



SONGS FOR A DAY

Aristéa Mellos

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Helen Zhibing Huang, *soprano*
Ada Arumeh Kim Lowery, *piano*

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Jane Bishop, *flute*
James Larsen, *cello*

1. Prelude 3'35"

2. La Tessitrice (Ada Negri) 4'31"

3. Louriana Lourilee (Elton) 7'18"

4-7. Songs of Resignation (C.P. Cavafy)

1. Walls 2'37"

2. Brought to Art 3'33"

3. Candles 5'24"

4. Voices 3'45"

8. Athena (Emily Kendal Frey) 5'35"

9-11. Songs for a Day (Yiannis Ritsos)

1. Suddenly 6'01"

2. Morning 6'01"

3. Afternoon 5'23"



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Art: Polaroids by Alek Lindus

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SONGS FOR A DAY

Songs hold the unique power of being able to transcend barriers. They are sung in all languages, across all cultures, and throughout time. Songs carry us through life, from the cradle to the grave: they are our alpha and omega. The very core of our human experience is expressed by the union of words and sound, and yet, the magic of a song is also in its brevity. The humble song can, in the space of a few minutes, plumb the depths of our unspoken desires, dreams, fears, and hopes. For these reasons, the form holds an endless fascination for me. The works presented in this album are art songs: a form in which the voice, text, and instrumental accompaniment are partners of equal value, working in sympathy to capture the essence of the narrative. These art songs, written between 2013 and 2019 act as testaments to my deep love for the human voice, and to the magic of storytelling through music.

Prelude, for solo piano, 2019

In 2014 I founded a fine arts festival on the island of Samos, Greece. 2019 marked the festival's fourth season at which I presented a selection of Preludes (Book I) by Claude Debussy. I completed this piano miniature ahead of the 2019 festival to complement my program, and to provide a personal commentary on the ways in which Debussy's use of harmonic colour and resonance has shaped my own approach to the instrument. This *Prelude* acts as a 'Song Without Words' – lowering us gently into the richly lyrical musical landscape of this album, ahead of a full submersion.

La Tessitrice (The Weaver), for soprano & piano, 2016

La Tessitrice (The Weaver) takes its name from the poem by the Italian poet Ada Negri. In 1923, Negri was holidaying on the island of Capri. The island's sensual beauty inspired her to write a volume of poetry entitled 'Canti dell'Isola' or 'Songs of the Island' to which *La Tessitrice* belongs. In my setting, the piano's motto perpetuo texture draws its inspiration from Schubert's song, Gretchen am Spinnrade. Here, however, the refined rhythm of the spinning wheel is replaced with the more cumbersome clack of the loom. The piano's motion is less fluid, and at times, it cuts out altogether, leaving the voice exposed in solitary isolation with its entreats of “weave”, “weave”. Much like Goethe's text in Gretchen, Negri's poem contemplates the themes of fate, love, and loss - the essential ingredients of life.

Louriana Lourilee, for soprano and piano, 2014

Louriana Lourilee is a gothic epic ballad for soprano and piano. Drawing from the Victorian spiritualist practice of communing with the dead, the poem places us into a ghostly world of garden paths, china roses, and swinging boughs, all of which appear to us like a lifeless tableaux of Victorian bourgeois life – a life that would be shattered by the onset of WWI. The moto perpetuo

of the dazzling piano reminds us of the excessive ornamentation of this era, like intricate lace work it covers a darker truth – that of loneliness, nostalgia, and a fading past, as the protagonist contemplates the depth of his grief and his state of endless isolation.

Songs of Resignation: Four settings of C. P. Cavafy, for soprano and piano, 2019

The Alexandrian Greek poet Constantine Cavafy worked primarily as a journalist and civil servant, distributing his self-published works to a select network of friends. Posthumously, he emerged as a titan of modern Greek poetry, and his minimal, prose-like writing style lends itself comfortably to English translation. In crafting this cycle, I selected four poems from Connolly's publication 'C.P. Cavafy Selected Poems' that span his philosophical and historical output. The cycle is designed to be performed without break – the final note of one song acts as the tonic or dominant of the next.

The cycle opens with *Walls*, a turbulent song that swings between feelings of anxiety and nostalgia. The poem, often regarded as a metaphor for Cavafy's homosexuality, also operates on a historical level, providing commentary on the dispersal of the Greek diaspora of Alexandria, Constantinople, and Smyrni in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. An ascending repetitive pattern dominates the piano accompaniment, whilst the vocal line steamrolls ahead obliviously, until the final exposed moments in which it solitarily notes that “they cut me off/from the world.”

I Brought to Art is a manifesto on the creative process. In my setting, I wanted to honour the power of Cavafy's confession, and to set the text without self-censorship. Where he talks of “unfulfilled loves”, the piano and vocal lines are unashamedly indulgent. The opulent lyricism strives to capture “beauty's form”, and in so doing, act as a manifesto to my own artistic aesthetic.

Candles confronts our fear of mortality, the slow decline into middle age, and the uncertainty that awaits each of us with our inevitable death. The song opens with an unaccompanied melismatic vocal line, reminiscent of the undulating strains of Orthodox chant. As the piano enters, the music locks into a regular pattern through which bells chime. A chorale in the piano gives way to a persistent, agitated, rising bass which is overlayed with a self-pitying vocal line. Just as in *Walls*, there is no turning away from the inevitable – the chorale setting returns, extinguishing itself in the depths of the piano's bass register.

The final song in the cycle, *Voices* is a hushed ode to the transformative power of the human voice. The vocal line twists and turns under the grace of bel canto ornamentation, while the piano ripples ever upwards, with celesta like clarity, before fading “far away.”

Athena, for soprano, cello and piano, 2013-2014

Athena was composed for the Art Song Lab Project as part of the Vancouver International Song Institute in the summer of 2013. The poet, Emily Kendal Frey, the original performing ensemble, and I, worked collectively throughout a week of workshops to shape the song into its final state. Originally composed for tenor, the song was modified for soprano in 2014. *Athena* confronts conflicting states of existence, juxtaposing birth with death, and the state of joy with the rites of mourning. An elegiac cello solo leads us into a funeral procession of sorts, as the gravelly voiced soprano recounts the mystery of her gruesome gestation “inside of her mother’s head”. Throughout the song, musical symbols associated with mourning undergo a transfiguration, shedding their gravity and dark hues, so as to become luminous agents of resolution and acceptance.

Songs for a Day: Three Poems of Yiannis Ritsos for soprano, flute, cello, and piano, 2014-2015

Songs for A Day comprises three dovetailing movements: I. *Suddenly* II. *Morning* III. *Afternoon*. The cycle opens in the evening, and the soprano represents a Penelope figure; the eternally waiting woman.

In *Suddenly*, she expresses feelings of longing made more acute by the absence of her nameless lover. The music is haunted by nocturnal sounds: the creaking of floors, the whistling wind, the clang of a loose shutter. *Morning* and *Afternoon* follow our Penelope-like protagonist during the day as she undertakes the duties of her domestic life: opening the windows, airing the bed-sheets, watering the flowers. And yet, in both poems, the domestic chores become vehicles for self-reflection or a fantastical escape. Thus the setting flirts between being serious and whimsical, ending with a musical depiction of our woman levitating in the air, suspended from the realities of this world.

Suddenly was originally composed for the inaugural Ritsos Project festival of 2014. Following the Greek premiere, Ossia New Music subsequently commissioned two additional Ritsos art songs for their 2014/15 season, which led to the birth of *Morning* and *Afternoon*.

— Aristéa Mellos, January 2020

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Piano: Hamburg Steinway D274

Microphones: Røde M5, Røde NT1, AKG C414

Producer: Josinaldo Costa

La Tessitrice/The Weaver

Ada Negri, translated by Maria A. Constantini

Tessitrice, che in ordine lento le sete e i
colori disponi al telaio

augusto – e ti veglian le rocce, e ti fa,
òmbra un rosaio:

che a intrider di sole e di luna le tele sulla
riva dei naufraghi adduci

e riadduci la spola guizzante tra fili d'oro,
fili di luce:

tessimi il drappo dell'ultimo sogno, tessuto
saldo, tessuto bene,

che vi sia dentro, tramato in porpora, tutto
l'intrico delle mie vene.

Tessilo di risa, tessuto di pianti, e di quel
nome che in cuore ho sepolto:

ch'esso mi vesta sin quando io viva, che
morte mi copra il volto.

Weaver, slowly you arrange your silks and
colors on your stately loom

– and the rock watches over you,
a rosebud shades you:

and to infuse your cloths of the sun and
the moon on the shore of the shipwrecked,

you dart your spool back and forth
between threads of gold, threads of light:

weave me a cloth of the last dream; weave
it taut, weave it well,

so that in it, woven in crimson, is the
whole tangle of my veins.

Weave it with laughter, weave it with tears,
and with the name I have buried in my
heart:

So it may clothe me as long as I live, so
that death may cover my face.

Louriana Lourilee

Charles Isaac Elton

Come out and climb the garden path,
Luriana Lurilee,
The China rose is all abloom
And buzzing with the yellow bee
We'll swing you on the cedar-bough,
Luriana Lurilee.

I wonder if it seems to you
Luriana Lurilee
That all the lives we ever lived
And all the lives to be,
Are full of trees and waving leaves,
Luriana Lurilee.

How long it seems since you and I,
Luriana Lurilee.
Roamed in the forest where our kind
Had just begun to be,
And laughed and chattered in the flowers,
Luriana Lurilee.

How long since you and I went out,
Luriana Lurilee
To see the kings go riding by
Over lawn and daisylea,
With their palm sheaves and cedar-leaves
Luriana Lurilee.

Swing, swing on the cedar-bough!
Luriana Lurilee
Till you sleep in a bramble-heap
Or under the gloomy churchyard-tree,
And then fly back to swing on a bough,
Luriana Lurilee.

Athena

Emily Kendal Frey

I had not known it, but I lived
inside my mother's head— her face Godlike,
white, a cast. Neck coiled in a snake,

ready to strike. My own eyes
slits beneath the heavy chalked lids.

How did I come then,
to haul myself up the scaffolding she'd left,
fist after fist, to crawl and stretch—

the glowing oval of her mind
hanging like a moon above me.

I cracked the crown—
pressed out and through, black bird
singing in my chest,

no light, no breath, my voice
still clinging to her lips.

Songs of Resignation

Four Settings of C.P. Cavafy, translated by David Connolly

I. Walls

Without consideration, without pity, without shame
They built great towering walls all around me.

And I sit here now despairing.
I think of nothing else: this fate gnaws at my mind;

for I had so many things to do outside.
Why didn't I notice when they were building the walls.

But I never heard any noise or sound from the builders.
Imperceptibly they shut me off from the world.

II. I Brought to Art

I sit and muse. Desires and senses
are what I brought to Art – things half-glimpised,
faces or lines; of unfulfilled loves
a few vague memories. I'll give myself to it.
It knows how to shape Beauty's Form;
almost imperceptibly complementing life,
combining impressions; combining the days.

III. Candles

The days to come stand before us
like a row of lighted candles –
golden candles, warm and vibrant.

The days gone by remain behind,
a dismal line of extinguished candles;
those nearest are still smoking,
cold candles, melted and bent.

I've no wish to see them; their shape saddens me,
and it saddens me to recall their first light.
I look ahead to my lighted candles.

I've no wish to turn lest horrified I see
how quickly the dark line lengthens,
how quickly the extinguished candles multiply.

IV. Voices

Ideal voices and ones we loved
of those who died, or those who
like the dead are lost to us.

Sometimes in dreams they speak to us;
sometimes in thought the mind
hears them.

And briefly at their sound return
sounds from our lives' first poetry –
like music, at night, that fades,
far away.

Songs for a Day

Three poems of Yiannis Ritsos, translated by Kimon Friar

I. Suddenly

Silent night. Silent. And you had stopped waiting. It was almost quiet.

Then suddenly on your face the so intense touch of him who is absent. He will come. It was then
you heard window shutters clanging by themselves.

A breeze had sprung up. And a little further down, the sea
was drowning in its own voice.

II. Morning

She opened her window shutters, spread the bedsheets on the
windowsill, saw the day.

A bird stared her in the eyes. "I am alone," she
whispered.

"I am alive." She went back into the room. The mirror too is a
window.

If I leap from here, I shall fall into my hands.

III. Afternoon

She watered the flowers and heard the water dripping from the
balcony.

The boards became drenched and worn. The day after
tomorrow,
when the balcony shall topple, she will remain
in the air,
quiet, beautiful, holding in her hands
her two big flower pots, her gardenias, and her
smile.

