

Ned Rorem: Setting Roethke's Poems to Music

In a 1998 interview, legendary American composer Ned Rorem spoke to the challenge of setting some of the world's greatest poetry to music. "A song is a bastard" he said. "It is uniting two art forms that did not ask to be forced together."

Perhaps no composer in American history has risen to this challenge with greater success than Rorem.



Time Magazine called him, "the world's best composer of art songs." Rorem has composed three symphonies, four piano concertos and an array of other orchestral works, music for numerous combinations of chamber forces, ten operas, choral works of every description, ballets and other music for the theater, and literally hundreds of songs and cycles. He is the author of sixteen books, including five volumes of diaries and collections of lectures and criticism. He has received numerous awards and honorary degrees including Fulbright and Guggenheim awards, a Grammy, a Pulitzer Prize and Ascap's Lifetime Achievement Award. Recently he served a term as President of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was awarded the Legion of Honor, Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters, by the French government.

Of his diverse body of work, it is perhaps Rorem's song settings that have received the greatest critical and popular acclaim. The composer has set to music the verse nearly 50 of the world's greatest poets among them, Walt Whitman, W.H. Auden, Charles Baudelaire, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery. "It's a question of taking a pre-existing lyric, often a lyric masterpiece, and then assuming that you can add something to it," Rorem once said.

In the spring of 1959, Rorem sent a letter to poet and University of Washington professor Theodore Roethke requesting permission to set some of his verse to music. This set into motion a relationship between the two Pulitzer Prize winners that yielded an artistically compelling fusion of poetry and music that continues to be performed and enjoyed around the world. In March of 2013 Rorem graciously offered to discuss his Roethke work with the Theodore Roethke Home Museum. What follows is a summary of that question and answer session.

ROETHKE HOME MUSEUM (RHM): How did your collaboration with Roethke begin?

ROREM: Roethke came to my attention through Alice Esty.* Alice commissioned me to set some of Roethke's work to music. At that time it was three poems. I really wasn't familiar with his work before then. Alice is to thank for bringing him to my attention. I wouldn't call my work with Roethke – or other poets - collaboration. I worked with poems that already existed. So he didn't write anything specifically for me to work with. It's more interpretation than collaboration.

RHM: Are there characteristics in Roethke's work – or that of any of the other poets you interpreted -- that make their works more effective from a musical perspective.

ROREM: The most important thing is that the poem has to be settable. There has to be an underlying musical quality. There are some poems I wouldn't dream of setting to music, although they are great poems. And there are other very singable works that aren't great poetry. I'm looking for the context –

the overall meaning rather than the poetic or literary value within the specific poem or cycle I am working on.

RHM: How did you find Roethke's work in this respect?

ROREM: As I mentioned, Alice commissioned the first three poems. But they proved to be, according to my tastes, very singable. I found them to be great to work with. All together I have set thirteen Roethke poems.

RHM: In your correspondence with Roethke regarding the Alice Esty commissions, you asked to make some very minor changes to the poems, presumably to make them work better musically. He agreed to those changes. Was it common to request changes to the poems?

ROREM: I really don't remember making any changes. So they would have been minor. I began with works that already existed, so again, not strictly collaboration. I have, however, been commissioned to work with writers, particularly in opera. But the Roethke poems already existed so it was up to me to decide whether they needed a voice and whether they should be done together or separately.



RHM: The Rorem-Roethke work debuted at Carnegie Hall, April 3, 1960. Esty gave a program that included eight Roethke poems that you set to music. Did you ever get any direct or indirect feedback from Roethke on the work when it produced?

ROREM: No. And that sort of bemused me. Poets always say, "yes, I liked it, but I wouldn't have done it that way myself." I never heard from Roethke. If I were a poet and my poems were set to music, I would be flattered or honored but I wouldn't really give a damn. A composer is a different person – a different type of artist. So it can feel like I have encroached on their work. And I guess that's a true but inevitable part of the process.

RHM: In one of your books you note that Roethke was supposed to attend one of the performances of his work but only showed up at an after party, drunk. Did you ever have a chance to meet with him?

ROREM: I can't recall if I ever met him. I know we never had a discussion. As far as my impression of him, it's all in the music. I know that he wanted to get his name on equal billing with mine, which I think is fine.

RHM: For someone approaching your interpretation of Roethke's work for the first time, where is the best place to start? Is there one that has been the greatest critical success? *Snake* seems to remain among the most popular pieces. Do you have a personal favorite?

ROREM: I really couldn't say. I don't like to pick just one. I like them all. *Snake*? Well it's a lively, catchy setting. It's a good piece for the singer who needs to pep things up. *My Papa's Waltz* is also very programmable. I just don't like reviewing my own music. I've written a lot about music, but not my own. Not many people sing these types of songs anymore and very few people write them. There are very few singers that give song recitals. That's just the state of music today – it's all about pop music.

RHM: It's interesting to see how widely your Roethke pieces are sung and interpreted on YouTube, and on the web in general, you can find people singing them all around the world. In fact I just watched one that was done in Iceland. There are hundreds of performances out there.

ROREM: Well that's nice to hear. I haven't really kept up with that sort of thing, but I'm really interested in seeing what's out there. It's good to know people still give a damn!

Rorem set 13 Roethke poems to music. The full catalog includes: I Strolled Across An Open Field, Memory, My Papa's Waltz, Night Crow, Orchids, Root Cellar, Snake, The Waking, The Apparition, Interlude, The Serpent , From Whence Cometh Song? And What Can I tell My Bones? Many amateur recitals of the Rorem-Roethke work can be viewed on YouTube.

As an introduction to the work, we suggest, "On an Echoing Road," by The Prince Consort. The recording contains a number of Rorem-Roethke songs.

For more information on Ned Rorem and his work visit his web site www.nedrorem.com

**Alice Swanson Esty (1904-2000) was an American actress, soprano and patron of the arts.*