vocal entrance in measure four is heavily accented as the poet calls out to the Rain God, but softens dramatically as he speaks of being “smitten by beauty.” In response, the piano leaves behind the driving rain and thunder, and is replaced by a momentary respite of quarter note C major and whole note A minor seventh chords (see Figure 78).

Figure 78. "A House in Taos," measures 9-11.

smitten by beau - - - - - ty.  
 trunken von Schön - - - - - heit.

*mf*

The storm begins again in measure 12 as the poet calls out to the Rain God again, "and we three are weary." Owens employs a half-step descent from D to C sharp in measure 16 at the first statement of weary, underscoring the exhaustion that accompanies painful relationships. The thunder disappears momentarily, and the triplet rain figure ascends by octaves, suggesting a more gentle rainfall. Owens resumes the storm again for until the conclusion of this section begins in measure 26. The thunder slows as the storm appears to pass by the house in Taos and the triplets relax to individual quarter note raindrops by measure 31.

A transition section begins in measure 35 as the poet asks one last question of the Rain God; "Do you understand the stillness of this house in Taos?" This question is accompanied by a static dotted half note C major chord followed by a quarter note B diminished triad for five measures. The storm makes one last attempt to rumble at "under the thunder," but succumbs to the stillness.

Section two begins at measure 44 in a sparse 6/8 as the accompaniment sustains a single chord per measure, portraying the "barren garden" described in the vocal line. Owens abruptly removes the F sharp from the key signature in measure 49, though a clear

new tonality is not established. The sadness of “But that there should be three barren hearts in this one house in Taos” is accompanied by a descending half step bass line and *tenuto* markings over “three barren hearts,” emphasizing the unhappiness that is present in this home. Owens notes that in measure 45 the “*ossia* is what it [the pitches] should be; lower notes are optional for baritones who don’t have these notes.”<sup>135</sup>

Measure 53 incorporates a dramatic *ritardando* over “ugly things to show the sun” as the accompaniment leaps upward by octaves to reach “the sun.” It is juxtaposed with the “moon” and an immediate *animato* in measure 54. Steady eighth notes appear in the accompaniment under the “moon” verse, stating a new chord every half measure. The statement “We can buy lovely things with money, you, she and I,” is revelatory through the *marcato* articulation and abrupt single eighth note accompaniment: Owens demonstrates that money will not buy happiness for these three people (see Figure 79).

Figure 79. “A House in Taos,” measures 58-61.

marcato

We can buy lovely things with mo-ney, you, she, and I.  
Wir kön-nen Schö-nes kau-fen um Geld, du, sie und ich.

rit. - - - - -

Owens indicates another section ending with a double bar following measure 61. The next section is a transition, but unlike the first, as the thunder and rain figures have returned. The text “Yet you seek, as though you could keep, this unbought loveliness of

<sup>135</sup> Interview with Owens, September 20, 2007.

the moon,” hangs over the thunderous whole notes of the accompaniment, building toward the return of the full storm in measure 66.

With the restatement of the original “storm” in the accompaniment, Owens scores the “wind” verse with a much more sweeping sense of melodic line. The “wind” figure appears in measure 72, as the both hands of the piano adopt a triplet figures – major thirds in the right hand and open fifths and sixths in the left (see Figure 80).

Figure 80. “A House in Taos,” measures 71-73.

The musical score for measures 71-73 of "A House in Taos" is presented in a two-staff format. The top staff is for the vocal line, and the bottom staff is for the piano accompaniment. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The piano accompaniment features a triplet figure in both hands, with major thirds in the right hand and open fifths and sixths in the left. The vocal line has lyrics in English and German. The lyrics are: "in -dividu-al thing. Touch our bodies wind, but blow quick-ly through the wis-re Körper sind- Komm, be-rüh'r Wind, a - ber sohnell streif die". The piano part has a triplet figure in both hands, with major thirds in the right hand and open fifths and sixths in the left. The vocal line has a triplet figure in the first measure, and a triplet figure in the second measure. The piano part has a triplet figure in both hands, with major thirds in the right hand and open fifths and sixths in the left. The vocal line has a triplet figure in the first measure, and a triplet figure in the second measure. The piano part has a triplet figure in both hands, with major thirds in the right hand and open fifths and sixths in the left.

The triplets of the wind prevail through the remainder of this section. The poet speaks of the “terrible snarl...of souls” that Owens illustrates through his use of rhythm. While the accompaniment maintains a triplet figure, the vocal line breaks free into a duple-influenced rhythm infused with dotted sixteenth notes tied to dotted eighth and half notes. The effect is one of struggling to express oneself through the constrictive grip of deep emotion (see Figure 81).

Figure 81. “A House in Taos,” measures 78-80.

mine, not yours, not hers, but  
 mei - nes, nicht dei - nes nicht ihr - - es, Ge -

Owens concludes “A House in Taos” with an extended coda underscoring the last six lines of Hughes’ text: “Blow quickly wind, / Before we run back / Into the windlessness – / With our bodies – / Into the windlessness / Of our house in Taos.” The rain returns, as does the thunder, but the thunder is less aggressive than before, having only a dotted half note beginning on beat two of each measure. The single statement of the chord and its weaker metrical position rob the thunder of some of its earlier power.

In this section the poet is asking for help to relieve the tension and discomfort of the relationship he shares with the two other people in the house. As a result, the vocal line is more legato and more pleading in nature, and incorporates a much more static approach to the pitch and text than before. The voice hovers between C sharp and D sharp when the poet begs the wind to “Blow quickly,” before descending to G sharp for “windlessness.”

Owens slows the tempo considerably for the conclusion of the song, moving from the *appassionato e allegro marcato* in measure 66 to a complete stop after measure 90. (Since publication, Owens has added a caesura at the end of measure 90 before restarting the rain theme in measure 91.) The original *allegro* returns for just a measure and



immediately retards in measure 92, followed by a second caesura. Again it appears that the poet is struggling to deliver his plea to the wind.

The following two measures incorporate a generous amount of *rubato*, with an anticipatory fermata on “the,” beat four of measure 93. The vocal D above the open fifth of the accompaniment provides an expressive moment of tension that Owens allows the singer to fill with emotion and turmoil before proceeding into measure 94, “windlessness.” The last statement of “our house in Taos” returns to the *sostenuto e maestoso*, and the accompaniment attempts one more appearance of the storm with an *accelerando* in measure 96 as the voice sustains “Taos.” The attempt fails, and the storm finally fades away to a final D-sharp minor chord over a G-sharp pedal, revealing that no resolution for the poet will be found.

**“Little Song”**

Lonely people  
In the lonely night  
Grab a lonely dream  
And hold it tight.

Lonely people  
In the lonely day  
Work to salt  
Their dream away.

Lonely people.

“Little Song” is a “work song, and it tells the “tragedy of people who work their whole life and get nothing out of it.”<sup>136</sup> Owens establishes the mournful nature of the song with the first notes of the accompaniment (see Figure 82). The eighth note pickup note is

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<sup>136</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

reminiscent of a bluesy bass line over which he layers a descending sixteenth and eighth note right hand melody line.

Figure 82. “Little song,” measures 1-2.



Owens strives to portray the cares of the world “weighing on your shoulders,” and syncopation figures prominently in the accompaniment and vocal line.<sup>137</sup> Syncopated rhythms should be accented in every instance, particularly the A that appears on the second half of beats one and three. The downbeat D and G in the piano should feel heavy, almost like a hammer striking an anvil at the beginning of each measure. It is relentless and gives the song a powerful monotony over which the voice laments.

This song comes as close to the true blues style as Owens has composed, as evidenced by the D minor tonality and syncopated upbeats on beat 4 of each measure. The descending figure in the right hand emphasizes the futility of the lament. The repetition of the “lonely people” theme provides a monotonous quality reminiscent of a work song. Though written in common time, it is better sung with a slight swing and “dirge-like

<sup>137</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

moan,” particularly all [o] vowels.<sup>138</sup> Each statement of “lonely” should be sung with a varying degree of pain and bitterness. The final measure should trail away in a weary *rallentando*.

Owens notes that measure nine is an extra measure and should be omitted in performance.

**“Jaime”**

He sits on a hill  
And beats a drum  
For the great earth spirits  
That never come.

He sits on a hill  
Looking out to the sea  
Toward a mirage-land  
That will never be.

The storm in “Jaime” is the not a storm at all, but the unending anticipation of the storm. Rogers suggests that “Jaime” is an Indian beating a drum, which is evidenced by the “lively accented and percussive rhythm pattern” in the F minor accompaniment ostinato found in measures 1 through 4 (see Figure 83).<sup>139</sup> This four measure ostinato is imitated in the rest of the remainder of the song, and “reflects the energy and dedication expended toward the expectant results of this... ritual.”<sup>140</sup> Unfortunately for Jaime, he does not recognize the futility of his efforts.

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<sup>138</sup> Owens, September 12, 2007.

<sup>139</sup> Rogers, p. 100.

<sup>140</sup> Rogers, p. 100.

Figure 83. “Jaime,” measures 1-2.



The voice enters in measure 3, securely in F minor. Owens incorporates a kind of “tribal” yell in the ascending sixth from G in measure five to E natural in measure six on “drum.” A hint of disappointment is revealed in the second tribal yell in measure nine (B flat) to measure ten (D natural). The figure occurs one last time in measures 13-14.

The last sung note of “Jaime” is G, the ninth over the ostinato F minor tonality below. Owens communicates through this interval that the desired response will never come, yet Jaime is so conditioned to perform his ritual that he does not realize the great distance from his goal.

#### “Faithful One”

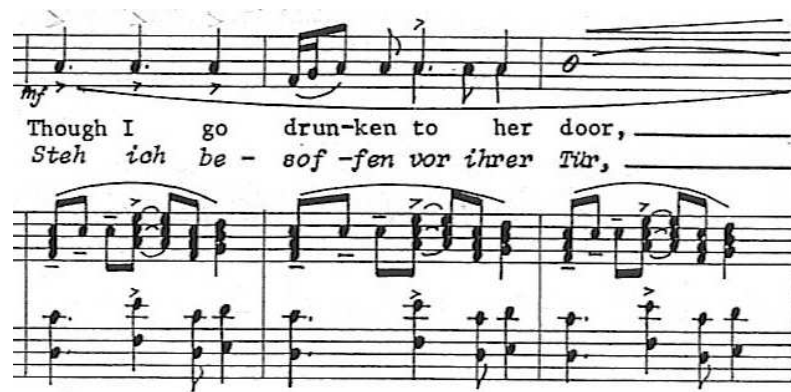
Though I go drunken  
To her door,  
I’m ever so sure  
She’ll let me in.

Though I wander and stray  
And wound her sore,  
She’ll open the latch  
When I come again.

No matter what  
I do or say,  
She waits for me  
At the end of day.

When considering “Faithful one,” it is easily possible to misinterpret Owens’ intent for the composition. The initial musical indication – *melancolico e moderato* – seems to imply sadness, longing, or remorse in the character. However, Owens intends the character of the song to be one of power and a “bragging” quality, full of intense drama.<sup>141</sup> In order to accomplish this, the suggestion of “melancholy” should be replaced with a sense of swaggering confidence, with much weight in each chord, particularly those with accents. Similarly, the voice should strike each accented note with flagrant self-assurance (see Figure 84).

Figure 84. “Faithful One,” measures 3-5.



The heavily syncopated nature of the accompaniment assists with the sense of swagger, particularly if the accents on the second half of beat two are observed.

The key change at measure 19 should be sung a little softer, but with a menacing, nasty tone, as it details the sins the poet has committed against the “faithful one.” Owens suggests that the singer experiment with a degree of nasality to achieve the right vocal color.<sup>142</sup> Each repeated pitch must become more intense until the abrupt cut-off after

<sup>141</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>142</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

“latch.” Owens notes that the final D (“latch”) in measure 23 is scored too long and should be shortened to an eighth note.<sup>143</sup>

The climax occurs at measure 27 in a swaggering, accented return to the original key. The left hand of the piano adopts the eighth note rhythm of the right hand for the first time in “Faithful One,” indicating that any hope of the poet changing his behavior is lost (see Figure 85). The half steps approached from the bottom may even be treated as evidence of a drunken quality to the bold proclamation of “No matter what I do or say.” A very legato, almost sliding, tone is appropriate, indicated by the slur markings. The D in measure 29 should be treated as a “long appoggiatura.”<sup>144</sup>

Figure 85. “Faithful One,” measure 26-27.



In measure 30, beat four should be sung with a fermata, sliding downward in a slow descent to the G on “waits.” A *rallentando* should begin on the second half of beat two in the same measure, slinking toward the *molto ritardando* scored in measure 31. A pronounced [d] at “end” should precede a complete break before “of,” and the same procedure should be followed before the final “day.” Owens encourages singers to make

<sup>143</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>144</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

use of the drama present in the silence between the words: “Make use of the pause – music keeps going in the silence.”<sup>145</sup>

**“Genius Child”**

This is a song for the genius child.  
Sing it softly, for the child is wild.  
Sing it softly as ever you can –  
Lest the song get out of hand.

*Nobody loves a genius child.*

Can you love an eagle,  
Tame or wild?  
Can you love an eagle,  
Wild or tame?  
Can you love a monster  
Of frightening name?

*Nobody loves a genius child.*

*Kill him* – and let his soul run wild!

“Genius Child” is the pinnacle of the torment felt by all of the characters in *Mortal Storm*. Hughes’ pity for the brilliant yet ostracized “geniuses” of the world is reflected in his attempt to demonstrate society’s suppression of their radical thoughts, and the ultimate decision to “liberate” their spirits in the cruelest of ways. Owens captures this idea beautifully in his musical setting, and, according to Rogers, “Genius Child” possesses the intensity afforded a finale.”<sup>146</sup>

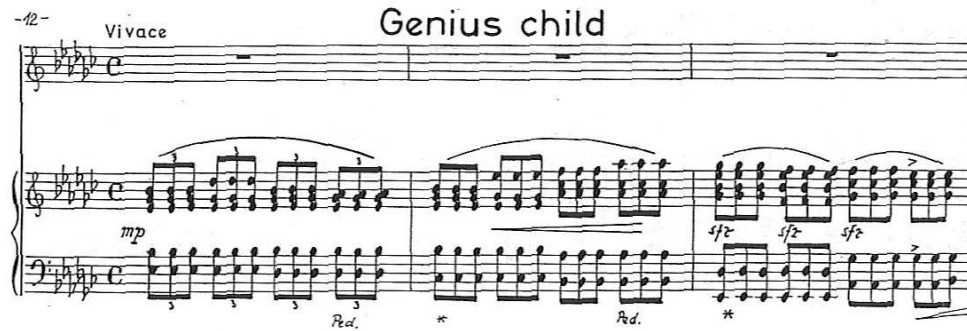
From the moment the introduction begins, a frenzied, almost panicked, musical environment is present. The *vivace* triplet figures almost become too fast for the pianist to play as the poet scrambles to find a solution for this “genius child” (see Figure 86).

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<sup>145</sup> Owens, September 11, 2007.

<sup>146</sup> Rogers, p. 105.

Figure 86. “Genius Child,” measures 1-3.



The voice enters in measure six with a hushed E flat, slowly building up the E flat minor scale. It reaches a D flat at “Sing it softly,” only to face an attempt to pull the pitch downward to A flat. The genius child finally succeeds in reaching the octave E flat in measure ten, as he sings “wild.”

The next phrase returns to B flat and mezzo piano, another attempt to suppress the unique voice of the genius. A struggle again ensues, this time as the pitch is pulled downward to F, via half steps of F to F-flat and E-flat before cadencing on the F in measure 15 against an E flat minor harmony. Owens’ ability to build tension in subtle ways reflects the quiet murmurs of unrest in a society that shuns persons of unusual talent or skill. “[Owens] indicated that due to a publisher printing error, a fermata was omitted over the final chord and the word ‘hand’ of measure 15. This fermata is to be generously observed as it crescendos for tension relief and contemplation of the previous text.”<sup>147</sup>

The lament “Nobody loves a genius child” is repeated twice, first over a *forte* A-flat minor ninth chord with the vocal line beginning on G, the seventh of the chord and cadencing on an F, a non-chord tone (see Figure 87). The second statement occurs at *mezzo piano* with an F over an E flat minor seventh chord. This phrase finally cadences solidly in E flat for all forces.

<sup>147</sup> Rogers, p. 106.



Figure 87. “Genius Child,” measures 16-19.

*poco meno mosso* *rall. e dim.*

No-bo-dy loves a Gen-ius child. No-bo-dy loves a Gen-ius child.  
 Nein, niemand liebt ein Wen-der-kind. Nein, niemand liebt ein Wen-der-kind.

Section two begins with a radical key change to G major as the poet muses “Can you love an eagle, tame or wild?” It is a surprising transition to a very lyrical and philosophical message in the midst of fear and restraint. Owens scores the second phrase of this stanza in A major, again a surprising shift of key, but still with a more hopeful sensibility than the opening section. The vocal line is scored in the middle range of the voice until measure 30, when the voice drops a major seventh to D for “monster of frightening [name]” (see Figure 88). The effect of this dramatic register shift beautifully illustrates the dark fear of this genius monster, which is promptly left behind for the major sixth leap to A natural at the cadence in measure 31.

Figure 88. “Genius Child,” measures 28-31.

Can you love a mon-ster of frighten-ing name?  
 O-der gar ein Scheu-sal mit schreckli-chem Nam?

The restatement of “Nobody loves a genius child” occurs in the A major key structure of the previous section, and here the voice appears to participate willingly, beginning the phrase on C sharp. Unfortunately for the singer, the accompaniment has modified to include an F natural pedal tone, against which the voice still sounds excluded. The second statement of the text returns to E flat minor, but yet again, the voice always seems to be singing outside of the established chordal structure. In retaliation, the voice will no longer be suppressed in pitch and resists being pulled into the B flat minor cadence, and proudly sustains an A flat, the seventh against the stated accompaniment chord.

The original triplet accompaniment figure bursts forth again in measure 40. The voice has now aligned with the accompaniment in E flat minor, and proclaims “Kill him” at a forte dynamic level. As what appears to be the only option for this culture of fear, the voice adopts the groupthink of E flat and concludes “Genius Child” with a soaring E flat minor scale on “wild”. Owens concludes the cycle with three pointed, violent E flat minor chords, a final musical representation of the violent end for the genius child.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusions And Aspirations

The songs of Robert Owens are a reflection of how he views the beauty of language, particularly that of poetry. He uses music to more clearly convey what he hears and feels in the poet's words, and does so to great success if one is emotionally, intellectually and spiritually available to the drama found in the song texts. Just as Owens carefully and lovingly considers each text before writing a single note, so should singers who aspire to perform his songs: "One has to have a certain depth about them. Singers – one is not usually thinking about the words, but the music, and in English, they don't read these poems. I find that such a pity – what's behind the words, that's what I am trying to get at."<sup>148</sup>

It is this aspiration to communicate the poet's words through the ear to the heart that makes Owens a successful composer of art song. He uses the tools that suit his task best, setting aside the rules and conventions of traditional Western music, turning instead to the sound of his own inspiration and the music that the words summon from him. As demonstrated in the forty-six songs discussed in this document, Owens' use of harmony, modulation, colorful intervals and rhythm combine to achieve distinct musical environments for Langston Hughes' words. Hughes himself found the poems more beautiful when paired with Owens' music.

Owens' music is driven by understanding and communicating the intent of Hughes' poetry, and therefore he asks things of singers like experimenting with different colors of vocal expression and unusual – sometimes "hard" – intervals in the melodic line to underscore the poetic intent. It is not uncommon for him to ask singers to perform

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<sup>148</sup> Owens, September 14, 2007.

augmented fourths and minor second intervals, if they suit the dramatic intent of the text. While some critics may claim that intervals such as these are awkward and unfriendly for singers, this author suggests that Owens' music *is* well written for the voice - although not in the traditional, *bel canto* sense. It is well written because it demands a connection to the poetry far above the simple negotiation of intervals and excellent diction, something singers should aspire to achieve in every song they sing:

Why do I write? What do I seek? The truth of the human tragedy – the wonders of life striving for explanations and answers to eternal questions – questioning given values, facing threatening and frightening facts of life, going far beyond the borders of race and color, reflections upon the beauty and the depth of thoughts in song and in sound, coping with the syncopations of the soul, understanding the emotions: the joys and sufferings of mankind. All of this lies in the words of these wise poets. My intentions are to pursue these paths in music. Listen carefully – rejoice and cry with me.<sup>149</sup>

For the singer who wants to experience the intimate relationship between text and music that only art song can provide, Owens has written 46 remarkable songs to equally remarkable poetry. For audiences who seek to find innovative ways to hear great poetry, and deeper ways of understanding those words, Owens has composed a level of music that defies the expectations of traditional composition yet manages to speak to the imagination and the heart in a truly compelling way.

It is the hope of this author that the songs of Robert Owens are soon *discovered* gems in the realm of art song. The elegant grace, exceptional musical environments and exquisite text settings certainly earn Robert Owens' songs a permanent place in the American art song repertory.

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<sup>149</sup> Owens, September 19, 2007.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Transcriptions of the Interviews**

**SEPTEMBER 11, 2007**

Jamie Reimer:

My interest is really the Langston Hughes songs. So you were telling me yesterday about how you came to meet Mr. Hughes...

Robert Owens:

Yes, I had a concert in Berkeley after returning home in 1958. I had left America in 1946 to go to Paris. First time I was back again, and at this concert, a woman came up to me who I had seen at the San Francisco Civil Service Commission where I had worked before joining the army, and she came up with her husband and congratulated me. She said, I want to give you a letter of introduction to Langston Hughes. (I didn't know who Langston Hughes was!) I am sure he would be delighted if you would set some of his poems. Then I thanked her very much, and when I was back from my second year at Albany State College in Georgia, where I had gone to from Vienna. They had sent me a contract, and I should sign it and come. I said, well, this was Providence, you know, because I didn't know if I should go to Germany, where I had been trying to get to all these years, or to go back to America and try to make some money – it was a strange set of circumstances.

JR:

And that was to play –

RO:

That was to teach. And that was in 1957 that I went there. I was there for a year and on summer vacation I went home to Berkeley and gave this concert and came back. I had only signed for a year and when I got to Albany, Georgia it was like going to a foreign country. Because the students – there was segregation at this time, 1957 – when I got there – you know, you hear all about this, but you never believe it is that bad. My father told me a couple times things, but you know... And then I came to Albany State College there, and it was like one world black, one world white, and they did not come together at all. And I was quite shocked – well, not shocked, I was quite amazed, this can't be true. And the first year that I was there, I was living quite dangerously, because I was ignoring all these rules. And they all thought I was French, the students... (laugh) I had to teach them all English so we could start the music eventually – these stories are too long, actually – but the first year I was in Albany it was like complete isolation. The only thing I could do was practice, the only thing I had there, that was my only outlet. But I did know the chair of the department and his wife, and I went to their place a couple times, rather regularly, actually.

I was watching all of this... well, for example: I had met a teacher from this Albany State College. He had had a letter of introduction to me from Denmark and he came to Vienna and visited me. And he was very helpless and would not go out of the hotel until I came

and picked him up... But he was the one – I had asked him out of conversation, what are you doing down there in Albany? Art, painting. And I said rather carelessly, do they have a music department down there? Oh yes, and they would love it if you would come! And this was the spring of 1957. And I had completely forgotten this conversation, and he left and went back to America, no, England, where he had two years leave. And then I suddenly got this contract that I should start on the first of September. So I wrote them that could not be back by the first of September, I had my master's exams the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup>, I will get there by October. So I wrote Leslie Green, that was his name, Samuel Leslie Green. He was in London. And I said, I got a contract from your school. Oh you did?! Did you tell them something about me? Well, I did, but I didn't know they were going to send you a contract. Well, I will be first coming back to New York on the way down in October. He said, good! We'll go down together. I'm living in Connecticut with my mother. You telephone me and we'll go down together.

Time passed – it was spring – and I still had his telephone number. So I wrote my father and told him that I was coming back to America, can you send me some money? He was not giving out any money you know? But all of sudden here is five hundred dollars. As it turned out, he thought I was coming back to Berkeley. When they heard – he and my stepmother Julie, a marvelous person – I got a call from the president of the school, yes, Mr. Owens, your mother telephoned me and said, what is my son doing down there in Georgia? He must come home immediately, telephone me immediately! So I wrote back home, saying that I can't come, I have a year's contract, and I will come the summer of 1958. But I get ahead of my story.

When I got back to New York, the second or third of October, this friend of mine, a painter I knew from Paris, I was staying at his place, and I telephoned Samuel Leslie Green. This lady came to the telephone and he came to the telephone – he didn't say hello, didn't say anything except "They burned the school down." He had told me there had never been any racial problems – he had been there for thirteen years before – there had never been any problems. This had gone around the world. I had gotten a telegraph from my friend in Copenhagen, he had heard about it. He said, "What are we going to do?" I said, what do you mean, what are we going to do? I have a contract, I've come all the way from Vienna – I'm going to collect my money in any case. "Aren't you afraid?" Didn't you tell me that nothing like this has ever happened? "Now Samuel, you gather yourself together and we'll go down on Monday, we'll go down together." So he came to New York and we rode down South.

Mr. Chadwell had sent a taxi, a car for us, this is John Chadwell, a tenor, and he was so embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Owens, but they burned down the school and all the students left, of course." Well, what are we going to do? "We'll wait another week and see if anything happens, and if not, we'll start teaching again, and when the word gets around..." The wealthier blacks, they had gone home, and the others, they are around Albany. So that was my first real experience there, coming back to America. They burned the school down. It turned out that they burned down – there had been a new building made for the kindergarten children, completely wood. And they had burned that completely down. And the assembly hall, they burned the curtains, the organ, and in the



back were the rooms where I was supposed to be teaching music. “So, who did this?”

Well, some people had seen white men running away with kerosene cans, but the police said that they had left the lights on in the assembly hall and they had caught fire on the curtains.

But in a week we started, and I read the roll, and they started laughing because my pronunciation – they weren’t used to hearing. So I had to – I started teaching them pronunciation. And I was there until the end of the term – summer of 1958 – and I was going home for the first time in all these years, and I was saying goodbye. And there were these pupils, some of them were 40 years old – 15 to 40 years old – and they came and they cried. Of course, I could not say no. They were so glad I was there, so then I said I will stay one more year. And Chadwell wanted me to take over his position, but I said, no, Chadwell, I am going to Europe, to Germany. Since I was eight years old I wanted to go to Germany.

So in 1959, I went to Germany. I flew to Copenhagen, stayed with a friend of mine, and he gave me a letter of introduction to some of his friends in Germany, a place where I could live until I got some place to practice. I was still thinking of my career as a pianist.

But that was eye-opening, you know? Opened my eyes to black society. But I saw that they had the same structure that they had got from the Americans, the whites. There were the doctors, the instructors, and they were one level, and then there were the poor. For example: the first year I went a couple of times to see what my students were doing in the

evening. I went to a couple of these bars – and I got a call, “Mr. Owens, it has been noticed that you and the students... you are an instructor. You don’t do that here, you don’t associate with the students.” Well, what’s behind them? Why can’t they talk? “Well if you do, please put on some jeans, don’t dress up.” How old was I at that time? 36? But the students thought I was one of them! So that was the first thought about I’m not supposed to do that, I’m not supposed to do that...

My grandmother was still living – my father’s mother – was still living in Denison, Texas. I wrote to her and told her where I was. And she wrote that I should meet this lady who was a good friend of hers, her son, that I should go by and say hello for her. So I went looking for – in the South, the black town, the main street is always Harlem. So I went to the main street of Harlem, and I went to the back, to this garage, and there was this fellow, and he said “will you hold this needle for me?” He was just going to put this needle in his arm. And I couldn’t say, what do you think your mother will – I was supposed to tell my grandmother how he was doing. And then I said hello to him and I left. About a week later, one of my students said, Mr. Owens, I see you are taking the needle? What? They watch everything you are doing. But all these things happened you know? And then you realize that this is a whole little community. We are the thinking people, and we have to think of that.

At the very beginning we didn’t have a piano and the organ was coal chars. And I said, when we get started, we will need a piano. So I went down to buy a piano for the school and I came in – at that time everyone knew I was from Europe – this is why they thought I

was French – and I said I want to buy a piano. “You’re a professor at the school? Where are you from?” Well, I just came from Europe, and then everything was okay. As long as I wasn’t from *there*.

And I met this white fellow, he was from Massachusetts, from Boston, and he had a little haberdashery there – right at the top of Harlem, off the pavement, where the road became sand, and I went in the store. And he knew that I was a professor at the university. Turned out that he was from Massachusetts and his wife from Arkansas, they had two kids.

Anyhow, I used to visit him at the haberdashery and talk about different things with him.

He had a good friend who was colored and if he came down could he stay at my place?

Yes, sure. And one day he said, I said, why don’t you come over and listen to some

records. Fine, fine. Where do you live? And I told him. He said, I’ll drive to where the

sand starts, and you pull down all the shades and you come and pick me up, and then

when we finish with the records you can pull up the shades. Are you kidding? No, I’m not

kidding. And all these sort of things happened. And later he said why don’t you come

over to my place? And I said, no, no, if it’s that difficult getting to my place, what will

happen if I go to the white neighborhood? It would never work. And he took me driving

around the countryside that first year, and he said, if the police stop us, you’re my boy.

(laugh) But I didn’t realize how dangerous I was living – if the police had stopped us...

But as I say, I realize what the conditions were they were living in. I had one very talented

girl – the wealthy people down there, when they graduated, they went to one of the big

black colleges. Her father was a dentist and she would come for lessons after school. But

one of the tragedies that happens in this time – later one sees that every race has been slaves of someone at some point...

JR:

Let's talk about that concert and how it got you to Hughes.

RO:

This was a concert that I played Beethoven, Scarlatti, and two works of my own that I debuted in Copenhagen in 1952. When I got to New York, I telephoned that I had a letter of introduction for Mr. Hughes. Fine, come on over to Harlem. So I got there and rang the doorbell and this little bowed lady came to the door. And I went up the stairs and there was Langston Hughes with a friend of his and his secretary, and I gave him my letter of introduction, and he wandered over to his bookshelf and pulled out this little thing, *Fields of Wonder*, lyrical poems, wrote a little dedication to me, and said, "See what you can do with it." So when I got back down to Albany, this was the second year, my last year there, I began writing. The first one was Silver Rain – Chadwell sang these at our Lyceum concert, and I wrote Tearless also at this time. And then at the end of the semester when I was leaving Albany, Georgia, I went back to New York and I telephoned Mr. Hughes and said, I have two cycles of yours. One is for tenor and one is for baritone. Would you like to hear them? And he said yes, I would like to hear them and I have a singer that can sing both tenor and baritone. So we made an appointment, I came up and I sat down and played Silver Rain and then Tearless, and he said, "Are those my words?" And I said, the certainly are, Mr. Hughes. "My god, they sound so much better with the music." And then

he said – in this one, in *Tearless*, I repeat the beginning at the end, and he said, why did you put this here? And I said, that's how you wrote it. And then I had a couple of questions – what did you mean when you wrote... And he looked at me rather blankly and said, "Really, I don't know." So I then realized, this is the inspiration that one has at the moment. You put it down, whether it be words, music. If you have this inspiration, you put it down. If you don't do it in that moment, you forget it. But I guess that is the same way with words. He couldn't remember why he had written that, so nobody knows. He wrote so many things. But I was interested in the lyrical things, because I am interested in something that goes into another world, you know?

And a couple of things I've written when all this was going on... when I left Georgia at just the right time, when I left in 1959, they had just begun the street marches, and all my students – and some of the instructors – had landed in jail. And I had talked about it with Caldwell, and said why don't you go back to Chicago, but they were making a good living and they could accept all that. For example, when I got back to America – after I had signed the contract, I looked at the little print down at the bottom, and it said, when you sign this you agree to all the state laws, meaning that you agree to the segregation – it's good that you don't realize that at the beginning. How careless I was! But these sort of things...

Where was I?

**JR:**

You had been talking about going back to Albany and writing *Tearless* and *Silver Rain*, then going to New York.

**RO:**

And so I played these for Hughes, and he *loved* them! (pause) I am looking for a letter I got from Langston Hughes several years later... maybe I will find that...

Where was I?

**JR:**

You were back in New York.

**RO:**

Yes, exactly. Then years later, he sent me this other letter, saying that I should sing “our songs” he said, because here they aren’t interested in publishing anything unless it is a musical or something. So you don’t have to worry – just have people perform them. And he visited me in Germany, took a picture of us about two years before he died. He was a sweet man – but as I say, I only met him a couple of times, and I didn’t really get to get into him, it was because I wrote his music.

And then I lost this book – well, I didn’t lose the book. There was a singer, Thomas Carey, who was going to sing *Mortal Storm* around the provinces – this was in Munich – oh, let me have the book, because I want to study it. I should have thought, you know,

because he was not reliable. But I gave it to him. And then what happened? He was in a train, and some people gave him some of these drops where you sleep, and they stole his recording machine, this book, and it was gone. And this was such a present, a precious thing, and I wrote to Langston Hughes and he sent me a few more books, but not that one because it went out of print. But I could have cursed Thomas Carey to his very death, you know?

So then when I got to Europe, there were a lot of singers, American singers, in Munich, no where was I? Hamburg, yes Hamburg for three or four years first. I went to Hamburg and there – this is a long story for us to start talking – when I went to Hamburg, I had decided... I lived for about four years starting in 1959 – that was the time when all this racial stuff had started, and I was glad I had gotten out of all that confusion... and it's often that things are happening and I say, what am I doing here? But these things when I look back, I met people and I've understood different things, but it's amazing – there's a *reason* for all this. But we'll start with that later.

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**INTERVIEW WITH JEFF KORBELIK, *LINCOLN JOURNAL-STAR*****RO:**

I remember telling my father when I was 8 years old, when I grow up I am going to Germany, and he said Oh really? Okay, fine. Then when it was time for me to go to Germany, after the war – it was (pause) 1946 – I couldn't go to Germany because there *wasn't* Germany – it was all bombed. But I had the GI Bill of Rights, and I said, "Well, where can I go? I want to go to Europe... what about Paris?" So then they said, "Paris, we'll pay for Paris." So I went to Paris in 1946. That was the beginning, well, the beginning of my life, so to speak.

In those days, there was no food, no heat, it was cold, it was winter... but there was music. And all these people from everywhere. All these musicians, these pianists from all over the world trying to get into the Conservatory. And I looked around and thought, my God, I will really have to start practicing - all these fantastic pianists – what I had been doing was really "dilettante-ish", you know? So I didn't get into the Conservatory, the exams were very, very strict, but one of the teachers at the Conservatory also taught at the music school in Paris – the Ecole Normale de Music in Paris – and he said he would take me as a pupil there. That was my luck, because that was the school of Alfred Cortot. And he lived long enough that I had some master classes with him, and I had my diploma – I have his signature on my diploma. Coming from America you don't realize what has been going on – coming from California, you don't realize what is going on in Arizona, you know – but as it was, it turns out that Alfred Cortot had been the Director of the Conservatoire, but when the liberation came, he was chased out of Paris because he had



collaborated with the Germans, and his good friend Wilhelm Kaemmer, he had said “I will march with you together against the whole world, we are brothers” and they chased him out of Paris. And he left Paris and went to..where was it?..Lausanne, I think. At Lausanne he had his school there, where his method was taught and where I landed. And that was my luck because I had him as my teacher. And that was how I got to the first place I got when I got out of America. My first experience in Europe was Paris.

You asked about Germany – it was years, years later. After Paris came Copenhagen and my debut as a concert pianist, then I went to Vienna where I studied four years with one of the most marvelous professors there. Then I was engaged as a teacher in Albany, GA – not Albany, NY – Albany, GA. I was there for two years, and then I said I will finally get to Germany. Then in 1959 when I left those shores forever and I first got to Germany.

Actually that is where I first realized that my career as a pianist – not as a composer, I hadn’t thought about that yet – I wasn’t going to be able to do it. I had met in Albany, Georgia, a Germany lady who, she had an agency. And she sold to our Lyceum concert a violinist, and she came with him. And when she heard I was going to Germany, she said, oh, when you come to Germany, contact me and I will manage you. When I got there, I contacted her and she came down – she was living way up on the North coast in Germany – she came down and took me to this manager, and he adored me, and I sat down, and he said fine, now I can give you concerts here in Germany, in Hamburg, of course, one concert nobody knows you, you have to give two or three, and then when you’re known here in Hamburg, then nobody knows you in Berlin, and then it goes like that. So I

realized that this would take awhile, and I thought that the agents would pay me, pay for all this, and then the publicity, and I said you will pay for all that? Oh no no no, you pay for that. So then I realized the idea that I had that when you have an agent, they pay for everything, it's not like that in Germany or in Europe at all, unless you get one of these big managers in America that arrange everything for you. Tough start, you know? So I said, this is going to be a little more difficult than I thought.

But I've always been very flexible, and I said, well we'll see what happens here. And I was living at – I had a letter of introduction – I've had more letters of introduction than some – with two gentlemen in Hamburg. And they had said I could stay there until I could find a room where I could practice. So I arrived on a beautiful September day and met these two gentlemen and they gave me a room there, and during the day I would go around looking for a room, enjoying the weather and whatnot. So one day I said what do you do? You leave at 5:30 in the morning and I don't see you anymore until 7:30 in the evening, we eat a little bit, then I go to bed and you go to bed. What are you doing? "We are film people. We design sets." And I said, Oh? Don't you have a little something to do there for me? "Well, do you have a good suit?" Yes, of course I have a suit. "Well, you put that on tomorrow and at 6:00 we'll go and see what we can do. We're doing a film where just your type is needed." And so I put on my little brown suit and went with them, and then I was engaged there as an extra...One thing always leads to another, I say in life. One must always say yes to things – Can you do this? Yes, of course I can. Can you do that? Yes. And only now and then (laugh) it gets a little difficult. But usually it works, and you see that you can do many things better than other people who you think they

should be able to do that better. There is a certain talent one has as a pianist, a certain gift, that prepares you with concentration, impact, that prepares you for these other things in life. Very... disciplined – and it can be used for many, many things. Memory of course – how can you remember all those lines? when I started acting. I said, o God, as a pianist you always play from memory – this is nothing... but I realized that you can do different things in life.

But to make it shorter – my stories are always long – I... there was one film with Moroccans, Algerians, Marrakheshians, and one of them was a lady-killer, but he couldn't speak German. But when they saw I could speak French, they adopted me. They said, “what are you doing, actually?” Well, I'm a musician, actually. “Well, I have a landlady, she has some rooms in her apartment where I'm living, maybe I can get you something tomorrow. You come with me after work and we will go to see if she has a place where you can stay. So they picked me up and I went home and said I have a room, I think, because Reggai told me that maybe he'd get me a room tomorrow. “Ah, Reggai, that good looking man and all those women and whatnot...” But I decided to go anyway.

I went with him that evening and there was this woman, Karla Fontaine – she had been a childhood star, acting – but those days were over, and she had been the mistress of a very wealthy man, a big opera fan, but he had unfortunately died two years before I arrived on the scene, but he had left her this house, and she could keep all of her jewelry and furs until she died, and then it would go back to the family. Unbelievable these situations!

Sometimes I think, how good that I left Berkeley (laugh) all these things happening and going on – sweet little Berkeley... Anyhow, she gave me this, “you can go up to the maids’ rooms, you can have one of those rooms for 60 German Marks – that was very cheap, you know – and so I said, good, fine, but I am a pianist, can I have my piano? I have to practice. Oh that doesn’t matter, I love music. So in two nights, I adopted a new home to those two, and I leave you day after tomorrow – I will live right in the middle of town, in a good district right near the two theatres where I worked for after this, it was really good, and I stayed in that room, I kept that room for *four* years at that price. Karla – that is another long story – but, I know that she did that and liked me living there. It was really a fantastic time, those four years in her home.

And then I went home one day before this all happened, they used to have on Wednesday, they have a time when people come visit, on Wednesdays. And they invited me to one of these, and one person there, he was an actor, he said, your German is so good – I have a play that would be good for you and they are looking for somebody. Do you play the trumpet? Yes (I do not play the trumpet). Good, do you sing? Yes, of course I can sing. And he said, you go down to the theatre – one of the few theatres that began to play again right after the war – was run by a Jewish woman that had stayed all the war in people’s cellars, and all the time she had been saved there in Hamburg, and she was now the principal there in this theatre. So I went down and they gave me the role, here’s the role, can you play the guitar? And I said yes, and being a pianist, I knew that I could play that very quickly with no trouble. So, okay, fine, so you will play the guitar, and you can rehearse with the man writing the music until the guitar comes. They rehearse one month

and play one month. And for this role, there are all these men on a boat, and I played the cook or something, and played on guitar all these Calypso songs, all these verses in German. So I went out and bought a little guitar book – how to play the guitar – and I told the producer that I had to get practicing, I only had two more weeks, and I went home and started looking at the book. The thing was, I could find the chords and play them, or I could do this German Calypso text, but I couldn't do them together at the same time. So, I would have to tell them I can't play the guitar. You know, it hurts to play these chords, to play the guitar (indicates fingers). So I went to them and said, I can't play the guitar. I can play the piano; therefore I thought I could play the guitar very quickly. "Don't say a word to the director – what was his name? – don't say a word to him! What we could do until later – if I play the piano behind the curtain, we'll put pins in the little hammers, it will sound like a harpsichord or a little guitar, and you act like you will play. You will pay me 5 D Marks per evening, and we played every day for 30 days. So we had finished rehearsing and he went to the third floor to Augeyer – that was his name! – to tell him that I couldn't play the guitar. Everyone was sort of waiting because the other actors realized what was going on, and all of a sudden we heard from the third floor "WAS?" – "what?" – and then came a long pause and the music director came down and said, he wasn't very nice to me, but eh will pay me and I will play the chords. So we played. We played for the whole month, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays, there were performances in the afternoon for old people, you know? And on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, the actors didn't take it too seriously. And on one of the Wednesday performances, there was a scene before my first song, "Over the big stream" – *Über in grosse Strom* – that was the name of the play and of the big song – and I would play "Brm, brm, brm," and the words

before I came in, the lines before I began playing were “I have been wandering over this stream for seventeen years” – he said it very dramatically – and according to all the young people – he was old, and they were all younger – it was seventy, not seventeen, but seventy years, and they did that for a long time. And this Wednesday afternoon, poor Burr, that was his name, said “I have been wandering over this river for seventy-seven years” and surprised all of them and surprised me, of course they realized that he knew they were making fun of him, and they had to drink coffee after that, and they all went to the back of the stage laughing after that that he had said that, that was my – I had to start singing – and right after those words – seventy years – the music director behind the curtain “brm, brm, brm” – and I was laughing, too, and I was in the front with the audience right there, and I was laughing and couldn’t stop so I turned, and I couldn’t – it was so funny – and after about ten times, I said I have to start now, and I start quietly and I sang this thing, you now. And after this thing, the curtains go down and I went back, and the director said, What was wrong with you? I played brm, brm, brm, and you didn’t start – what was wrong with you?” I said, I’ll tell you that later. (laugh) That was impossible. That was one example of when I said I could do something and it was a mistake. So, that’s one of those little funny stories where I always tell someone to say yes if they ask if you can do something...

Yes, that was how I started in Germany. Then I began, I got one, then I got another role at the Kammerspiele and I played there sort of regularly actually, for the next couple of months, and there was another theatre around the corner, and I played piano for a couple of shows they had. The leader of the KämmerTheatre, she had the respect of all the people

in Hamburg, everyone knew her story, that she suffered all that and she was the first one to open the theatres, she had all the stars, after the war.

And one day I was playing a butler in *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof* and Big Momma had a scene where the butler was waiting behind the curtain to go onstage. And there had been a discussion in the newspaper about killing the animals or something, and I just said, oh yeah, they're protesting about killing the animals, but no protest about killing people. And she looked at me, her eyes opened, of course I didn't realize what I was saying, and she thought about those concentration camps, and I had her support from that day on. And then the first Thursday in March was the Week of brotherhood, and when that came she asked me if I would play, and I did. And then she sent me to the big edition house in Hamburg, and she sent me with a letter of introduction and said that he should do something for me. And he was the first one who published things for me, the California Suite and some other things, and she called the radio and said we have a pianist here that really should play on the radio. She did so much for me and sent me here and there and protected me... And seldom do you get that sort of support. And it's become of those few words – and I didn't realize that it meant so much to her.

Then I began also composing for a couple of people up there. The songs of Emily Bronte for a contralto that was there, and she began giving me, for my accompanying her, she gave me breathing lessons for acting – of course that's important, you know. So she performed these, and performed some other thing which I wrote for her and I had three concerts there. And I had a good life there in Hamburg, and I got my first part in a film...

anyway, I got a part in a film being filmed in the middle of Germany and I was a ballet master for this little company of local girls – ballet girls. And I had a scene – I just had this one scene – they’re dancing onstage and then I sit with the director, then I stand up and say “what is this? What are you doing there, it’s completely wrong!” So I said that, and then somebody laughed in the audience – no one was supposed to be reacting to this, you know - and it turns out that the photographer for the press, and so we had to do it again. Afterward he came over and said, you’re good – do you have a manager? And I said no, he said you must get a manager, you must come to Munich because that’s where they all are. And I give you my card here and when sometime you come to Munich you telephone me and I’ll help you find a manager. So a couple of months later – no, a year after – I went to Munich and I telephoned him, and he arranged something, and she (the manager) came rushing in and she looked at me and said, when are you born? September. “Ah, Virgo. I think I will take you.” She did everything with a horoscope, she planned everything, contracts, this that and the other, she did with a horoscope. She was very good. Her daughter is handling me now and never does anything.

So I got a manager in Munich, and then I got one play after the other so I had to leave Hamburg, but I kept this room I had for about a year until I finally moved out to Munich.

**Jeff Korbelik, *Lincoln Journal Star*:**

What about Langston Hughes?

**RO:**



Langston Hughes – a letter of introduction. This was in 1958. I had a concert in Berkeley. I went to Paris in 1946, this was 1958. And sitting in the audience was a woman I had known when I was a kid, and she came up with her husband, and she said this was a marvelous concert, and I want to give you a letter of introduction to Langston Hughes. And I am sure he would be so glad if you would set some of his words to music. So this was 1958, I was on vacation and on my way back down to Albany GA and went to New York to see my friend, a painter, and telephone Langston Hughes. He said I should come up, which I did, and I went to his home and the first thing he said after I presented him with the letter of introduction was “do you want a lemon vodka?” and (laugh) I had never had a lemon vodka – yes, of course – so then he got me a lemon vodka and motioned me on over to his library and took out this little book, *Fields of Wonder*, lyrical poems. I have set almost all of these poems to music. The next year, 1959 when I went to Hamburg, I telephoned him on my way out from Georgia, and told him that I had these two cycles that I had completed – *In Time of Silver Rain* and *Tearless* – and would he like to hear it, one for tenor and one for baritone, and he said yes, he would like to hear for both voices, so he came and I went up and played these songs for him, and he sat there when we had completed it all and said, Are those my words? And I said, they certainly are, Mr. Hughes, and he said, My God, they just sound so much more beautiful with music. So that was his reaction to my music.

**SEPTEMBER 12, 2007**

**RO:**

“The Old Stoic” oh my God, I wrote this for a woman – what was her name? – One of the first things I wrote in Hamburg with English text. She sang them a couple of times, and later some other woman sang them on the radio she had her own accompanist, but these Emily Bronte – when you discover and see what these people have written, especially these women, and they’ve been writing, you know women weren’t supposed to be writing – all on their own, amazing.

Do you know the poems of St. Vincent Millay? I had no idea that she existed... it was Darryl (Taylor) said that he would love me to write something for him. These Millays were so fantastic – so then I wrote these for him as a little surprise – it’s actually a woman thinking about her past, but that meant a lot to him, so, well... then I discovered a little book and I bought a biography of hers, it’s very long, I’ve only got to the beginning of her life when she got to New York. But so interesting! You see all these things have been going on – and this was the time of Langston Hughes. Those were the days, my goodness! But people on the East Coast know her, but people on the West Coast have never heard of her.

He sang those on my concert – I must remember to give a copy of those to you – but....Yes, and there were a couple of Americans that I hadn’t seen for years as a composer – Lou Bloom – he was at Collette Warren’s house, I don’t know what that was, but a couple of musicians were there – I haven’t seen Lou Bloom in really almost a hundred years, I didn’t know he was still alive – he really wasn’t one of my favorite people, but I recognized him, thank goodness I recognized him. Collette, I had wanted her

to sing on the concert, but her husband has one of these diseases – Parkinson’s’ I think – and she said she doesn’t know how her time is and wouldn’t trust herself to say yes – I had to plan it way ahead of time. But she was telling everybody to come to the concert, and she was also there, and Lou Bloom was there, but I didn’t expect him to come – but there he was.

But in this, “What lips” I repeat at the end the words “a little while, a little while” – I do that two times. I changed that since we had done it on the recording. I told Darryl about it, of course, and after the concert, Lou Bloom came in his nice blue suit, he came back, “Oh I enjoyed it so much, and that you repeated, just a little while, a little awhile” – he knew the poem, but he’s from New York, and he knew about her.

**JR:**

That was something I wanted to ask you about. When Kyle was singing “Luck” today – the last part of the text was repeated. I know that some composers are adamant about leaving the poem in its original form...

**RO:**

No, no I repeat almost all of the Hughes things. I repeat it because it is so short. They’re so short. So very often I repeat something here or there.

**JR:**

So do you do that...

**RO:**

Sometimes after they've been performed, sometimes before they've been performed, when I see... Sometimes when you write something and you don't get it performed right away, but you get it performed sometime or other, looking at it again, you say oh I need to do this again, I need to repeat this. I don't change the structure, but often I repeat a couple of measures or an idea. For example when these things are too short, I almost have to do that.

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**JR:**

Here's the big question: Who influenced your music?

**RO:**

Composers?

**JR:**

Yes, and others.

**RO:**

Well, that is why I wanted to go to Europe, to Germany. Because my favorites were Schumann, Schubert, because of the messages they had. And the beauty that touched me,

reached me. And later, I was compared with Schubert. But for writing songs, that was my – I wanted to have something with melody and beauty. This wasn't with Beethoven, Chopin, Ravel – that all came later, but in the very beginning, it was the German school.

**JR:**

Tell me about the Beethoven, Chopin, Ravel. When did that come in?

**RO:**

That was when I got to Paris. I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in Paris. I was trying to get into the Conservatory, and when I finally didn't – I got into Alfred Cortot's Ecole Normale de Musique – I began studying the French school of music.

**JR:**

You hadn't really studied it to that point.

**RO:**

No, no. What I learned was the German school of music. So when I got to one of my main, as a pianist, one thing I felt very much was Chopin – when I got to Paris, I had to start learning the French school of music, Ravel, Debussy, this sort of thing. An entirely different world from I had ever heard. It took me some time to get used to the different school. They had this sensuous approach, all these vague sounds (chuckle). So, in my youth in Berkeley, where the things one studies on the west coast, she had had the method of the German school. So that was the beginning, those were my ideas.

**JR:**

I read – I think it may have been in one of Glendower's introductions for you – that your songs became more dramatic after you wrote *Kultur! Kultur!* Do you think that's true?

**RO:**

No – when was that?

**JR:**

1970

**RO:**

No, that's not true. Drama – I have that in my conception. It has to be what it has to be. I like something to be told. Thoughts, feelings, and in such a way that is clear. Nothing that is too vague and too artistic, though you don't come out and say that, you know? And that is what made the difference in my music, and in Schubert, and in getting away from Schubert and Schumann – they have their dramatic pieces, too – I wanted to say something that has to do with human beings. Not something... you know, you and me.

**JR:**

Do you find that your experiences on the stage have any impact on the way you write?

The characters you play, the situations you find yourself in onstage?

**RO:**

No, vice versa. In music, you're working all the time with emotions, and thoughts, and situations of the soul, and as a musician, one is used to that. That's what you're doing all the time. You don't have any words. But – when you get to on the stage, you understand these emotions that are being projected. You understand them much better than other people because you've been working with them – you understand them in a much deeper form... When I started acting, I thought this is good. When you are giving a whole evening of music, you don't know if they are getting it or not, but when you are acting and you have the language, it is much easier. You are used to understanding other people's emotions – it's fantastic. You can produce all the nuances you have in speech – of course, you have to learn the language – of course, I already knew English – you have to learn how to express yourself in a different tongue. But this is all a part of the things they interest me. What are they talking about? What is their training? That is what is so interesting. And then you begin seeing every language forms the people, and they have the... their traditions and everything behind them and I have always – I don't believe in looking back, I believe in looking forward, and all this business about roots has annoyed me completely. I have been protecting myself and trying not to be influenced by so many different things – leaving America was one of the main things – and trying to see what other societies are different. That worked a long time... until Europe has been Americanized. And I think it's so funny – things that I, words, things in my youth now come up in every day life in Germany. It was years earlier that I experienced that. But there is no getting away from that, America has influenced everything so much. And I was trying to get away from that so I could develop myself – sort of a do it yourself from

the inner – what I wanted to write, but is this true? – what I said yesterday about finding the truth – like Shakespeare said, things are seldom what they seem. And that is so true, he knew what he was talking about. How true that is – it's amazing. Comes up again and again. People that you know, people that you see every day. Things that try to influence you, politically or whatever, that you are manipulated... but when you realize that, you try to look behind and see what they really mean. But you have to know what is important to you – you can't know everything, you know. And I used to read all the newspapers, to know everything that is going on, but why? You can't influence this or that, these few things I can do, do it. I was reading last night in bed, Jane Wyman became 93 – she died at 93 – and I remember all these first films... What has Jane Wyman have to do with me? Why does one have to have all this information? (Laughs) but in the end, one gets all this information.

I don't know if you realize, when I was 15, when I got to high school – or was it junior high? – I had written a piano concerto. I had written it in junior high school. And later, we played it – there was a conductress, Jessica Marcelli, and we performed it with me at the piano at the Greek Theatre – we had performed it in junior high school and again at the Greek Theatre. And that was a big sensation. And I remember going to Miss Ellis at the library – she always suggested which books that I should read, and I should do this and do that – along the way there have been so many nice people that take an interest in me, give me advice, Miss Ellis was one of these people. The first time I visited her after this concert, she said, Oh, Robert, that was such a marvelous concert, if you never do another thing in your life, you have done that! But my reaction was, (laugh) that's not enough –



what could I do, just sit down and enjoy, talk about that concert? But that was a big concert. That she should say that, you know. I was only 15, you know? But I remember Miss Ellis... the world could not have been that good.

**JR:**

At least in the United States, there seems to be a trend for art songs to be written mostly for female voices, but you have so many songs for men. Is that just because these singers have come to you and said, please write something for me?

**RO:**

It's because these singers were all in Munich, and when I wanted to have some perform, I had these people with beautiful voices, and I wrote something for them, man or woman.

**JR:**

So virtually every composition was written with a particular singer in mind.

**RO:**

Yes, most.

**JR:**

Were there any that you wrote just because you felt moved to put something on paper?

**RO:**

Yes, early, perhaps. Because I began writing things very early. But later, I purposely wrote things for certain things for people that I wanted them to sing. And they were looking for something new for their repertoire.

**JR:**

So is it strange to hear those compositions sung by other voices, then?

**RO:**

No, it's marvelous, marvelous! Once they were written, it wasn't as though these singers were singing them ideally, you know. They were singing them more or less. I remember one – what was her name? – she was singing “Heart.” To this day, she still hasn't gotten the pitch right. (Laugh) But it isn't as though nobody else should sing these. It was just getting them written for someone or somebody.

**JR:**

So when you start writing – clearly, you have a great love for the poetry...

**RO:**

Yes, yes. That's the first step. Because these are the thoughts that interest me. I look for poetry – I mean, real poetry – looking for the beauty, for the message. Then I read them many times, and think about them. That's the first step. The second step is creating the atmosphere of the accompaniment.

**JR:**

Before the melody?

**RO:**

Before the melody. Then, putting the melody with the words, along the accompaniment.

Therefore the accompaniment, when they start, they continue to hear the same pattern.

And the words, going to the words and the melody, they sort of come at the same time.

That's it – the words, then the accompaniment, and then building, putting the melody with the words or adding to the accompaniment.

**JR:**

So in that way, like Schubert in the way you create the environment for the text and maintain it throughout the piece.

**RO:**

Yeah.

**JR:**

How interesting.

**RO:**

That's my system.

**JR:**

Have you ever been tempted to do a dialogue between voice and piano?

**RO:**

Dialogue between flute and piano, between cello and piano, they came later. Otherwise, it's collaboration between the piano and the voices, you know?

**JR:**

Would you say that you have written more pieces for the voice than you have for instruments?

**RO:**

Yes.

**JR:**

So why is that? Why more songs than instrumental works?

**RO:**

Because I had more singers around! I just recently found this cellist, so I got this inspiration to write for the cello, because of this cellist. The violin sonata, because I knew this woman who has a son, Jacob, up in Nuremburg, who plays the violin. And were on a program of almost all my music, and she had been on a program with this violin work by a black composer, and I would have to accompany people. And I took a look at this and

said, my god, it's all the same thing. And I said, I will write something for her myself. So I phoned her and said on her answering machine that this work was not worthy of her, and I was going to write something for her. And there came my violin sonata.

**JR:**

I think it's wonderful that each of your works has a person tied to them. It goes back to your earlier statement about wanting to write something human – it's appropriate that there is a real human attached to each of them... Since my interest is the Hughes songs more than anything else – you didn't set all of them?

**RO:**

I would have, in time.

**JR:**

That was the goal, to get all of them set to music?

**RO:**

Well, not actually... I don't know how many he thought I was going to do, but while I was writing, I would have this baritone or this soprano, and I would take from there, from this source. But there was this short, concise – sometimes three sentences, sometimes one or two sentences: "To some people love is given, to others only heaven..." This sort of thing fascinated me.

**JR:**

*Only* heaven.

**RO:**

Exactly. Exactly.

**JR:**

I remember thinking that was quite a statement – not how I expected that to turn out of all. Is there a reason, musical or otherwise, that the order of some the poems – like in *Mortal Storm* – are in a different than they are in the book?

**RO:**

No, they are in the order as they were in the book that I have. This one that I have was from 1947 in New York. This book – I don't know how many copies they made – anyway, they didn't make anymore. When I lost this – when Thomas Carey lost it – I wrote Langston Hughes and asked if I could get a new copy, and he said they hadn't edited anymore, but he would send me a couple of other books. But they never got this same order, or the same things in the thing called *Fields of Wonder*. The things I have are in the original order.

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**JR:**

I would love to know more about your mother, if you would like to talk about her.

**RO:**

You know, at that early age, one does not realize who is who. (laugh) When I was born, my mother was – I think she was about 15, my father was 16 – and this was all down in Denison, Texas. And thank goodness my father's mother, my grandmother, had about five sisters. And one of them lived in Berkeley, Sally, Aunt Sally. She was tough (laugh). And she raised up my father until I was about one year old and I came with my mother up to Berkeley. And I only know from that time, actually, coming to light, you know?

I remember we had a visit from Aunt Sally, and I was crawling around on the floor, and I would go to the piano, play a little, get back on the floor. And tough Aunt Sally said, What is he doing down there? And my mother said, he's listening to Lily Ruth – she lived on the first floor – he's listening to what she's playing, what she's practicing, and he gets on the piano and plays it. What? He's talented! Put him, get him some lessons! And my mother was a pianist, but she hadn't thought about anything like that. But this was during the crash – the depression – and my father was working, and my mother was playing for these parties, making her money. And Biggie, she had raised my mother.

**JR:**

Who was Biggie?

**RO:**

Biggie was the half sister of my mother's. And that's a long story... because when I was young... go back a little further... I don't know where they were, someplace in Texas... My grandfather and my grandmother had gotten married, they were very young. And my father's, no grandfather's family, were wealthy, and they didn't accept my mother's mother, because she was poor. And they didn't accept my mother. And then, my grandmother got very ill, and my grandfather he was also a pianist, playing at bars or whatever – once he was going home, and a beggar came up and asked for money. And the way I was told, my grandfather put his hand in his wallet to get him something, and the man stabbed him over the shoulder and robbed him. (I have a picture of my mother and me, and my grandfather in Berkeley.) Then, my grandfather was dead, and my... she was not... then she got Alpharetta, and she was sort of dying I guess. He was twenty, and he must have been about twenty at this time, and she swore her half sister Hazel not to let this family get Alpharetta. So Biggie fled to Denison, Texas...

**JR:**

With your mother?

**RO:**

Yes. And then, fifteen or sixteen years later, I was born. All very tragic, actually you know? You think about your Greek tragedies... So, that was a long story. I couldn't find out – I mean, my father, nobody had died in that family, and I was not interested in them at all! I was interested in my mother's family. I couldn't get a word out of them, and Biggie wouldn't tell me. All of this story I heard later, and they were keeping this all very



quiet. So we were in Berkeley, I grew up in Lincoln Grammar School, the first six grades, and then junior high school and everybody discovered my talent in Berkeley, and then I got to Paris, as I told you. In the meantime, before I got to Paris, I was in the army. I had been working in the Civil Service Commission in San Francisco in the front office. I had gotten – I had started – the war was going on, and I was 17, but I had been working there since I was 15, and I had started going to night school to be a cadet, a flying cadet. And we took these examinations and all this. And one day, I had gotten a letter from the government – I didn't know what it was – that I should go to San Francisco on such a date. Which I did on my way home from work, 5:00, and I went in, and they said you're in the army now. You're drafted. Of course, I should have read that. I hadn't taken it seriously at all because I knew I was going to be a cadet! I hadn't finished! Well, the rest of that story, I'll tell you about that. But my first day in the army I was taken – my father didn't know.

**JR:**

He didn't know you were in the army?

**RO:**

He didn't know. They took us to some camp. So I telephoned – I was not at all prepared. All the others had their toothbrushes... I was not prepared at all. Father, they took me in the army, the army in Fresno. Would you send me a toothbrush? And he said what? How could they do that? And at that time I was living with Aunt Sally. My father lived not too

far away with his second wife, Lou. He got all excited, but he did send me some things down.

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***LINCOLN LIVE, SEPTEMBER 14, 2007***

**RO :**

And there was a librarian, that she always gave me books to read and whatnot, and then I began to be interested in poetry, not only prose, and what are they beginning to talk about, you know, what are their thoughts? And then I had a feeling for words and they interested me, and then I began writing songs, and I was able to... I had an imagination about things. When I was a kid, everybody in the neighborhood I gave a nickname. And years later when I went back to Berkeley, to San Francisco, actually, a friend of mine, I had called him Turtle, his name was Turtle, everyone had called him Turtle since childhood, but his name was Ernest Cunningham (?) and I met him, and I said Hi, how are you doing? Yes, Turtle. And I remembered all these years what I called him – he never really did like that name. There was a girl I called Peaches, and when I went to the supermarket to buy something, she was sitting at the counter, and she recognized me, but of course when I saw her, of course, it was Peaches. And this sort of thing, this playing with the way people look, I have that sort of imagination. And that was also a sort of gift – I can't read people's thoughts, but almost. (laugh)

**Bill Stibor (host of Lincoln Live radio show):**

Well, your settings are just lovely and it comes naturally to you it seems, and they fall easily on the voice, I'm sure, as we know now.

**JR:**

Except when he makes me sing really high all the time!

**BS:**

Up in the tessitura?

**RO:**

Yes, but you see the thing was – I was very ambitious, very ambitious all the time, very ambitious as a kid. And I wanted these things to be really serious things for people to sing. And not to sing it “lalala” but to *mean* something.... that’s why some of these things were more difficult than I thought they would be, but I mean, I had the inspiration...

**BS:**

They are what they are.

**RO:**

Yes.

**BS:**

So is it just you or do you have other people on the program?

**JR:**

We have about 25-30 different people on the program – everything from chamber music to art song. Something for everyone.... Faculty, students, friends...

**RO:**

Marvelous. I'm so surprised - Yesterday one of the faculty members sang, and I was so surprised that he was going to participate... So good.. and we had something to talk about because he had questions about interpretation, and that's always something... that nobody knows exactly what this is. When I am able to get my hands on these people, then I can explain it. But it usually isn't like that.

**BS:**

(Laugh) Yeah, it's always tough, when you're half a world away. It's a crap shoot almost.

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**BS:**

That's what's interesting about your career – not only do you play piano, compose, but act as well – keep it interesting.

**RO:**

That's something marvelous, with my interest in language – the music and the words – of course, theatre, because I missed... very often when I get compliments from actors, it's because I'm musical, you know? Very often with actors, in America, and in England,

acting is 90% the emotion that you are putting into it. Of course in England, it's just natural that they speak the language very well. But in America they don't speak the language well –

**BS:**

It's more of a physical –

**RO:**

– yes, yes. But in Germany, I discovered after some time what they had been talking about – what did you say? Or, the accent, oh yes, you know, that was not classical stage German. What are they talking about? I'm pronouncing – until I really began listening – and acting on the stage, 90% is the language, which they didn't realize but I realize the accenting of certain syllables in the word. And I had a very good friend, George Goodman, a baritone - I wrote a couple of things for him early in the good old days in Munich when a lots of Americans with good voices were there trying to get started. And we met every Sunday and I played piano for all of them to sing, and George said – he had a girlfriend who was German, helping him with his German – “You know Bob, there is no other language you can make so many mistakes in one language!” – which is true – but even so, even the Germans, when I listen to them speak, in one sentence I always hear the wrong accent on one word... everybody doesn't hear that, you know?. But as I was saying, about 90% of the acting *is* the language in German, but they mean for you to speak it exactly, or they don't like it or they don't understand it. They expect their

language to be spoken poetically. And, um, their language hasn't changed very much.  
Very proud of it.

**BS:**

Do you set English most often?

**RO:**

Yes, I did, because the singers I had were singing in English. But when I got to Germany, I worked with a teacher who was teaching me how to breathe – she was a singer – so I started writing for her. I wrote some things in English for her, but also some things in German, because, I mean, that's her language. So I started writing things in German, and much later, I find some things by Hermann Hesse and other poets that I like. And when I was down in Bavaria, in Munich, I was invited down to Princess – what was his name? – the Duchess' house down there, and she gave these concerts, and there was a singer that I had met in Munich after years and years of going to different countries, and he had been in the fifth grade in Berkeley and turned out to be one of the big, big names on the opera stage, a bass, and he was invited down to sing, and I went down and accompanied him. And she said, I think you should write something by Hugo von Hoffmanstahl. Now Hugo von Hoffmanstahl wrote Rosenkavalier, but many other things also, and I said, yes, but how will I find something? I will find something for you. And she found something for me – three short poems – and she wanted me to write and I said, good, fine, I will do that. So we went back to Munich, And then she invited me down to the country again for a marvelous dinner, fish, beautiful, and I told her I had to get working, and she said, yes

you stay overnight tonight, and you will be sleeping in the bed that Hugo von Hoffmanstahl used to sleep in. What? My goodness! And it turned out that one of her relatives in Vienna was very ill, and Hoffmanstahl was very interested in other people, and when he found that she was almost dying, he started giving her little duties to read things for him and while he was writing something else. And so he kept her alive with his – he kept her alive. And that was the contact they had with Hoffmanstahl and Maria ended up marrying an American and living someplace on some big plantation in the Carolinas...

(beginning of Lincoln Live program)

**BS:**

Well, speaking of new music, you can't get more new than living composer Robert Owens working with students, faculty and friends at UNL.

**RO:**

Thank you very much, I'm glad to be here.

**BS:**

So, Robert, you've had a very interesting life – you were born in Texas, raised in California, and spent most of your adult life in Germany, I hear?

**RO:**

No, no, I began in Paris. This was 1946 when I left America and had the GI Bill of Rights, and I had two years where I could study on my own, and I wanted to start in Germany, but Germany was completely devastated. But then I had got my passport and was ready to leave America for some shores, so then I said where can I go? Will you pay in Paris? Oh yes, we'll do that. So I switched over with my teachers and they said "can you speak French?" and I said oh yes, of course, and it was off to Paris.

**BS:**

And it was a lucky happenstance since you being a pianist first got to study with one of the greatest pianists of all time, Alfred Cortot.

**RO:**

When I arrived he was not at the conservatory at that time because he had been a collaborator in the war, and they had chased him out of Paris, but he had a school that was called the Ecole Normale de Musique, and he was the head of that school. He was living at the time in Lausanne, and he would come secretly for master classes to Paris, and I would have master classes with him, and he would disappear again, and that happened for two years. And then one day, my professor Jean Gentile, with whom I worked every Thursday, said Cortot is going to give a concert at the Theatre de Champs d'Alene, and all the students must come and applause because you must support him. And I was an unknowing innocent American, and I went to this concert and it was full, but it had not announced that Cortot was going to play.



**BS:**

But it was full?

**RO:**

It was full, these Sunday afternoon concerts always were full. So I was sitting up the gallery waiting for something to happen and the symphony played some French work. Then they announced that Alfred Cortot was going to play some concerto or Chopin. He at that time was high in age, and he came onstage with a cane, somebody – he could almost not see anymore – helped him to the piano and he sat down. The whole orchestra stood up and left the stage. I said, my God, what is going on here? But that was their answer to him, he had been a traitor. So he sat there, then he started to play the B minor sonata of Chopin. (sings) Unfortunately, this work, the second movement of this work is a funeral march. (sings) When that started, it was become – you could feel something was going to happen - the people started yelling. “Stop, stop! Traitor!” And some people were clapping, we were clapping and some people were booing – and he played all through that. It was a funeral march. You know, all the Jews being killed... And then the program was over and we had to leave because nobody came back to play. So we were discussing that after, and then we found out *why* he wasn’t there at the school. And then about one year later they announced a concert he was going to play – maybe it was two years later – and he came out and played and people applauded. I guess they accepted him.

**BS:**

You seem to have a natural ability for setting words to music – and you were mentioning that because you love language so much, I think that helps a lot...

**RO:**

Yes, and it is also a gift that one has for understanding words, what they really mean, and it is always looking for the real meaning of things, and it's also, not only music, understanding, or trying to understand or finding out the real meaning of what is behind the words. And the combination of these things is very important. And it has helped me so much in my acting, my stage acting. And because understanding music, you can understand words and you've been working all this time with emotions, and it's a very good way to go from the ear to music to words to feelings – it all sort of fits in together.

**BS:**

You're better able to find the meaning of behind the words from the music in the words. We're going to be hearing a piece from your *Motivations* cycle, "The cottager to her infant."

**RO:**

This is, um, Dorothy Wordsworth. I had not heard too much about her, but her brother, William Wordsworth. And looking for different things, it's quite by chance, and all of a sudden you see something. The cottager to her infant, comforting her child, oh this is just beautiful. I always find an accompaniment to base the whole story on, and I found this little accompaniment, very simple (sings), and then it went on and one, and then I started

with the words, and before you realize, it is good and you have finished the first verse.

And it repeats three times.

**SEPTEMBER 14, 2007**

**JR:**

When did you find out, you sat down at the piano and said, I can do this?

**RO:**

My mother was a pianist.

**JR:**

Did she teach you?

**RO:**

No, actually. Because... I sort of started very early. I had an aunt that visited my mother one day, I was crawling around on the floor – about two or three years old – putting my ear on the floor and then going to the piano and playing little things. And this aunt of mine said, what is he doing down there on the floor? And my mother said, oh yes, he is listening to what Lily Ruth is playing down there on the first floor and he listens and goes and plays it at the piano. What? He is talented – I will pay for his lessons. Let's find someone to teach him! And I have a picture of my first piano lesson in Berkeley on Woolsey Street where I'm coming home from my first piano lesson. It's with my mother and my grandfather – a tragic story – and me. I had my first piano lesson at age four. We

always had a piano in the house and I grew up playing the piano. Grammar school was... and I went to Lincoln Grammar School around the next corner. And I spent six years there, but there was always some kind of music I was doing. I began writing my first things for the piano – “The Storm,” this that and the other – and my mother had been playing in the evenings to make a little money... as a child you don’t realize what is going on with the parents... but it must not have been very easy because those were the Depression – I was born in 1925, so that was just getting started – so I don’t know exactly what was going on there, I wasn’t aware of all that. Children don’t realize if you don’t have this or that – I was off playing with other children and all that. But about my mother – she, playing for these parties and whatnot, she got tuberculosis and she didn’t tell anyone until it was too late to help her. So when I was eight years old, my mother had to go to the sanatorium. She stayed there and I couldn’t visit her because of the contagious. And I would sometimes drive out with my father and sit in the car and wait while he visited her. And in those days, with tuberculosis, they put you out in the good air, and hope that they can operate. And so this was for four years. And in the meantime when I was 12, I was in junior high school, and then she got tired of being there and wanted to come home. So we had moved to Woolsey Street and were living on Morgan Street, and I remember she came home and was lying there. I remember at Christmas time she gave me some music – my father had gone and bought it. And I didn’t see her very much because of the contagious, but I remember her now and then. Then she wanted to go out with her girlfriends and whatnot, and she went out then came home again because she was too weak to really do that. And then we moved again, down to Ashby Avenue, and that must have been too much for her, that move. Because one afternoon I was sitting in some class

in junior high school, and the teacher came to me and said that I should go home because my mother was dying. I could leave that class and go home. I went home, it was a walk about 15 minutes, and I got home and my mother was dying. And there was Aunt Sally – the one who got my father up to Berkeley, she was the sister of my grandmother, she sort of ruled everything with an iron hand – this was Aunt Sally. And she was there. Biggie, who had raised me, raised my mother, she was there crying when I got home. My father was working as a waiter on the ferry boats in the bay (the Bay Bridge was not there yet) and he was working the ferry going from Oakland to San Francisco, and he wasn't there. But they had phoned to tell him that my mother was dying. And I came and she was lying in her bedroom. Biggie, she didn't want me to see my mother dying, but Sally said, you go in there, it's your mother. And I was very glad that she had said that. I went in, and she was lying there, and I went over to the bed, and she looked at me and took my hand, and said, I know you will be a great musician. And then she sort of raised up, and there was a sort of light in her face when she told me that, and then she sank and she died. So I saw that, you know? I didn't take it – I was 12 – I didn't take it very seriously. She was 28. Beautiful woman. And there were these two families, and she was from the one family I knew nothing about. And my father – his family that they went to in Denison when my mother was born, another tragic story with her father, and Biggie took her to Denison and brought her up so that one family wouldn't take her. I don't know the details. But anyhow, my mother died. And then Biggie started moaning and carrying on, and Sally, but by the time my father got back to Berkeley, she was already dead. He did not cry until the burial. He was not a religious man – we couldn't get him to any church – but he was there for the funeral. But when we went up to the cask to look at her, he broke down

sobbing. He was only one year older – he was 16 when I was born, she was 15 – young. And this was the situation. So after my mother had died, that was... I saw what was happening, but I didn't cry, not even at the funeral. But I remembered what she had told me and took it seriously.

**JR:**

And she was right.

**RO:**

Yes. The other part of the family, my mother had no brothers and sisters, my father was an only child, I was an only child, and that was one of the things that I wanted to leave to go to Germany. Music, music, music. At the age of eight, I told my father, when I grow up I want to go to Germany. My father was not musical, I think he did business things... I was going my own way with my own ideas, and nobody in the family... after my mother died, I had no one in the family with music... I was on my own very early. But also with a will of iron, I knew what I wanted... knowing that I wanted something entirely different than the people surrounding me. Including Aunt Sally and her husband Uncle Tob, which they did when I was 15 and began working at the Civil Service Commission in San Francisco. And then when that happened, my father – of course, my mother had been in the sanatorium for four years, and this young man, he met other young women, but I never realized what was going on, actually. And one day, I moved down to Sally's – they lived about three blocks down. Uncle Tob, her husband, he was working at the slaughterhouse (which meant that we ate well, all those steaks and whatnot!), and she kept

trying to get my mother... Sonny should come and live at our place and then he can go to San Francisco and work from our place. And my father, there was this woman that I saw now and then, I didn't know who she was, and from the playground, when I would go down to Ashby where I was living, I sort of ran into her a couple of times. One day she said hello to me, and I looked – thank goodness I was not rude or anything! But I smiled at her, thank you I'm fine, how are you? And I did not know that was going to be my stepmother. So it was very good that I was nice to her.

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**JR:**

What about jazz? You were growing up just as America was finding its voice.

**RO:**

There are people who can improvise – my mother could play anything. The thing is what you are trying to express and what interests you – what you're trying to say or what you're hearing is saying to you. That's the big difference between classical and jazz or non-jazz: Expressing something for their feelings, is it out of their feelings, what they are compensating for or striving for...

**JR:**

Does your music do that for you?

**RO:**

I was trying to find something that I don't hear. Something in the classical – I studied the classics – something that expresses for me a continuation of my classical feelings and what make sense to me. And I want to express something that I find beautiful, what I have to say, in my classical way of expressing myself. With the training I have had classically, and putting that in action with my own thoughts and own feelings. And that's the big difference – I listen to jazz and I like certain things, and I have grown up with it, I know it – but when I want to express something myself, it's the classical line I'm trying to go into other regions with what I am doing. And this is the direction that I take. And you've studied the forms, heard the forms, now what do I want to do? How can I do something that I feel is good. So much of the classic - I was teaching a class, and someone asked me what do you feel about Copland? Sentimental. And she said, oh you're right. Because what they were trying to express there, Copland and these people, from whatever they heard around here, but I have taken my inspiration from what I have inside me because I have a lot of imagination and I want things to sound like *this*, or the things I am looking for I can express in a different way, but I have something to say. That's why I was looking for something else. When I went to Europe, I went to Paris, I heard all these things from the new world of music...

**JR:**

You grew up in a very interesting time in music. I was checking dates, and you just missed Nadia Boulanger...

**RO:**



Oh no, she was there... But I didn't study composition.

**JR:**

You didn't have anybody that you said, when Robert Owens grows up, I want to be this person?

**RO:**

No, but I adored Beethoven. This is why I wanted to go to Germany, to see – where they have written this music, these marvelous people. That is why I was going to Germany – but I didn't get there for a very long time, not until after Georgia.

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**RO:**

Yes it is very interesting talking to you about this because these are...

**JR:**

So you didn't study composition?

**RO:**

I didn't study composition. I studied the things that one does as a musician – harmony, structure, those things, but as far as going to classes by this professor, that professor, they wanted me to do that in Vienna, too. But they always wanted you to sound like their sound.

**JR:**

So is there a Robert Owens method?

**RO:**

Yes! (Laugh) I break all the rules for successive fifths, parallel chords, and all that. But I have found a style – melody, clarity, and having every sound is important. Like the orchestra – every instrument. It's something that makes my music a little difficult, and different, because it's *simple* but that's the most difficult because it has to be *right*, because you will hear everything that is not fitting in there. I have a great affinity for Bach, the old masters, and I have some of that in my music also. So yes, I have developed a style. I didn't know it then, but I can look back on a program like this, and I can see what I've done...

**JR:**

A signature?

**RO:**

Yes. So... and the thing is, I have – starting in Paris and finishing with my diploma from Cortot, and my teacher Gentil, I had private lessons with him every Thursday. And he was at the school with Cortot as director – until they chased him out – and the GI bill paid for all of it. And I was living quite good, because first it paid \$50 a month, and then \$60 a month. And I had my father put \$10 in the bank and send me the rest. That was 1946. And I proceeded to find the black market – all the students did. There were a lot of

Americans there – painters from New York, but I was the only one from California, from that far away. And they knew how to get the black market to get lots of francs. You go to the Place de L’Opera and sort of look around, someone will approach you that you have dollars to sell. So I did that – and I remember the first time I went to the Place de L’Opera, and people were standing around, and a man came up. And he said, Follow me. and I went down this alley to his family, he had a little kid. So I got I don’t know how many Francs, but monthly, I went to the Place de L’Opera – there was nothing to buy in 1946, no food, no clothing, but winter came – one of the coldest they’d had in the last hundred years – I had to buy some warm clothes, a coat. Those California things didn’t keep me warm. That’s how I began to gather to get some clothes, go to the theatre. That was the beginning of the existentialism in those days – Piaf, Cocteau, Simone Signoret, they all began in these small little theatres, and I would see all these people in the theatres and at these concerts. That was when I said, my god, I’m beginning to live! And that was the beginning of my studies and actually the beginning of seeing what life was really about...I remember one month the letter didn’t come from my father with the money – only one time – and I lived the whole month on oatmeal. I had bought oatmeal and found some milk – you’d buy the cans and get them home, but you couldn’t get them open! These sort of things happened. And after about a year, little by little, the bread got better and started tasting like something, the coffee got better. And on Wednesdays, at restaurants you could start to get some fish, and the next year, we got meat. But you see in those conditions and nobody has any money anyway, it was really marvelous, really wonderful – it was fantastic!

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**RO:**

So he [Gentil] said, Robert – he called me *Robert le Diable*, Robert the Devil – what are you going to do now that you have the Diploma? Are you going back to America to teach my system with the thumb? And I said, well I don't quite know what I am going to do. Yes, you go back to America! I had met a Danish dentist – he was on his way to Schweitzer in Africa to be a doctor – and I said, I have finished my studies now, and I don't know what I am doing. Will you come with me to Africa? And I said, no... he was rather surprised, but I had come to Europe to study with Cortot! And he didn't quite get that. And he said, will you come to Copenhagen? And that sounded better. So just about that time I had decided I would go to Copenhagen, Gentil called. Have you decided where you are going? Robert, they have good butter! So he thought it would be ridiculous to go somewhere that had good butter and milk, but no art, and who would teach his system? So I went to Copenhagen, and it was the best step I could have made – two years later I gave my debut as a pianist in Copenhagen.

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**RO:**

The Baptists... all this screaming and carrying on just frightened me to death, sensitive child that I was. And then I became Catholic – music ceremony, but it annoyed me that I had to pray and that everybody prayed the same. And I thought that this can't be right, can't be how you go to church. But when I was in Paris, there was a little Catholic church right behind the Cité d'Université, and I went over there a couple of times. Sometimes they needed someone to do the mass, so I was doing that, and there was a girl, Marie Peters, also a singer – I wrote something very early for her – and she was Catholic all of

her life. And we were looking for some food actually – those early days in Paris when you couldn't find anything – and we were walking to the Cité and I looked in the shop and I said, oh there's some bread and some salami. Let me go in and see, and I walked in and said are those to be sold? So I bought two salami baguettes. So I went out and told Marie, look what I have found! And we were just about to eat those baguettes, I was just going to sink my teeth into it, and Marie said, oh no Robert, today is Friday! No meat! And I hesitated – it was Friday, you could eat no meat on Friday – so I said, oh my god, we had finally found some meat! So we threw this away. So when I went to confession, I asked the Father about this, I said you know I think I almost sinned. Yesterday, it was Friday, and I almost ate some salami. What did you say? Oh no, no, no my son – the war! If you find some meat, you eat it! And that made me begin to think. The whole idea of Catholicism in America – they didn't have to suffer these realities. Entirely different. The French – they were all Catholic – none of them went to church, it was just part of their life. And no one – Even the priest was telling me, no, no, no – the war, if you have chance... So I began to have doubts. But I stayed Catholic for much longer, until Germany. But as a Catholic you have to pay tax to the church all the time. And when you make money, they take that out – and someone asked me, are you paying that? What religion are you? You should be saving that! You should be getting that money. So I asked how I could get out of that? You go to the police station – police station? To jail? – so I went to the police and they said, you want to get out of church? Okay, write that down, and they put it on my card at the police and that was the end of that. So, the whole attitude is something entirely different. And this whole thing with the war was the reason I got out of the Catholic Church. So many things annoyed me with the Catholic Church.

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**JR:**

Did you ever sit back after composing something and say, this is *it*?

**RO:**

No, I like so many of my things. I remember when I was rehearsing this George Goodman, a good friend of mine and musician. And we used to go on tour with these little folksongs that I would arrange for him. And he would pay me a little money, and it was very good. I remember we were practicing something or other (hums) – that’s your music, Robert! (laugh)

**SEPTEMBER 15, 2007**

**RO:**

We were living at the top of a house with no lift – once he had a visit from his mother. He was Austrian – from the mountains. He was not a person from the city... and I was surprised that he was so interested in spirituals. So he wrote up all these notes and the words and I went to work on these spirituals. Then he said, yes, we were going to go on tour. His girlfriend would manage us, her father was a banker. And our first town was going to be Hanover, at the theatre. I had just auditioned for a play at the other theatre that was around the other side of the corner for...what was the name of that play? *Taste of Honey*. And I had auditioned for that and gotten the role. So then the time came for our concert in Hanover, we were practicing, rehearsing at home. There was almost nobody there. And his wife, when I met her, oh yes, Mr. Owens! And somebody completely I

couldn't imagine that she and him had gotten together. So we gave this concert and got down to Hanover. We sang all the spirituals in German, but there was almost no one in the audience. She was embarrassed and came backstage afterward – it's difficult when there are only 13 people in the audience. There was supposed to be a concert in another city, but I was sure her father would not pay for all these empty houses. I would have said goodbye, but we lived in the same house! I said goodbye to her. But she had planned a whole tour – she thought we were going lots of places. But I had to do a play. She said, no, no! I have talked to them already. And I went and talked to the head of the theater and she said I'm so sorry you won't be able to do this. I said, what do you mean, sorry? A young lady came by and said you can't have him because he will be doing concerts with my husband during this time. So we had to get someone else.

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**JR:**

What did you say about the importance of modulation?

**RO:**

In my music, it is very important to be aware of continuous modulation, going from one key to the other, because it colors the expression of the words, thoughts and feelings.

**JR:**

Would you say that you use modulation instead of, or in combination, with text painting?

**RO:**

What sort of painting?

**JR:**

Like in “Girl” – the “la la”s sound like a laugh.

**RO:**

Yes, that is text painting. That was something I wanted to say the other day – “the chilliest land” – these words, the adjectives, they express something and it has to be expressed in the voice, otherwise you could just be saying anything. And therefore, to color these, sometimes it’s in the interval, sometimes it’s in the harmony, but it has to be in the voice also. “Chillest land.” He had the idea of what this is. And there where you start tasting your words, when the words are tasted, then it becomes part of the voice.

**JR:**

And I don’t really see such obvious text painting – say, if the word is “descend”, you go down – as I do in other composers.

**RO:**

I am very much trying to get people to listen to the words of their speech – to understand what they are speaking... therefore, I ask them to read these things. And it’s almost always a rather rapid going through the text. And then I talk about it. I read these poems before I set them to music. And I read them many times, and not right away, you know. I



read the text very often, I try to get into what has been said, to get the feel of the words, when I get started.

**JR:**

So how long does it take to write a single song?

**RO:**

It goes very quickly. Once I get the accompaniment going, it comes right out of that. It takes time later to write it all down, copy it out. But writing it as such, it's right away, once I decide to do it. I choose the poem, I think about it, I choose the accompaniment, and then I start.

**JR:**

You don't labor over it... It's interesting talking about how so many of the colors have to come out of the voice. I think this really reinforces – correct if I am wrong – your ideas about the importance of the poetry. You see composers set wonderful poetry, but it isn't always about the words. Sometimes it's more about the music. It seems very apparent to me that no matter how complicated the accompaniment is, or how difficult the tessitura, you want people to understand the vocal line.

**RO:**

It's a question of inspiration. I don't know how inspired the singers are when they are singing, but this is when something just takes you away, you know? And you start going

up there above all this daily... “traffic’s din”... plodding away, not listening to what this little bird is saying, all these things that are happening. He flies away, and you’ve missed it... When I get inspired by a certain thought, that gives me an idea about a melody I would like, what do these words bring out in me?

**JR:**

I appreciated it when you replied to my question about if women could sing songs written for men and vice versa... but what are your thoughts on transposing?

**RO:**

I don’t believe too much in transposing. I don’t do transposing myself. I choose these keys, the keys I’ve chosen, and I’ve just left it at that, you know? But as you see, these Emily Bronte, women have sung them, Donnie [Ray Albert] has sung them as a bass-baritone, counter-tenor with Darryl [Taylor].

**SEPTEMBER 16, 2007**

**RO:**

One of the main things I was thinking about... that is exactly not what I do. And the reason is, everything I write has to do with words. I first choose the words and try to see the beauty of what is being said, or the message of what is being said, and I get that into my system, and then I go into the actual writing which is usually – no, always is – to get the atmosphere of the accompaniment for the words. Once I get an atmosphere, I can begin with the basic tempos and the rhythms – my things are always, I will say,

rhythmically interesting. It is very important to be exact with the rhythms. The rhythms build up the atmosphere. And off that, then my spirit goes, and it is according to whatever happens then that is like my inspiration. I have a gift for melody... I can spin a melody off a telephone book (laugh) or any words. When you go into different spheres with the ideas, then my imagination, it turns loose and you can go into all these different worlds. And that is what one must understand when one sings my things. It's all well and good to sing the notes and whatnot, but it's always more to it than meets the eye. There's much more than meets the eye. *Border Line* is a very example good of that because these "Exits" – until I understood what he was saying... when I got the idea (humming), but anyhow, the suicide, whether you drown, you have different choices in how you exit but they all bring peace, you know? And this goes into spheres when I am writing, these are tones and poems that I am not used to thinking about, and therefore, it turns into wondrous things, this is another world, and that means there is no saying, when I do this, this will happen. It is always a new experience, according to what the words waken in me – the emotions, or the point of view of the message, or the point of view of the atmosphere, like "Circles", how it starts like a swirl. And that is based upon the rhythm in the accompaniment. And the accompaniment becomes something on its own, and the voice goes its way, and then it is a collaboration of several things. One has to think of orchestras, rather than just voices, they are all important. This makes it more complicated for the pianist because of the modulations – these are all nuances which (singing from "Heart"), then it changes (sings again) happy, then it changes a different color (sings 2<sup>nd</sup> theme from "heart"), coming back to the original harmony, then the final (sings final section). And also, I have a feeling – we have the structures – I've studied form and all

that, you realize that the most difficult part is coming to the end of something. Then you have to come to some sort, if the work is long, if the work is short, it's no problem, a couple of phrases, a couple of harmonies.

**JR:**

I noticed in "Convent" the other day that you repeat the first section again at the end, and I noticed that you do that a couple of times. A nice bookend.

**RO:**

It is a nice way to end simply. But in "Convent," there is this which one has to explain the meaning to people. In the convent, the innocence and the temptation, that comes right in the beginning. (sings accompaniment theme) Menacing and evil – the people don't go far enough. They have to realize what that is, and when they realize it, they can do something with their voices. And that is something the girl singing "Sleep" is doing so well. She goes further into the poetry.

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**RO:**

I was working at the Civil Service Commission in the Federal Office Building and I had heard about the war, that there was going to be a draft, so I decided to be a cadet. They were talking about the cadets, the cream of the crop, flying, you know? So I went to night school one or two nights a week over in San Francisco and... we were going to these

classes and whatnot, and then all of a sudden, one day – I told you that – I got this letter. Yes, I was at war. And I said, you can't do this, I'm going to be a cadet! Of course, they couldn't care less, I was army and that was that. And when I finally got to the school there, I was allergic – I had to be very careful with grass and things, and we would be having these drills and things...

Well, it seems to be that word got around there that they had enough Black pilots in Tuskegee for the whole army, and they were beginning to flunk out as soon as possible the new ones. And one day they took us on a bivouac and we marched down, way out someplace, then we had duty and we were going by these barbed wire things and during my week, I had about two hours to be out there, and I thought, "What I am doing out here?" So this was for about three days, and when we got back, the sergeant who led us out there said "this is the training you had in case you are out in the jungle and get shot down." I don't know anything about jungles! So I said, this is not going to happen.

So I remembered my allergies and I went to the dispensary – as a cadet, you have to be in perfect, perfect health – and I knew that I was allergic to dust and to grass, so that was what I was going to do. They tested me for seventeen allergies, and I was allergic to all 17 of them! The major said, "How did you get into the cadets in the first place? We'll send you to a sandy place in California so they don't throw you out of the service!" But what I would have to do is resign from the cadets, and I would have to go to this captain or major, or whatever he was, and resign from the cadets.

So I went in one morning – and this is why I don't like people saying "sir", it's one of those military things – and I went to this military officer, and I told him I wanted to resign. He said, what do you mean? Do you realize how much money we've put into you? You're the cream of the crop? You will be doing this for your country, and you want to resign? What are you? What have you done before?" And I said, 'I'm a pianist.' "A pianist! Well, since you're insisting, you have to put it on paper, but I warn you, I will see that you are overseas on the first ship that's going." And I knew I was not going overseas, because the major had told me I was going to California. You know, pure innocence. Pure innocence. I was seventeen, almost eighteen.

So I started talking to myself, I know where I'm going. So I wrote the letter, sent it in and one day I got my walking papers. So you get your orders, and then you get on the next train to wherever you're going. So I got on the train with another man named Thomas, I think, from Chicago. He had the papers. He was sort of swearing, thinking they were putting him out of the cadets because he had trouble with his training – he crashed. We got on this train, in the middle of the South, we had to go to the colored part, until we went over the border, then we could sit where we want. I thought we were going north or west or something. And finally he said, I wonder where we are going. So he opened the envelope and it said "Stuttgart." Stuttgart! That is in Germany! But no, it was Stuttgart, Arkansas! And I said no, I am going to California. So we got to this little place, so we got off in the middle of nowhere! Arkansas. Dust. As far as the eye could see, nothing but that. Nobody was waiting for us. I was thinking I would be getting a transfer, going on another train. So we were sitting there, and in the distance I saw this dust storm.

The dust storm turned out to be a Jeep picking us up. The man was also Black. He drove us to this little barracks. We got out and went in. It was the Captain so-and-so and the Lieutenant, his name was David. So Thomas goes in with his breast out, and I followed him, thinking oh my God, and this captain said to us in a Southern voice, Alright boys, you're here in Stuttgart, Arkansas, and this is the place you will be until the end of the war. And don't try to get away because we have guns and we will catch you. That was our welcome. And Thomas started to say something, of course it was a shock to him, too, and the Lieutenant said, don't you talk back, and I couldn't speak. And he looked at me and said, can't you speak? What's wrong with you? I couldn't get a word out, I was completely stunned. And then it turned out it was one of these companies where they send the bad seeds, the murderers, and that was where I was until the end of the war. Thank goodness it was only two years!

This was one of the miracles. When I was there, they used to go out to the fields – I was really young, most of them were thirty-five, forty. The first thing that happened, was that because I could read and type, I was right away put in the office with the Captain and I did all the paperwork, the passes into town. It could have been much worse! It was all very simple. But then I began to get used to it. And slowly but surely, they began to really like me. There would be big fights, and I would calm everyone down. But then I found out that this Lieutenant, David, can't be much older than I am – maybe 21 or 22 – and he was from Mississippi, true South, and he was one of the poor whites. He had about five or six brothers and a sister, and as soon as these sons get to be sixteen, they sent them to the

army, one less mouth to feed. He had been in the army all this time. In the South, in the army, that means pure prejudice all the time. Nothing to be done. And when I heard that, then I said, I am going to make it my duty to convert him, he can't be much older than I. One on one, I can do this. You can't work with crowds, you know. I had that as my duty. If I was going to be there, I was going to do this. He had just gotten married, and he would go home to Little Rock on the weekends – she too was a southerner.

But then it turned out that the Captain got out of the army, and David became the Captain and head of the department. I had already begun working on him. He was the only one I had dealt with. We were Company C. The rest of the people were far from us – and we, Company C – C for colored – were on the outskirts of camp near the German prisoners of war. That was my luck, because not only did I have David to convert, I had the prisoners over there. And there were about six of them exactly my age, and they had been taken in Africa. Kids, just my age. They were behind a barbed wire fence there, but their mess was right opposite from our mess. But I could go down from the dispensary along the barbed wire and we could talk. And they guy in the watchtower couldn't see us. And they had never seen a person of color before, and it was purely forbidden. But we were so hidden, it was almost safe. But I didn't tell David that! I got them some books; I began learning German from them.

They would always walk and about five thirty they would come home from the fields past our barracks into their barracks and you could hear them from far away, singing. I was getting all this German spirit! Nobody knew this of course! And one afternoon, David and



I had gotten very chummy and we were sitting on the veranda, and they came marching down, and there was one, Gerhardt, and he had given me his address – the only one I ever met later – and Gerhardt saw me sitting there, and he said, “Robert! Robert!” and I said, David don’t you want to go in? Of course, they didn’t know, but if I had been caught!

## APPENDIX 2

### Catalog of Owens' Published And Recorded Songs

#### SONGS FOR VOICE AND PIANO

**Copyright 1986 Orlando-Musikverlag, Munich. Reprinted by special arrangement with Classical Vocal Reprints, North American selling agent. Reprinted by permission.**

*Border Line, Op. 24.* Song cycle for baritone and piano. Poems by Langston Hughes.

*Desire, Op. 13.* Song cycle for tenor and piano. Poems by Langston Hughes.

*Drei Lieder für Mezzosopran mit Klavier, Op. 19.* Poems by Joseph von Eichendorff.

*Drei Lieder für Bariton mit Klavier, Op. 20.* Poems by Hermann Hesse.

*Drei Lieder für eine tiefe Stimme und Klavier, Op. 47.* Poems by Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

*Four Motivations* for baritone and piano, Op. 21. Poems by Dorothy and William Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson.

*Heart on the Wall, Op. 14.* Song cycle for soprano and piano. Poems by Langston Hughes.

*Images, Op. 15..* Three songs for a high voice. Poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar and Waring Cunney.

*Mortal Storm, Op. 29.* Song cycle for baritone and piano. Poems by Langston Hughes.

*Silver Rain, Op. 11.* Song cycle for tenor and piano. Poems by Langston Hughes.

*Stanzas for Music.* Four songs for tenor and piano. Poems by Lord Byron.

*Tearless, Op. 9.* Song cycle for baritone and piano. Poems by Langston Hughes.

*Three Countee Cullen Songs.* For high voice and piano. Poems by Countee Cullen.

*Three Songs* for a deep voice and piano, Op. 18. Poems by Emily Jane Brontë.

*Three Songs* for coloratura-soprano and piano, Op. 31. Poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

*Three Songs in memoriam George Jackson* for baritone and piano, Op. 41. Poems by Claude McKay.

#### SELECTED SONGS AVAILABLE IN ANTHOLOGIES

*Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*. Patterson, Willis C., ed. Published by Edward B. Marks Music Company, 1977. Includes “Faithful One” and “Genius Child.”

*A New Anthology of Art Songs by African American Composers*. Simmons, Margaret R. and Jeanine Wagner, ed. Published by Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. Includes “Heart,” “Girl,” and “Havana Dreams.”

#### SONGS FOR VOICE AND ORCHESTRA

Available from Orlando – Musikverlag, Munich, Germany:

*Border Line, Op. 24*. Song cycle for baritone and orchestra. Poems by Langston Hughes.

*Fields of Wonder*. 11 songs for tenor and strings. Poems by Langston Hughes.

*Heart on the Wall*. Five songs for soprano and orchestra. Poems by Langston Hughes.

#### RECORDINGS

Albert, Donnie Ray. *Tearless: Song Cycles of Robert Owens*. Cinnabar Records, CNB102, 2003.

Pleas, Henry. *Cantata*. Copyright Henry Pleas, 2003.

Taylor, Darryl. *Fields of Wonder*. Videmus Records TROY897, 2006.

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