

mindful melodies

Siena Forest, soprano
Mary Jo Gothmann, pianist

NATURE

Midsummer

Music by Amy Worth

Text by Richard Le Gallienne

I never thought that youth would go

Music by Samuel Barber

Words by Jessie Rittenhouse Scollard

Im Kahn

Music by Jórunn Viðar

Text by Cäser Fleischlen

Walking

Music and words by Charles Ives

Clouds

Music by Ernest Charles

Words by Anonymous

RELATIONSHIP

The Thought

Music by Gustav Holst

Words by Humbert Wolfe

Alone with Mother

Music by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

Words by Kathleen Easmon

C'est l'extase

Music by Claude Debussy

Poem by Paul Verlaine

Im Zimmer

Music by Alban Berg

Text by Johannes Schlaf

Blue

Music by William Bolcom

Poem by Arnold Weinstein

RESISTANCE

Stehe Still

Music by Richard Wagner

Poem by Mathilde Wesendonck

As It Is, Plenty

Music by Benjamin Britten

Text by W. H. Auden

Never!

Music by Paolo Francesco Tosti

Words by Githa Sowerby

DEATH

Little Fly

Music by John Alden Carpenter

Poem by William Blake

O that it were so!

Music by Frank Bridge

Words by Walter Savage Landor

Emily's Aria from Our Town

Music by Ned Rorem

Libretto by J. D. McClatchy

mindful melodies

This recital was funded by a Music in Action Grant from The Richard Wagner Society of the Upper Midwest.



Siena Forest

“A first-rate singer and a crackerjack musician,” Siena Forest “steals scenes” with arresting portrays that are “exquisitely sung.” She is a highly sought after collaborative artist in opera, concert, art song, and new work. Recent highlights include *La bohème* with Theater Latté Da, “Forest was an excellent Mimí, aside from her voice which was beautiful, she conveyed a sense of adoration for Rodolfo in a performance that began in her eyes and radiated outward from there.” With Skylark Opera Theatre, Siena sang the title character in the North

American premiere of *Besse*. In addition to an active performing career, Siena is dynamic behind the scenes as a producer, fundraiser, administrator, and consultant. As the founding president of OOPS MN, in their first 20 months raised \$75,000 (including a \$15,000 MRAC grant), collaborated with 50 local artists and produced 10 projects. Thanks to a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, Siena will be adding librettist to her list of roles as she and composer Wendy Durrwachter collaborate to create a chamber opera set in a restaurant. Join Siena’s mailing list to stay up to date www.sienaforest.com



Mary Jo Gothmann

Pianist and JOYA Artistic Director, Mary Jo Gothmann enjoys a varied career as a chamber musician, soloist, opera coach and organist. Her recent chamber music engagements have included performances with the Chamber Music Society of Minnesota, Hill House Players, Bakken Trio, Music at Trinity, Colonial Chamber Music Series, Lakes Area Music Festival, and the Taos Chamber Music Group. Mary Jo performs frequently with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Minnesota Orchestra and has performed with EOS Orchestra in

New York City, and as a piano soloist with the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra and the St. Paul Civic Orchestra. She has worked for some of the most prestigious opera companies in the United States including the Metropolitan Opera, Santa Fe Opera, and Minnesota Opera and has performed recitals with singers from the Metropolitan Opera as well as with instrumentalists from many of the country's major symphony orchestras. Mary Jo is a graduate of the Metropolitan Opera Lindemann Young Artist Program, University of Minnesota, New England Conservatory and St. Olaf College. Mary Jo has been the principal organist at Zion Lutheran Church since moving to Shoreview, Minnesota in 2005.

mindful melodies

program notes, texts, translations

Nature

“Midsummer” (1927)

Music by Amy Aldrich Worth (1888-1967)

Text by Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947)

Before discovering this song, I had never heard of Amy Aldrich Worth. The internet tells me that she was an American composer, organist, and choir director, but unfortunately, the information ends there. She must have had some notoriety during her lifetime as there is a wonderful recording of Joan Sutherland singing “Midsummer” with the New Philharmonia Orchestra on the album *Songs My Mother Taught Me* (1973), but much of Amy Worth’s story is yet to be told. In this song, the virtuosic accompaniment carries you away just as nature carried the speaker away from her to-do list. I envision a child explaining to their mother that they had every intention of doing their chores, but the natural world’s call was too loud to ignore. Towards the end of winter, I love when we have our first warm day and everyone awakens from their hibernations to spend time outside. You can hear the hope of spring in this song. Those days are coming soon.

I meant to do my work today—
But a bird sang in the apple tree,
And a butterfly flitted across the field,
And all the leaves were calling me.

And the wind went sighing over the land,
Tossing the grasses to and fro,
And a rainbow held out its shining hand—
So what could I do but laugh and go?

“I never thought that youth would go” (1925)

From *Two Songs of Youth*

Music by Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Words by Jessie Belle Rittenhouse Scollard (1869-1948)

This short song by Samuel Barber is charming and complex at the same time. It immediately had me looking up “blithe” (happy or joyous, showing a casual and cheerful indifference) and “fain” (pleased or willing under the circumstances) in the dictionary. The song describes a moment of enlightenment, where the speaker, like most youths, lived in a sort of bubble of ignorance regarding aging and death. While on a walk surrounded by trees, the speaker fully realizes that they will age and die, and the trees, though they will outlive the speaker, will die too as part of the endless cycle of life and death. I imagine the speaker feels “perfect peace of heart” because the realization of mortality included the reality of death, that being, it is inevitable and unavoidable.

I never thought that youth would go
Who was so blithe and fain,
Or if he strayed I thought a song
Would call him back again.

But knowledge came one April day
And woke me with a start –
When I walked alone in a wooded lane
With perfect peace of heart.

“Im Kahn”

Music by Jórunn Viðar (1918-2017)

Text by Cäser Flaischlen (1864-1920)

Jórunn Viðar was an Icelandic pianist and composer. She grew up and lived in Reykjavík, Iceland and briefly studied at the Music Academy in Berlin and the Juilliard School of Music. This song describes the experience of being on a gently rocking boat, blissfully riding the current into the horizon. As a kid my family would spend time in Maine, where we had an inflatable raft that was tied to a tree, but in the afternoons, my dad would untie it and drift off while napping. It was a small lake and probably the only way a father of three girls got any quiet time to himself (that and while doing yard work). Nowadays, in the summers, my dad I kayak and explore the islands of Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire and I feel an extreme sense of peace and harmony syncing with the waves. The piano has lots of water-like motion and the climax coincides with the speaker rhapsodizing about the extreme comfort they feel, like a baby in a crib with the lapping water singing them into a blissful rest.

Translation by Brian Cole:

Schaukelt weiter mich, ihr Wellen!
Schaukelt weiter mich, ihr Winde!
Durch die wunderbare Ruhe
dieser lichten Einsamkeit!
Leise, leise wiegt mich weiter
In die Ferne zu den stillen,
weissen Wolken, tragt mich fort.
Wohin ihr wollt!
Immer mehr versinkt die Küste
mit dem Strand und mit den Bergen,
alles wird zum blauen Glanz.
Selig lieg ich auf dem Rücken
horch auf die Ammenlieder,
cie mir Wind und Wellen singen.
Falte langsam meine Hände,
schliesse lächelnd meine Augen
und verträume in den Himmel,
wie ein Kind in stiller Wiege.
Meine Mutter ist die Sonne,
und ich weiss, sie hat mich Lieb!

Keep on rocking me, you waves!
and keep on rocking me, you winds
through the wondrous
peace of this bright solitude!
Softly, softly, keep on rocking me
into the distance to the calm white clouds
that clamber round the horizon,
take me away, wherever you will!
The coast sinks deeper and deeper
with the beach and with the mountains
everything becomes blue gleam.
Blissfully I lie on my back,
and listen to the nursery songs
that are sung to me by the wind and waves.
I slowly fold my hands,
smile and close my eyes
and dream I am in Heaven
like a child in a restful cradle.
My mother is the sun,
and I know she loves me!

“Walking” (1902)

From *114 Songs*

Music and words by Charles Ives (1874-1954)

The musical score does not include the name of the composer, but after our first run through, Mary Jo immediately knew it was written by Charles Ives. He was an insurance salesman and prolific modernist composer regarded as an “American original.” He got his musical influences by sitting in the Danbury, Connecticut town square and listening to his father’s marching band and other bands on the other sides of the square simultaneously. You will hear in this piece exactly what Mary Jo did that made it iconically Ives, excerpts of melodies that are diegetic to the scene. For instance, during the spoken part halfway through the song, the marching soldiers (who were just singing the song), stop to watch a funeral procession as the piano plays the dirge they hear in the distance. And then the wind changes, and they hear sounds from a dance at the roadhouse and the piano plays what they were hearing. For soldiers, their life is at the beck and call of their superiors and so without the ability to decide to die or to dance, they live in the moment, walking and waiting for their next order.

A big October morning,
the village church-bells,
the road along the ridge,
the chestnut burr and sumach,
the hills above the bridge
with autumn colors glow.
Now we strike a steady gait,
walking towards the future,
letting past and present wait,
we push on in the sun,
Now hark! Something bids us pause...
(down the valley, a church, a funeral going on.)
(up the valley, a roadhouse, a dance going on.)
But we keep on a walking,
,
tis yet not noon-day,
the road still calls us onward,
today we do not choose to die
or to dance, but to live and walk.

“Clouds” (1932)

Music by Ernest Charles (1895-1984)

Words by Anonymous

A Minneapolis native, Ernest Charles spent most of his life in New York City and Beverly Hills. In addition to being a composer, he was a professional singer performing in vaudeville and Broadway reviews. He composed around 45 songs for voice and piano and they are known for their rubato, sweeping vocal lines, sumptuous melodies, and ingenuous charm. “Clouds” is the song that put him on the map as a composer, and it's

easy to see why. The introduction, which returns at the end, is so incredibly peaceful and picturesque eliciting images of lying on the grass observing the clouds pass across the sky. During camping trips, I love reclining in my hammock, watching the leaves of the tress flicker in the breeze and sunlight.

Clouds adrift in the summer sky
Resemble Life, as they wander by.
Whence they come and whither they go
We often wonder but never know;
One little hour we know their grace -
They pass like shadows, nor hold their place,
Ever recurring, like the dawn,
Never enduring, but always gone,
Part of the infinite, shall we say,
Part of the moment we call today.

Relationship

“The Thought”

From *Twelve Humbert Wolfe Songs*, Op. 48, H. 174 (1930)

Music by Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Words by Humbert Wolfe (1885-1940)

Irony aside of writing a poem for someone about not writing them a poem, the poet knows the fleeting nature of words, and of flesh, but the purity of sitting in thought endures. I see a lot of parallels of “holding you in a thought” to the practice of a compassion meditation. Gustav Holst is best known for his orchestral suite, *The Planets*, though he composed many other works across a range of genres. The accompaniment is sparse and the score indicates “senza misura” or “without meter” or “in free time” though the vocal line notates durations of notes.

I will not write a poem for you,
because a poem, even the loveliest,
can only do what words can do -
stir the air, and dwindle, and be at rest.

Nor will I hold you with my hands, because
the bones of my hands on yours would press,
and you'd say after, "Mortal was,
and crumbling, that lover's tenderness."

But I will hold you in a thought
without moving spirit or desire or will
for I know no other way of loving,
that endures when the heart is still.

“Alone with Mother”

From *Five Fairy Ballads* (1909)

Music by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Words by Kathleen Easmon (1891-1924)

In recent days, there has been a resurgence of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s music. Of mixed-race birth, he was a British composer and conductor who unfortunately died of pneumonia at the age of 37. Coleridge-Taylor sought to draw from traditional African music and integrate it into the classical tradition, which he considered Brahms to have done with Hungarian music and Dvořák with Bohemian music. “Alone with Mother” describes the memory of spending a rare and precious moment alone with their mother in her big chair while she told magical stories about fairies and distant lands. For the speaker, these moments alone together were treasured and they would hang on her every word, completely present in the moment together.

The time we like the best of all
Is when the shadows creepy crawl,
One after another;
When the golden sun sinks down in the west,
And the tired birdie flies home to its nest,
And we're left alone with mother.

Then the story fairies silently creep,
And over her big armchair they peep,
One after the other;
And she tells us the wonderful things they say
Of fairy countries so far away,
When we're left alone with mother.

“C’est l’extase langoureuse”

From *Ariettes oubliées*, L. 60 (1885-1887)

Music by Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Poem by Paul Verlaine (1844-1896)

When I first considered programming mindful songs, I immediately knew I would include “C’est l’extase langoureuse” because of the story and poetry. The post-coital speaker describes the sense of peace they feel in the arms of their lover, comparing it to things in the natural world; however, towards the end of the piece, they realize their lover hasn’t responded and they anxiously seek confirmation that they are sharing the same feelings.

Translation by Richard Miller:

C’est l’extase langoureuse,
C’est la fatigue amoureuse,
C’est tous les frissons des bois
Parmi l’étreinte des brises,
C’est, vers les ramures grises,
Le chœur des petites voix.

It is languorous rapture,
It is amorous fatigue,
It is all the tremors of the forest
In the breezes’ embrace,
It is, around the grey branches,
The choir of tiny voices.

Ô le frêle et frais murmure!
Cela gazouille et susurre,
Cela ressemble au cri doux
Que l'herbe agitée expire ...
Tu dirais, sous l'eau qui vire,
Le roulis sourd des cailloux.
Cette âme qui se lamente
En cette plainte dormante
C'est la nôtre, n'est-ce pas?
La mienne, dis, et la tienne,
Dont s'exhale l'humble antienne
Par ce tiède soir, tout bas?

O the delicate, fresh murmuring!
The warbling and whispering,
It is like the soft cry
The ruffled grass gives out ...
You might take it for the muffled sound
Of pebbles in the swirling stream.
This soul which grieves
In this subdued lament,
It is ours, is it not?
Mine, and yours too,
Breathing out our humble hymn
On this warm evening, soft and low?

"Im Zimmer" (1907)

From *Sieben frühe Lieder*

Music by Alban Berg (1885-1935)

Text by Johannes Schlaf (1862-1941)

Without a piano introduction, this song describes a peaceful scene with the speaker's head comfortably resting in the lap of their love while the autumn sun sets and a fire blazes in the hearth. Berg wrote these songs as a young man when he was a student of Arnold Schoenberg. In 1928, while working on *Lulu*, Berg compiled seven songs he wrote between 1905-1908 and orchestrated them. He felt that it would probably be years before his next premiere, and he hoped these songs would keep his name in the public memory. The orchestration of "Im Zimmer" is notable for the ironic use of wind instruments to articulate an indoor atmosphere, but in this recital you will hear the piece as it was originally written, for voice and piano, which adds no irony to the intimate setting of the piece.

Herbstsonnenschein.
Der liebe Abend blickt so still herein.
Ein Feuerlein rot
Knistert im Ofenloch und loht.
So! Mein Kopf auf deinen Knie'n,
So ist mir gut;
Wenn mein Auge so in deinem ruht,
Wie leise die Minuten zieh'n.

Translation by Richard Stokes:

Autumn sunshine.
The lovely evening looks in so silently.
A little red fire
Crackles and blazes in the hearth.
Like this! With my head on your knees,
Like this I am content;
When my eyes rest in yours like this,
How gently the minutes pass.

"Blue" (1996)

From *Cabaret Songs, Vol. 1*

Music by William Bolcom (1938-)

Poem by Arnold Weinstein (1927-2005)

The first and potentially only time you will ever hear me sing low G's, Bolcom wrote these cabaret songs for mezzos, but if mindfulness in relationship could be distilled, it would be: "this is what I want to do, is sit real still with you." A characteristic of deep relationships is

the ability to comfortably sit in silence together. I also appreciate the speaker in this text acknowledging their own failings. Learning how to apologize and own your mistakes is required in order to have healthy relationships and it takes years to hone the practice of overcoming the knee-jerk, defensive ego reaction of deny and attack. I wish you many moments of sitting real still with someone you love and apologizing for your failings.

This is what I want to do,
my heart,
is sit real still with you.

After all that cruising
in around and out of town,
put them down who dared refuse me
and the same old line I threw
ah but up I grew
and now all I want to do,
my heart,
is sit real still with you.

After all that screeching
talking fast and slowing down
only now and then to reach you
the you'd let me know I knew
that what I preach is none too true
that's why all I want to do,
my heart,
is sit real still with you.

(Cause I do know this about people
and I DON'T mean some:
awfully smart people are often awful dumb!
Aren't we?
We just don't realize
that behind the eyes,
behind the mind,
you find the sweetest brilliance
and a stillness of such blue
that- that's why all I want to do,
my soul,
is sit real still with you.

Ah, so sweetly down the hill
That is what I want to do,
sweet soul,
is sit real still with you.

Resistance

“Stehe Still” (1858)

From *Wesendonck Lieder*, WWV 91

Music by Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Poem by Mathilde Wesendonck (1828-1902)

A set of five songs for female voice and piano, Wagner composed these while he was working on his opera, *Tristan und Isolde*. The second song in the set, the first half is a thundering, tumultuous cry for uncontrollable forces to stop- time, the universe, thoughts, breathing, sounds, urges, wanting. The second half focuses on that delicate moment when two beings find each other, very reminiscent of the moment in *Tristan und Isolde* when the couple's eyes meet after drinking the love potion. The speaker wants to live in the blissful pause that is created between lovers. The line just before the ending, “when the soul wishes for nothing more,” contains the believed answer to the riddle, the completion of two souls. This musical belief is that two beings, upon finding each other, need nothing more, time stops, and they perceive eternity. The poetry, combined with rumors about the nature of Wagner and Wesendonck's relationship, leaves the listener wondering if they too were caught up in an emotional whirlwind that was becoming as perilous as the dramatic, sweeping music.

Translation by Richard Stokes:

Sausendes, brausendes Rad der Zeit,
Messer du der Ewigkeit;
Leuchtende Sphären im weiten All,
Die ihr umringt den Weltenball;
Urewige Schöpfung, halte doch ein,
Genug des Werdens, laß mich sein!

Rushing, roaring wheel of time,
You that measure eternity;
Gleaming spheres in the vast universe,
You that surround our earthly sphere;
Eternal creation - cease:
Enough of becoming, let me be!

Halte an dich, zeugende Kraft,
Urgedanke, der ewig schafft!
Hemmet den Atem, stillt den Drang,
Schweiget nur eine Sekunde lang!
Schwellende Pulse, fesselt den Schlag;
Ende, des Wollens ew'ger Tag!
Daß in selig süßem Vergessen
Ich mög' alle Wonne ermessen!

Hold yourselves back, generative powers,
Primal Thought that always creates!
Stop your breath, still your urge,
Be silent for a single moment!
Swelling pulses, restrain your beating;
Eternal day of the Will - end!
That in blessed, sweet oblivion
I might measure all my bliss!

Wenn Auge in Auge wonnig trinken,
Seele ganz in Seele versinken;
Wesen in Wesen sich wiederfindet,
Und alles Hoffens Ende sich kündet,
Die Lippe verstummt in staundendem Schweigen,
Keinen Wunsch mehr will das Innre zeugen:
Erkennt der Mensch des Ew'gen Spur,
Und löst dein Rätsel, heil'ge Natur!

When eye gazes blissfully into eye,
When soul drowns utterly in soul;
When being finds itself in being,
And the goal of every hope is near,
When lips are mute in silent wonder,
When the soul wishes for nothing more:
Then man perceives Eternity's footprint,
And solves your riddle, holy Nature!

"As It Is, Plenty"

From *On This Island*, Op. 11 (1937)

Music by Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Text by W. H. Auden (1907-1973)

"As It Is, Plenty" is from W. H. Auden's poetic collection *Look Stranger!* (1937) and is the final song of *On This Island*, Op. 11 (1937), which is a set of 5 songs by Benjamin Britten. The poem is an expression of social and political commentary on life in Britain in the mid-1930's. The poet is disillusioned with the rise of capitalism, consumerism, advancing mechanization, and the effects on both the family unit and conventional social interaction. Success is measured in terms of economic profitability. I'm sure if Auden was writing this today, it would include compulsive cell phone use and the vapidness of social media.

The verses are intensely satirical as is evident in the profusion of negative images, such as "thinning hair," "rough future," "intransigent nature," and "betraying smile." Auden also colors normally positive associations by interspersing economic, materialistic images such as "the children happy and the car," "the wife devoted: to this as it is, to the work and the banks." These uncomfortable juxtapositions raise questions as to the purity and value of family life. Also, the repetition of the definitive article in "the children," "the car," "the wife," "the work," "the banks," further demeans and depersonalizes the value of the items and the social relations described. Text repetition in this song is used as a means of reflecting upon the superficiality of the words. For the listener, it's a constant guessing game between pianist and vocalist, as the vocalist never enters twice on the same beat of the measure, which keeps everyone constantly on their toes.

As it is, plenty;
As it's admitted
The children happy
And the car, the car
That goes so far
And the wife devoted:
To this as it is,
To the work and the banks
Let his thinning hair
And his hauteur
Give thanks, give thanks.

All that was thought
As like as not, is not;
When nothing was enough
But love, but love
And the rough future
Of an intransigent nature

And the betraying smile,
Betraying, but a smile:
That that is not, is not;
Forget, forget!

Let him not cease to praise
Then his spacious days;
Yes, and the success
Let him bless, let him bless:
Let him see in this
The profits larger
And the sins venal,
Lest he see as it is
The loss as major
And final, final.

“Never!” (1910)

Music by Paolo Francesco Tosti (1846-1916)

Words by Githa Sowerby (1876-1970)

In the first verse, the speaker describes the night falling and lulls their beloved to sleep, reminding them that love blossoms just to die, but time will not have that affect on their love. I think of this first verse as a mother singing her crying child to sleep. In the second verse, the speaker is numb to the changes in nature because their loved one is no longer around or is unable to remember the times they spent together. Continuing with my interpretation of the mother and child relationship, the second verse is sung by the child. The now grown child is singing, lamenting the cognitive decline of their mother, and lulling her to eternal sleep in the same way her mother soothed her as a baby.

This song is included in the resistance part of the program not just because of the title, but because of the interplay between acceptance and resistance. In the first verse, the hopeful poet after observing the “tender” nightfall acknowledges the futility of crying and fighting sleep, encouraging acceptance. Yet, in the second verse, times have gotten darker (“winter sky” and “bitter rain”) and we come to learn that the speaker is despondent because they are disconnected from their loved one. Even though there is a repeat of the soothing chorus, the preceding negative verse colors the reading with bitterness and irony, for even as the speaker says their love will never die, the audience knows that it already has.

The tender darkness falls at last and covers up the light
And all the happy world below is dreaming in the night,
The weary day is over and every heart is free
And all the past is waking and will not let me be!
Sleep, beloved sleep to rest
Why go weeping? Sleep is best!
Love and longing wake but to die
Time may bring them, but never, but never
But never you and I!

I shall not heed the winter sky nor feel the bitter rain,
And what should summer mean to me?
You will not come again!
You will not once remember
The hour you held me dear,
But in my heart I hold you
And in my heart I hear
Sleep beloved sleep to rest
Why go weeping? Sleep is best!
Love and longing wake but to die
Time may bring them, but never, but never
But never you and I!

Death

“Little Fly” (1912)

Music by John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951)

Poem by William Blake (1757-1827)

This song sets a text of William Blake's from his 1794 work *Songs of Experience*. The song opens with a quick piano intro and the speaker reeling from the seemingly accidental (or “thoughtless”) murder of a fly, whose “summer's play” was “brushed away” by the speaker's hand. Comparing their own existence to that of the fly's, the speaker realizes that their life too will be brushed away someday. The worrying doesn't advance farther though, because the speaker reasons that when we are dead, we do not know that we are dead: consciousness ends when our life ends, so we will be happy to be dead because we won't know otherwise. Regardless of whether or not consciousness continues, the speaker's death, like the fly's, is ultimately out of their control. So the speaker will continue on happily because they cannot stop the hand of fate, of god, or of time, just like the fly's inability to stop the speaker's hand.

Little Fly,
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brush'd away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance
And drink & sing:
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life
And strength & breath
And the want
Of thought is death;

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.

“O that it were so!” (c. 1912)

Music by Frank Bridge (1879-1941)

Words by Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864)

“O that it were so!” is one of Frank Bridge’s commercial song successes. Written for voice and piano (and later orchestrated), most of his early songs were intended to be high-quality salon entertainment and they were heard in drawing rooms and on concert stages. The piano accompaniment is Romantic, sweeping, and lush. The text, though simple, is heart-warming. In a direct address to their loved one, the poet remarks that if in death we dream, their dream will be blessed because it would be of their beloved. If the feelings generated by this eternal dream are similar to the feelings generated in a compassion meditation, it will be a blissful afterlife indeed.

It sometimes comes into my head
That we may dream, may dream when we are dead,
But I am far from sure we do.
O that it were so,
O that it were so, then my rest would be,
Would be indeed among the blest,
I should for ever dream,
I should for ever dream of you.

“Emily’s Aria”

from *Our Town*

Music by Ned Rorem (1923-2022)

Libretto by J. D. McClatchy (1945-2018)

“Emily’s Aria” is from Act III of Ned Rorem’s opera *Our Town*. It is an adaptation of the 1938 play by Thornton Wilder, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and still remains popular today. Set in Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, the story follows the everyday lives of citizens in the fictional small town between 1901 and 1913. At this point in the show, the audience has watched childhood neighbors, Emily and George, grow up, fall in love, and get married. Act III opens in the cemetery and we learn that Emily died giving birth to her and George’s second child. After her funeral, ignoring the warnings of the other spirits, Emily goes back to her 13th birthday. She joyfully relives the scene, but the experience quickly turns painful, as she realizes how little people, (and she herself) appreciate and are present for the simple joys of life. She asks the Stage Manager if anyone truly understands the value of life while they live it and he responds, “No, the saints and the poets, maybe - they do some.”

Mindfulness is the remedy to mindlessness. The next time you find yourself washing the dishes, taking out the trash, or shoveling snow, gently return your attention from wandering thoughts to fully embody and experience the present so that unlike Emily, you can look back upon your life and have confidence that you fully realized (and were grateful for) life while you were living it.

Take me back.
Take me back up the hill.
Take me back to my grave.
Wait! One more look.

Goodbye. Goodbye, world. Goodbye Grover's Corners.
Mama, Papa, goodbye.

Goodbye to ticking clocks.
To Mama's hollyhocks.
To coffee and food.
To gratitude.
Goodbye. Goodbye world.

Goodbye to ironed dresses.
To George's sweet caresses.
To my wedding ring.
To everything.
Goodbye. Goodbye, world.

Does anybody ever realize life while they live it?
Every minute of it?
Every moment of it?
Oh, Earth, you are too magical for anyone to know your miracle!
Oh, take me back.
Take me back up the hill.

Resources to Explore

Online:

Free Course on Coursera - The Science of Well-Being by Yale University

Books:

The Places that Scare You by Pema Chödrön
Awakening the Buddha Within by Lama Surya Das
Feeling Good by David D. Burns
Already Free by Bruce Tift
Buddhism Plain and Simple by Steve Hagen
Loving What Is by Byron Katie
Breath by James Nestor
How to Practice by Dalai Lama XIV
The Mastery of Self by Miguel Ruiz Jr.
True Love by Thich Nhat Hanh
When Things Fall Apart by Pema Chödrön
What Happened To You? by Bruce D. Perry
Radical Acceptance by Tara Brach
10% Happier by Dan Harris
The Last Lecture by Randy Pausch
The Book of Joy by Dalai Lama XIV and Desmond Tutu

Video:

Stutz (Netflix)

Apps:

Headspace

Woebot

Ten Percent

Podcasts:

The Life Coach School Podcast

Unf•ck Your Brain

At Home with Byron Katie

Feeling Good Podcast

The Happiness Lab with Dr. Laurie Santos

Tara Brach

Secular Buddhism