A PERFORMER'S EXAMINATION OF JOHN MUSTO'S
SHADOW OF THE BLUES AND RECUERDO

D.M.A. DOCUMENT

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by
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Approved by
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Dedicated to my family:

my mother who taught me how to write,
my grandad who taught me to ask questions,
and my grandmom who taught me to sing.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION
THE LIVING COMPOSER

For many music students, the living composer is an oxymoron. Unlike performers, who are idolized for their artistic vitality (life), composers are dead, intangible idols, revered for creations which are synonymous with, or replace, their identity. In other words, when a student exclaims that she loves Bach, she is really saying that she loves Bach’s musical creations, his compositions. In the mind of the student, the composer is separated from his mortal persona, just as a piece of paper is separated from the tree it once was; we know the paper comes from the tree just as we know the music comes from the composer; but what is this knowledge? Is it reality or assumption? Is the distinction important? Can we truly see the tree, with its mossy bark and leaves in shades of green? Or does our mind approximate this knowledge with a generic tree? In terms of the composer, how generically lifeless are the images of those we idolize?

When presented with an actual living composer, one stumbles in confusion. It is immediately obvious that he is alive, yet, at the same time, we hold on to our feelings of idolatry, wanting to say “I know you because I know your music.” The composer may then point out, “You can only know my music, if you know me.”
And if you are lucky, a relationship begins which will illuminate, not only his life and music, but also, what it means to create, to perform, and to know.

To a degree, all of this is an attempt to rationalize the importance of this project. Throughout my education, as a performer and teacher, I fear that many times I have missed the point; my experience in researching John Musto’s life and music and my discussions with him, have helped me to learn (or remember?) three valuable lessons. These are not rules, nor will they apply to every situation or composer, however, their importance merits inclusion within this document.

Lesson 1 – Performing: Music is fun and should be entertaining. Why do we, as performers and audiences, so easily forget this fact? We should all cherish our ability to make and appreciate good music.

Lesson 2 – Creating: Performing is re-composing. As John Musto explains, “The very act of learning to play a piece of music is to re-think it with the composer, retrace his footsteps (finger-steps) and then in the best performances, re-compose it onstage.”

Lesson 3 – Knowing: Don’t allow yourself to be intimidated by The Definitive Performance – it cannot exist. Even the composer plays his pieces differently than what is printed on the page. This comes from two different discussions with Mr. Musto. In the first, he explained how he is in the process of editing his collected songs for a new publication. One change he had to make in all of the songs was faster tempi markings. In our interview he stated, “I look back over the tempi and I think I changed most of it. Across the board, faster.”

The
second discussion was related to what Mr. Musto refers to as the “international style of playing.”

You hear one pianist play something and you hear another one and it’s pretty much going to be the same thing. Whereas if you put on, for instance on that gizmo [78], if you play a recording of Paderewski’s minuet... You listen to Paderewski play it and then you put on a 78 and listen to Rachmaninoff play it. And it is two completely different pieces. Utterly different. And these two men both knew each other. They knew each other's playing, they heard each other play, but there is just this freedom of imagination and style.3

Samuel Barber was another pianist whose playing exemplified the above quotation.

“Barber sat down and played, Scriabin, C# minor, [op. 2, no. 1]. And it was a sound from another world. It was an eloquence, the whole sound world. The way he had with his fingers, his hands, were on the keys, it was from another time.”

These are merely my lessons, and I am sure, some readers and musicians will find them obvious while others believe them to be insightful. The experience has shown me the importance of recognizing and learning from the living composer in a way that cannot be done with those who have passed. As Mr. Musto states:

I went to [Graham Johnson’s] class a few months ago at Juilliard. He gave this long speech because I was there. And he said to the kids, ‘you see, you have a living composer right here and this is what we need to do is walk up and ask him a question. This is what we can’t do with Brahms or Schubert and yet we need to know that.’ And he said that were Brahms or Wolf or someone to walk into the room today, he would know what he’d look like at any stage of his life, he would know what his preferences were for dinner. It’s this stuff that he feels he has to know if he is going to sit at the piano... basically he was telling them you can’t just get up and sing something. You have to know about the poet and composer because basically what you do when you write a song – I
write a song, and it’s my interpretation of the poem. It’s my reading of that poem and I control the lens.5

Through a biography of Mr. Musto, a summary of his musical style and influences, and a detailed analysis of the songs in Shadow of the Blues and Recuerdos, I hope that the reader will be able to avoid generically lifeless images of this composer and his songs.

Procedure

Preliminary work was done examining all of Mr. Musto’s published songs; additionally, I reviewed related literature to help decide which sets to focus on. I then interviewed the composer at his home in New York City to discuss his life and songs.

Related Literature

There is a limited amount of information in print concerning John Musto. The most detailed information is found in previous dissertations on the composer: “Shadow of the Blues and Dove Sta Amore: Selected Songs of John Musto” by Jessica Molin, 2000; “A Performer’s Guide to John Musto’s Penelope: A Cycle of Seven Songs for Soprano and Piano” by Karen Kanakis, 2005; and, “An Analytical Study of John Musto’s Encounters for Tenor and Orchestra” by James Hall, 2006. Other information about the composer and his music was mainly found in newspaper articles and select journals.
1 John Musto, “What are the Pros and Woes of Being a Self-Taught Composer?” NewMusicBox, http://www.newmusicbox.org/page.nmbx?id=37hf06
3 ibid.
4 ibid.
5 ibid.
CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN MUSTO

"You know I've played all of it and it all sinks in. When you play a lot of music, you see how it is put together and it has to affect you somehow, technically, how to do things. I don't particularly enjoy, I mean it's wonderful music, but I don't go out of my way to listen to German lieder for instance. You know I love to play it, it's great, but it's not... I much prefer to listen to Ella sing."¹

The above quotation perfectly introduces John Musto as a composer and performer. Born in Brooklyn, in 1954, Musto was raised in a highly musical home. The patriarch of the middle-class Jewish family, Vincent Musto, was a jazz guitarist, and music, especially improvisation, was an integral part of the family dynamic. When asked about his studies in improvisation, Musto replied:

I wouldn't call them studies, no. I studied piano with a piano teacher, a private piano teacher and then went to the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music... my father would just pull out his acts and say 'now we're going to do "Satin Doll," come on down. Go.' And he always had musicians coming over and playing and it was just something that happened in the house; we did it naturally, we didn't study it... It was nothing planned, it was just the way the household was and we just grew up doing that. You know, that's what musicians used to do way back when.²

Musto began studying piano at age four and at eight years old, "he became the organist at his Bensonhurst parish... reveling especially in improvisation."³

Eventually he enrolled as a piano performance major at the Manhattan School of
Music where he earned both a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree. He studied with Seymour Lipkin, a student of Rudolf Serkin, focusing on traditional conservatory repertoire. Outside of school, Musto played guitar and keyboard in pop bands as well as working as a piano technician. After graduating he began his career as a concert pianist, however, he continued to work as a piano technician, which eventually led to examining Samuel Barber’s piano for pianist Paul Jacobs; Musto now owns the piano. Paul Jacobs was a legendary pianist, most known for his work in Paris with Boulez and Stockhausen, and his recordings of Busoni and Debussy. In the years before his death in 1983, Jacobs was a “great help and inspiration” to Musto.4

It is important to note that Musto did not receive any formal training as a composer. “I am a self-taught composer, assuming the definition is merely that one has had no formal lessons with a teacher of composition. I’m certainly not a self-taught musician.”5 It is Musto’s training as a pianist, both in playing classical repertoire and improvisation of popular music, that has educated his composing.

I had the requisite harmony and counterpoint classes at school, but I really learned to write music by playing it. Lots of it. The very act of learning to play a piece of music is to re-think it with the composer, retrace his footsteps (finger-steps) and then in the best performances, re-compose it onstage. In this sense, I will always be studying composition.6

This approach has obviously worked for the composer. He has won two Emmy Awards for his film scores for Into the Light (1995) and Brick City Lessons (1999). In 1997 he was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for his song cycle Dove Sta Amore.
He has also received a Rockefeller Fellowship grant (2000) and has had numerous commissions from elite ensembles, festivals, and performers (see Appendix A).

Musto’s first published songs, *Two by Frost*, were composed in 1982 and are dedicated to soprano Amy Burton. Their relationship (they were married December 28, 1984), serving as the initial inspiration for Musto’s song composition, continues to influence and educate his compositions for the voice; “If I have a vocal question I just ask Amy.” Musto also began working with pianist Steven Blier who lived around the corner from him. As he said in our interview, “I was just in this community of mostly singers.” Between 1992-1994 Musto served as the New Music Coordinator for the New York Festival of Song. Besides Miss Burton, his songs have been championed most notably by singers Paul Sperry and William Sharp, and accompanist Graham Johnson, who has said: “If there is a finer composer of song with piano alive and working in the world today, I would very much like to know his or her name.”

Unfortunately, due to frustrations over obtaining rights to use poetry, Musto has vowed to stop writing songs, unless a lyric is written especially for him to use.

I can’t tell you how difficult it has become to deal with people’s estates and people’s lawyers. Because these aren’t people [who], like when Samuel Barber was doing it — the people he went to for permission were people who went to concerts, they actually knew what he was doing. These people haven’t been to a concert in their lives.

In our interview, Musto elaborated on this problem using two specific instances as examples. In the first, the publisher indicated that it was a standard request,
however, after Musto completed the composition, they denied his request, stating that he was not allowed to set the poem to music. He ended, “what did they think I was going to do with it?” In another instance, the poet requested to know how large the auditorium was and what the ticket prices were for different sections. “I have had so much trouble with song texts, that I don’t ever want to set another one again, because I don’t want to deal with anyone’s publishers.”

However, singers should not despair! Musto and his publisher Peer Music Classical have plans to release a volume, in high voice and low voice editions, of his collected songs. As Musto himself said, “it’s going to be a big book, and I think it’s a contribution to the song literature.” Unlike many 20th-century American song composers, Musto composes for a wide variety of instruments and ensembles (see Appendix A). As he pointed out in our interview, “I’ve never considered myself a song composer and I have really only written a handful of songs… I think all of this song writing was simply a good practice to using a bigger canvas in writing opera.”

Musto’s first attempt at writing opera, with librettist Denise Lantot, was entitled Pope Joan. The two worked for years on the project, traveling to Bellagio, Italy, and working through completed scenes in a composer’s workshop setting. The opera was eventually abandoned and remains unfinished. His second attempt, the comedy Volpone, had its premiere in 2004 and has already entered the repertoire. Volpone was written with librettist Mark Campbell and is loosely based on the Ben Johnson novel. He is also currently working on two other operas: one, commissioned by the University of Maryland and the National Gallery, will open in
November 2007; the second, another comedy set to open in 2010, was commissioned by Wolftrap and St. Louis Opera.

Musto continues to live in New York City with his wife Amy, and their thirteen year old son. He leads a busy life as a composer and performer. Referring to this dual role, Musto has said: “It's a balancing act I've never quite figured out.” 15 Nevertheless, he feels it is an imperative responsibility.

I want to make more time for performing. It revitalizes my energies for composing. If anything went wrong in the 20th century, it's that the composer abandoned the stage. Can you imagine a choreographer who's never danced? But now there are composers with doctorates who can't play 'Chopsticks.' It should be a law, like jury duty. Every composer should have to step up to the plate, in front of a paying audience, at least once a year. 16

Reviews of his compositions may be surpassed only by reviews of his playing. Pianist, conductor, and general director of the Caramoor festival, Michael Barrett, states that:

I think everyone needs to hear John playing Bach. No one will have heard anything like it. John is a composer and a real ornamentalist, so when he takes the repeats he goes way beyond what a pianist like me would do. He goes into an extremely private, wonderful, intricate place. I think if you could somehow mix Bill Evans and Cyrus Chestnut and George Gershwin and teach them how to play Bach properly, that's what you hear in John's improvisations. They sound so pure to me. And they still sound like Bach. 17

Like his life, Musto's composing and performing are a convergence of popular idioms and classical training. In our interview, he elaborated, “Mozart used popular idioms, Bach did; I think it is more of a going back to something, it's a long tradition, referencing popular music.” 18
2 ibid.
3 Cori Ellison, “Stepping to the Plate, as Pianist, as Opera Composer,” New York Times, May 7, 2000, sec. AR43.
4 John Musto, “What are the Pros and Woes of Being a Self-Taught Composer?” NewMusicBox, http://www.newmusicbox.org/page.nmbx?id=57hf06
5 ibid.
6 ibid.
8 ibid.
11 ibid. or
14 ibid.
CHAPTER 2
INfluences, Process, and Style

Style, when applied to music, is an amorphous term. Looking up 'style' in my 40-year-old Webster's New World Dictionary, I find that there are ten separate definitions, five of which could easily be applied to address a composer's music. While they all share similar themes, there are also some differences; does style, in terms of musical style, refer to the characteristic manner of expression or the way in which the music is constructed? Arnold Schoenberg offers the following comprehensive explanation:

Every man has fingerprints of his own, and every craftsman's hand has its personality; out of such subjectivity grow the traits which comprise the style of the finished project. Every craftsman is limited by the shortcomings of his hands but is furthered by their particular abilities. On his natural conditions depends the style of everything he does... Style is the quality of a work and is based on natural conditions, expressing him who produced it... But he will never start from a preconceived image of a style; he will be ceaselessly occupied with doing justice to the idea.¹

In a separate chapter, he continues:

... a style cannot arise when the object around which it is supposed to develop is kept away from living influences. For style is not what people usually imagine. It is not something faithfully guarded... [it is] something constantly changing.²
There are several elements from Schoenberg’s description which should be emphasized. First, style arises out of the characteristic traits and background of the composer. Second, style is the natural expression of the composer. Third, style is constantly changing. Finally, and most importantly, the composer does not write with style in mind, but rather focuses on the idea of the composition. A composer’s style is the result of past influences and training, filtered through his compositional process.

I found, in my interview with John Musto, that he views his musical style in similar terms. When asked about the attention writers give to the influence of jazz and the blues in his music, Musto replied, “I don’t have any opinion on that to tell you the truth. I just write it, send it out there. That’s the world I come from. And that’s what I do.” Tenor Paul Sperry reaffirms this: “[Musto] doesn’t think about style, he simply reads the poem; if he is attracted to the content and thinks the form makes it settleable, he proceeds, and the appropriate music comes out.” It is only through examining Musto’s background and influences that one begins to understand his musical style.

As was said at the end of Chapter One, Musto’s composing and performing are a convergence of popular idioms and classical training. The list of composers Musto has said to admire further illuminates this. He states that George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, William Bolcom, John Corigliano, Randy Newman, Francis Poulenc, and Mozart are all influences on his musical style. He labels another inspiring composer, Frederic Chopin, as “the greatest bel canto composer.” Musto elaborated: “There is not an extra bar, there is not an extra um-pah. It’s perfect
music, absolutely perfect. And he took that style from the opera composers
[Donizetti, Rossini, and Bellini] and just completely outshone them in my humble
opinion.”

Speaking about his own opera compositions, Musto tells of the influence
from a surprising source:

I didn’t learn about writing opera from opera although there are
certain operas I really admire: Marriage of Figaro, Falstaff. But I also
learned a whole lot about how to write for the stage from subbing
and watching Chicago on Broadway… it’s a show where the band is
up on risers here, the piano is here, conductors here, and the players
are there, and here’s the audience. So you can see everyone, and
feel everything going on and you just watch that piece work, eight
shows a week. And it worked like clockwork. It is an amazing
piece of theatrical machinery. The pacing, especially for comedy;
where the jokes are and how they work; how you move from one
place to another. That was an education.

In terms of his songs, Musto’s compositional process begins by reading a
great deal of poetry. According to Musto, “setting a text is a composer’s way of
reciting his favorite poems.” His wife, soprano Amy Burton, says of this process,
“He typically would pore over volumes of poetry, sometimes for months, looking
for a poem that ‘sang’ to him, and often put together poems that didn’t necessarily
seem to share a theme or obvious characteristic, even to him.” For Musto,

the text dictates the music. I am drawn to texts that are theatrical…
not meditations… I think of my character as having something to
say on stage as if [the poem] were happening now… what’s going
on on stage? How does it have to do with the character? Who is
the protagonist of the song? What kind of interlude should
accompany a certain dramatic beat?

In our interview, he reiterated this idea: “I gravitate toward theatrical texts, texts
that a character can sing. And I write music portraying that character on stage. I
tend to shy away from poems that are just meditations on the universe, things like that. I like them to be very specific, and say a very specific thing.” He primarily reads American poetry which is reflected in the fact that very few of his songs are settings of British poets. In reference to the poems he has set, Musto said, “They are all poems that I thought had a theatrical basis. There was a person there that you can musicalize. There was a situation there to musicalize. And there was room in the poem for the music to get in there and do something.” Once the poem is chosen, his compositional process is quick, relying on his training as a performer and his improvisational skills. “I notice technical details in my music after the fact, or have them pointed out to me by others… Not every choice is the product of a conscious thought. This is not to say they are serendipitous. They’re just instinctual.”

In summary, Musto’s musical style draws on his jazz background as well as his training as a concert pianist (these are his characteristic traits). This results in songs that are quite difficult technically, especially for the pianist, but are still appealing to audiences (this is the composer’s natural expression). They are highly, melodic and tonal, and while some are in specific popular forms, such as the ragtime influenced song, “Recuerdo,” others defy easy classification, such as in “Echo” (his style is constantly changing). All of this is filtered through Musto’s compositional process which is inspired by the text (he focuses on the idea of the composition).

While examining the songs in the following chapters, one will note the recurrence of several compositional techniques that may be viewed as stylistic
minutiae. It is important to realize that it is not the individual occurrence of these elements, but their combination that defines a composer's characteristic style. In terms of John Musto's music, these include:

a. The text setting is almost always syllabic, with few melismas

b. The composer rarely repeats text that is not repeated in the poem

c. Important text is accentuated through unexpected rhythmic variation (such as triplets, syncopation), or by removing the accompaniment and setting the voice *a cappella*

d. In nearly all of his songs, the composer uses motives at the beginning of the piece which are then transposed and varied throughout the song

Examples of all these elements can be found in the following chapters.

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8 ibid.
10 ibid., 9.
13 ibid.
CHAPTER 3

SHADOW OF THE BLUES

When Eileen Farrell exclaimed, "I gotta right to sing the blues,"¹ she was invoking her right to sing not just a genre of songs, but to sing with all of the feeling "blues" implies. In its most specific, musical sense, the blues is defined by its improvisatory style based on an underlying musical pattern, such as the 12-bar blues; however, many blues musicians state that feeling blue while performing is the most important aspect of this music.² It is this latter element of the blues that is most pertinent to John Musto's Shadow of the Blues.

The title of the set has a double meaning: while it is a reference to the title of another work by poet Langston Hughes (1902-67), one of his Simple stories, it also characterizes a common theme in the four poems. By calling the set Shadow of the Blues, Musto draws attention to the elements in the songs and poetry that are influenced by the blues, however, they are not truly blues songs: just shadows of that genre.

Shadow of the Blues is one of Musto's only works that groups a set of songs unified by a single poet. In our interview, Musto noted in reference to the Hughes' poems he set, that "I remember reading them and thinking they actually read like
song lyrics, not poems.” Hughes had a significant background as a lyricist, writing text for composers such as Kurt Weill (Street Scene), William Grant Still (Troubled Island), and Margaret Bonds (The Ballad of the Brown King).

His family was not always supportive of his writing; dependent upon the financial support of his father, Hughes studied engineering at Columbia University but did not complete his degree. He later attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, receiving a B.A. degree in 1929 and a doctorate in 1943. Other than travels, he spent the entirety of his life (post-college) in Harlem.

In the 1920s, Hughes became an influential writer during the Harlem Renaissance. He was also highly interested in communism as it pertained to equalizing the injustice of a class system.

“Silhouette”

Southern gentle lady,
Do not swoon.
They’ve just hung a black man
In the dark of the moon.

They’ve hung a black man
To a roadside tree
In the dark of the moon
For the world to see
How Dixie protects
Its white womanhood.

Southern gentle lady,
Be good!
Be good!

The poem “Silhouette” was published with two others as a set of three songs about lynching. The poems, which were to be read (not sung), included
suggestions by Hughes for musical accompaniment; for “Silhouette,” the poet requested violins playing “satirically sentimental music.”

There are several elements in the poem that contribute to its satiric sentimentality. In the first stanza, the lynching is mentioned almost flippantly, suggesting that there is nothing for a civilized woman to be upset about. Oddly, Hughes uses “dark of the moon” rather than “light,” and repeats this line, perhaps to bring attention to the fact that those who have done the lynching do not want to be seen by anyone. This contrasts with the following line where the poem states that the “world” is the projected audience. In the last line of the second stanza, “white womanhood” is juxtaposed with the preceding mention of the “black man.” The remaining lines of the poem add an additional element; does the repetition of “Be good!” imply that white women were at fault for seducing black men, or fabricating stories against black men?

In his setting of the poem, Musto repeats text at the end, something he rarely does. When asked about this, he reiterated that it was unusual for him to do so and continued to say “this really felt like a song lyric and if you’re doing a pop tune you add a few things at the end.” The song is marked “Breezily” and its suggested tempo is slower than what the composer himself performs: “in the new [edition] I stepped up the tempo; the tempo I actually take is much faster than was written. It works better.”

In writing the music, Musto taps into the satirical quality of the poem. He states that “the poem is so dark; sometimes it’s more effective if the music works against the message and that makes the piece work.” The piece begins with a
syncopated motive in the piano that is repeated and varied throughout the song (see Example 3.1).

Example 3.1 – Musto, Shadow of the Blues, “Silhouette,” mm. 1-3

With the syncopated rhythm, the descending parallel motion chords immediately set up the flippant quality that both poet and composer intend. After the opening vocal measure, the rhythmic motive of the first bar is repeated in the vocal line and is echoed in the piano. In the next phrase (Example 3.2), Musto draws attention to the oddity of “dark of the moon” by his use of the triplet and a poco rubato.

Example 3.2 – Musto, Shadow of the Blues, “Silhouette,” mm. 4-6

Returning to the tempo, the piano repeats the motive, this time in a much higher tessitura.
In the next phrase, a new motive is introduced. Whereas in the first motive the second beat of the measure is obscured by the syncopation, this new motive uses a pick-up and leap to accentuate the second beat, followed by a syncopation covering beat three. This motive is repeated four times in the right-hand of the piano, each time at a higher pitch (Example 3.3). The vocal line also ascends in a chromatic sequence, again emphasizing "dark of the moon" through the use of triplets. After this dynamic, pitch, and tonality climax, the piano returns to a chorale-like accompaniment, supporting the vocal line which quotes the chorus of "Dixie’s Land" (Example 3.4), altered only by the syncopation on the word "Dixie." The chorale-like texture in the piano continues until measure 14 where the opening motive returns, enharmonically equivalent to its appearance in measure five.

Hughes’ repetition of text from the beginning of the poem inspires Musto to return to the same melodic figure as in measure two, albeit a semi-tone lower. This is rectified in the following measure where Musto repeats the line, returning to the opening vocal pitches. The following sequence of three "be good[s],” begins on the highest vocal pitch of the song; Musto also adds one extra "be good.” Both of these elements help to highlight this text. The piano echoes the first two "be good[s]” both metrically and melodically, and as the vocalist sustains the tone, the piano enters with the same rhythmic motive that started the song. This time, however, the pitch contour is ascending rather than descending, adding an almost questioning quality to the end of the song (Example 3.5).
Example 3.3 – Musto, *Shadow of the Blues*, “Silhouette,” mm. 7-9

Example 3.4 – Musto, *Shadow of the Blues*, “Silhouette,” mm. 10-11
"Litany"

Hughes' poem was originally entitled "Prayer," however, Musto made it very clear that he did not view the poem as religious. As he pointed out, the last line clearly states that these people feel forsaken by God.

Gather up
In the arms of your pity
The sick, the depraved,
The desperate, the tired,
All the scum
Of our weary city

Gather up
In the arms of your pity
Gather up
In the arms of your love-
Those who expect
No love from above.

The poem is simply directed to the reader and asks him to both pity and love those who are downtrodden. When asked about his interpretation of the text, Musto pointed out that

Langston Hughes was never poor, he made a good living, he was very well known... I've heard ["Litany"] a lot with the singer getting all distraught and suffering through the piece, and it's not effective that way. Langston Hughes, when he wrote that, he wasn't writing about himself. There's a certain reserve and distance.\textsuperscript{8}
In Musto’s setting, the piano introduction is longer (in duration) than the entire song “Silhouette;” this type of introduction is quite unusual in Musto’s songs. The piece begins with a rhythmic motive that contrasts short and sustained pitches. After an identical repetition the motive is augmented and supported by a change in harmony that is accented by an (implied) suspension that resolves to D major (Example 3.6).

![Example 3.6 – Musto, Shadow of the Blues, “Litany,” mm. 1-4](image)

The introduction continues, developing by slowly adding new harmonies while maintaining the motive of short – sustained. This changes in measure seven when the sustained element of the motive is significantly shortened, accentuating the syncopation, and accelerating the harmonic rhythm of the piece. Although chromatic, the music remains unified through its repetition of the motive in a descending melodic sequence (Example 3.7). In measure 11 there is a return to the harmony and rhythm of measure three, transposed to G major. The G major sonority then moves to g minor in measure 12 followed by a resolution to B major in second inversion. The combined rhythm of measures 12-13 also follows the short – sustained motivic pattern, albeit on a significantly augmented scale.
After such a lengthy introduction, culminating in a chord that is sustained a full two beats longer than anything up to this point, the accompaniment returns to the opening motive, this time echoed by the entrance of the voice. Other than two small rhythmic changes (in measures 23 and 25), the accompaniment in measures 14 through 25 is an exact repetition of the introduction. The vocal line also makes use of the short – sustained motive, most notably in measures 15-16 where the melody inverts the pitch contour (from what is in the piano) and in measures 17-18 where the leap of a minor seventh echoes previous occurrences of that interval in measures seven and nine.

Musto draws attention to the unusual text at “arms of your pity,” by eliminating the short – sustained motive and syncopating the melody. As in the piano introduction, the harmonic rhythm speeds up as the singer lists those who are in need of help. Even so, the vocal line returns to using short – sustained rhythmic pairings in this section (Example 3.8).
As if highlighting the text, Musto sets the next line in triplets, transitioning into the G major tonality in measure 24 with a leap of a major seventh (as opposed to the previous minor seventh leaps mentioned above) in the vocal line on the word “weary.” As the text states a repetition of the opening line of the poem, the accompaniment finishes the music of the end of the introduction (Example 3.9). However, rather than ending in B major, as in the introduction, Musto changes the harmony in measure 26, ending instead in f♯ minor with an 8-7, 4-3 suspension. When compared to the expected B major tonality, this chord comes as a shock, adding emphasis along with the triplet (and \textit{poco rit.}) in the vocal line, to accentuate the text.

At this point there is a dramatic change in the poetry; rather than “arms of your pity,” Hughes now writes of “arms of your love.” “Love” is the highest pitch so far in the vocal line and it matches the highest pitch in the piano (ignoring the octave displacement of male voices). By returning to a major key and changing the pitch contour in the accompaniment, Musto sets this line with a sense of hope. This is shattered in the following bar with the sudden change in dynamic and the harmonic shift to minor.
Example 3.9 – Musto, Shadow of the Blues, “Litany,” mm. 23-26

The short – sustained rhythmic motive returns in the vocal line in an almost exaggerated way for the last line of the poem. As the singer arrives on the last syllable, the piano returns to the same material from the beginning and its earlier repetition in measure 14. This continues for six measures and then begins again (the fourth time the pianist has played the material). The ambiguity of the final chord, along with the numerous repetitions of the opening theme, ends the song with a sense of futility.

“Island”

“Island” is one of Hughes’ non-traditional blues poems. Rather than identifying with the blues in its poetic structure, it has the “feeling, spirit, attitude,
and approach” of the blues. Perhaps most striking in this poem is that the speaker feels as though his sorrow, rather than his happiness, will eventually take him to the fair island.

Wave of sorrow
Do not drown me now:

I see the island
Still ahead somehow.

I see the island
And its sands are fair:
Wave of sorrow
Take me there.

Similar to “Litany,” “Island” begins with a long piano introduction. Musto explained that “that particular piano lick started in [my] piano concerto. I liked the undulating quality of it, the asymmetrical quality of it.” Because of its “Fast and fleeting” tempo marking, and the variety of unusual time signatures, the piano accompaniment in the song is quite difficult. An excerpt from the introduction shows how skilled the pianist needs to be to maintain the control needed to play the piece (Example 3.10).

Example 3.10 – Musto, Shadow of the Blues, “Island,” mm. 4-9
For the most part, each time the vocal line begins, the music is in 6/8. Musto gives the singer additional help by preceding the entrances with a re-articulation of the bass note, the same pitch class as the singer’s first note. With its long sustained phrases, the vocal line is in direct contrast to the accompaniment, seeming to float above the frenetic quality of the piano; it is almost as if the piano is going in fast-forward while the singer seems to be moving in slow-motion.

Other than the last note of the vocal line (and two other small exceptions), the entire song is built upon the same melody; in each phrase the melodic rhythm is slightly altered to accommodate the text (Example 3.11). The vocal line thus acts as a wave, cyclic in its melodic regularity above the rippling accompaniment.
Example 3.11 – Musto, *Shadow of the Blues*, “Island,” mm. 16-24

“Could Be”

This poem is another prime example of the song-lyric quality Musto described above. The catalogue of addresses are all famous jazz music locations: Hastings Street in Detroit, Lenox Avenue in Harlem, 18th and Vine in Kansas City, 5th and Mound in Columbus, Ohio, and Rampart in New Orleans.
Could be Hastings Street,
Or Lenox Avenue,
Could be 18th & Vine
And still be true.

Could be 5th & Mound,
Could be Rampart:
When you pawned my watch
You pawned my heart.

Could be you love me,
Could be you don't.
Might be that you'll come back,
Like as not you won't.

Hastings Street is weary,
Also Lenox Avenue.
Any place is dreary
Without my watch and you.

In our interview, Musto described some of the qualities that make a successful lyric
(as opposed to a successful poem):

You're given this little bit of information at a time and you get
deeper and deeper into this character... That's the kind of lyric that
keeps an audience, "now what's going to happen," it keeps them on
the edge of their seat. That's a great lyric. Because you only hear a
lyric once. I avoid poems that are dense and complex. Most poetry
today is written with the idea that it is going to be read; you hardly
ever hear poetry anymore. You could go to readings and things,
but basically, the way people digest poetry is by reading it. And if
you don't understand something you go back to the beginning and
read it again. You can't do that with a song. You get it once. You
go once through and that's it. If you don't get it, you don't get it.
So, I tend to look for poems that are very succinct and
straightforward and that you understand all the time what's being
said. Because you don't get a second chance at it.10

Despite the complexity of the music on the page, "Could Be" is more
closely related to jazz and blues idioms than the other songs in the set. It is the
only song in the set that maintains the same meter throughout (excluding two
consecutive measures in the middle of the song). Musto explains his reasoning for the complexity of the rhythms:

It’s in a kind of written out swing-time. I could have written it straight and just said swing-time. That actually was the tradition in popular music, was that you would write something out straight and just say ‘swing-time.’ [But] does a performer who is used to playing Schubert and Beethoven know how to play swing-time? ²²

Particularly in the piano, the strong beats are obscured by ties from the preceding sixteenth note, adding emphasis to the weak beats. The piece begins with an eight-beat-long motive that centers around the pitch E-flat, with upper and lower neighbor tones, eventually ending on C (Example 3.12).

Smoothly, moderately (♩ = 92)

Example 3.12 – Musto, Shadow of the Blues, “Could Be,” mm. 1-3

This becomes a repeated theme throughout the song and is continually embellished. In the introduction, the theme is repeated four times. After a descending chromatic line in the left-hand (measures three-four),” a true bass line enters in measure six, near the beginning of the third repetition; the tonic – dominant pulses of the bass give the song its bluesy quality when contrasted with the chromatic pitches of the treble (Example 3.13).

* Measure numbers in this song are counted beginning with the first pitches, rather than the first full measure.
Example 3.13 – Musto, *Shadow of the Blues*, “Could Be,” mm. 6-8

When the voice enters in measure nine (Example 3.14), the blues quality is further accentuated by the lowered third and the enharmonically lowered fifth, two pitches that are characteristic of blues music. Musto notes that although he had written the last pitch of each line as sustained, he prefers them to be short. “You know, I wrote the last notes of this first phrase to be held, but I wish I had made them short. That would be more appropriate for a jazz, blues style.”

Example 3.14 – Musto, *Shadow of the Blues*, “Could Be,” mm. 9-11

Notice also in Example 14 that the theme from the beginning of the song is still there, as well as the tonic bass pulses on each downbeat. This music continues through the next phrase and is then altered at the end of measure 13 where the bass note enters a sixteenth note earlier than expected, covering the downbeat of
measure 14 which is then transferred to the vocal line which covers the downbeat of measure 15. This would not be remarkable except for the fact that the voice has accented the downbeats up until this measure. This syncopation in measure 15 accentuates the text of the last line of the first stanza (Example 3.15).

![Example 3.15 – Musto, Shadow of the Blues, “Could Be,” mm. 15-17](image)

The music then returns to the earlier theme, first seen in measure six.

Musto sets the beginning of the second stanza of poetry, exactly like the first; the next line, however, is altered, setting up a climax on the word “pawned.” The ascending whole tone scale in the bass, accenting all four beats in the measure, and the textural change in the right hand of the accompaniment both contribute to alerting the listener that something important is about to occur (Example 3.16).

What is important, as Musto said about successful song lyrics, is the new information given in the last two lines of the stanza.
Example 3.16 – Musto, *Shadow of the Blues*, “Could Be,” mm. 21-23

Other elements that contribute to highlighting this passage include the sustained chord in measure 21 and the complete absence of accompaniment in the following measure, leading to the word “heart.”

The opening theme returns in measure 24, transposed a major third higher. At the entrance of the voice in measure 28, the music changes again, accentuating the new information given in the text. The vocal line is syncopated against the accompaniment which is playing on the beat (Example 3.17).

Example 3.17 – Musto, *Shadow of the Blues*, “Could Be,” mm. 28-30

Musto repeats the next line of text, “Might be that you’ll come back,” and adds a sense of hope in the music with a *crescendo* and the dramatic leaps in the vocal line. As in “Litany;” this sense of hope is destroyed both textually and
musically (Example 3.18). The meter changes into compound triple for just two measures and the harmonic rhythm slows down significantly with the change in texture of the piano. Additionally, each word is sustained for a nearly equal duration (there is also a *poco rit.*) and the dynamic is much softer after the preceding *crescendo to poco forte.*

Example 3.18 – Musto, *Shadow of the Blues,* “Could Be,” mm. 33-35

Returning to the tempo, and the original meter, the opening theme returns exactly as in the beginning of the song. Hughes’ return to the street names allows Musto to return to earlier melodic material, however, the rhythm is altered by the syncopation within each beat. This division of the beat into two, rather than three, continues through the end of the song. He highlights the word “weary” in the first line of the stanza with a short *fermata* and the absence of accompaniment.

“Dreary” is accented by the textural change in the piano and the last line of text is *a cappella.* The last chord ends the song with a bluesy feeling in its inclusion of the lowered third, seventh, and fifth (enharmonically).
1 Eileen Farrell, 1991, I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues, Sony, CD.
7 ibid.
8 ibid.
11 ibid.
CHAPTER 4

RECUERDO

Most of John Musto's song sets feature a variety of poets. His wife, soprano Amy Burton describes his process of choosing texts: "He typically would pore over volumes of poetry, sometimes for months, looking for a poem that 'sang' to him, and often put together poems that didn't necessarily seem to share a theme or obvious characteristic, even to him."1

Re cuer do features three poems that have seemingly diverse subjects and are written by three diverse poets. Despite the changes in subject, they are all linked by the common theme of "memory." In Spanish, recuerdo means "I remember" and each song in this set deals with different types of memory through a first person account. The music follows the diversity of the subject, with each song quite different from the last, however, like a memory that lingers, there are common musical themes that unite the songs as a set.
“Echo”

The set begins with a poem by British poet Christina Rossetti (1830-94). Best known for her poem “Goblin Market,” Rossetti is considered one of Britain’s devotional poets. She was born in London and grew up in a bilingual home, as her father was an Italian living in exile. She was proposed to twice, however, neither ended in marriage due to religious reasons; the first suitor converted to Roman Catholicism, and the second was considered a religious skeptic.

Rossetti was deeply devout, writing commentaries on the bible and strictly observing the liturgical calendar as well as fast days. It is clear that this religious devotion was instilled by her mother, to whom she dedicated all of her books of poetry. She was also very close to her brothers; her brother William was an atheist as well as a literary critic, and her other brother Dante Gabriel, is best known as a poet and painter, and is “legendary for his sensuality.” Harold Bloom writes of the relationship between faith and sensuality: “Christina Rossetti’s intense faith was intricately fused with an erotic temperament… and her lifelong renunciation (so far as we know) of sexual experience testifies to a rather frightening strength of will, or of faith.”

With the references to “Paradise,” “dreams,” and therefore sleep, “death,” and the door that “lets out no more,” the poem references Rossetti’s belief in the doctrine of Soul Sleep. Soul Sleep is the state of rest of the soul between death and the Second Coming.
Come to me in the silence of the night;
   Come in the speaking silence of a dream;
Come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright
   As sunlight on a stream;
   Come back in tears,
O memory, hope and love of finished years.

O dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter-sweet,
   Whose wakening should have been in Paradise,
Where souls brim-full of love abide and meet;
   Where thirsting longing eyes
   Watch the slow door
That opening, letting in, lets out no more.

Yet come to me in dreams, that I may live
   My very life again though cold in death;
Come back to me in dreams, that I may give
   Pulse for pulse, breath for breath:
   Speak low, lean low,
As long ago, my love, how long ago.

In our interview, Musto described his interpretation of the poem:

I was picturing a house, very quiet, real late at night, with clocks
   ticking. It’s an incantation is what that poem is... and [when] it
says ‘Come to me, pulse for pulse, breath’ - it’s almost like that’s the
   visitation. It’s almost like now, he actually conjured this person.
And then it ends, exactly the way it began, so that you’re left with a
   feeling that maybe this happens every night.6

The sound of ticking clocks becomes the first motive (Motive 1) in the

music, with the repetition of the same pitch classes (E-flat and C) in different

octaves gradually becoming more dense and eventually faster, developing through

measure 14 (Example 4.1)
Example 4.1 – Musto, *Recuerdo*, “Echo,” mm. 10-13

After the music reaches a climax in measure 14 on the word “stream,” the rhythm in the accompaniment slows down through the next measure, leaving room for a new motive (Motive 2) in the right hand of the piano in measure 16 (Example 4.2).
Example 4.2 – Musto, *Recuerdo*, “Echo,” mm. 16-17

The first motive returns in measure 17; it is now a semi-tone higher and after two repetitions, is raised another semi-tone in measure 21. Musto draws attention to the last line of the stanza by setting the voice, without accompaniment, in a descending (incomplete octatonic) scale.

A new theme appears in the piano in measure 23 (Motive 3; Example 4.3), anticipating the text “dream;” it is repeated several times and eventually transposed a semi-tone higher in measure 31.

Example 4.3 – Musto, *Recuerdo*, “Echo,” mm. 24-26

In the following section, Musto lengthens the text “love abide” using several pitches on each syllable, something he rarely does (Example 4.4). The piano
interlude that follows returns to Motive 2 (measure 34), albeit transposed and in
diminution.

![Musical notation]

Example 4.4 – Musto, *Recuerdo*, “Echo,” mm. 33-35

Near the end of the interlude, there is reference to the scale originally heard in
measures 19-20 of the vocal line (the last line of the first stanza). This time
however, the scale is definitely in C major, contrasting with the G major scales in
the left hand, and it finishes a semi-tone lower.

The following section, where Musto has set the last half of the second
stanza, gradually increases with frenetic quality, achieved mainly through an
increase in chromaticism. Motive 2 reappears in measure 48 at the climax of this
section, back in the original key but still in diminution. After this climax, a new
section begins, even more fevered; the tremolo in the right hand (a minor third,
reminiscent of Motive 1) and the sharply articulated bass notes continue through
the first three lines of the third stanza of the poem. Motive 2 also reappears
(Example 4.5). Musto described this section as being influenced by Mahler.⁷
Example 4.5 – Musto, Recuerdo, “Echo,” mm. 50-53

In his program notes for Schubert’s “Wehmut,” Graham Johnson says that “Schubert is the master of unleashing a tempestuous middle section… which leaves the reprise subtly yet irrevocably altered by what has been learned in the storm.”

In “Echo,” the end of the storm begins what Musto termed “the visitation.” Returning to the reference of dreams in the text, Motive 3 movingly reappears, and the vocal line, as if transfixed by the appearance of the lost love, is melodically fixed on the same pitch.

The vocal line ends with a descending C major scale, a repetition of what was heard in the piano in measures 37-38 and a variant of the vocal line in measures 19-21. As the voice finishes, Motive 1 (Musto’s ticking clocks) returns a
semi-tone higher than at the beginning; as Johnson says, the reprise is “subtly yet irrevocably altered by what has been learned in the storm.”

Example 4.6 – Musto, Recuerdo, “Echo,” mm. 61-65

“Recuerdo”

“[Millay] was the very presence of the art of poetry itself. If poems could ever take a human form, then this is what they would look like.”

Poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) led an extraordinary life, detailed most thoroughly in Nancy Milford’s biography, Savage Beauty. Winner of both a Pulitzer Prize (1923, the first woman in the U.S. to win the award) and the Frost Medal (1943), she is known not only for her poetry, but for her numerous affairs and her independent spirit. After graduating from Vassar in 1917, she moved to
Greenwich Village where she lived for four years before traveling through Europe for two. In 1923 she married Eugen Boissevain and moved to a 700-acre farm where they lived for the rest of their lives.

We were very tired, we were very merry--
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable--
But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,
We lay on a hilltop underneath the moon;
And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.

We were very tired, we were very merry--
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry,
And you are an apple, and I ate a pear,
From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere;
And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.

We were very tired, we were very merry,
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry,
We hailed "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head,
And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;
And she wept, "God bless you!" for the apples and pears,
And we gave her all our money but our subway fares.

Musto related the following information about Millay during our interview:

Millay was pretty wild. They were knocking around New York in the twenties. She used to play at the Bronstein Players down in the Village. She used to be in plays and things like that. She lived in the narrowest building in the Village, or it might have even been the narrowest building in New York and she actually wrote a poem about "in my narrow little room." . . . ["Recuerdo" is] just a reminiscence -- from whenever. Just looking back when we were young and crazy and rode the ferry back and forth for no reason at all, just didn't want to go to bed, and didn't want to be at the party.11

In his program notes for the song, the composer says, "the poem is a wistful glance back at a more carefree time, when she was a denizen of Greenwich Village. It is set to a leisurely ragtime tune."12 Musto has written in a ragtime style quite often,
both for solo piano and for voice and piano. Of ragtime, he says: “[It] can be elegantly simple, eloquently high-flown, bittersweet, profoundly sad, devilishly funny. But most of all, it allows the piano to sound so well.”\(^{13}\)

Ragtime is most generally identified by its syncopated rhythm; there are several typical rhythmic motives, many of which can be found in “Recuerdo” (Example 4.7).\(^{14}\)


The two melodic and rhythmic motives heard in the introduction, reappear at the beginning of each stanza with the repetition of the text “We were very tired, we were very merry— / We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.” (Example 4.8) Although the music returns to this at the beginning of each stanza (the third time, in a slower tempo), what happens in between is best described as sounding like “something familiar viewed in a slightly crazy mirror, its harmonies distorted to capture the blurred memory of a night of fun and fatigue.”\(^{15}\)

At the end of the second stanza, Musto sets up the climax on the word “gold” by transposing the motive in the vocal line by ascending whole tones and
increasing the chromatacism and harmonic rhythm (Examples 4.9 and 4.10). One should also note the similarity in pitch contour to that of the opening of the song.

Example 4.8 – Musto, *Recuerdo*, “Recuerdo,” mm. 1-6

Example 4.9 – Musto, *Recuerdo*, “Recuerdo,” mm. 44-45
Example 4.10 – Musto, Recuerdo, “Recuerdo,” mm. 49-52

Just as the night wears on in the poem, Musto sets the beginning of the third stanza in a much slower tempo than in the first two stanzas; there are spurts of energy back to the original tempo, and the piece ends fluctuating in this way (Example 4.11). Musto adds, in pop-song fashion, a dreamily hummed repetition of the opening theme in the final measure.
Example 4.11 – Musto, Recuerdo, “Recuerdo,” mm. 73-77

“A Last Song”

The poetry for the last song of the set is an excerpt from the final lines of “After the Persian” by American poet Louise Bogan (1897-1970). Twice divorced, Bogan was plagued by severe depression for which she was hospitalized twice in the early 1930s but was never completely rid of. Nevertheless, she was the poetry reviewer for the New Yorker from 1931-1968. A biography of Bogan, written by Elizabeth Frank, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1986.

“After the Persian” was first published in the New Yorker in 1951. In her book, Frank points out that the last lines of the poem (those used by Musto) are reminiscent of the Hans Bethge poems set by Mahler for Das Lied von der Erde.
Goodbye, goodbye!
There was so much to love, I could not love it all;
I could not love it enough.

Some things I overlooked, and some I could not find. 
Let the crystal clasp them 
When you drink your wine in autumn.

After the complexity of “Recuerdo,” Musto begins “A Last Song” “slowly, simply,” opening with a motive (Motive 1) that will continue throughout the piece (Example 4.12). As seen in Example 4.13, Motive 1 responds to the entrance of the vocal line and this continues through measure 12. In measure five, still a part of the piano introduction, a new theme appears (Motive 2; Example 4.13), the descending line, this time as a sequence of descending sevenths, is reminiscent of the descending lines used throughout “Echo,” discussed above.

Example 4.12 – Musto, Recuerdo, “A Last Song,” mm. 1-4

Example 4.13 – Musto, Recuerdo, “A Last Song,” mm. 5-8
Both of these motives continue throughout the song, joining together at times, as well as in transposition and slight variation. The music takes on a feeling of anxiety in the next section where the bass descends in incomplete octatonic scales; the “moving ahead” tempo eventually climaxes on the word “find,” where Motive 1 appears in a new key and is characterized by minor intervals, rather than major (Example 4.14).

Example 4.14 – Musto, Recuerdo, “A Last Song,” mm. 15-19

Although the piano interlude continues to play the motive in the new key, the music gradually slows down, arriving back at Tempo I at the entrance of the voice on the text “Let the crystal clasp them.” Immediately, the texture becomes much more dense, and increases through the next three measures.
In measure 25, the bass begins a descending line that continues through measure 29 (Example 4.15); starting in eighth notes, it gradually slows down to quarters and then half notes. At measure 27, the music returns to the piano introduction in measure 5, preparing the singer’s *a cappella* “in autumn.”

![Musical notation]

Example 4.15 – Musto, *Recuerdo*, “A Last Song,” mm. 25-28

Musto inverts a variant of Motive 1 at the end of the song; it still sounds familiar, but is somehow lifeless (Example 4.16).
Example 4.16 – Musto, *Recuerdo*, “A Last Song,” mm. 29-31
4 ibid.
5 ibid., 10
7 ibid.
12 John Musto – program note
17 ibid., 361
CONCLUSION

The songs reviewed here are only a small portion of John Musto’s catalogue of works. Nevertheless, they are representative of his style as a composer and provide an excellent introduction to his other songs and compositions.

Musto’s training as a musician, both in improvisation and as a concert pianist, sets him apart from other American song composers. His songs are at once virtuosic and approachable, driven by his love of poetry. With his wife, soprano Amy Burton, as a reference, his vocal works are truly singable, evidenced by their continued appearance in song recitals and professional recordings.

Although he does not compose with a style in mind, his compositions do fit into a set of parameters, or consistencies, based on the idea that style is a representation of training, filtered through process. In reference to his songs, the following elements are viewed as characteristic: 1) the songs are melodic and tonal; 2) he often uses popular idioms, such as “ragtime,” or sets the songs to follow popular performance practice such as “swing-time;” 3) text is usually set syllabically and is musically highlighted through unexpected rhythmic variation such as syncopation and triplets; 4) the music develops from motives that appear at the
beginning of the work and are repeated, transposed and varied throughout the piece.

It is unclear how John Musto's songs will be viewed in the future, especially as the composer has vowed to stop writing songs. Nevertheless, with his continual development as a composer of opera, singers will very likely turn to his songs as miniatures of the composer's style. An analysis of his opera Valpore, and how it compares to his song composition, has not been done.

The composer also needs to be placed in a larger context of American song composition, something that can only be completed after more time has passed. In other words, how do Musto's songs compare with the American songs that make up the current canon? How do they compare with other, modern, American songs? It is my belief that musicians and scholars will find great rewards in answering these questions.
APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF WORKS

_Canoznettas_ (1984) 7 minutes
“Western Winds” (anonymous); “All Night by the Rose” (anonymous); “The Silver Swan” (anonymous)
High Voice and Piano
Medium Voice and Piano

_Enough Rope_ (1985) 6 minutes
“Social Note” (Dorothy Parker); “Resume” (Parker); “The Sea” (Parker)
High Voice and Piano
Medium Voice and Piano

_Shadow of the Blues_ (1986) 8 minutes
“Silhouette” (Langston Hughes); “Litany” (Hughes); “Island” (Hughes); “Could Be” (Hughes)
High Voice and Piano
Medium Voice and Piano
Low Voice and Piano
Premiered 1986 by: Christopher Trakas, baritone; Steven Blier, pianist

_Two by Frost_ (1986) 4 minutes
“Nothing Gold Can Stay” (Robert Frost); “The Rose Family” (Frost)
High Voice and Piano
Medium Voice and Piano

Medium Voice and Piano

_Lament_ (1988) (Edna St. Vincent Millay)
High Voice and Piano
Medium Voice and Piano
**Recuerdo** (1988) 12 minutes
“Echo” (Christina Rossetti); “Recuerdo” (Edna St. Vincent Millay); “A Last Song” (Louise Bogan)
High Voice and Piano
Medium Voice and Piano
Premiered 1988 by: William Sharp, baritone; Steven Blier, pianist

**Quiet Songs** (1990) 25 minutes
“maggie and milly and molly and may” (e.e. cummings); “Intermezzo” (Amy Elizabeth Burton); “Quiet Song” (Eugene O’Neill); “Christmas Carol (To Jesus on His Birthday)” (Millay); “Palm Sunday: Naples” (Arthur Symons); “Lullaby” (Leonie Adams)
High Voice and Piano
Medium Voice and Piano
Commissioned by: The New York Festival of Song
Premiered 1990 by: Amy Burton, soprano; Steven Blier, pianist

**Encounters** (1992) 25 minutes
“Piano” (D.H. Lawrence); “Witness” (cummings); “Encounter” (cummings);
“Passacaglia” (cummings); “Ballad” (John Millington Synge); “Epilogue” (cummings)
Tenor and Orchestra
Commissioned by: Paul Sperry and the Cleveland Chamber Symphony
Premiered 1992 by: Paul Sperry and the Cleveland Chamber Symphony; Paul Sperry and the Albany Symphony

**Old Grey Couple** (1994) 10 minutes
Prologue and Scene (Archibald MacLeish)
Soprano, Baritone and Piano Four-hands
Commissioned by: Song Celebration
Premiered 1994 by: Marsha Hunter, soprano; Brian Kent, baritone; Thomas Linker and John Musto, pianists

**Dove Sta Amore** (1996) 15 minutes
“Maybe” (Carl Sandburg); “Sea Chest” (Sandburg); “The Hangman at Home” (Sandburg); “How Many Little Children” (James Agee); “Dove Sta Amore” (Lawrence Ferlinghetti)
Soprano and Orchestra
Soprano and Piano
Mezzo-soprano and Piano
Commissioned by: Concert Artists Guild
Premiered 1996 by: Dominique Labelle, soprano; The Jacksonville Symphony; Roger Nierenberg, conductor
**Starsong** (1997) 8 minutes
SATB Chorus, Harp, 2 Horns
Commissioned by: The Spoleto Festival Chorus
Premiered 1997 by: The Spoleto Festival Chorus

**5 Concert Rags** (1998) 26 minutes
Piano Solo
Premiered by: John Musto, pianist

**Overture to “Pepe Joan”** (1998) 4 minutes
Full Orchestra
Premiered 1998 by: The New Haven Symphony; Gerold Steichen, conductor

**Divertimento** (1999) 20 minutes
Flute, Clarinet, Viola, Violoncello, Percussion, and Piano
Commissioned by: The Vail Valley Music Festival
Premiered 1999 by: eighth blackbird

**Piano Trio** (1999) 15 minutes
Violin, Violoncello, and Piano
Commissioned by: The Miller Theater at Columbia University
Premiered 1999 by: The Ahn Trio

**Book of Uncommon Prayer** (2000) 50 minutes
SATB and Piano
Commissioned by: Carnegie Hall/Miller Theater at Columbia University
Premiered 2001 by: Amy Burton, soprano; Staci Rishoi, mezzo-soprano; Steven Tharp, tenor; William Sharp, baritone; John Musto, pianist

**Penelope** (2000) 25 minutes
Soprano and Piano
Commissioned by: The 92nd Street Y
Premiered 2000 by: Amy Burton, soprano; John Musto, pianist

**Rags for the Richest** (2000) 15 minutes
Mezzo-soprano, Tenor, and pianist
Commissioned by: The New York Festival of Song
Premiered 2000 by: Stephanie Blythe, mezzo-soprano; William Burden, tenor; Michael Barrett, pianist

**Five Motets** (2001) 10 minutes
Mixed Chorus
Commissioned by: Chanticleer
Premiered 2001 by: Chanticleer
Sextet (2001) 25 minutes  
Clarinet, Piano, and String Quartet  
Commissioned by: The Miller Theater at Columbia University  
Premiered 2001 by: David Krakauer, clarinetist; Alan Feinberg, pianist; The Flux String Quartet

River Songs (2002) 10 minutes  
Medium Voice, Violoncello, and Piano  
Commissioned by: Close Encounters with Music  
Premiered 2002 by: William Sharp, baritone; Yehuda Hanani, cellist; John Musto, pianist

Passacaglia (2003) 15 minutes  
Large Orchestra  
Commissioned by: The Dallas Symphony  
Premiered 2003 by: The Dallas Symphony; Andrew Litton, conductor

Viva Sweet Love (2004) 10 minutes  
Medium Voice and Piano  
Low Voice and Piano  
Commissioned by: The Marilyn Horne Foundation  
Premiered 2004 by: Jason Hardy, bass

Volpone (2004) 2 hours  
A Comic Opera  
Commissioned by: The Wolftrap Foundation  
Premiered 2004 by: The Wolftrap Opera Company; Kim Pensinger Witman, artistic director

Piano Concerto 1 (2005) 30 minutes  
Piano solo and Full Orchestra  
Commissioned by: The Caramoor Music Festival  
Premiered 2006 by: John Musto, pianist; The Orchestra of St. Luke's; Michael Barrett, conductor

Piano Concerto 2 (2005) 25 minutes  
Piano solo and Full Orchestra  
Commissioned by: The Caramoor Music Festival  
Premiered 2006 by: John Musto, pianist; The Gotham Sinfonietta; George Steel, conductor
APPENDIX B

DISCOGRAPHY OF SONGS

Dove Sia Amore

Encounters

“Heartbeats”

“Island;” “Litany”

“Litany”
Bogdan, Tom and Harry Huff. 2007. New American Art Songs: For Your Delight... CRI, Inc.

“The Rose Family”

Recuerdo

“Recuerdo”
“Recuerdo;” “Social Note”

*Shadow of the Blues*


“Triolet”
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MUSTO

March 21, 2007; interview at the composer’s residence, in New York City, between the author and John Musto.

Daniel Hunter-Holly: So what I have done up to this point, in terms of research, is gone through and found a lot of things that you have said and that other people have said in reference to your music.

John Musto: huh

DHH: And I was hoping we could go through some of that as well as a timeline of your life, in terms of a bio

JM: right

DHH: I just had some questions about that as well

JM: okay

DHH: I have that you were born in 1954 and that your father was a jazz guitarist?

JM: That’s right; 53 years ago today as a matter of fact.

DHH: Today is your birthday?

JM: That’s right?

DHH: Oh my gosh! Well, happy birthday!

JM: Me and Bach, and Mussorgsky
DHH: How interesting. Well, thank you again for meeting with me today; I appreciate that.

JM: and Matthew Broderick ... and Cori Ellison. Do you know Cori?

DHH: yes, I have some quotes from her.

JM: I have to call Cori today.

DHH: and Matthew? Are you going to call Matthew Broderick?

JM: No, no, no. Cori and I are actually hours apart.

DHH: Wow. Was your mother a musician as well, or anyone else in your family?

JM: No, just my father.

DHH: Alright

JM: I think his father played the mandolin.

DHH: Here in America?

JM: He was an immigrant.

DHH: One of the things I found about you is that you had a lot of studies in improvisation with your dad, and I was wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on what that means.

JM: I wouldn’t call them studies, no. I studied piano with a piano teacher, a private piano teacher and then went to the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music. When we were kids, my older brother and I both studied. And my father would just pull out his acts and say 'now we’re going to do “Satin Doll,” come on down. Go.’ And he always had musicians coming over and playing and it was just something that happened in the house; we did it naturally, we didn’t study it.

DHH: So it wasn’t like an hour a day you had to do these kinds of things?
JM: No. It was nothing planned, it was just the way the household was and we just grew up doing that. You know, that's what musicians used to do way back when.

DHH: Okay. Just from the things I've been able to find, I have a ten year gap where I know you were composing, but I wasn't sure if there was anything else between 1984 and the early 90s. From the bios that I've read, there wasn't anything that filled in that time and I wasn't sure if I was missing anything or if that was just a time you spent a lot of time composing?

JM: Well, I was playing concerts.

DHH: Mainly solo concerts, or a lot of accompanying?

JM: A lot of things with singers; I had done a lot of solo playing before that, when I was in school, lots of recitals. I didn’t study composition, I was a piano major at Manhattan School of Music. So I had to play a lot of repertoire and a lot of solos, and I don’t know... it didn’t appeal to me. It wasn’t something I really wanted to do.

DHH: The composition? Or...

JM: The playing concerts as a thing to do all the time. And I really did want to compose.

DHH: How did you start accompanying? Was that something else you had done during school or after you met Amy?

JM: I did it at school and through knowing Amy and Steven Blier who used to live around the corner from me... I was just in this community of mostly singers.

DHH: My first introduction to you and your music was when I was a student at UC Santa Barbara, and in 1998 you came and gave a concert with William Sharp.

JM: With Bill! Oh, I remember that! That was fun.

DHH: I was very young at that point and did not know very much about new music in general. Something I want to talk about later is the way you programmed Ives on that concert. I
think you did four or five Ives songs where he uses musical quotations and Mr. Sharp had also then sung the hymn or popular song before that.

JM:  Yeah. That came from a concert we did at Bard. It might have been the summer before. At Bard they focus on one composer every year and they have seminars and have speeches, and books and all kinds of stuff. And this particular recital was with Mary Ann Hart and Bill and me, and it was called, “Ives: Models and Sources.” So, we did, for instance we did his setting of “Ich grolle nicht,” we did Schumann and Ives, things like that. We probably did the one about the merry-go-round. The explanation is much longer than the song was; it’s the one where he is making fun of Tchaikovsky. It’s called, um… [The Side-Show] I don’t remember. It’s a waltz but it goes 3/4 and 2/4 because the donkey that was pulling, the horse that was pulling the merry-go-round had a limp and he had this Tchaikovsky quote in it; it’s a very crazy song. We just took a little piece of that concert and did it in Santa Barbara.

DHH:  My last question from this timeline, I have a list of commissions you have received, but I don’t have a very updated version of that; some of the last things I have are 2002 with the Dallas Symphony and 2004 with Volpone.

JM:  You know what, let me take care of this right now and print something out for you…. Okay, this is almost up to date.

DHH:  Terrific, thank you so much.

JM:  To make it completely up to date, I am writing an opera now, for the University of Maryland and the National Gallery, which goes up in November. And we do, with Mark Campbell that did Volpone, and we’re doing a piece for New York Festival of Song, we’re sharing the bill with Bill Bolcom; Mark is writing both librettos. He’s doing an Italian folktale that I’m going to do.

DHH:  Original?

JM:  Yeah. It’s kind of a concert, theatre type of thing. And then we do another opera for Wolftrap and St. Louis which goes up in 2010, a comedy. And I think that’s up to date.
DHH: terrific! So what I have with this, like I said, is a lot of quotes, and I’ve gone through and written some questions. I won’t read through everything unless you’re trying to remember.

JM: whatever

DHH: Okay. So, I wanted to talk first about some of your influences. I have that you admire the music of Gershwin, Bernstein, Randy Newman, Bolcom, Mozart, Poulenc, and I was curious because you seem to most admire modern composers who have blurred the line between popular music and art music.

JM: Yes

DHH: and I was wondering if that was more of an influence on your own compositions, or if, ... what came first? ... do you admire those composer because that is partly your style or is that partly your style because you admire those composers... does that make sense?

JM: Gee, I don’t know if I would... that thing about blurring lines, you could say the same thing about Mahler. Mozart used popular idioms, Bach did; I think it is more of a going back to something, it’s a long tradition, referencing popular music.

DHH: And I wondered if you had any influence from the more common song composers such as Schubert, Schumann, Wolf? Any of those composers? I didn’t see them in the list and I wondered if that was on purpose.

JM: You know I’ve played all of it and it all sinks in. When you play a lot of music, you see how it is put together and it has to affect you somehow, technically, how to do things. I don’t particularly enjoy, I mean it’s wonderful music, but I don’t go out of my way to listen to German lieder for instance. You know I love to play it, it’s great, but it’s not... I much prefer to listen to Ella sing.

DHH: One of the quotes I found from you is that you consider Chopin to be the greatest bel canto composer, and I wondered what elements of bel canto style you’re referring to in that
JM: When Chopin would teach his music, he would tell his students, go and hear Pasta sing, go and hear Viardot, or whoever were the reigning divas, singers, go and hear them sing. And he was passionate about going to the opera and hearing what was current. And that was bel canto, that was the style. It’s clear, just from the way he writes that that’s what his music is about. I tend to be a little inflammatory with my opera friends, but I really believe this, there’s no… when Amy would come home from one of her opera productions and there’s twelve pages marked off with a paper clip that they’re not doing: ‘we’re going to cut this; it’s just repeating anyway; we’re going to go from here to here and cut this and cut that’ – you can’t do that with a piece of Chopin. It doesn’t work. There is not an extra bar, there is not an extra um-pah. It’s perfect music, absolutely perfect. And he took that style from the opera composers and just completely outshine them in my humble opinion.

DHH: I’m not familiar with many of his songs; do you find this in his songs?

JM: Not in his songs, no, he just did Polish folksongs. No, I mean in his piano music, that was his style.

DHH: So I have some quotes about your feelings about Paul Jacobs’ and Samuel Barber’s playing and how you don’t often hear piano concerts anymore because you find the sound very homogenized.

JM: Well, I think this is just, it goes along with what has been the sentiment about performance since the recording era. There is kind of an international style of playing, and you hear one pianist play something and you hear another one and it’s pretty much going to be the same thing. Whereas if you put on, for instance on that gizmo (78 Victrola), if you play a recording of Paderewski’s minuet. Do you know that piece?

DHH: No

JM: You do. (Sits at piano and plays) You listen to Paderewski play it and then you put on a 78 and listen to Rachmaninoff play it. And it is two completely different pieces. Utterly different. And these two men both knew each other. They
knew each other’s playing, they heard each other play, but there is just this freedom of imagination and style ... Paul was not that kind of player; he was a wonderful player and that wasn’t his kind of music. He just played Elliot Carter and Boulez and he played beautiful Debussy, in public and in his recordings, he recorded Debussy, he recorded Carter

DHH: ...Busoni

JM: Busoni, he was a huge fan of. But in private he would sit down and play Bach. Or he would rip off a Liszt Hungarian Rhapsodie, that was exquisite. But he was very much of this modern, kind of playing, 20th-century kind of playing. Not a lot of rhythmic liberties. And Samuel Barber played on this piano, Paul bought this piano from him. I went to look at it; I was a piano technician when I got out of school, and during, when I was in school. So Paul had asked me to go and look at this instrument for him and so Barber sat down and played, Scriabin, C# minor, is it opus 2? (Sits at piano and plays the beginning of op. 2, no. 1) And it was a sound from another world. It was an eloquence, the whole sound world. The way he had with his fingers, his hands, were on the keys, it was from another time. Have you ever heard him play?

DHH: I think I have a recording of him playing, accompanying the Hermit Songs.

JM: Same thing as Benjamin Britten. Wonderful, wonderful piano player.

DHH: How does this idea relate to your own songs? Do you feel like there are risks within the songs or within the performing world today, for them to become part of that international style?

JM: You know when you write something, you need to let it go. You put as much information – this is on my mind now because we are finally putting together my collected songs in two volumes and I’m going over all of this, what do I want in this, how much do I want to say about this and reconsider every single thing. No matter how much information you put into a score, it will never come out the way you play it, when someone else plays it. You don’t want it to. You want someone else to bring what they have
to the piece, that’s what makes it so different, that’s what makes it interesting. I think that the pieces, and I would say this with anything, piano concertos, or whatever.... So much of what I do has to do with popular styles which are not really written. You look at a piece of Bach – there’s nothing. There’s nothing there. He wasn’t expecting that people 300 years hence were going to be [playing his music] and there were no directions because, it was like popular music now, you’re playing with a group of people and you say this is how it goes. You want to teach someone a tune, you play it and you say this is how it goes and they get it by ear and they play it. There is a certain freedom in non-specificity built into that kind of way of making music. If you say something is... for instance “Could Be.” It’s in a kind of written out swing-time. I could have written it straight and just said swing-time. That actually was the tradition in popular music, was that you would write something out straight and just say ‘swing-time.’ Does a performer who is used to playing Schubert and Beethoven know how to play swing-time?

DHH: Right

JM: And so that, and for instance in Dove Sta Amore, there’s the first piece called “Maybe,” it’s the same thing, it’s a swing-time kind of thing, I notated it in swing-time. Swing-time is basically, triplets but not; you know, it’s sort-of triplets. And there’s a give and take, and sometimes it’s triplets and sometimes it’s straight. You have to know the style, you have to know the feel. And then again, there’s a rag that I wrote called in Stride. It would have been so complicated to notate it that way and it was a rag, it wasn’t an art song where you are referencing the style, it actually is a rag so you just say, ‘swing-time.’ But now that American culture is ubiquitous, I think that someone in France or Germany picking up one of these pieces would know what swing-time is.... I forgot what the question was.

DHH: That’s okay, that’s all really interesting to me. Going back to your training in piano, which seems very traditional in terms of the repertoire that your teachers at MSM had you do, do you think that balanced or distracted you from where your musical interests are as a composer?
JM: Oh, I think that it was all good. You play a piece by Beethoven you study what a Beethoven composition is, you learn how Beethoven puts his pieces together. It bothers me a little when I hear composers today that simply grew up in rock and roll. And they’re writing pieces for... again, there’s such a blur, what do you call it, do you call it concert music? You are writing pieces for a pianist who would play the Waldstein Sonata and Liszt Etudes, and you want them to put this piece on a program, something like that, and your background is in rock and roll and you actually don’t play any instrument, I find that that’s troubling.

DHH: Going back to improvisation, do you have a feeling about how improvisation relates to composition; is every improvisation a composition and vice versa?

JM: No, not at all. Because I’m a pianist I start at the piano. That’s where the ideas start to flow. Eventually you have to have your idea about what you’re going to do and you have to go and work it out. That’s basically the way Chopin worked. He was always at the piano, and he would improvise for hours. Then he would get an idea and then he would write it out and sometimes he would work for months on a four-page waltz or something. Just to get it exactly the way he wanted. He would work it, and work it, and work it, and hone it till it was exactly right. But it comes, the initial impetus for the piece, came from actual music making.

DHH: Paul Sperry wrote an article in Opera News, over ten years ago, where he talks about how your taste in poetry gravitates toward serious poems, especially from socially conscious pop song texts of the 60s. Can you elaborate?

JM: No, I think he was talking about Shadow of the Blues. I did admire a lot of that music but, no, I gravitate toward theatrical texts, texts that a character can sing. And I write music portraying that character on stage. I tend to shy away from poems that are just meditations on the universe, things like that. I like them to be very specific, and say a very specific thing.

DHH: Relating to that, you’ve primarily set American poets. Is that because you primarily read American poetry or...
JM: That is the poetry that appeals to me.

DHH: I haven’t found that you’ve written any songs based on Emily Dickinson…

JM: I don’t like Emily Dickinson.

DHH: Let me read you something from a review of a CD that was all Langston Hughes poetry; “Litany” and “Island” were both on it. “Why is it that some poems seem to cry out for music while others are complete without it? How can music enhance a poem? Conversely, when and how does music perhaps obscure or undermine a poem?” I wondered if you agree with that, especially in terms of the theatricality …

JM: Yes, in terms of, specifically the Langston Hughes poems, I remember reading them and thinking they actually read like song lyrics, not poems, which in fact, Langston Hughes was interested in doing. He collaborated with James B. Johnson, and…

DHH: …Weill

JM: Kurt Weill, and he was interested in that. A poem has to have room in it for music. Which is interesting. I spent a few weeks at Bellagio, as a fellow at Bellagio, an hour outside of Milan.

DHH: Is that when you were doing Pope Joan?

JM: Yes. And there was a guy there, Charlie Williams; he goes under the name C.K. Williams. He won a Pulitzer Prize I think in 2000 for one of his poems. And we wound up getting up, we were the first at the breakfast table early in the morning. We would just shoot the breeze before everyone came down. He came down one morning and said, “I have a lyric for you.” Now, his poetry is dense with information, long long long lines; as a matter of fact, he usually has a very long line and then another one below it that is almost as long, but not quite, and he said that he actually wanted his publisher to lay it out oblong so that they wouldn’t have to wrap the lines around, but it was just too expensive to do that. And just very dense poems. And he brought this thing down, which was just a handful of
syllables in each line. And it wound up being, well the poem’s called, _Flamenco_. And it was about a guitarist that he met in Spain that was a drug addict. And it was a terrific song lyric, terrific song lyric, he knows how to write a song lyric. So when it came time for me to set it out, I said “Charlie you got to talk to my publisher, your publisher has got to do this thing,” and he said “no, it’s not a poem. I’m not going to publish it; it’s a lyric.” And there is a big difference between a poem and a lyric. This is why when I was looking for a librettist, for _Volpone_, I didn’t want a poet because they generally don’t know much about the stage. They do have a certain musical sense. I didn’t want a playwright because it is all about the stage and they write a lot of prose and I just can’t deal with prose. That’s how you end up with this American opera style that’s just endless recit., and just goes on and on and on. I wanted a librettist, someone who knew how to write a lyric. [Mark Campbell] knew about both: he knew about poetry and he knew about the stage… The vast majority of poetry I’ve read should never be set; it doesn’t need it. There has to be room for the music.

**DHH:** Are there any other poets, besides Langston Hughes, that spring to mind that have the same kind of quality?

**JM:** Oh, loads, all the people that I’ve set, a whole list of people. They are all poems that I thought had a theatrical basis. There was a person there that you can musicalize. There was a situation there to musicalize. And there was room in the poem for the music to get in there and do something.

**DHH:** In one thing I read, it said that you were wanting to give up writing songs because of having to deal with publishers.

**JM:** Oh, I’m done. We’re putting out these two volumes and then that’s the end.

**DHH:** Especially now that you are doing these two volumes, who helps you edit your works? Is it something you take to singers or other musicians to help you decide how it works?

**JM:** If I have a vocal question I just ask Amy. But I find that, for instance, especially over the years, playing these pieces over and over and hearing them being done, I noticed that… you know, you get to know a piece. You don’t really
know a piece until you've played it. And once you've played it a few times, and you discover how it behaves, I found that I was putting more things in that were different from what I originally marked, that sometimes were completely the opposite. For instance you say there is going to be a rallentando and then you are going to this next tempo but you realize that the rallentando isn't where you marked it. And actually you do perhaps a little accelerando until there. These little things that you find that you do, and you won't know that until you've played it, maybe a bunch of times. So going through these songs again, after all these years, is an accumulation of a lot of performing experience with them and figuring out how they work the best and how I really do play them.

DHH:

In your interview with Cori Ellison you said that "if you understand the concept of virtuosity on one instrument, you'll understand it on another." I was wondering what you considered to be elements of virtuosic singing and if you feel that those elements are in your songs, or how would you incorporate that idea into the songs you have written.

JM:

I was thinking more of instrumental music when I was talking about that. There are some things in *Dove Sta Amore*, some difficult stuff in that last song, vocalises, florid singing. There are a lot of composers writing now, and actually through the 60s, 70s, who were writing virtuosic pieces for people to play and they can't play them themselves. What I meant by that is, if you know what it is to play a Chopin Etude on the piano, then you understand that world on the violin. You can't do it yourself, but you know that when you're writing a violin concerto, and you say here's a part where I really want it to fly, and you also know, like Brahms did – Brahms regaled Joachim with questions about the violin for his violin concerto because he wanted to do it right. He didn't want to write something that was impractical or awkward. If you are writing for an instrument other than your own you need to talk to, for instance I talked to the clarinetist, when I was doing my clarinet sextet, because the clarinet part is really hard. From my personal experience, I have played people's pieces where you look at it and say this person doesn't play the piano – a pianist would never write this. And there was one composer who was writing etudes for the piano and it was just awkward and kind of stupid. I wouldn't write a piano
etude. When you write an etude you are really stretching the accepted technical level and you are going off in some other direction; if you haven’t played anything on an instrument, it is kind of hard for you to know what that is. Lygeti certainly did it. He claims he was a bad pianist. He had to get around the keys. He wrote some fantastic etudes. If he wrote those etudes with really having no facility at the piano then that’s quite an achievement, out of the ordinary.

DHH: This may be redundant, but I was wondering how your experience as a song composer alters the way you interpret other composers’ songs.

JM: Being a composer alters the way you play anything, just anything. I did a Schubert song... “To be sung on the water”...

DHH: “Auf dem Wasser zu singen”

JM: Yes, with Bill Sharp. I started it and he thought it was so slow. I took this tempo that was (sings first few measures). He said “it’s so slow, I’ve never heard it this slow before.” And I said, “you know, it’s to be sung on the water” – this wasn’t even being a composer; I used to rent a house in the country and it had a row boat. I said, “have you ever rowed?” (Sings first line again while pretending to row a boat.) How can you row that fast? It’s a kind of, very innig feeling in that piece. I think, perhaps being a composer, you don’t accept everything that has been handed down. You figure out why it is the way it is. Of course that piece I just looked at the text; it was weird but he said let’s do it and now he only does it that way. I do think that when you’re a composer you get into the music in a completely different way in terms of performing. And again, you really do have to deal with all the things, the technical matters, that anyone does in order to play a piece of music. I think composers sometimes underestimate that when they get up and perform. They forget how many hours it takes in preparation before you set your foot on stage. Just because you are a composer doesn’t mean you can sit down and play anything.

DHH: A lot of composers weren’t very successful in composing operas. Can you think of any qualities in your composing that have enabled you to find success with Volpone and the
other operas you are writing? Is there something that makes a good opera composer as opposed to someone who is better at smaller works such as songs?

JM: I've never considered myself a song composer and I have really only written a handful of songs. There may be about fifty in all, maybe a few more. There are people, like Darren [Hagen] and – God – Ned [Rorem], Ricky [Ian Gordon], they've written scads of songs. I think the first thing you need to write a good opera is a good libretto. That's the first stop. If the libretto isn't good, it's just not going to work. I guess I don't make a distinction between a song and an aria, for instance. I think they are both the same. It's a story you're trying to tell. And it's a character you are trying to flesh out on stage. It's just the same. I think all of this song writing was simply a good practice to using a bigger canvas in writing opera. You do need to know about the orchestra and there's a certain theatrical, dramatic angle – again the libretto helps a lot, if you have a librettist who is really savvy about the stage then that work is all done for you. I didn't learn about writing opera from opera although there are certain operas I really admire: Marriage of Figaro, Falstaff. I've seen a lot of opera in my day, traveling around with Amy. But I also learned a whole lot about how to write for the stage from subbing and watching Chicago on Broadway. I subbed one of the piano parts about ten years ago. It's a show where the band is up on risers here, the piano is here, conductors here, and the players are there, and here's the audience. So you can see everyone, and feel everything going on and you just watch that piece work, eight shows a week. And it worked like clockwork. It is an amazing piece of theatrical machinery. The pacing, especially for comedy; where the jokes are and how they work; how you move from one place to another. That was an education.

DHH: Almost everyone who writes about your music references the influence of jazz and the blues. Do you feel that gets a justified amount of attention or is it over-emphasized in some ways? Are there other ways you would characterize your musical style?

JM: I don't have any opinion on that to tell you the truth. I just write it, send it out there. That's the world I come from. And that's what I do. I would say that a lot of younger
composers are doing something with rock-and-roll. I just don't find that rock-and-roll is that interesting to use as a jumping off point. Rock-and-roll was the people's music, it was the great democratizer, the idea that anyone, with a guitar and a garage could play rock-and-roll. There are rock-and-roll songs that are literally three chords. And they are great rock-and-roll songs. But outside of a few standouts, like Clapton, Jon Bon Jovi, folks like that who really play, are real virtuosos on their instruments, I find there is a lack of virtuosic instrumental interest, especially now with MTV and video; it's all about the look. You see someone's video and it's wonderful and then you hear them live and it's atrocious because they actually really can't sing, they really can't play that well. Jazz was never like that; jazz was not for everyone. It was something that was very specialized; you needed to be trained, some of them trained themselves, it's something that you worked at, and you went to hear jazz because it was something that not everyone could do. It was a very specialized kind of thing with complicated, theoretical underpinnings. Even today, you hear someone like Fred Hirsch play and there is all this counterpoint going on – it's really like jazz counterpoint. I just never felt like rock-and-roll – and God knows I played enough of it – I always came home with my ears ringing and my hands hurting. The one thing about rock-and-roll that is my biggest complaint is that it is always loud. There's no place for a quiet moment, introspection, rhythmic variation. It is pretty much a blunt instrument to my ears, so I tended to find something a little more subtle.

DHH: I don't have much of a background in jazz or blues. For me they are rather broad terms. Are there certain elements within those descriptions that you find best characterize how they influence you?

JM: I don't know if I could pin anything down like that.

DHH: In terms of your own music and musical quotations do you feel you are quoting ideas. For instance in Volpone, when Volpone pretends to die the orchestra plays the chord used to announce Mimi's death in La Boheme.

JM: Oh, that is just a little joke. We got a laugh on that, too. In Volpone there is also a section that is a take-off on Don Giovanni.
Another quote, in the first song in *Shadow of the Blues*, “Silhouette,” the “Dixieland” quote...

That's not a quote. Quote is when you take something whole and put it in your music. For instance, I have just published some rags for piano. They're not quotes, they're not putting ragtime in quotations — they are rags, that's what they are. When Mosca, in the opera *Volpone* sings a blues about how everyone is so greedy, it's a blues. It's the blues. It's my version of blues. That's what it is.

Going back to “Silhouette”...

There is a quote in there, “Dixie.” (Sings part of the tune). The idea behind that piece, the poem is so dark, and sometimes it's more effective if the music works against the message and that makes the piece work. And so whenever I hear that piece, actually in the new version I stepped up the tempo, the tempo I actually take is much faster than was written. It works better.

I have a technical question. On the Peer Music website there is a quote from Graham Johnson, saying “If there is a finer composer of song with piano alive and working in the world today, I would very much like to know his or her name.” Do you know what the context of that quote is, where it came from?

I don’t remember.

Even with that recommendation, it doesn’t make you want to compose more songs?

No. You know what, we're going to put these two volumes out, they're two identical volumes, one for high voice one for low voice, it's going to be a big book, and I think it's a contribution to the song literature. I can't tell you how difficult it has become to deal with people's estates and people's lawyers. Because these aren't people, like when Samuel Barber was doing it — the people he went to for permission were people who went to concerts, they actually knew what he was doing. These people haven’t been to a concert in their lives.
DHH: I love the quote of yours, asking someone for permission to use the poetry, and after you had composed the song, they said, “well you can’t set it to music.” And you said, “what did they think I was going to do with it?”

JM: That permission is still outstanding. I gave it to my publisher. It was for a piece for Chanticleer. I just said to him, “look, if you want to publish this piece, take care of this, because I am out of this now, I just can’t deal with it.” I was working on the *Book of Uncommon Prayer* and Laura Reiding had a poem that I was going to use for vocal quartet, and I called them and they said, “oh, just write this letter, the standard thing and blah blah blah.” So I wrote the piece. Three weeks later they wrote to me and said “we’re not giving you permission” because somewhere there was a letter from Laura Riding saying she never wanted to hear her pieces set to music. Another guy, I forget which poet, he wanted to know how many seats were in the auditorium, what were the ticket prices of the different sections. I just can’t spend time on this anymore and I’d love to write – you know if Mark [Campbell] wants to write some lyrics for me, I’d love to do those.

DHH: How did you find him?

JM: Through a guy named Joe Falcon, who’s a very good friend of mine, I did a Gershwin record with him, with Rob Fisher. Hellacious pianist. He conducted some on Broadway. He conducted *Victor, Victoria,* and he wrote some shows that are going up now throughout the country, a couple shows that keep getting performed – he’s just an all around fantastic musician. And I said to Joe, “look, this is what I want to do, this is the kind of piece I want to write and I just don’t want to go to the usual suspects as librettists because I don’t like what I’m hearing.” And he said, “why don’t you try this guy, Mark Campbell, I’ve known him for a while.” And we just – he came over and showed me some of his stuff and I saw this lyric called “Nude at the Piano.” And it was a perfect, perfect song. It was a perfect lyric. It was about that long. It was about this guy sitting at the piano, drunk, he’s drinking beer, you don’t know why, what is this guy doing sitting naked at the piano drinking beer, and he tells you about his girlfriend that left, and it just gets stranger and stranger until finally in the last verse it says “here I am nude at the piano, the piano I bought for you.”
So he bought her the piano and... the thing that Charlie Williams wrote for me was the same thing. You’re given this little bit of information at a time and you get deeper and deeper into this character. He was talking about this guitarist. The hook was “he played like a fiend.” It starts “I got this guy” and the guy said that he was Jewish and he changed his name and he had some Spanish name but it actually wasn’t that, he was an American and then it said that sometimes he would have to go for medication and that, in fact, he was a junkie, and the long story short is that you couldn’t believe a word this guy said. But it kept coming back to the hook, “but, he played like a fiend.” That was the one thing that was true was that the guy played phenomenally. That’s the kind of lyric that keeps an audience, “now what’s going to happen,” it keeps them on the edge of their seat. That’s a great lyric. Because you only hear a lyric once. I avoid poems that are dense and complex. Most poetry today is written with the idea that it is going to be read, you hardly ever hear poetry anymore. You could go to readings and things, but basically, the way people digest poetry is by reading it. And if you don’t understand something you go back to the beginning and read it again. You can’t do that with a song. You get it once. You go once through and that’s it. If you don’t get it, you don’t get it. So, I tend to look for poems that are very succinct and straightforward and that you understand all the time what’s being said. Because you don’t get a second chance at it.

DHH: I know you have done a lot of concerts with Amy and others. Do you have any thoughts on how you might program Requiem or Shadow of the Blues in a recital?

JM: No, I don’t know.

DHH: Do you think the songs can be excerpted from these sets?

JM: That’s a very interesting question because most of them do stand on their own, because they are generated by the character that is in the poem. There are very few of them that can’t stand alone. For instance, Penelope, has to be done as a cycle, the cycle that it is. We have excerpted the last song, because the last song can kind of be done on its own. But there is a progression in that – you take a piece out of the middle of that and the audience won’t know what it
means. The problem I have, and this is usually with the press, is that singers, being singers ... in general singers are busy doing operas. That’s how you make money; you don’t make money singing art songs. They have very little time and they generally don’t sing recitals and when they do, I think you’ll find that your average opera singer will go back to their graduation program, even twenty years later. But when they are learning a new piece, it’s funny, a singer will work on an aria for years, and years, and years. Because the aria is a money maker. If they don’t get a song in a few days, they’ll move on to something else. They’ll say, “I’m done with this; I can’t do this now,” and put it aside. So you’ll write a song cycle, or a group of songs you feel belongs together. There are certain songs that are really challenging, you’re sort of bending tonality and it gets – balance is one of the most important things in any work of art. You can have something a little astringent, something maybe welcoming in the beginning and then get a little astringent and then somewhere in the middle you’ll have something very serene or something popular and friendly and then another spiky one. And you put it together. And then a singer will go and with several song cycles then say, “this one’s easy, this one’s easy, this one’s easy, this one’s easy” and put them together. Then, that’s the group that they put together. And then some reviewer listens to it and says, “oh, see. Lightweight. This is all this guy does.” If you actually heard these pieces in the way they were intended to be, it’s a quite different experience. But, I think most of them can actually stand on their own, because the poems stand on their own.

DHH: The last quote I have is from the article about you being the composer-in-residence at Caramoor. Michael Barrett talks about you playing Bach, how everyone needs to hear you play Bach. I wondered if you felt there was a deeper connection between Baroque music and jazz...

JM: Yeah, I mean jazz is, you take a standard and embellish it and that is exactly what it is like to play Bach. There’s the tune and then you start ... The whole story isn’t there in a lot of Baroque music; it’s really like a lead sheet. When you look at the way Bach ornamented, for instance, things in his English suites, it’s not that he put a trill here and a doo-hickey there – he really re-composed the lines and re-thought them. The Goldberg Variations is a compendium of
ornamentation and variation in Bach. Study that. There are all kinds of things you could do – there’s nothing worse than hearing a Bach suite and someone plays, they take all the repeats and it’s all the same. What is the point! The whole point of them playing these things and varying them is because of the enjoyment of it and I think that’s the point where popular music and what was going on years ago, kind of converge.

DHH: Can I ask you a few more questions related to the songs?

JM: Yeah.

DHH: In “Silhouette,” that seems to be one of the only songs of yours where you repeat text, at the end of the song…

JM: Yes, [the poem] ends “be good!” Maybe there’s two “be good!” I’m not sure.

DHH: The version of the poem I found ends with two.

JM: Yeah, and I added one more. I generally don’t do that with poems, but again, this really felt like a song lyric and if you’re doing a pop tune you add a few things at the end.

DHH: I was curious about the title for Shadow of the Blues…

JM: That’s the title of one of his collections of poems; I think maybe, two of those poems came from.

DHH: When you are looking at the poems, how deep into the poet’s biography do you get or do you feel like you have a pretty good understanding of the poetry from the start?

JM: You know, I’m interested in that. For instance, I’ve set some poetry of Archibald MacLeish. One of them was actually quite fascinating. It was called “Old Photograph.” And he’s looking at an old photograph of his wife there on the beach, in Enite. I read about this in Amanda Vaill’s book called “We were all so young” – something like that [Everybody Was So Young; Gerald and Sarah Murphy: A Lost Generation Love Story]. There was this circle of people around Gerald and Sarah Murphy, who were rich, well-heeled people in the twenties and thirties, all the way back through World War One, back to the beginning of the 20th century.
Gerald was a painter and they had this circle of artists who would come, basically mooch off of them. They had this place in Enitepe that they called “something Americana?” - I don’t know – they all lived as expatriates and they had Picasso there and they had Jon dos Pasos and Archibald Macleish and his wife and the Fitzgeralnds and the other guy, who am I thinking of, macho guy, wrote…

DHH: Hemingway?

JM: Yeah. All those people, they were all a part of that. People dropping in and staying. And there were two poems, one was called “Words to be spoken” and basically they were burying his sixteen year old son, Gerald’s son, and the other one was called “Old Photograph” where he is looking at this and he’s thinking back, and he’s saying “Oh the Murphy’s were fine, they took care of her, she was singing Melisande with Croiza who was a very famous mezzo, French mezzo. This was all very factual, this stuff. The Murphy’s had a child die of meningitis when he was sixteen years old. It helps to know this, actually. I think the pieces do have more resonance and make more sense - you don’t need to know that, but I was quite happy to find it out.
When you read that “the Murphy’s were fine, and they sent us this…” you might say, “well, who are the Murphy’s?” That particular piece, “Old Photograph,” that entire piece is made out of snippets of Pelleas et Melisande by Debussy. All the tunes come from that. Basically, yes, I think it’s important to me to know something about the poet, the poet’s life, and what the poet might have been like. I think it’s important too, for instance, in Shadow of the Blues, Langston Hughes was never poor, he made a good living, he was very well known, and when he writes - “Litany” was originally called “Prayer” and then he named it “Litany” and then in this new collected poems that came out a few years ago, it’s back to being “Prayer” again. But I’ve heard that a lot with the singer getting all distraught and suffering through the piece, and it’s not effective that way. Langston Hughes, when he wrote that, he wasn’t writing about himself. There’s a certain reserve and distance. And it’s also not a religious piece; I know a lot of people do it in church but it pointedly says at the end…

DHH: “no love from above”
JM: Yeah.

DHH: Do you have any thoughts on who it is directed to...

JM: It is to whoever is reading the poem, or hearing the poem. So I think those things can actually affect the way you perform, if you know what it's about. The background of it. I went to [Graham Johnson's] class a few months ago at Juilliard. He gave this long speech because I was there. And he said to the kids, "you see, you have a living composer right here and this is what we need to do is walk up and ask him a question. This is what we can't do with Brahms or Schubert and yet we need to know that." And he said that were Brahms or Wolf or someone to walk into the room today, he would know what he'd look like at any stage of his life, he would know what his preferences were for dinner. It's this stuff that he feels he has to know if he is going to sit at the piano; basically he was telling them you can't just get up and sing something. You have to know about the poet and composer because basically what you do when you write a song - I write a song, and it's my interpretation of the poem. It's my reading of that poem and I control the lens. It may not be the same camera angle that the poet was thinking of, but his point was, yes, you do need to know as much as you can about the poet and the composer to really do justice to the piece.

DHH: Do you still consider "Litany" to be your favorite song that you've written or are there other songs you wish were performed more often?

JM: No, I don't have a favorite.

DHH: I had read that somewhere

JM: No.

DHH: In terms of the song "Island," how the meters change so often, why did you choose such complex time signatures?

JM: That piece came out of a piano concerto, which I just premiered last July. That particular piano lick started in the piano concerto. I liked the undulating quality of it, the asymmetrical quality of it. And I made sure that whenever the singer is singing, you're in 6/8. So that you can get your
bearings. (imitates the rhythm in sixteenth notes, 
emphasizing the beats). And then when the piano is alone, 
it can go back into irrational meters. Once you’re singing, 
you’re back in 6/8, just to make it practical.

DHH: The places in “Could Be,” that Langston Hughes lists, are 
all of those in New York? Are they places that you’ve been to 
and have memories of?

JM: I think some of them might be in Chicago. I haven’t 
tracked down all of them. We did that once before; Paul 
Sperry and I tried to figure out what all these places were.

DHH: One of my favorite songs in these two sets is “Echo.” 
Going back to Graham Johnson, he talks about how in 
Schubert, “Schubert is the master of unleashing a 
tempestuous middle section… which leaves the reprise 
subtly yet irrevocably altered by what has been learned in 
the storm.” I wondered if you had any thoughts about that, 
related to that song in terms of the middle section that has 
the tremolo in the piano.

JM: That poem is… it starts out… I was picturing – I get these 
pictures. I was picturing a house, very quiet, real late at 
night, with clocks ticking. It’s an incantation is what that 
poem is. “Come to me in the silence of the night” and, the 
middle section actually is – I was initially thinking of 
Mahler. A kind of fevered kind of sound. So that when it 
calms down again, and it says “Come to me, pulse for pulse, 
breath” – it’s almost like that’s the visitation. It’s almost like 
now, he actually conjured this person. And then it ends, 
exactly the way it began, so that you’re left with a feeling 
that, maybe this happens every night. Yes, that’s a very 
good piece [Graham’s quote]. Where did he write that?

DHH: It’s from one of his program notes for the Schubert 
collection. The next song, “Recuerdo,” do you have any 
feeling about how long ago the memory took place?

JM: Well, the thing about that, Millay was pretty wild. They 
were knocking around New York in the twenties. She used 
to play at the Bronstein Players down in the Village. She 
used to be in plays and things like that. She lived in the 
narrowest building in the Village, or it might have even been 
the narrowest building in New York and she actually wrote
a poem about “in my narrow little room.” It doesn’t matter when it is. It’s just a reminiscence from whenever. Just looking back when we were young and crazy and rode the ferry back and forth for no reason at all, just didn’t want to go to bed, and didn’t want to be at the party.

DHH: I had a lot of small quotes from the article you wrote for Piano Today, about your concert rags.

JM: Oh, yeah.

DHH: Do you feel the same things apply from those concert rags to this song?

JM: Like what?

DHH: For instance: “What attracted me to the ragtime revival was that the music wasn’t set off in quotation marks, or accompanied by post-modern winks or ironic knowing glances. Nor was it a nostalgic trip down memory lane. Rather, it was, if we remember the Greek root of that adjective, nostos, a homecoming.” And that “Ragtime can be elegantly simple, eloquently high-flown, bittersweet, profoundly sad, devilishly funny. But most of all, it allows the piano to sound so well.”

JM: Yeah, all those things. You know, I used ragtime in it’s kind of care-free mode for that song. It’s kind of breezy, which is exactly the opposite I used, for example, there’s a song called “Lament.” And it’s another ragtime tune, and it’s very slow. It’s about a mother telling her kids that their father has died. There’s this kind of song, it’s called the Pathetic Song that was very popular in the late 1800s. Things like “The Baggage Coach Ahead.” It’s quite a beautiful song – we snicker at it now, but these were the days before television, before records and stuff like that. People would go to a music hall and they would hear this song; there’s this guy with his small children on a train, and they were crying, he can’t shut them up, and somebody says to him, “can’t you keep those kids under control – where is their mother?” And then he goes into this story that their mother’s actually in the baggage coach ahead, she’s in her coffin. So this whole genre of a song like that. And people would actually just weep at these songs – they were terribly affected by them. So “Lament” is kind of in that tradition.
It's a beautiful poem. It's all about, she's going to take stuff from her husband's pockets. You can play with this, and you can play with that, trying to make the best of the whole situation.

JM: [The new edition] is something we are working on right now... the music isn't terribly different, you know, it's just little things have been adjusted. Nothing is really - I mean, here and there I think there that I actually rewrote some notes or something like that, but they're the same songs. They're more readable, performance instructions are a little more accurate. And the tempi are more accurate! That's another thing - I look back over the tempi and I think I changed most of it. Across the board, faster.

DHH: That reminds me of some of Graham Johnson's classes on Schubert – so often we take those tempi from songs as standards and he was so willing to change the tempo to a) fit whatever sounded best for the singer, and b) what he felt was a truer tempo for the song.

JM: When you're sitting and listening with me - maybe this is something just, that I'm not good at. When I initially put a marking on a song - first of all, you really realize how much a tempo will fluctuate when you play something. Because you'll put a marking and you'll say "yes, that's good; that's good for that marking." And then you'll find yourself a page later, and you'll find that you're playing a whole lot faster. You have to make a decision about, do I mark this faster. Do I point this out and say "faster" because then you leave yourself open - and Brahms talked about this too - because then you leave yourself open to somebody saying "Oh, this guy wrote faster," and all of the sudden it's... Where it's just the subtlest thing. I find it difficult. And depending on what time of day it is, what you're doing, your metabolism, what it is at that time of day; you're looking at a tempo - you know, I played the Bach Two Keyboard Concerto last summer at Caramoor. And in a rehearsal, I took some tempo, and everyone was... I had too much coffee! I just had too much coffee! And I was going at it and it was just too fast. Tempo is a variable that can vary widely, you know.
JM: [The Ives’ song] that I'm thinking of ... “Side Show.” Yes. So he says in the song, “an old horse unsound, turns the merry-go-round.” (Plays intro on piano) That’s the horse limping. “Making poor Mr. Riley look a bit like a Russian édance” because it puts it in five (plays intro again, this time counting), puts the waltz in five. And the tune that he’s talking about is this, from the sixth symphony (plays quote from the end), he quotes that in the piano. And he’s talking about this song called “Is that Mr. Riley” which goes (plays the song and sings) so that’s the tune he used. It’s a brilliant song. Absolutely brilliant. But it takes so long to actually tell you what he is doing. And the song goes by so fast. Absolutely brilliant, this song.

LIST OF REFERENCES


Musto, John – program note


