

*The Song* (1919) by Leon Kroll (1884-1974).

Source: Sotheby's. Artist's private collection (c.1919). By descent to the present owner.

## SYLLABLES OF VELVET SENTENCES OF PLUSH AMERICAN ART SONG AS PRAXIS

PROF.SSA. NICOLE PANIZZA

In collaboration with Università degli Studi di Firenze,  
and the International Center for American Music (ICAMus)

Università degli Studi di Firenze

Florence, Italy

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10am-1pm

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This presentation has been borne out of my deep interest in, and personal experience of, American art song praxis: both as a key influence within the wider scope of artistic curation, and in advocacy of the poet-composer-performer-audience continuum as an ethnographic vehicle of critical enquiry. The various ways in which the American art song composer, and their chosen poet/s, craft their respective materials offer not only a meaningful account of the singularly unique attributes of their shared creative identities, but also serves to reflect and capture singular moments within American cultural memory.

In designing the following narrative, I have taken direct cue and inspiration from the songs themselves: examples that illuminate the broad arc of American art song history: from its first inception to more contemporary trends. Presented as individual 'sonic and visual snapshots', yet curated to speak as a collective whole, each example has been carefully selected to commemorate a particular aspect of American socio-political and/or cultural legacy. In so doing, the poet, composer, and performer are ideally placed, as a dynamic conduit, to illuminate aspects of American cultural memory that may otherwise lay undiscovered, dormant, silenced, and forgotten.



Francis Hopkinson (1834) by Thomas Sully (1783-1872). National Gallery of Art.

**Francis Hopkinson** | 1737-1791

*My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free*  
(1759)

Although art song tradition in the United States is, in relative terms, 'young' compared to that of its Western Europe counterparts there nevertheless remains a critically important legacy of over two centuries' worth of song composition.

The birth of the American art song coincided with the birth of the country, with the first extant art songs credited to the composer, jurist, inventor, artist, essayist, Francis Hopkinson.<sup>1</sup> Hopkinson was a friend of George Washington, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and the only American-born composer for whom there is evidence that he wrote songs before 1800. After commencing his formal music training at seventeen, Hopkinson became known for his proficiency as a harpsichordist, organist, and psalmodist. He is noted for his innovative experiments to improve harpsichord tone, by first "substituting crow-quills with metal tongues, then leather quills, and finally with velvet cork".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Francis Hopkinson'. *Biography*, Library of Congress. <https://loc.gov/item/ihas.200035713>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*



'My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free' (1759)). Original Score. Source: Library of Congress.

Hopkinson's earliest composition, *Ode to Music* (1754), was shortly followed by his first song, *My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free*. Composed in 1759, it is a setting of the poem *Love and Innocence* by Irish clergyman Thomas Parnell. Scored for voice and harpsichord it exists as "the first extant secular song by a living American composer".<sup>3</sup> Contained in a collection of Hopkinson's manuscripts, dated from 1759 to 1760, the song is currently housed in the Music Division, Library of Congress.<sup>4</sup>

As was common performance practice at this time, Hopkinson composed the song in two parts - treble and bass - leaving the harmonic details to be determined by the accompanist. With a notably elegant and appealing melody, the song is "frequently punctuated by a repeated passing-note, resulting in a charismatic syncopated rhythmic effect. A brief postlude concludes the piece."<sup>5</sup> The following performance features baritone Thomas Hampson accompanied by pianist Craig Rutenberg, in an extract from a live performance in 2010.<sup>6</sup> [My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1v1v1v1v1)

<sup>3</sup> 'Francis Hopkinson', Penn Collection, University of Pennsylvania. <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/francis-hopkinson/>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> 'My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free', Song of America. The Hamsong Foundation. <https://songofamerica.net/song/my-days-have-been-so-wondrous-free/>

<sup>6</sup> 'My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free'. Thomas Hampson (baritone), Craig Rutenberg (piano), New York Philharmonic's Offstage and Barnes and Noble. 1 April 2010. Source: YouTube.



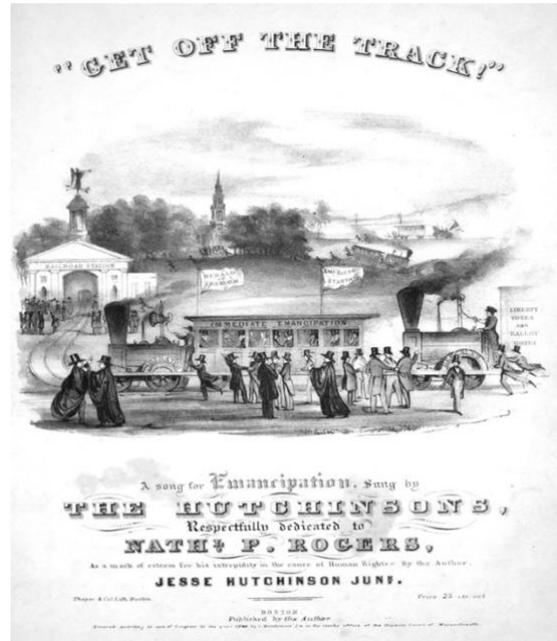
The Hutchinson Family (1845), Artist Unknown. Source: The Metropolitan Museum.

**The Hutchinson Family | 1844-1898**  
*Get Off the Track!* (1894)

The Hutchinson Family Singers were the first commercially successful American popular music act to fuse social protest with public music performance. The original members comprised of thirteen of the sixteen children of Jesse and Mary Hutchinson of Milford, New Hampshire. The eleven sons and two daughters “made their singing debut in the late 1830s and at first sang sentimental, patriotic tunes celebrating the virtues of rural life.”<sup>7</sup> However, in 1842, they “began to more closely associate with the abolitionists, and soon their repertory of songs championed such reformist causes as temperance, women's rights, and above all, the abolition of slavery.”<sup>8</sup>

Their public image soon became an amalgam of Christian revivalism, abolitionism, and agrarianism. This arguably aided their course by providing financial success and avoiding potential criticism of taking advantage of slavery issues. *Get Off the Track!* - an abolitionist song composed by Jesse Hutchinson Jr. in 1894 - is dedicated to anti-slavery and edited Nathaniel Peabody Rogers, as a “mark of esteem for his intrepidity in the cause of human rights.”<sup>9</sup>

Unambiguous in its message about the direction in which America was headed, the song grafted an original anti-slavery lyric onto the borrowed melody of a racist tune. The result was not just a hit, but a newfound ‘voice’ for the abolitionist movement. The following 2013 recording features the Dutchess Anti-Slavery Singers: a faithful representation of the original arrangement, accompanied by banjo.<sup>10</sup> [Get Off the Track!](#)



‘Get Off the Track!’ (1894), Front Cover. First Edition. Source: Library of Congress

<sup>7</sup> The Hutchinson Family Singers. Gilman Collection. The Metropolitan Museum. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283176#:~:text=The%20original%20members%20of%20the,the%20virtues%20of%20rural%20life>.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> ‘Get Off the Track! A Song for Emancipation’. Original Score (1844). Published by the author. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661453/>

<sup>10</sup> ‘Get Off the Track!’. Part of the Mid-Hudson Anti-Slavery History Project. The Dutchess Anti-Slavery Singers. First Congregational Church, Poughkeepsie, NYC. March 2013. Source: YouTube.



### From the Concert Hall .....to the Parlour!

By the early nineteenth century, dependence on a primarily English style of song composition waned as American composers searched for a voice of their own. Between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, they found increased inspiration in the African American spiritual. A nationwide interest in the spiritual arose with the advent of steamboat travel, begun on the Mississippi in 1811, and with exposure to the minstrel show: the first national form of American musical theatre. It was from these Mississippi steamboats that Northerners became acquainted with the work songs and spirituals of the ‘coloured folk’.

‘Power of Music’ (1872), Duval and Hunter. Source: Library of Congress.

The advent of ‘parlour music’ - typically song composition and performance crafted for the domestic space - became one of the most popular American art forms in the 19th century. With a piano found in most nineteenth-century American middle-class homes, women typically burdened with domestic activities were also able to pursue creative practice outside of their daily routines – promoting a significant wave of female-led composition and performance at a time when the female artist’s voice was often muted, if not silenced. The material itself was disseminated as sheet music, and the text commonly took its bearing from the works of European writers such as Robert Burns and Thomas Moore. It was in this inconspicuous, yet fertile arena, that the nineteenth-century American composer Stephen Foster, excelled.



Stephen Foster (c. 1860). Source: Library of Congress.

### Stephen Foster | 1826-1864

*Beautiful Dreamer* (1864)

A “melodic genius with tender, sympathetic lyrics and infectious rhythm”<sup>11</sup>, Stephen Foster is often credited as ‘America’s First Composer’, and widely regarded as one of the first who “made professional song writing profitable”.<sup>12</sup> A self-taught musician, his poems, and melodies “were written in a simple manner, with remarkably little musical embellishment or complexity. His works mirrored a kind, modest, and sympathetic personality; and are widely considered the first genuinely American in theme: characterizing a love of home, temperament, river life and work, politics, battlefields, slavery, and plantation life.”<sup>13</sup> For his songs composed after 1860, Foster “turned his creative energy to the parlour ‘ballad’: a style of song noted for its sentimental or narrative text, frequently at a slow to moderate tempo.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> ‘Stephen Foster’. *The Songwriters Hall of Fame*. [https://www.songhall.org/profile/Stephen\\_Foster](https://www.songhall.org/profile/Stephen_Foster)

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

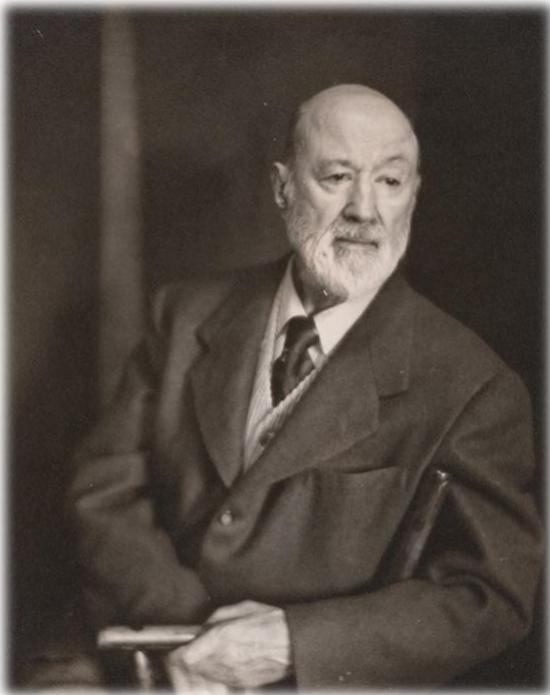
<sup>14</sup> ‘Stephen Foster’. *Song Collection* (‘Beautiful Dreamer’). Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200031150/>

The subjects of Stephen Foster's ballads were "relatively free of minstrel-song influences, focusing on topics devoid of Southern themes, such as mother, love, and home."<sup>15</sup> One of Foster's most enduring and memorable balladic examples, 'Beautiful Dreamer' was written approximately six months before his death: where he was destitute, in poor health, and surviving by writing songs in haste and selling them for hardly any money. Here, we see Foster's melodic genius at perhaps its very best: "exemplifying Foster's final sentiments and retaining its place as one of America's most beloved serenades."<sup>16</sup> The following performance, recorded in 2018, features the soprano Nadine Sierra accompanied by Bryan Wagorn at the piano.<sup>17</sup> [Beautiful Dreamer](#)



'Beautiful Dreamer' (1864). First Edition. Source: Library of Congress

Toward the turn of the nineteenth-century, composers also became more ambitious, turning their creative energies to the more serious 'art song'. This trend was sparked by the decision of many American composers to study in Europe; where, as a result, they were exposed to German *lied* and French *mélodie*: song forms that emphasized the fusion of poetry and music. European-trained composers, including Edward MacDowell (1860-1908) and Charles Loeffler (1861-1935) expertly crafted songs that integrated European aesthetic values into works with uniquely American qualities.



Portrait of Charles Ives (c.1947) by Clara Sipprell

**Charles Ives** | 1874-1954  
*Charlie Rutledge* (1920)

Throughout the "thirty years of a creative life that left a legacy of highly original orchestral, piano, choral, and chamber works as well, Charles Ives continued to compose songs – some 150 by the time he abandoned composition altogether in the early 1920's."<sup>18</sup> Publishing them, Ives quipped, was "an act of 'cleaning house' – an ambivalent effort, both apologetic and proud, to lay before a public he distrusted 'the autobiographical leaves of my soul'."<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps "nowhere more so than in his songs can the myriad of Ives's inspirations be heard—from German, French, and English Romanticism to the secular and religious Yankee tunes to Anglo-American ballads and parlor songs. Through the juxtaposition of these "subliminal sources, together with flights of unprecedented melodic and harmonic originality", the composer "managed to create an eclectic personal and communal American diary."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

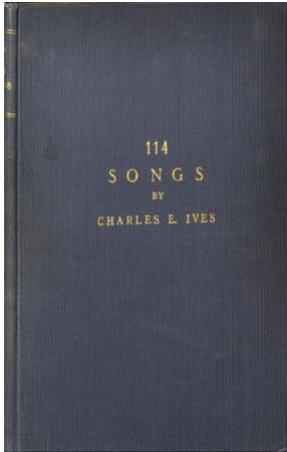
<sup>17</sup> An exclusive performance and conversation with soprano Nadine Sierra, celebrating the release of her debut album 'There's a Place for Us' on Deutsche Grammophon. Bryan Wagorn-pianist. September 27, 2018. Source: YouTube.

<sup>18</sup> Hampson, T. and Verdino-Süllwold, C.M. *PBS-I Hear America Singing*, Song of America, The Hampsong Foundation. [www.songofamerica.net/composer/ives-charles/](http://www.songofamerica.net/composer/ives-charles/)

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

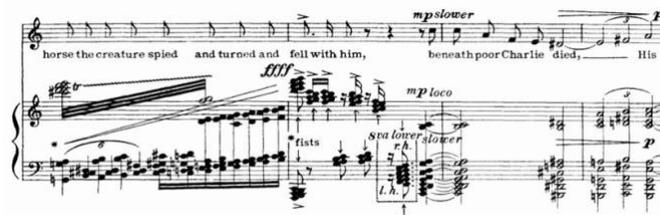
<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

(Art) song, for Ives, “served as a medium of creative dialogue—not only in the literal sense of narrative and lyrical communication between performer and audience, but also in the figurative one of a composer’s conversation with the Self.”<sup>21</sup> The immediacy and relative brevity of the song form “permitted Ives to remove his usual mask of well-bred reserve and to liberate a litany of uninhibited emotions in miniature carols that chronicle daily joys, sorrows, discoveries, and milestones.”<sup>22</sup> In 1922 Charles Ives self-published a discreet volume, containing “a very personal testament”.<sup>23</sup> None of the 114 Songs (as the edition was titled), which Ives had selected, edited, and ordered with great care, had ever before been issued. In the Afterword to the collection, the composer defended this sally into print after years of public silence as an opportunity to evade a question somewhat embarrassing to answer: “Why do you write so much which no one ever sees?”<sup>24</sup>



114 Songs (1923).  
Front Cover, First Edition.  
Self-published by the composer.  
Printed by G. Schirmer.

That Ives “saw his edition of the *114 Songs* as a consciously ordered progression of musical and poetic thoughts is clear from the care which he took to arrange the works. His choice to open with one of his last completed songs, ‘Evening’, and to close with his first known composition, ‘Slow March’, reflects the composer’s desire to embark on an autobiographical journey.”<sup>25</sup> Between these bookends Ives “creates a multi-layered arrangement of melodies that reads simultaneously in linear and cyclical fashion. The songs march progressively through recollection, reality, and anticipation—through past, present, and future, as it were—at the same time as they meander cyclically from later life back to the childhood of memory.”<sup>26</sup> More than becoming a sequential chronicle, however, Ives has in fact created, as his biographer Stuart Feder observed, a “Book of Hours”.<sup>27</sup> Ives’ song canon is a series of episodic moments linked by the tenuous threads of memory. Taken together they “chart an existential voyage which begins in temporal sensations and events and segues to the greater metaphysical passage.”<sup>28</sup>



An extract from  
‘Charlie Rutledge’ (1920),  
Source: Boosey and Hawkes.  
Bars 37-40

\* In these measures, the notes are indicated only approximately; the time of course, is the main point.

The text of Ives’ song ‘Charlie Rutledge’ derives from the 1920 edition of *Cowboy Songs*, collected by John A Lomax. It was presumed anonymous at that time but in the 1938 edition Lomax ascribed it to one DJ ‘Kid’ O’Malley. The “cowboy heaven is one of Ives’s many variations on musical evocations of the afterlife. But the stylistic range of this song far outstrips the normal requirements of a cowboy ballad, with its fanfares, clusters played with fists, and rhythmised speech”.<sup>29</sup> The following performance features Abigail Levis, mezzo soprano Scott Murphree, tenor Mischa Bouvier, baritone Grant Wenaus, piano, and was recorded live in New York City in 2019.<sup>30</sup> [Charlie Rutledge](#)

<sup>21</sup> Charles Ives, *Song of America*. The Hampsong Foundation. <https://songofamerica.net/composer/ives-charles/>

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Ives, C. *114 Songs*. (1923). Self-published by the composer, printed by G. Schirmer.

<sup>25</sup> Ives, *Song of America*. *op.cit.*

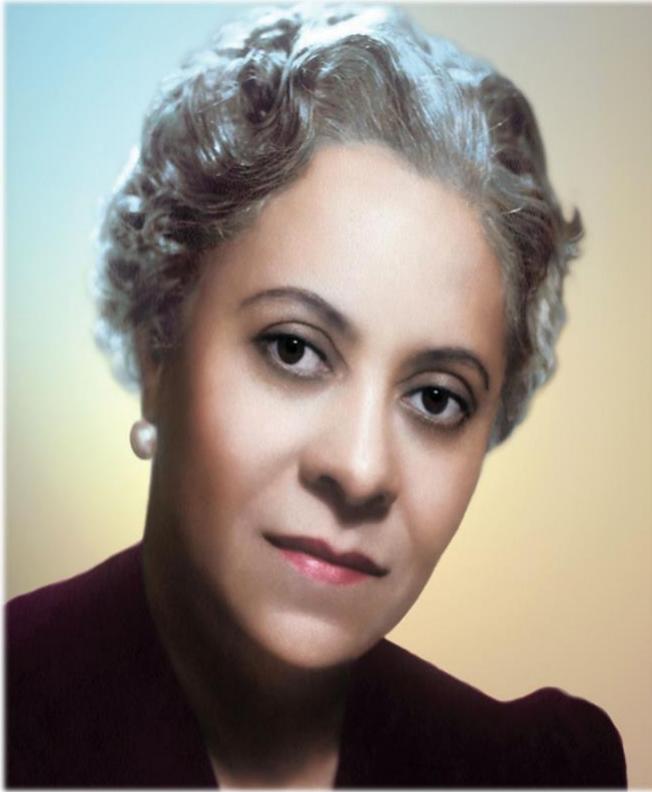
<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Feder, S. *The Life of Charles Ives: Musical Lives* (1999). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>28</sup> Hampson and Verdino-Süllwold, *op.cit.*

<sup>29</sup> ‘Charlie Rutledge’. *Charles Ives: A Song - for Anything*. Liner notes by Calum Macdonald (2005). Hyperion Records.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Charlie Rutledge’ Abigail Levis, mezzo soprano Scott Murphree, tenor Mischa Bouvier, baritone Grant Wenaus, piano. (2019), New York City. Source: YouTube.



Florence Price. Source: Naxos of America

**Florence Price** | 1887-1953

*At the Feet O' Jesus* (1930)

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Price began her studies at New England Conservatory at the age of 16. After earning her Artist's Diploma in organ, and a piano teacher's diploma, she returned to the South and taught in two schools before heading the music department at Clark University in Atlanta. She married in 1912, and in 1926, Price and her family moved to Chicago.

It was here that she began studying at the American Conservatory, initiating a compositionally prolific and creative period of her life. In 1932, she rose to national prominence when her *Symphony in E minor* won the Wanamaker competition and was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra – “the first symphonic work by an African American woman to be performed by a symphony orchestra”.<sup>31</sup> She continued to teach and compose until her death in 1953.

Price is perhaps best known for her art songs, sung by many prominent singers of her day including Leontyne Price, Blanche Thebom, and Etta Moten. Her compositional style combines contemporary influences, such as those of the Harlem Renaissance and African American cultural heritage, with neo-Romanticism, which was popular among composers at that time.

Price's song *At the Feet o' Jesus* exudes salvation. A setting of a Langston Hughes' poem *Feet O' Jesus*, it is an example of the black nationalist school of composition applied to the genre of art song, in the radiant key of E major. Its rich, warm harmonies and lustrous vocal melodies demonstrate, musically, that the composer's prayer has in fact been heard, that she basks not in the sea of sorrow that is the dominant image of Hughes's poem, but rather in the warm waters of salvation in Christ. The following performance features soprano Dr. Ollie Watts Davis, with Dr. Casey Robards at the piano, and is drawn from the 2015 documentary *The Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence Price*.<sup>32</sup>

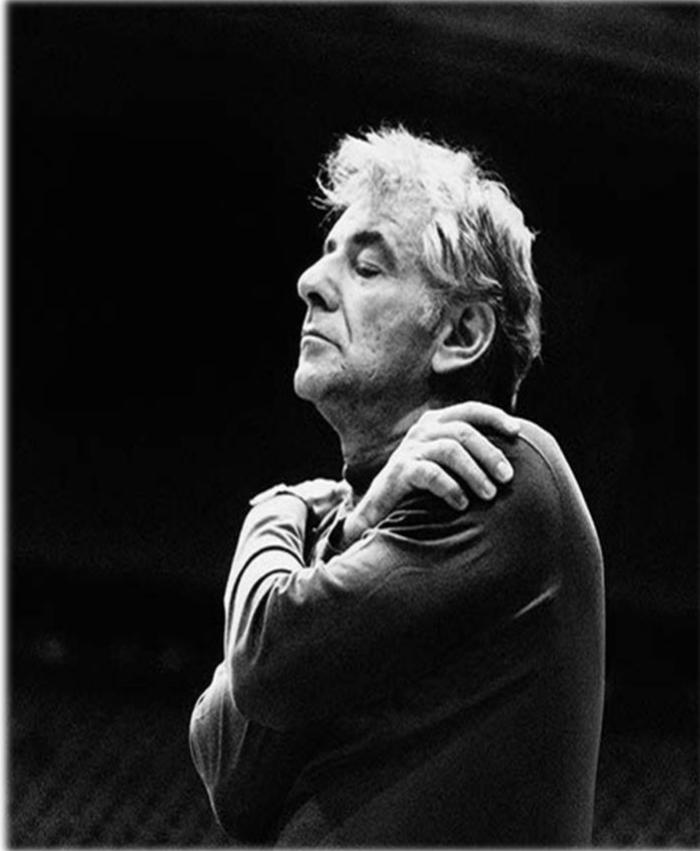
[At the Feet O' Jesus](#)



Langston Hughes. Photo by Jack Dalano/Getty Images

<sup>31</sup> Slonimsky, N. (ed.), *The Concise Edition of Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 8th edn, New York: Schirmer, 1994, p. 791.

<sup>32</sup> 'At the Feet o' Jesus', from *Two Songs* (1930). Text: Langston Hughes (1901-1967). Dr Ollie Watts Davis - soprano, Dr Casey Robards - piano. Extract from the documentary *The Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence Price* (2015) <http://thecagedbirddoc.weebly.com/>



Leonard Bernstein. Source: Sony Classical

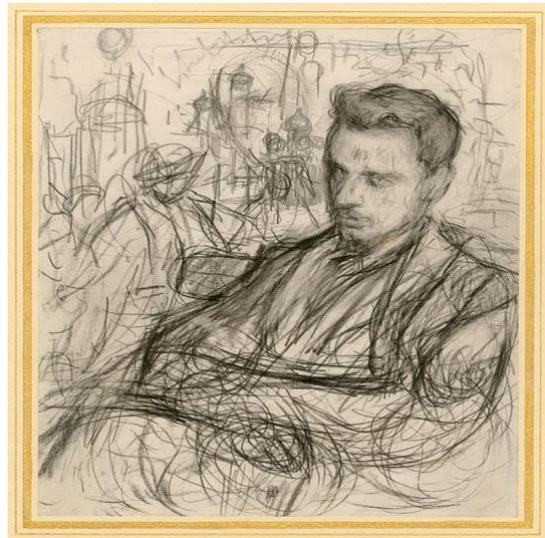
**Leonard Bernstein** | 1918-1990  
*Extinguish My Eyes* (1949)

One of the most renowned and beloved composers and conductors of the twentieth-century, the full remit of Leonard Bernstein’s creative genius has been more acutely realized in the years following his death. Not only has Bernstein become increasingly esteemed for the “dramatic, driving force he embodied in classical music performance and education”<sup>33</sup> he is also widely acknowledged as “a composer of variety, vitality, and substance.”<sup>34</sup>

Until literally a few days before his death Bernstein remained notably active: he continued to compose, conduct, tour, and teach with the energy and gusto that remained synonymous with his signature style. His flamboyant *elan*, his creative ‘voice’, his “larger-than-life, often unconventional persona”<sup>35</sup>, have become the stuff of legend, while his recordings, videos, lectures, books, and treatise remain vital contemporary artistic resource.

However, “beyond the glitter shines a substance that can only gain in luster as American music moves into the 21st century—an inspiring and inspired voice of an artist who unabashedly proclaimed: ‘Life without music is unthinkable, music without life is academic. That is why my contact with music is a total embrace.’”<sup>36</sup>

In 1949, Bernstein set a pair of texts by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the first of which, *Extinguish My Eyes*, was introduced that same year by mezzo-soprano Jennie Tourel at the Town Hall in New York. A beautiful love song, with a “pulsating, restless passion under it...”<sup>37</sup> Bernstein masterfully captures Rilke’s sublime text: ‘Extinguish my eyes, I’ll go on seeing you/Seal my ears, I’ll go on hearing you’. The following performance features soprano Areli, with Mark Evans at the piano, recorded in August 2020.<sup>38</sup> [Extinguish My Eyes](#)



Portrait drawing of Rainer Maria Rilke by Leonid Pasternak. Unknown date.

<sup>33</sup> Hampson and Verdino-Süllwold, *op.cit.*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> ‘Extinguish My Eyes’. Joyce DiDonato-soprano, David Zobel-piano. Source: You Tube. <https://youtu.be/-9tAUwqeqxg>

<sup>38</sup> Bernstein, L. ‘Extinguish My Eyes’, from *Two Love Songs* (1949). Text: Rainer Maria Rilke. Areli-soprano, Mark Evans-piano, Henry Zelenak-audio. 4 Aug 2020. Source: YouTube.



Samuel Barber (1956). Portrait by Yousuf Karsh.

**Samuel Barber** | 1910-1981

*The Crucifixion* (1953)

Throughout his compositional canon, Samuel Barber “adhered stubbornly to his own inner voice—a voice rich in subtlety and sumptuousness that relied deeply on melody, polyphony, and complex musical textures, all fused with an unerring instinct for graceful proportion and an unabashed affinity for Romantic thought and emotion.”<sup>39</sup>

But perhaps it is through his song compositions that Barber “is at his most Romantic and impassioned”.<sup>40</sup> A trained baritone, Barber’s ‘love of poetry and his intimate knowledge and appreciation of the human voice inspired all his vocal writing’. John Browning asserts that throughout Barber’s life, “the composer was never without a volume or two of poetry at his bedside. Poetry was, Browning believes, as necessary to his existence as oxygen.”<sup>41</sup>

Renowned for his immaculate and considered choice of song texts, Barber decidedly embraced a wide variety of contemporary writers: notably key examples from the Georgian School, Irish bards, and the French Symbolists: the latter intimately connected with the linguistic experiments of the 20th century Irish writer James Joyce, and to contemporary American literary voices such as James Agee.

‘The Crucifixion’ is the fifth song from Barber’s *Hermit Songs*: a cycle of ten songs for voice and piano. Written in 1953 on a grant from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, the cycle primarily derives its content from a collection of anonymous poems written by Irish monks and scholars from the 8th to the 13th centuries, in translations by W.H. Auden, Chester Kallman, Howard Mumford Jones, Kenneth H. Jackson, and Seán Ó Faoláin. Robin Flower, writing in *The Irish Tradition* states: “It was not only that these scribes and anchorites lived by the destiny of their dedication in an environment of wood and sea; it was because they brought into that environment an eye washed miraculously clear by a continual spiritual exercise that they had that strange vision of natural things in an almost unnatural purity.”<sup>42</sup> Barber explains further: “The *Hermit Songs* are small poems, thoughts, or observations, some very short, and speak in straightforward, witty, and often surprisingly modern terms of the simple life they led - close to nature, their animals, and God. Some are literal translations and others were translated more freely (where existing translations seemed inadequate).”<sup>43</sup> The cycle was premiered in 1953 at the Library of Congress, with soprano Leontyne Price and the composer as pianist. The following performance features mezzo-soprano Sarah Champion, with Dr Nico de Villiers at the piano, recorded in 2012.<sup>44</sup> [The Crucifixion](#)



Author portrait of Beauvais in a manuscript of his *Speculum Historiale*. c. 1478–1480, for Edward IV. Source: British Library

<sup>39</sup> ‘Samuel Barber’, *Song of America*. The Hampson Foundation. <https://songofamerica.net/composer/barber-samuel/>

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Flower, R. *The Irish Tradition*. (1993). Lilliput Press.

<sup>43</sup> Barber, S. *Hermit Songs*, printed preface to score. (1953) Boosey and Hawkes.

<sup>44</sup> ‘The Crucifixion’ from *Hermit Songs* (1953). Text: an anonymous Irish monk, c. 8-13th-centuries, Sarah Champion, mezzo soprano, Dr Nico de Villiers, piano. 22 September 2012. Source: YouTube.

**Libby Larsen** | 1950 –  
*Try Me, Good King* (2000)

The American composer Libby Larsen stands as one of the most dynamic and influential composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. Whilst writing extensively for orchestras and mixed ensembles, she remains attracted to the qualities of the [human] voice. Besides her renowned contributions to the contemporary American art song canon, Larsen’s more adventurous compositions include a cantata about Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as a multi-movement cycle entitled *Mary Cassatt* (1844–1926), which is performed with projections of Cassatt’s paintings. In Larsen’s own words, “Music exists in an infinity of sound. I think of all music as existing in the substance of the air itself. It is the composer’s task to order and make sense of sound, in time and space, to communicate something about being alive through music.”<sup>45</sup> It is perhaps through the medium of her art song compositions that we can best hear Larsen’s own words in full magnification.



Libby Larsen. Source: Composer’s website.



Ann Boleyn (c. 1501-1536), Second wife of Henry VIII  
Unknown artist, English School (c. 1550)

Larsen’s 2000 song cycle *Try Me, Good King* is a “group of five songs drawn from the final letters and gallows speeches of the first five wives of Henry VIII. Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, and Katherine Howard. Henry’s sixth wife, Katherine Parr, outlived him and brought some domestic and spiritual peace into Henry’s immediate family. Although her written devotions are numerous, and her role in the story of the six wives of Henry VIII is that of a peaceful catalyst, in these songs Larsen chose to focus on the intimate crises of the heart that affected the first five of the six wives. In this sense, the cycle represents a monodrama of anguish and power.”<sup>46</sup>

In conceiving the cycle Larsen “interweaves a lute song, composed during the reign of Elizabeth I”<sup>47</sup>, into each work. Whilst the original lute works “represent some of the finest examples of the golden age, they also create a tapestry of unsung words which comment on the real situation of each doomed queen.”<sup>48</sup> The following performance of ‘Ann Boleyn’ (based on John Dowland’s lute song *If My Complaints*) was recorded in 2021 at the Holywell Music Room, University of Oxford, featuring soprano Nadine Benjamin and pianist Dr Nicole Panizza.<sup>49</sup> [Try Me Good King](#)

<sup>45</sup> Composer’s official website.

<sup>46</sup> Larsen, L. *‘Try Me, Good King’: Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII* (2000). Composer’s introductory notes. Oxford University Press.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> ‘Try Me, Good King’: Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII (2000). Text: Anne Boleyn (1501-1536) | 44:00

*Till It Has Loved: American Art Song in Recital*. Nadine Benjamin - soprano, Dr Nicole Panizza - piano. Holywell Music Room, University of Oxford. 23 Sept 2021. Source: YouTube.

**Jake Heggie** | 1961 –  
*That I Did Always Love* (2014)

Although the American composer Jake Heggie has more recently focused his creative energies towards the operatic medium, he has nevertheless continued to systematically return to his musical heart and soul – storytelling through song. A committed advocate of writers and their literary legacies, sources of inspiration for his song composition included poetry by Maya Angelou, W.H. Auden, A.E. Housman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sister Helen Prejean, Gini Savage, Vincent Van Gogh, and Frederica von Stade, to name a few. However, there is perhaps one writer who has remained consistently central to his song canon: the American poetess Emily Dickinson.



Jake Heggie. Source: *The Primavera Project*. Photo by James Niebuhr



Emily Dickinson, daguerreotype (c.1847). Source: Amherst College

First introduced to Dickinson’s work by his mentor, American composer Ernst Bacon, Heggie has since returned time and time again to her elliptic yet compelling verse. *That I Did Always Love* is the fourth song of Heggie’s 2014 song cycle *Newer Every Day: Songs for Kiri*. Commissioned by the Ravinia Festival in celebration of Dame Kiri Te Kanawa’s 70th Birthday, it received its premiere on 12 Aug 2014 at the Ravinia Festival, with soprano Kiri Te Kanawa and the composer at the piano.

For Heggie, “Dickinson’s evocative poetry, and Te Kanawa’s luminous voice are a match both natural and inevitable”.<sup>50</sup> Notably, many of the first texts Heggie “ever put to music were by Dickinson”<sup>51</sup>, and his first encounter with Te Kanawa occurred in the early 1980s “when he turned pages for her accompanist at a recital she gave at UCLA, where he was studying piano and composition”.<sup>52</sup> The following performance features tenor Nicholas Phan, with Robert Mollicone at the piano, recorded live in January 2016 at the SF Performances salon at The Rex, San Francisco.<sup>53</sup> [That I Did Always Love](#)

<sup>50</sup> Von Rhein, J. “A Diva in the Twilight of her Career Inspires New Song Cycle, at Ravinia”. *Entertainment*, Chicago Tribune (2014).

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> ‘That I Did Always Love’, From *Newer Every Day: Five Songs for Kiri* (2014). Text: Emily Dickinson. (1830-1886). Nicholas Phan, tenor, Robert Mollicone, piano. Recorded live at SF Performances Salons, The Rex. 28 January 2016. Source: YouTube.

Although a full account of the American art song tradition is beyond the scope of this presentation, it is hoped that the featured examples will serve as an invitation for further exploration and appreciation. The American art song, in its relatively brief journey, may not have traveled far but it has certainly traveled wide: from the Psalm settings, and hymns of the East, to the hillbilly and cowboy songs of the West; from the work songs of the North to the minstrel songs and African American spirituals of the South.

The songs featured within this presentation demonstrate the extraordinary range of American art song style proliferating during the past 250 years. The repertoire is unified through the sensitivity of each composer to the text; poetry afforded new momentum through the addition of layers of musical interpretation enacted by the performer in real time. Each song offers us, the audience, an opportunity to observe examples of cultural memory through somatic storytelling. It is perhaps fitting to suggest that, both in and through art song performance praxis, America's rich and complex history can be (re)read, heard, and assimilated - and therefore felt, lived, and experienced - anew.



'An Old Song' (1874) by William John Hennessy (1839-1917)  
Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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