

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: November 1, 2014, Sage Chapel, Ithaca, NY. Commissioned by the Cornell University Chorus, Robert Isaacs, Conductor

Duration: 6'
Instrumentation: Women's Chorus

Songs from Ort is inspired by the collaborative experiments in poetic “erasure” of husband-and-wife poets Christian Hawkey (American) and Uljana Wolf (German). Their recent book, *Sonne from ort*, is (according to the dust jacket) “a bi-lingual collaborative erasure of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ and their en face 1907 German translations by Rainer Maria Rilke... These love poems to Robert Browning were written between 1845 and 1846 and published in 1850. The title purposefully suggested they were translations from the Portuguese in order to veil their personal content.”

Hawkey’s erasure (in English, of the Browning), and Wolf’s erasure (in German, of the Rilke) of Sonnet XXI appear in this musical setting. First I set the erasure words in a kind of high relief of rich harmonies and more lyrical text-setting, over the complete Browning sonnet AND its German translation by Rilke, in a more monotone, rhythmic, speech-like setting. After this treatment is complete, the piece returns to the erasures alone, first in German and then in English, without the source latticework of the complete poem – revealing Hawkey’s and Wolf’s new syntax and meanings: the art of the erasure poem.

In order to explore further the concept of “erasure” and what it might mean in musical terms, I turned to a third couple: Clara and Robert Schumann. Like Browning, Clara Schumann created offerings of love for her husband, in the form of solo piano Romances. Like the Brownings, Clara and her husband (also named Robert) were artists in the same medium. In composing “Songs from Ort,” I began my own process with musical erasures on these Romances by Clara Schumann, selecting only brief glimpses of her music and creating the “high relief” of the Wolf/Hawkey settings entirely from Schumann’s pitches. As with the erasure poems, Schumann’s notes undergo a total transformation of harmonic syntax and meanings in their new setting.

Poems misleadingly named translations are transformed 50 years later through translation, and again one hundred years after that, through erasure. Robert Schumann sometimes published Clara’s music under his own name, bringing yet another wrinkle into this dense game of misattribution. Whose piece is this? Now it is yours!

– Lisa Bielawa

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Text

Sonnet XXI from Sonnets from the Portuguese, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1849

Say over again and yet once over again
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
Should seem 'a cuckoo-song,' as thou dost treat it,
Remember never to the hill or plain,
Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain,
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed!
Beloved, I, amid the darkness greeted
By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt's pain
Cry...speak once more...thou lovest! Who can fear
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll –
Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll
The silver iterance! – only minding, Dear,
To love me also in silence, with thy soul.

German translation, Rainer Maria Rilke, 1907

Sag immer wieder und noch einmal sag,
daß du mich liebst. Obwohl dies Wort vielleicht,
so wiederholt, dem lied des Kuckucks gleicht
wie du's empfandest: über Tal und Hag
und Feld und Abhang, beinah allgemein
und überall, mit jedem Frühling tönend.
Geliebter, da im Dunkel redet höhnend
ein Zweifelgeist mich an; ich möchte schrein:
<Sag wieder, daß du liebst.> Wer ist denn bang,
daß zu viel Sterne werden: ihrem Gang
sind Himmel da. Und wenn sich Blumen mehren,
erweitert sich das Jahr. Laß wiederkehren
der Kehrreim deiner Liebe. Doch entzieh
mir ihre Stille nicht. Bewahrst du sie?

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XXI from *Sonne from ort*, Christian Hawkey & Uljana Wolf, 2012

XXI

again, over again,
the word repeated

her green

voice

though each
though each

XXI

SAG

wie dus fandest:

Feld

viel Stern

Und

- weiter

nicht s ?

Special thanks to Christian Hawkey and Uljana Wolf for sharing this intriguing and beautiful work with me, reprinted here with permission from Kookbooks and book designer Andreas Töpfer.

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