



'A Song' (1895) by Alice Pike Barney (1857-1931).
Source: Smithsonian American Art Museum

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring of 2019, I was honoured to be asked, on behalf of the International Center for American Music (ICAMus) and l'Università degli Studi di Firenze, to direct and curate a multi-linear research project focussing on American art song composition and performance. Specifically designed with the Italian post-graduate Music-Humanities student in mind, my objective was to provide students with the opportunity to critically examine key aspects of the diverse and dynamic medium of American art song, as a viable means of more closely understanding their capacity to 'voice' American history, memory, and legacy.

My interest in American music and literature began some 20 years ago, when I first performed Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* as part of my first of three MA (Music) recital. The process of preparing this work for live performance encouraged me to delve further into the wider canon of 20th and 21st-century art song compositions by American composers and poets. Their fascinating (and often complex) relationships continue to inform and define my creative practice, as both a performer and scholar.

In conceiving this project, I was especially keen to introduce students to key moments in American cultural history through select examples of contemporary art song practice. The symbiotic relationship between music and literature, and the ways in which they work both independently and collectively to communicate American identity and spirit, provided the foundation for this exploration.

The project format consisted of two distinct stages: an initial digital 'workshop', followed by a series of live seminar-style presentations. The online 'workshop' was interactive in nature; specifically tailored to encourage students from different research backgrounds to engage, discuss, debate, and collaborate. Participants were assigned to small groups (c.2 people), with each group undertaking a critical examination and evaluation of the corresponding set work. This methodology provided an opportunity for each group to study composer, poet, and performer - with a specific focus on each work's unique creative and historic significance:

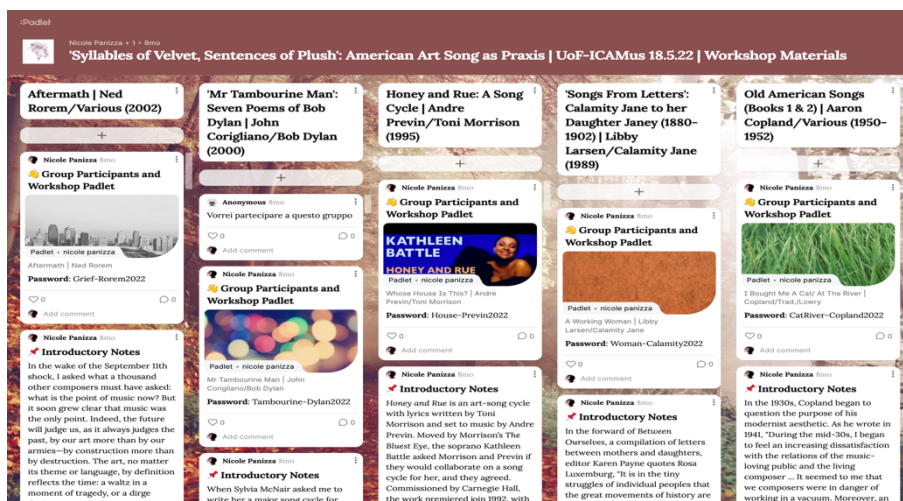
Aftermath | Ned Rorem/ Various (2002)

'Mr Tambourine Man': Seven Poems of Bob Dylan | John Corigliano/ Bob Dylan (2000)

Honey and Rue: A Song Cycle | Andre Previn/ Toni Morrison (1995)

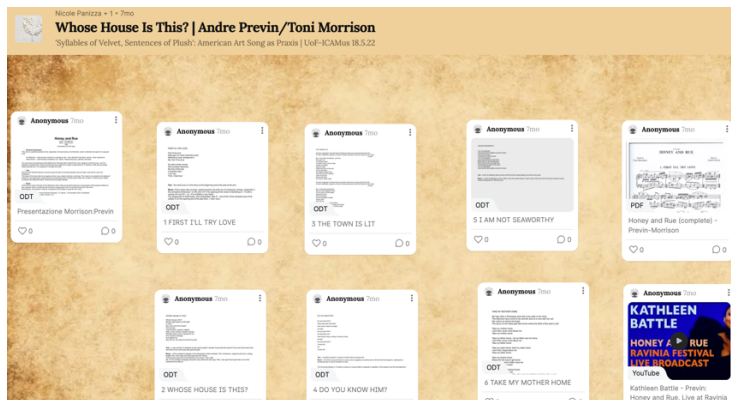
'Songs from Letters': Calamity Jane to her daughter Janey | Libby Larsen/ Calamity Jane (1989)

Old American Songs (Books 1 & 2) | Aaron Copland/ Various (1950-1952)



Each group was designated a six-week period to carry out this work and had password-protected access to their own online platform (Padlet). This mechanism provided the means for them to both individually (and jointly) plan, upload reference material, curate, and ultimately upload their final documentation. In curating each set of materials representing each cycle was based on the following structure:

- ⇒ Group Participants and Padlet Access Details
- ⇒ Introductory Notes
- ⇒ Case Study - *Set Task*
- ⇒ Case Study – *Text*
- ⇒ Case Study – *Score*
- ⇒ Case Study – *Audio/Visual Recording*
- ⇒ Cycle – *Score*
- ⇒ Cycle – *Audio/Visual Recording*
- ⇒ Further Reading and Resources



In addition to prioritising a wide selection of introductory materials (including recordings and scores), I also provided a selection of set questions, including ‘prompts’ serving as an initial point of entry such as form and structure; socio-political narrative; rhythmic device; prosody and text placement; instrumentation; harmonic vernacular, and performance gesture (amongst others). My objective was to afford each group a suitable level of freedom and creative license when carrying out their research, but at the same time wanted to encourage each student to reflect on, independently, the material in question. These ‘prompts’ incorporated such areas as the context in which it was conceived, contemporaneous artistic practice (ideally inter-medial), and creative approaches to performance curation and presentation.



The second (and final) phase of this project featured a series of live presentations, as part of a three-hour public seminar held at l'Università degli Studi di Firenze. The event opened with my own presentation, providing a critical context for the students' ensuing work by tracing the history of American art song praxis via select sonic and visual examples. This was followed by each group presenting their findings through c. 10-mins conference-style presentations inclusive of audio-visual example. The event concluded with an opportunity for both participants and audience to openly discuss the data as generated by and through this project, including closing comments and acknowledgements.

The following publications serve as a literal, visual, and sonic account of the resultant findings of this project. It features my own introductory presentation and select exemplars of the student's work. It has been an immense privilege to witness the various ways in which all participants have embraced these remarkable works: their enthusiasm, talent, and acumen by the repertoire on offer. On behalf of ICAMus, and our valued partners at l'Università degli Studi di Firenze, we sincerely hope that you will enjoy the following material: an opportunity to immerse oneself in the breadth of America's extraordinary cultural legacy, via art song praxis.