



CARLOS SIMON:
*An Elegy:
A Cry from the Grave*

Notes on the Program

By Noel Morris ©2021

From the composer

“*This piece is an artistic reflection dedicated to those who have been murdered wrongfully by an oppressive power; namely Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and Michael Brown. The stimulus for this composing piece came as a result of prosecuting attorney Robert McCulloch announcing that a selected jury had decided not to indict police officer, Daren Wilson after fatally shooting an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.*

The evocative nature of the piece draws on strong lyricism and a lush harmonic charter. A melodic idea is played in all the voices of the ensemble at some point of the piece either whole or fragmented. The recurring ominous motif represents the cry of those struck down unjustly in this country. **While the predominant essence of the piece is sorrowful and contemplative, there are moments of extreme hope represented by bright consonant harmonies.**”

– Carlos Oliver Simon Jr., 2015

SIMON: *An Elegy: A Cry From The Grave*

This is an ASO premiere.

Instrumentation: String orchestra

DEBUSSY: *Trios Chansons de Bilitis*

In 1894, a collection of erotic poems surfaced from ancient Greece depicting steamy encounters between the maid Bilitis and her lover Sappho, the great poetess of Lesbos. An instant sensation, the 143 poems offered a new window into women and sexuality in Greece in the 6th century B.C. Published by one Pierre Louÿs, the collection came with a fascinating account of the detective work leading to the poems' discovery on the walls of a tomb in Cyprus. There was only problem: Louÿs had made the whole thing up—including the poems.

Louÿs had managed to perpetrate a great ruse, supported by a thorough accounting of his sources. He detailed the work of a non-existent archeologist; he referenced earlier, German translations, and cited poems that had yet to be properly translated into French. Providing a brief biography of Bilitis, Louÿs mirrored the autobiographical nature of her poems,

outlining her life from childhood to the more jaded woman she later became. It was an incredibly well-executed hoax, fooling lay people and academics alike. And by the time Louÿs came clean, the literary quality of his poems outweighed his malfeasance.

Louÿs and composer Claude Debussy were part of a circle of friends, "the Mardistes", who met on Tuesdays at the home of Stéphane Mallarmé, a (today) mind-boggling assemblage of creatives that included Oscar Wilde, Rainer Maria Rilke, W. B. Yeats, Claude Monet, Renoir, Degas, Rodin, and others.

In 1897, Debussy set three of the poems to song, drawing inspiration from the spirit of the ancient Greek lovers. To add the flavor of antiquity, the composer used modes, especially the Lydian mode with the fourth note of the scale raised by a half step. In 1901, Debussy returned to Louÿs' collection and wrote incidental music to accompany a staged adaptation.

DEBUSSY: *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*

This is an ASO premiere.

Instrumentation: Piano and voice

WAGNER: *Wesendonck Lieder*

On the evening of August 28, 1850, Richard Wagner planted himself beside a clock at the Swan Inn in Lucerne. As the big hand moved across the twelve, he imagined the opening notes of *Lohengrin*, an opera he had completed two years before. It was the night of its world premiere. At that moment, Franz Liszt was in a Weimar theater, cuing the orchestra. Had Wagner been in attendance, he would have been arrested.

Among composers, he occupies a space unto his own. The massive scale of his works sets him apart. He had an imagination on the level of George R. R. Martin (Wagner was writing about swords, sorcery, warrior women, bastards, cunning dwarves, incest, dragons, and world domination 150 years before *Game of Thrones*). Wagner's harmonic language fundamentally changed the way we hear and write music. And he was anti-social.

On a number of occasions, he skipped town to avoid debt collectors. Between 1849 and 1858, he was a fugitive from German territory for his involvement in a failed revolution. All the while, he worked on his Ring operas and lived off the charity of others.

In the spring of 1857, he moved with his wife, Minna, into a cottage on the estate of their benefactor Otto Wesendonck. There, Wagner fell into a romance with the man's wife.

A pivotal relationship in cultural history, the affair fueled 'music of desire' within the composer's imagination—the wellspring of his watershed work *Tristan und Isolde*. The affair also inspired the present set of songs.

Mathilde Wesendonck was an author and a poet. In 1857, Wagner set five of her poems to music, and declared, "I have done nothing better than these songs."

With marital tensions bubbling over, the Wagners moved away from the Wesendonck estate and separated. In the meantime, Richard grew closer to Cosima von Bülow, the wife of a famous conductor and champion of his music.

On April 10, 1865, Hans von Bülow conducted the first rehearsal of *Tristan und Isolde*. That same day his wife, Cosima, gave birth to Wagner's love child—a daughter named Isolde.



WAGNER: *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*

This is an ASO premiere.

Instrumentation: **2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, harp, strings**

BRITTEN: *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge*

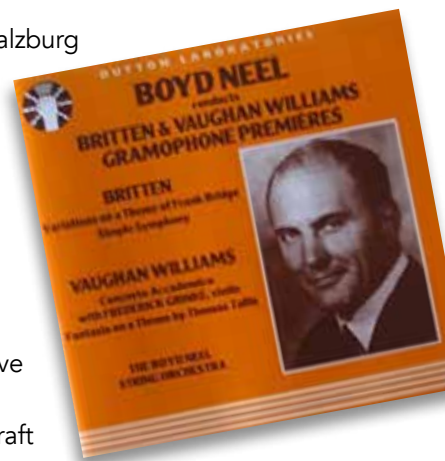
“As a child I heard little music outside my home. There were the local choral society concerts and the very occasional chamber concert, but the main event was the Norwich Triennial Festival. There in 1924, when I was 10, I heard Frank Bridge conduct his suite “The Sea,” and was knocked sideways.

By that time, 10-year-old Benjamin Britten had been a prolific composer for half his life. Eventually, the eminent composer Frank Bridge agreed to take the boy on as a composition student, and thus began an extraordinarily productive and, at times, excruciating process.

“Often I used to end these marathons in tears; not that he was beastly to me, but the concentrated strain was too much for me,” recalled Britten. “He really taught me to take as much trouble as I possibly could over every passage, over every progression, over every line.”

These lessons proved formative, as did Bridge’s embrace of the more experimental music coming from composers on the continent. At 16, young Britten entered the Royal College of Music where he found its brand of musical orthodoxy unbearable. Slipping away from school, he continued to take lessons from Bridge and eventually dropped out. At this point, Bridge put in a good word for the 19-year-old Britten who then landed a job as a documentary film composer. It was this work that led to a last-minute opportunity.

In May of 1937, the Salzburg Festival invited a conductor named Boyd Neel to feature a new piece by a British composer during the August series. Needing someone who could write quickly, Neel gave the job to Britten. Ten days later, he had a draft in hand.



The Variations are based on a theme from Bridge’s Three Idylls for String Quartet from 1906. After the introduction, each variation is a portrait of a different aspect of Bridge’s personality: his integrity/depth, his energy, his charm, his wit, his humor, his tradition, his enthusiasm, his vitality, his reverence, and finally “his skill/our affection.” The title page bears the dedication: “To F.B. A tribute with affection and admiration.”