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# A graduate recital in voice

Marie Sorenson  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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A GRADUATE RECITAL IN VOICE

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Music

Marie Sorenson  
University of Northern Iowa  
December 2015

This Study by: Marie Sorenson

Entitled: A Graduate Recital in Voice

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Music

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Date

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Dr. John Hines, Chair, Thesis Committee

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Date

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Dr. Korey Barrett, Thesis Committee Member

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Date

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Dr. Mitra Sadeghpour, Thesis Committee Member

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Date

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Dr. Kavita R. Dhanwada, Interim Dean, Graduate College

This Recital Performance by: Marie Sorenson

Entitled: A Graduate Recital in Voice

Date of Recital: Friday, November 6, 2015

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Music

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Dr. John Hines, Chair, Recital Committee

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### Abstract

Marie Sorenson, soprano, presented her graduate voice recital on Friday, November 6, 2015 at 6:00 p.m. in Davis Hall of the Gallagher-Bluedorn Performing Arts Center on the University of Northern Iowa campus. The program consisted of three sets of music by Reynaldo Hahn, Johannes Brahms, and Jake Heggie, in collaboration with pianist Polina Khatsko. This abstract discusses musical and historical features of the recital pieces in the order of the program.

As a notable composer of the French *mélodie*, Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947) primarily composed his songs during *La Belle Époque* or “The Beautiful Era.” During this French “golden age,” the arts flourished and salon-style music, including songs that were short and accessible, became popular. Hahn occupied the most fashionable salons in Paris where he played and sang his own compositions. Hahn’s biographer Bernard Gavoty spoke of Hahn’s love for singing: “He sang as we breathe, out of necessity.”<sup>1</sup> Many of Hahn’s *mélodies* were comfortable in scope and range to fit his own voice. He was very sensitive to the demands of the text and was drawn to poetry that complemented his intimate musical style. Hahn followed in the style of his teacher, Massenet, and maintained the models of French restraint and simplicity. His vocal lines were speech-like but moved freely and his piano accompaniment used *ostinato* figures, usually one or two measures in length.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2006), 210.

The first *mélodie* in the Hahn set is “À Chloris” (“To Chloris”), written in 1916 to the text of Théophile de Viau (1590-1626). Hahn’s elegant setting matches the antique splendor of de Viau’s *Baroque*-era poetry. In this song, the vocal line is comprised of short fragments that capture the natural speech cadences of an ardent lover in combination with longer lyrical lines. The piano accompaniment maintains its own melody, with a bass line similar to that of a *chaconne* ornamented with typical *Baroque* turns. According to Thea Sikora Engelson in *Mélodies of Reynaldo Hahn*, this piece was based on Bach’s Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D, BWV 1068, commonly known as “Air on a G String.”<sup>2</sup>

The next *mélodie* is “Dans la nuit” (“In the Night”), the fifth song from *Les feuilles blessées* (*Wounded Leaves*). “Dans la nuit” was written in 1904 in Versailles and was dedicated to Madame M. de Lisboa.<sup>3</sup> The text was written by Ioannes Papadiamantopoulos (1856 - 1910), under the pseudonym Jean Moréas, from *Le cinquième livre des stances*. The text speaks of heartbreak and impending death set on a rocky cliff over the ocean. The intensity of the text is portrayed in Hahn’s music through agitated arpeggios, minor scales, and nonfunctional chordal relationships in the piano accompaniment. The vocal line expands over the turbulent accompaniment in a rising scale to the perfect fifth followed by a leap down of a perfect fourth. The use of the *forte* dynamic and the dramatic, extroverted character of the piece were very atypical of Hahn’s compositional style.

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<sup>2</sup> Thea Sikora Engelson, *The Mélodies of Reynaldo Hahn*, (Ann Arbor: ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 2006), 321.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

The third *mélodie* in the Hahn set is “Nocturne” (“Nocturne”), composed in 1893 to text by Henri Cazalis (1840-1909), under the pseudonym Jean Lahor. Hahn composed the piece in a 3/8 meter with an eighth-note ostinato, dominated by open intervals on a perfect fifth, perfect fourth, and Tri-tone, blurring the metric organization. The ambiguous setting of the *mélodie* embodies Hahn’s perceived intent of creating an ethereal and hazy state of being. Along with the metric organization, the dynamics also contribute to the mood of the piece, ranging from piano to pianissimo to create an unusually hazy but mesmerizing atmosphere.

Following “Nocturne” is Hahn’s *mélodie* “Mai” (“May”). This piece was written in 1889 and was based on text by François Coppée from his collection *Les mois*. Hahn composed this piece when he was only fifteen years old and wrote it in 3/4 meter in the Romantic style. The melody’s sweeping lines embody the alternation between love and loss in the text, with the melody dominated by steps and thirds with wider intervals mostly during moments of high emotion. The piece’s two-part form allows for the expression of both the bliss of spring and the sorrow of a newly lost love. In general, the voice and the piano are equal partners in this piece. In the A section, the voice is doubled in the accompaniment, reinforcing the text of loneliness and isolation. In the B section, when the singer longs to enjoy spring but is experiencing heartache, the voice is doubled in the right hand while the left hand remains independent.

The last *mélodie* in the Hahn set is “Fêtes galantes,” written in April 1892 and dedicated to Carles Levadé. Hahn chose to use text by Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) who took inspiration from Antoine Watteau's (1684–1721) painting of the *fête champêtre*,

featuring characters masquerading at a garden party. Hahn composed “Fêtes galantes” in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century rondo form, which stems from the French *rondeau*, famous across Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first two verses feature a repeated pattern of parallel thirds in the piano paired with an arching and legato vocal line. The third verse varies from the previous two, featuring descending semitones with an octave leap in the vocal line, accompanied by sweeping arpeggios in the piano. On the last word (“brise”) of the vocal line, the piano has two chromatic scales that move in opposite directions, arriving at the return of the refrain in the piano postlude.

While Hahn was successfully composing in the style of the French *mélodie*, Johannes Brahms’s (1833-1897) German *Lied* contributed to him becoming one of the greatest composers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Brahms wrote 380 *Lieder* for one to four voices and was particularly interested in folk songs. Brahms experimented with musical symmetry and asymmetry and maintained both strictness and freedom in texture, rhythm, line, and form. Brahms’s goal in his *Lieder* was to portray emotional intensity and expressively impact the listener. Because of this, he believed that musical totality was always related to text and that formal development was most important.<sup>4</sup>

The Brahms set consists of two selections from the song set *Vier Gesänge* (Four Songs), Op. 43, composed between 1857 and 1864. “Die Mainacht” (The May Night) was composed in 1864 on text of Ludwig Christoph Heinrich Hölty. In this *Lied*, a somber man walks through the woods on a mystical May night, grieving love lost. This *Lied* personifies typical poetic themes of the Romantic era, including lament, loneliness,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



moonlight, and the night. Brahms sets three of Höltz's four stanzas in a modified ternary form and pairs the expressive melody with rich texture and dramatic harmonic progression. Brahms alters the second stanza (Höltz's third stanza) with a change in key and accompaniment pattern. He also varies the ending of the vocal line to create a soaring arch on the text "und die einsame Träne rinnt" ("and the tear falls"). In the final stanza, Brahms once again employs an extended phrase on "und die einsame..." and also repeats the word "heißer" ("burning"), dramatically emphasizing the passion of Höltz's text.

The second piece in the Brahms set is "Von ewiger Liebe" ("Of Eternal Love"), composed in 1864. This text is often misattributed to Josef Wenzig. In fact, Brahms composed this *Lied* on text of August Heinrich Hoffman von Fallersleben's (1798-1874) *Gedichte*, a free transcription of a translation from the Wendish by Joachim Leopold Haupt (1797-1883). The plot of "Von ewiger Liebe" follows a boy who is walking his girlfriend home. He declares that their love has brought her shame, but she reassures him that their love is more enduring than steel or iron. There are three voices in this *Lied*: the narrator, boyfriend, and girlfriend. Each voice has its own distinct section.

The piece begins with a piano prelude consisting of a common Brahms bass-line melody paired with broken chords, anticipating the narrator's entrance. The narrator sings the first two stanzas and sets the scene. In the third stanza, the boy's dialogue begins and the music changes to fit his character. The vocal phrases become more assertive and the accompaniment grows dramatically and begins a pattern of triplet figures. After the boy has passionately declared his anguish, a piano interlude slowly diminishes the angst and drama of the previous stanza. To match the girl's text in the fourth stanza, the meter

changes from 3/4 to 6/8 and the tonality becomes major. The vocal line is less distraught and more legato and the accompaniment has a fuller texture. On the girl's repetition of "Unsere Liebe," Brahms creates one of his typical hemiola rhythms, which creates a ritardando, emphasizing the girl's strong affirmation of love.

The second half of the recital is dedicated to a musical scene for soprano and piano titled *At the Statue of Venus*. It was composed by Jake Heggie (b. 1961) with libretto by Terrence McNally (b. 1938) and was commissioned by Opera Colorado for the opening of the Ellie Caulkins Opera House in 2005. In a program note written by McNally and Heggie, they explain how honored they were by the commission:

In these perilous times for the arts, the opening of a major new arts venue is an occasion for rejoicing, of course, but reflection, too. What is the vitality of a new opera house if it is only a museum for works of the previous century? The arts must continue to explore who we are, not just who we were. Yes, a work of art is eternal and timeless, but the artists who forge them are not and these men and women must be nurtured as avidly as the great works of art of the past are preserved and/or re-examined.<sup>5</sup>

The premiere performance was given by soprano Kristin Clayton, accompanied by Heggie on the piano.<sup>6</sup> In this operatic scene, the main character, Rose, is a middle-aged woman who is waiting in a museum next to a statue of Venus for a blind date. She worries about having worn black slacks, which she references throughout the piece ("The slacks were a mistake..."). Rose is concerned about her looks and age, and compares herself to the various other women she sees in the museum ("Look at all those women..."). She also speculates on who her date is and what he looks like. Rose sees

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<sup>5</sup> Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally, *At the Statue of Venus: A Musical Scene for Soprano and Piano*, (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, Inc., 2007), Program note.

<sup>6</sup> The soprano role was written for Renée Fleming, but due to an illness in the family, she was unable to perform the work for the premiere.

men walking around her and wonders if one of them is her date, judging them by their looks and her assumptions (“It’s him, it’s him!”). She almost gives up and leaves, but instead stays and reflects on the love she felt as a child, longing to recreate that feeling of unconditional love (“I was a lucky child...”). She fantasizes about her date and how wonderful he will be (“Will I know him?”). The audience never meets the man but hears him call out “Rose,” to which she responds “Yes?” before the piano brings back the opening material in a three-measure piano postlude.

Although this scene may follow the tradition of other composers, Heggie’s unique musical style is apparent. There are elements of jazz and American popular music infused with contemporary harmonies and rhythmic complexities of modern classical music. Aaron Keebaugh, a musicologist and writer for the *Boston Classical Review*, expands: “Heggie’s colorful score possesses elements of lyricism and American neoclassicism: crisp, rhythmic piano lines, and shifting meters highlight Rose’s nervousness.”<sup>7</sup> Due to the frequent meter changes and independence of the accompaniment from the voice, strong collaboration between the pianist and soprano is crucial. Along with the competing piano and voice parts at times, this work is also difficult to sing because of the wide range of the vocal line. For more “conversational” sections, the vocal line stays in the lower range of the staff to allow for a more natural declamation of text, while the more expressive text is often sung in the upper range of the staff and above. However, if the

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<sup>7</sup> Aaron Keebaugh, “Intermezzo Serves Up a Compelling American Triptych of One-Act Divas,” *Boston Classical Review*, last modified on September 16, 2012, <http://bostonclassicalreview.com/2012/09/intermezzo-serves-up-a-compelling-american-triptych-of-one-act-divas/#sthash.HnUPkFLc.dpuf>.

troublesome range and complex meter shifts can be overcome, the result is a stunning representation of musical innovation.

*At the Statue of Venus* is a strong example of the accessibility of Heggie's music. To some, the term "accessible" could be interpreted as an insult, but Heggie explains his unapologetic view towards his music: "I want the audience to feel challenged because they're listening to something new, but not feel alienated because they can't understand what's coming up."<sup>8</sup> Along with the accessibility of Heggie's music, the subject matter of *At the Statue of Venus* is also identifiable to the audience. Heggie combines a contemporary theme and light-hearted humor with underlying complexity and significance.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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Marie Sorenson, Soprano

In a Graduate Recital

assisted by:

*Polina Khatsko, piano*

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the  
Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance  
From the Studio of Dr. John Hines

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À Chloris  
Dans la nuit  
Nocturne  
Mai  
Fêtes galantes

Reynaldo Hahn  
(1874-1947)

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Selections from *Vier Gesänge*, Opus 43  
2. Die Mainacht  
1. Von ewiger Liebe

Johannes Brahms  
(1833-1897)

**Intermission**

At the Statue of Venus (2005)  
“The slacks were a mistake...”  
“It was a sexy voice...”  
“Look at all those women...”  
“It’s him. It’s him!”  
“At night...” (A Lucky Child)  
“Will I know him?”

Jake Heggie  
(b. 1961)