

PROGRAM NOTE DEVELOPMENT

Please turn in, on one sheet of paper, a “listening guide” for your audience. Look for interesting or beautiful aspects of the setting to call to their attention. Frame the piece in its background story: where did it come from and why was it written? Why sing it now?

1. Musical Setting

- Look at the text as the original poem, with the author’s line breaks. If it is a foreign language song, try to read it both in the original language and separately as a translated poem. See how it looked to the composer and think about why he or she might have made the musical choices he or she did when setting it. What do you think the composer was trying to say?
- Look for and list musical details that are specific text illustrations, for example, accompaniment pattern: “here Schubert depicts a galloping horse in the piano part”; harmony: “Schwantner uses consonant yet ambiguous open fifths to illustrate the moon shimmering on a silver sea in a moment that is neither minor nor major”.
- Think about melody, harmony, accompaniment pattern, meter, tempo, style, length of phrases, etc. Where are the important moments? Especially high, low, or long notes? Why?

2. Background (keep this concise and directly relevant to the song)

- What are the names and dates of the composer and poet? What were the personalities of these creators like and what did they do for a living if not composing/writing? Where were they born and where did they live? What were their family lives like? Did they know each other?
- What were some major events in the world of the creators at the time your song was written? What might have been going on in their personal lives that inspired them to write your song? Is this song part of a larger work of either the poet’s or the composer’s? What is the opus number?
- If this selection is from an opera, musical, song cycle or other larger group, where does it fit in to the over-arching plot? What is the character trying to do; what does he or she want?
- Does this information give you ideas about why the song is written the way it is? Make choices as a performer?

3. Poem and Illustrations

- Include the poem (translation only) somewhere on the page, as the author published it.
- Look for pictures on the Internet of the composer, poet and places or people in their lives. Or find pictures of things mentioned in the song: objects, locations, individuals, etc.

4. Sources

List the sources you used.

Citation guides are available at http://www.library.wvu.edu/lmt/page.phtml?page_id=698

*Students in 315 and 415 who are preparing recitals may turn in ONE program note compilation per GROUP of songs, to be included in their recital program.

Have You Seen But A White Lily Grow?

Words by Ben Jonson

Music attributed to Robert Johnson



Have you see but a white* lily grow,
Before rude hands have touched it?
Have you mark'd but the fall of the snow,
Before the earth hath smucht it?
Have you felt the wool of beavor?
Or swans down, ever?
Or have smelt of the bud of the briar?
Or the nard of the fire?
Or have tasted the bag of the bee?
O so white, oh so soft,
Oh so sweet is she, so sweet is she.

The lyrics of this song were written by Ben Jonson, (1572 – 1573) for his play “The Devil is an Ass,” a satirical spin on the Faust legend. Ben Jonson was a contemporary of Shakespeare. He was and is considered to be one of the great poets of his time. As a boy he was educated at the Westminster School where he studied under the famous classical scholar William Camden. He never attended a university, but he was given honorary degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge. He is known for his dramatic plays, which were often written with the intention of being set to music. He wrote many masques for the court, and the musical settings of these masques are sometimes referred to as the first English operas. Although it is uncertain, this musical setting of “Have You Seen But A White Lily Grow” has been attributed to the late Renaissance composer, Robert Johnson. He spent his entire life working under Sir George Carey, who was a patron of The King Men’s Players (Shakespeare’s acting troupe). Through this connection he began to compose pieces set to plays and masques. He is also known to have composed other pieces set to poems by Ben Jonson.

An interesting musical device used in the piece is word-painting. Word-painting is a trait common to the renaissance period, where composers would write a musical line in order to mimic the image the words were supposed to convey. For example, there is an upward scale on the word “grow” to reflect the upward growth of a flower. Also, during the passage “but the fall” there is a step-wise motion down a fifth, to reflect falling snow. The music is also sung softly and quietly for the majority of the piece.

It may also be noted that this is not a declamatory song. The poet is not loudly declaring his love for the world to hear. He chooses to use metaphors and the five senses to represent the tranquil, private love he has for this woman. The metaphors also reflect the nature of the woman the poet speaks about. She is not a bold, daring courtesan, not a temptress – rather, she is a soft, quiet sort of beauty.

*The word used in the original version of the poem is *bright*.

<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/jonson>

Ingolfsson, Arni Heimir. “Jonson, Ben.” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 13: 204-206. New York: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001

Lumsden, David. “Johnson, Robert (ii).” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 13: 165-167. New York: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001

Jonson, Ben. *The Devil is an Ass*. New York: St. Martins Press, Inc, 1994