

A Recital of Shakespeare Songs

Give me some music...that piece of song...

Twelfth Night, Act 2:4

The Elizabethan age marked an early high point of English music, a great flowering of sacred and secular forms from grand anthems to intimate devotional music, from settings of metaphysical poetry to convivial madrigals, lively street ballads and bawdy drinking songs. It was also an age in which language itself aspired to the persuasive power of music, in which rhyme and meter wedded to wit and intricate word play carried thought and emotion to heady heights. Musical references permeate Shakespeare's works, including over 100 songs or references to songs in his plays, but it is the magic of his language with its rich insights into the human condition that have inspired generations of composers to wed their music to the enchantment of Shakespeare's verse.

This CD devoted to Shakespeare settings begins with a collection of songs from the 17th to the 19th centuries, some actually used in productions of his plays, others more suited to domestic enjoyment. There follows an interlude of four 16th-century songs that are referenced in the Bard's plays, followed by Shakespeare-inspired songs from a late-Romantic master, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and concluding with two sonnets set by Mary K. Jackson composed for this recording.

In 1906 Charles Vincent published a collection of *Fifty Shakspeare Songs* (using the Elizabethan spelling of the poet's name) illustrating, as he writes in his preface, "the growth of style, the improvements in harmonic combination, the freedom introduced into melodic passages, and the gradual development which has taken place in music generally, from the time when it was yet in its infancy to the present advanced state of the art." The first grouping recorded here [trs 1-9] follows in the main Vincent's chronological survey, beginning with Henry Purcell, whose "Come Unto These Yellow Sands" (text modified by Dryden), was written for Shadwell's version of *The Tempest* performed in 1690. Thomas Arne, a noted theater composer, is perhaps best remembered as the author of "Rule Britannia". His "Where the Bee Sucks," likewise drawn from *The Tempest*, and "When Icicles Hang by the Wall" (with its realistic hooting owl!) from *Love's Labor's Lost* are characteristic of his light, graceful – and highly popular – style. Shakespeare's international appeal is attested by two settings by Haydn and Schubert. Haydn's "She Never Told Her Love," from *Twelfth Night*, is part of a set of six songs composed during his second visit to London in 1795. Its expressive keyboard introduction and interludes makes of the clown's song a soliloquy of grief that bear the traces of Haydn's experience as an opera composer. With Schubert ("Hark, Hark, the Lark" from *Cymbeline*), on the other hand, we have one of classics the Viennese Lied. It is one of three Shakespeare settings from the summer of 1826 (Schubert would write no others) and has an undeniable freshness with its jaunty 6/8 meter and exclamatory keyboard outbursts so redolent of the Austrian countryside. Monk Gould, a noted church musician, was also a prolific song composer and his "Who is Sylvia" (from *The Two Gentlemen from Verona*) takes us directly into the Victorian parlor. Sir Arthur Sullivan composed several dozen songs and ballads and his "Sigh No More, Ladies" (from *Much Ado About Nothing*), is drawn from a set of five Shakespeare songs completed in 1864. Its sprightly assertiveness brings to mind better-known light operas with W. S. Gilbert. The Irish composer Thomas S. Cook, from a much earlier generation, drew "Over Hill, Over Dale" from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, although the text does not appear as a song in this, one of Shakespeare's most musically-saturated plays. This nimble setting is the work of an experienced theater composer who was long-time conductor at London's Drury Lane Theater. This brief survey of 17th, 18th, and 19th-century Shakespeare songs concludes with "Autolycus' Song" by James Greenhill, a noted teacher and church musician who was one of the editors of the path-breaking *A List of All the Songs and Passages in Shakspeare which have been set to Music* (1884). His setting is both dramatic and lively and paints a fine musical portrait of the roguish pickpocket, jack-of-all-trades clown of *The Winter's Tale*.

The four songs accompanied by guitar (trs 10-13) appear in Vincent's collection under the rubric "Songs Mentioned by Shakspeare in the Plays" and are thus texts and tunes that predate Shakespeare's works. The text of "Light O' Love" (which is mentioned in both *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*) was written by Leonard Gybson and first appeared in 1570; it is said to have been Shakespeare's favorite tune. "Farewell, Dear Love" (in *Twelfth Night*) is a paraphrase of the first verse "Corydon's Farewell to Phillis" of 1590. The tune is by the lutenist Robert Jones from the first book of his *Songs and Ayres set out for the Lute* 1601. "Peg O' Ramsay" is likewise mentioned in *Twelfth Night* and while Vincent identifies a later source – *Wit and Mirth* of 1719 – the words of the ballad cited by Shakespeare fit the tune exactly. There are two mentions of "Green-sleeves" in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a tune that probably dates from the late 16th century and a text that was first registered at the London Stationer's Register in September 1580.

Among the most fervent of Shakespeare's twentieth-century admirers was Erich Wolfgang Korngold, the Viennese Wunderkind whose first Shakespeare-related score was his orchestral suite for *Much Ado about Nothing* completed in 1919. Korngold's interest was rekindled in 1934 he was called to Hollywood to adapt Mendelssohn's music for Max Reinhardt's film production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Warner Bros., 1935). Eventually Korngold, like Reinhardt, found permanent refuge in Los Angeles from Nazi Germany and he went on to become one of legends of Hollywood film music, winning Oscars for *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *Robin Hood* (1938).

Between 1937 and 1941 Reinhardt directed a drama workshop in which he staged various Shakespeare scenes, culminating in an evening entitled “Shakespeare’s Women, Clowns, and Songs,” for which Korngold had written his op. 29 *Songs of the Clown* (his first settings in English, all drawn from *Twelfth Night*); the premiere was sung by the twenty-year-old Nanette Fabray. According to Korngold’s wife, Luzi, these songs were a reworking by memory of earlier settings which he had left behind in Austria. With the first notes of “Come Away, Death” we enter a late-Romantic world that hints of the weariness of some of Mahler’s *Wunderhorn* settings, an atmosphere that evokes the loss that haunted so many central European exiles. “O Mistress Mine,” by contrast, is positively bucolic, its successive strophes varied both in pianistic and delicious harmonic nuance. Both “Adieu, Good Man Devil!” and “Hey, Robin!” are witty, rhythmically agile miniatures that demonstrate why this opera composer proved such a master of cinematic characterization. “For The Rain It Raineth Every Day” is perhaps the most ambitious song of the set, encompassing the trajectory of a life from childhood to maturity. The piano accompaniment is curiously disjointed – lumbering octaves in the bass, twittering figures hopping about in the treble – as the vocal line battles its way through the wind and the rain.

The songs of op. 31, likewise written for one of Reinhardt’s Shakespeare evenings, features texts from *Othello* and *As You Like It*. “Desdemona’s Song” is affecting in its simplicity, never once leaving the intimate space that is Desdemona’s confrontation with her fate, her refrain, “Sing willow, willow, willow,” perfectly calibrated in its chaste pathos. “When Birds Do Sing,” from *As You Like It*, as are the remaining two songs, has a fresh openness that offers a striking contrast to the brooding world of *Othello* (Reinhardt’s juxtaposition of plays could not be more extreme!). With “Under the Greenwood Tree” Korngold provides a splendid evocation of summer indolence with perhaps just a hint of the popular style of American musical theater. Nature is also central to “Blow, Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind,” although the horizon is now significantly darker in this song of bitter irony, a sardonic foil to the resigned melancholy without which the cycle began.

“My Mistress Eyes” (Sonnet 130) was written in 1947 and was incorporated with four earlier songs to form the five songs of op. 38. The setting is altogether more formal with arching gestures and restless chromaticism that harken back to the style of Korngold’s more ambitious Viennese songs. The gentle *poco allargando* of final line, “I think my love as rare as any she belied with false compare,” brings Korngold’s Shakespeare-inspired oeuvre to an elegiac conclusion.

The two sonnets by Mary K. Jackson step back from Korngold’s luxuriant opulence. In “From You Have I Been Absent in the Spring” (Sonnet 98) Jackson’s pure and innocent opening and recurring sixteenth note patterns conjure the many-faceted beauties of spring, which Shakespeare uses as a metaphor for the absent lover. In “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day” (Sonnet 18) nature likewise provides the metaphors for that beauty that defies the death of a loved one: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

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