The Five Song Collections of John David Earnest
Set to the Poetry of Robert Bode:
A Performer’s Perspective

D.M.A. Document

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by

Dennis M. Bassett,
B.M.E., M.A. in Vocal Pedagogy

The Ohio State University
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Document Committee:

Dr. C. Patrick Woliver, Advisor
Prof. Loretta Robinson
Prof. Kristine Kearney

Approved by:

[Signature]
Advisor, Graduate Program in Music
Abstract

The collaborative ideas of composer John David Earnest and poet Robert Bode have resulted in musical compositions that are an important addition to 21st century American art song repertoire. The collaborative ideas of these two men are manifest in five collections of songs: *Crickets and Commas (Five Haiku)*, *In Tomorrow’s Fields*, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, *The Future in My Hand*, and *War Dreams*. This document provides biographical information on these two artists, as well as detailed information about the five song collections on which they collaborated. It is the author’s intention to give the reader a general outline and working knowledge of each piece, and share with them some of the subtleties and nuances discovered in the preparation and presentation of these works.
Dedicated to my loving wife and my mentor:

My wife, Donna, who has loved me and supported me in all my endeavors. Thank you for always being there for me and your countless hours of advice. My mentor and friend, C. Patrick Woliver, who has shaped me into the teacher and singer that I have become. I am forever grateful for everything you have given me.
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Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, especially to my mother, Monica, and sister, Maureen, for their love and support. For their encouragement for me to take risks and accomplish things I never thought possible. I am truly humbled by their
generosity, love, and support. All of my accomplishments mean more to me because of all these people in my life.

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Vita

2000..........................Bachelor of Music Education - Choral  
Winthrop University  
Rock Hill, SC

2000-2004.......................5th and 6th Grade Choral/ General Music Teacher  
Crowders Creek Middle School  
Clover, SC

2005-2006........................Graduate Teaching Associate in Voice/ Opera  
The Ohio State University  
Columbus, OH

2006.............................Master of Arts in Vocal Pedagogy  
The Ohio State University  
Columbus, OH

2006-2009........................Graduate Teaching Associate in Voice/ Opera

Fields of Study

Major Field: Music

Studies in Vocal Performance, Vocal Pedagogy,  
Vocal Literature and Music Education
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Preface

A Collaboration of Artists

Merriam-Webster defines collaboration as: “working jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor.”¹ The collaborative ideas of composer, John David Earnest, and poet, Robert Bode, are manifest in five song collections: Crickets and Commas, In Tomorrow’s Fields, War Dreams, Four Songs of Sophistication, and The Future in My Hands. The first three collections of songs are considered by Earnest and Bode to be song cycles, whereas the latter two are considered collections.

John David Earnest has been composing music for most of his life, but since becoming a professional composer, he has worked with famous composers such as John Corigliano, Richard Hundley, Lee Hoiby, and Samuel Barber. Through these collaborations, he has honed his compositional style that results in a tonal language rich in texture and emotion.

Robert Bode has been writing poetry only since the early 1990s. Although new to the genre, he has already received two awards for his poetry, and several of his poems have been set to music.

¹"
From their first meeting in 1984, these two gentlemen have maintained a strong friendship, and an even stronger working relationship. Their collaboration has resulted in five song collections for solo voice; several single art songs; and ten choral pieces.

This document provides biographical information on these two artists, as well as detailed information about the five song collections. It contains primary source materials, much of which has been provided through one on one interviews, and also from a man who knows the two men, and perhaps their music, better than anyone else, Lee David Thompson. Thompson, the lifetime partner of Robert Bode, is an accomplished vocal coach and pianist. John David Earnest and Robert Bode agree that these collections could not have come to fruition without the collaborative ideas of Lee David Thompson. Though Thompson is not the main focus of this document, his name will appear from time to time, and it is important for the reader to know the significant role he played in the creation of these song collections and this document.

Chapter One is a brief biography of John David Earnest which includes information about his upbringing, and the influences (both musical and personal) that have helped to mold him into the man and composer that he is today. Like many of us, his family played a large role in his journey, but he also received guidance from teachers, colleagues, and “guardian angels.”

Chapter Two is a brief biography of Robert Bode, musician and poet. Bode is an accomplished conductor and singer and his musical experiences influence his poetic
writing. The impact of music on his writing is significant. Though Bode is a late-bloomer to the canon of poetic writing, his knowledge of poetry is immense. As a small child, Bode remembers listening to literature discussions between his parents. He availed himself of high school and college classes in poetry and writing, and his involvement in music exposed him to some of the best texts in the world. Music and poetry have been interwoven throughout his life, and this concentration on the sounds of words have been fodder for his poetic muse.

The remaining chapters pertain to the five song collections. Each chapter begins with a brief description of the collection or cycle, and proceeds with a performance discussion about each song. Each song description begins with the poetry and then continues with a discussion of how the music enhances the words.

Chapter 1

Who is John David Earnest?

Earnest was born in Lubbock, Texas on August 11, 1940, a little more than a year before the United States entered World War II. A year later, his mother, Aralyne Wright Earnest, and father, Porter Earnest, moved to Odessa, Texas where his father opened an automobile garage and worked as an auto mechanic. He also opened a nightclub. His mother worked at the local hospital as a nurse. Later, they had two more children, a boy, Daniel Porter, born in 1943, and a girl, Ara Lynn, born in 1950. As a child, Earnest was constantly being exposed to various styles of music. He sang in his school choir, was a clarinet player in his elementary school band, and listened to countless albums brought home from his father’s nightclub.

The nightclub or “honky tonk” was called Dance Land and was located next to Porter Earnest’s garage. After school, Earnest would stop by and listen and dance to the music on the jukebox and often memorized the songs. Honky Tonks were very popular in the early and middle 20th century in the south and southwest, and catered to a “blue-collar” clientele. The club was a hang-out for soldiers stationed at Midland Air Force Base, as well as for the “roughnecks”- men who worked in the oil fields.
Seeing that Earnest had a great interest in music, his mother and grandmother took him to the touring concerts that were performed at the local high school. Earnest recalls one memorable concert presented by the piano duo Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale. This led to a desire for piano lessons, and at the age of ten, he began formal piano instruction. He began composing immediately. Earnest created imitative pieces that he calls “carbon copies of Mozart.” He continued piano, composing, and singing throughout high school and graduated in 1958.

In the autumn of 1958, Earnest enrolled at Austin College in Sherman, Texas with a major in pre-medicine. While growing up, he not only spent time visiting his father’s work places, but also spent time visiting his mother’s place of work at the hospital. He had thoughts (though not lasting) of becoming a doctor. After two years, he realized that he spent more time in the music building singing and playing piano than studying medicine, and decided to change majors and schools. In 1960, Earnest enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin as a composition major. He reflects on his years at UT as some of his favorites and calls them “some of his happiest.”

He continued singing in ensembles such as the a’ cappella choir and the Chamber Singers under the direction of Dr. Morris Beachy. Earnest claims that everything he knows about choral music is due to Dr. Beachy, and moreover, Dr. Beachy is one of the most inspirational and influential people of his life. Other teachers at the University of Texas that proved to be influential were Kent Kennan, professor of composition and author of the book, The Technique of Orchestration; Janet Begoy, professor of music theory; and Luther Klein, professor of composition.
The composition faculty placed a strong emphasis on contemporary music, and the University of Texas hosted the Southwest Contemporary Music Festival every spring. Guest composers were invited to conduct master classes and the primary thrust of the festival was to showcase the music of contemporary composers. Notable participants while Earnest was in school at UT included: John Cage, Igor Stravinsky, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Aaron Copland. Earnest graduated with a Bachelors of Music degree in composition in 1964, and enrolled in graduate school the following autumn at UT.

His years as a graduate student helped define Earnest as a composer. In the mid-20th century, the dominant compositional influences were the serial composers of the Second Viennese School, and later, composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen. Most composers affiliated with academic institutions directed composition students to learn the serial method and Earnest was no exception. Like many young composers, one’s tastes can be somewhat fickle and lean toward the style of the composer most admired at the time. One can therefore find it difficult to settle on a means of expression. For a short period of time Earnest fell under the influence of Anton Weber. He collected all of his recordings and scores and analyzed them, but eventually moved on, gravitating toward the styles of Bartok, Britten, and Stravinsky’s “Neo-Classical” period. He wrote two pieces in serial style that were “extraordinarily unsuccessful.” He soon discovered that he was particularly skillful as a melodist and settled on a tonal harmonic language. He credits this ability to his upbringing as a singer. He was at first uncomfortable and somewhat embarrassed around his colleagues and mentors until he realized that not everyone can write tunes
and that this ability was a gift. Ned Rorem, composer and writer, has shared the same feeling when he said, “I compose what I need to hear because nobody else is doing it. Yet I feel guilty about what I do best – setting words to music. Because it comes easily, meaning naturally, I feel I’m cheating.” Earnest settled as a melodist and embraces a tonal harmonic language. He believes that it fits his personal style. Earnest graduated from the University of Texas with a Master of Music in Composition in 1967.

During college, Earnest took an interest in poetry and would read it as time allowed. On some nights, he went to the poetry section of the library, chose books at random and began to read. He gravitated towards American and English poets of the 20th Century and developed a discriminating eye for poetry that “sang” to him and could be set to music.

Upon graduation, Earnest hoped to find a teaching position at the university level, but was unsuccessful. He returned to Odessa for about a month, and he explains that shortly thereafter, “his life was guided and shepherded by angels.” A series of events took place that began with a call from a high school friend (whom Earnest had not spoken to in years) that knew he had graduated and was looking for work. The friend asked if Earnest would be interested in moving to Philadelphia to teach for an “after-school” program that did not require certification. He was charged with integrating the arts (i.e., music, drama) into the program. With the support of his mother and grandmother (his father was not that happy), Earnest packed up and flew to Philadelphia.
Earnest reflects on his time in Philadelphia as a “very lonely and depressing time.”\(^6\) Due to conflicting schedules, he rarely saw his friend, and the move from Odessa to Philadelphia was a large culture shock. He spent a majority of his time figuring out how to get around the city, and was so busy designing and implementing plans for the after-school program, that he spent no time composing. He quickly realized that Philadelphia was not right for him and at that time the second “angelic” event took place.

After a few months in Philadelphia, Earnest received a call from his friend, Ainslee Cox, from the University of Texas who was conducting in New York City. Cox asked if Earnest would be willing to move to New York to work for a friend as an assistant copyist (someone who writes out scores and instrumental parts by hand). Cox, remembering how legible and precise Earnest’s scores were in college, thought he would be perfect for the job. Earnest jumped at the chance and in January of 1968, took a bus from Philadelphia to New York and moved into the Westside YMCA on 63\(^{rd}\) Street.

He began writing for composer/copyist Anthony Strilko, whom Earnest credits as the one who “trained and groomed him in the profession of music notation.”\(^7\) Through this job, Earnest worked on the music of composers such as Leonard Bernstein, William Schuman, Lee Hoiby, and Robert Starer. This experience enabled him to learn not only from Strilko, but from other great composers as well. He worked full-time as a copyist from 1968-1973, which allowed him to move out of the YMCA and rent an apartment on the West Side. In 1973, he reduced his copyist work to part-time and began composing again. Slowly, he began to establish himself
as a freelance composer. He wrote piano pieces, pop songs, and eventually began to work for a small film company composing film scores. When writing film score cues, one composes the cue, and immediately records it, sometimes as soon as two days later. Earnest learned how to put material together quickly and effectively, and honed his ability to orchestrate.

The 1970s for Earnest was a time not only for composing and copying, but a time to network. He developed a working relationship with Lee Hoiby, which later grew into a friendship. This relationship helped him secure work as a copyist for Hoiby’s new opera, *Summer in Smoke*. Through Hoiby, Earnest met Samuel Barber. He spent the summer of 1978 working for Barber in Italy, who, Earnest says, taught him how to shape lyrical lines, expand his harmonic language, and refine his orchestration technique. Also, through Hoiby, he met the composer John Corigliano, which again, began as a working relationship, but later developed into a strong personal friendship. Earnest copied the score and worked on the layout and score preparation for Corigliano’s first film score, *Altered States*, which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1981 for Best Music, Original Score. From the work on that film score, Earnest learned many new orchestral techniques (many of which, Corigliano pioneered), and later prepared the score for another film with Corigliano, *Revolution*.

The 1980s proved to be a very productive decade for Earnest as a composer. In 1983, he wrote his first major orchestral piece “A Permian Symphony” which was premiered by his hometown symphony, the Midlands-Odessa Symphony. He wrote a
piece for the United States Air Force Singing Sergeants arranged for wind ensemble and chorus on the poetry of Mark Van Doren, a Pulitzer Prize winning poet who taught at Columbia University. Also during the 1980s, Earnest was commissioned to compose choral pieces for various Gay Men’s Choruses, which were beginning to immerse in many metropolitan cities.

Earnest first met Bode in 1982, but a more significant meeting occurred in 1984, when Bode was in New York conducting the Men’s Chorus from the University of Cincinnati. Pam Elrod, a mutual friend of both men, and choir director at a private high school in New York City is responsible for bringing the two men together. She, like Earnest and Bode, is a graduate of the University of Texas, and had known Bode from his days spent at the university. Elrod had known Earnest through his relationship with Morris Beachy. Bode, who was working on his DMA at the University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music and was the conductor of the Men’s Chorus, was asked by Elrod to perform a concert with the Men’s Chorus in New York. Elrod extended an invitation to Earnest to come and hear the choir and meet Bode, which he gladly accepted. After that meeting, Bode and Earnest continued to correspond with one another and the two men became close friends. In 1986, Bode accepted a faculty position at Whitman College. A year later, he commissioned Earnest to write a choral work for the Whitman College Chorale. The poem that Earnest chose was a villanelle entitled The Waking by the Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Theodore Roethke. The piece was premiered at Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA in 1988 and later had its New York debut in 1990.
The decade of the 1990s proved to be just as lucrative as the 1980s for Earnest as a professional composer. He also began to venture into the realm of teaching, and taught composition privately in New York City.

In 1999, Earnest was approached by Bode and Lee David Thompson (professor of piano at Whitman College and friend) about the possibility of teaching composition at Whitman College for a year. The university had a professorship, which rotated between departments, called the Johnston Professorship, which brought in non-academics (people from the professional world) to teach and bring their expertise to the classroom. The Department of Music was receiving the professorship, and Thompson and Bode thought it would be very beneficial for the students to have Earnest teach at Whitman for the year, as there was no composition teacher at the college. Earnest agreed and was awarded the Johnston Professorship. He began teaching composition in addition to a course he created, *American Music and the Arts in the 20th Century*, in the fall of 1999. Earnest needed to be back in New York for the spring and was allowed to split his one year appointment into two fall semesters, 1999 and 2000. By the end of his second fall semester, the composition department had grown, and the college asked Earnest if he would consider teaching composition on a part-time basis. Whitman established a schedule that allowed Earnest to teach six weeks a semester (four weeks in the middle of the semester and the last two weeks of each semester), which allowed Earnest to fulfill his responsibilities in New York as well as in Walla Walla. Earnest continues this schedule and has created a thriving composition department at Whitman College. In addition to his teaching
responsibilities, Earnest continues to receive commissions for his works, teaches composition privately, and recently completed a re-orchestration of Corigliano’s opera *The Ghosts of Versailles*.

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1 John David Earnest, interview by author, Walla Walla, WA, October 3, 2008
2 ibid.
3 ibid.
5 John David Earnest, interview by author, Walla Walla, WA, October 3, 2008
6 ibid.
7 ibid.
Chapter 2

Robert Bode: Conductor......and poet?

Robert Bode is not only an accomplished poet, but an accomplished conductor as well. Since music has shaped his life and his poetry, it is important not to overlook his musical influences and write only about Robert Bode the poet. To truly understand him, it is necessary to discuss Bode’s musical upbringing and how it led and influenced his poetic personality.

Robert Bode grew up in Austin, Texas, and knew from an early age that music was going to play a prominent role in his life. From his earliest years, he always wanted to be a conductor. When friends of the family would come over, he would make them watch him conduct recordings of the finest orchestras in the world. In his youth he learned to play the French horn, but his passion was conducting. During his high school years, his music teachers saw so much promise and talent in him that they allowed Bode to conduct some of the ensembles. From these performances, he gained valuable podium experience before he ever entered college.

Bode spent his freshman year in college at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, where he contemplated entering into the Methodist ministry, due to his vast interest in theology. While a freshman at SMU, he sang in the university chorus and
also was allowed to study conducting with graduate level students. It was during this time that he realized that the passion to study music and conduct was too strong and he needed a change of venue. After his freshman year at SMU, he transferred to the University of Texas at Austin, which was much larger than SMU, and would afford him more opportunities in the music world. Though Bode’s early ambitions as a conductor were instrumental, he began to focus more towards choral conducting.

Bode had always been involved in singing. In Bode’s third year at Texas, his mentor, Chuck Smith, left the University of Texas and also his job as the choral director at First United Methodist Church of Austin. He recommended Bode as his replacement, which he accepted and remained there as choral director for four years. This was a very prominent church in Austin and though Bode cherishes his time there, he reflects, “I had no business conducting there,” referring specifically to his young age and inexperience. After Chuck Smith left, Bode began working with Morris Beachy through his remaining years of undergraduate work and his two years of graduate work. He holds Beachy in the highest regards and credits him as being one of his major musical influences. After graduating with his Masters Degree (and through the connection of Morris Beachy), Robert spent a year conducting in Wales at the University of Cardiff with Clifford Bunford. Mr. Bunford was in charge of the opera, choral, and orchestral programs, and recognizing Bode’s talent, placed him in charge of the choral program for the year.

From Wales, Robert applied and was accepted into the doctoral program in conducting at the University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music. During his study there, Bode was director of the Men’s and Women’s Chorus, and in his
second year, also began directing the Jazz Choir. During his third year, a small liberal arts college in Walla Walla, Washington, Whitman College, inquired at CCM if anyone would be interested in a one-year appointment at their school. The previous choral conductor at Whitman had been a CCM alumnus and after a failed search, the committee at Whitman contacted CCM. Bode was recommended, interviewed, and offered the one year appointment, with the understanding that a full search would ensue the following year. If Bode was interested in remaining, he would need to re-apply for the job.

Bode enjoyed his time at Whitman College and applied for the full-time position which he was offered, and began as Assistant Professor of Choral Conducting in 1987. A few years later, Bode began to rekindle his passion for orchestral conducting, and applied for and became the music director/conductor of the Mid-Columbian Symphony, a regional semi-professional orchestra. He held this position for fifteen years. In 1993, he entered a conducting competition and won the Conducting Prize at the Symphonic Workshop International Competition for Conductors in Hradec and Morovice, Czech Republic. As a result of winning the competition, he participated in a three-month residency with the Bohuslav Martinu Philharmonic in Zlin, Czech Republic. In 2006, Bode became the artistic director for the professional choral ensemble, Choral Arts in Seattle and subsequently resigned as music director of the Mid-Columbian Symphony. Bode today remains the artistic director for Choral Arts, and has received critical acclaim for his vision and direction. He continues to serve on the faculty at Whitman College and is now Chair, Department of Music.
Bode’s interest in poetry began in his early childhood. Both of his parents were school teachers and were very interested in language, poetry, and writing. When he was a small boy, he remembers listening to his parents discuss English grammar on a trip. Bode grew to appreciate the sound of text. While in his undergraduate study, he took as many English and poetry classes as he could. He explains that “it wasn’t because he wanted to write, he just wanted to experience the poetry.”

His love for poetry and text proved to be therapeutic for him when in 1993; Bode took a sabbatical from teaching at Whitman College.

Bode took a sabbatical in order to learn the Alexander Technique (a technique used to release tension in the body often used by singers) and learn more about the art of teaching voice. Robert relinquished all of his performing (teaching and conducting) responsibilities, with the exception of the Mid-Columbian Symphony, in order to focus on his studies. This was a very “confounding experience for him” and he became lost without performing. He slowly slipped into depression and sought council from his minister on what he could do to combat his depression. Bode’s minister suggested that he find another creative outlet, and Bode felt that writing could be that outlet. The minister asked him to write down anything and come back the following week with the writing examples. Bode did as the minister requested, and in one sitting, wrote five fully formed poems as if he “had a backlog of poems that needed to come out.”

Bode confesses that he doesn’t know how or where the poetry comes from. He lets the experience of inspiration strike, and when it does, he knows that he is ready to write. He explains that he enters an emotional state or place, and in that place, words
begin to form and spill out from his pen onto paper. He has attempted to be more systematic about the process of writing, and in one summer, he would sit in a quiet place of the house everyday and attempt to write. He discovered that he was not successful writing in that manner because the “poems were not ready.” He feels that the poetry works in his subconscious first, then the spark of inspiration strikes, and he is then ready to write. Subconscious and inspiration aside, writing poetry is a craft, and a craft that Bode has honed over time.

Certain poems require a specific rhyme scheme. A villanelle, for example, is a complex poem that is set in a fixed nineteen-line form employing only two rhymes and repeating two of the lines according to a set pattern. Line 1 is repeated as lines 6, 12, and 18; line 3 as lines 9, 15, and 19. The first and third lines return as a rhymed couplet at the end. Bode constructed a villanelle that Earnest set entitled Villanelle. Writing poems with certain rhyme schemes or humorous poems is much different than the more serious poems Bode writes because they are devoid of any emotional attachment for him. His more serious poems are deeply rooted in emotion, and he believes the poem is successful when he “rereads the poem and revisits the emotion.”

Bode is very complimentary of Earnest’s settings of his poetry stating, “John David always conveys the emotion that I feel when I conceive them.” Earnest reciprocates by explaining that he often hears the music while reading Bode’s poetry and gets a sense of the mood and emotion. However, neither one discusses the poetry in the beginning stages of collaboration. Earnest is not alone in hearing the music while reading Bode’s poetry. Other composers have told Bode that they instantly hear
the music while reading his poetry. Being a singer and conductor, Bode developed an interest in the sounds and rhythms of words, and has an innate ability to fuse sound in his poetry. He often approaches writing poetry with an ear for the sound and an ear for the music. Those that look closely at his poetry will observe a unification in vowels (he has a tendency to use more open vowels) which helps create consistency throughout the poem. Bode insists this construction is unintentional, but intentional or not, it creates good unity from beginning to end. He has been strongly influenced by lyric poets, such as William Butler Yeats, Sharon Olds, Mary Oliver, Theodore Roethke, and Walt Whitman. He says that he is drawn towards lyric poets with “emotional truth, interested in nature and comparing nature to emotional states and human conditions.”

While setting one of Bode’s poems to music, Earnest has often requested one or two more poems from Bode so to create a song cycle. After the request is made, Bode does not think about the task again. Rather, he lets it percolate in the subconscious over time and only writes when he is ready to put pen to paper again. Once he has written the poem, he leaves it for a day and when he returns, he begins to mold and shape it to make it more viable as a song. He says that he writes very differently when he knows a poem will be transformed into a song. Poetry unintended for a song will have a more modern style, with fewer words and harsher realities; but when a poem is designed for a song, it is more inclined to be expressive and have a softness about it. The songs chosen for this study often contain soft, lyrical lines.

Robert Bode’s musical persona informs his poetic writing. From his haiku to
villanelle, or from his comic to serious poetry, Robert Bode has found a voice in the poetic world that sings to those who read it.

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2 ibid.
3 ibid.
4 ibid.
5 ibid.
8 ibid.
9 ibid.
Chapter 3

Crickets and Commas (Five Haiku)

As the title implies, Crickets and Commas is a song cycle setting of five haiku Bode wrote in the summer of 2001 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Most people are familiar with the basic structure of haiku: 17 total syllables, set in a 5 – 7 – 5 syllabic structure. But perhaps there are thematic undertones in haiku that might not be as familiar. For instance, traditional haiku should contain “kigo” which is a word or term that indicates time of year in which the haiku was written or takes place. The “kigo” for Crickets and Commas is summer. Also, traditional haiku contains “kireji,” which is a type of “cutting-word.” The use of “kireji” varies depending on where it is used in the poem. If used at the end of a poem, it helps bring about a definite ending, which brings the reader back around full circle and provides closure. This use is evident in the song Lightening. When used in the middle of the poem, it can create a “paradoxical function of both cutting and joining” which can produce two separate ideas that contrast each other. This use of “kireji” is applicable to Tumbleweed and Crickets.

Earnest explains that his overall goal in writing the music to this song cycle was to create “five little etudes” with one dominant rhythmic theme consistent throughout. He orders the pieces of the cycle in a “fast – slow – fast – slow – fast”
rhythmic structure. Earnest aimed for a “directness and simplicity” throughout the cycle.

I. Comma

This idea of simplicity and one dominant theme can be represented no better than in the first song of the cycle, Comma. When a performer begins to prepare a song, there are several different approaches one can take. A good place to begin is with the text of the song, as it should be the main goal of a performer to communicate the intent of the composer and/or poet to the audience. Although the music (sounds) enhances this goal, it is the text which brings it to fruition. Therefore, in looking at the first song of this cycle, it is important to single out the words:

*When touched by his muse*

*the Poet adds a comma*

*and then takes it out.*

This poem contradicts the traditional haiku link to seasons and nature, and is meant as a sarcastic joke and should be portrayed as such. Earnest aims to tell the joke quickly and the music moves swiftly towards the punch line, “then takes it out.” He feels it is important to juxtapose a slow lyrical line text against a “crunchy, dissonant, edgy sound” of text to help accentuate the meaning. It is also important to point out the dominant rhythmic theme used throughout the piece, which is the consistent eighth notes as seen in Example 3.1:
Another important factor in this piece is Earnest’s placement of rests in the vocal line that break up the text in the appropriate place and brings out the humor in the text and therefore underlines the punch line. In Example 3.2, one can see how he breaks up the line, “the Poet adds a comma and then takes it out.”
II. Tumbleweed

In the next song, *Tumbleweed*, Earnest shows a mastery of “word painting” which is defined in The Harvard Brief Dictionary of Music as “the reflection in musical materials of the ideas resident in or suggested by certain words of a song or other vocal piece.”\(^7\) Word painting is the cornerstone to *Tumbleweed*:

*In dry summer wind*

*a tumbleweed lifted up*

*and danced in the sun.*

Earnest garners a lazy image from this poem. Growing up in west Texas, he had many vivid recollections of tumbleweeds being blown across the land by dry winds. He begins the piece by representing the wind in the rhythmic motive shown in Example 3.3. This motive is repeated two more times. The laziness of the opening

![Example 3.3 - Earnest, Crickets and Commas, “Tumbleweed,” mm. 1](image-url)
Example 3.4 – Earnest, *Crickets and Commas*, “Tumbleweed,” mm. 3-6

line is represented in the vocal line by the use of longer rhythmic valued notes (Example 3.4). An additional example of word painting in this piece is the ascending line on the text, “lifted up,” as seen in Example 3.5.
Another familiar characteristic in the music of Earnest is the use of triplets which helps stretch the rhythm and, as Earnest has said, “allows the piece to breathe.” In this piece Earnest uses the triplets before the “wind” motive (Example 3.6) to convey a sense of momentum leading into the faster motive.

Example 3.6 - Earnest, *Crickets and Commas*, “Tumbleweed,” mm. 16-17

III. Lightening

Like *Tumbleweed*, *Lightening* begins with a descriptive motive, demonstrated in example 3.7. Earnest represents the flashes of lightening in these quick rhythmic
Example 3.7 - Earnest, *Crickets and Commas*, “Lightening,” mm. 1

bursts. He also ends the piece in the same way, and in doing so, represents one of the definitions of “kireji” by bringing the piece around full circle. Earnest is also able to bring the other definition of “kireji” to fruition by creating a parallel between the musical structure and textual structure, thus accentuating the paradox. In the text:

*Even in the dark*

*when the lightening breaks the night*

*the sky is pale blue.*

a paradox is created by the use of four key words: *dark, night, sky, blue.* Earnest draws attention to these words by setting them with longer note values. Earnest also creates two distinct moods in this piece to correspond with the text. The first $7 \frac{1}{2}$ measures have an agitated disjunctive accompaniment, while the final $9 \frac{1}{2}$ measures have a calm and serene accompaniment. These two moods are separated by beats of rest in the vocal line and in the accompaniment (Example 3.8), which boldly
Example 3.8 – Earnest, Crickets and Commas, “Lightening,” mm. 6-9

represent the shift in mood. The descending sixteenth note octave Es and Bs (Example 3.9) at the end of the piece represents the lightening flashes moving away in the distance.

Example 3.9 – Earnest, Crickets and Commas, “Lightening,” mm. 13-15

IV. Crickets

As soon as the sound settles from Lightening, the listener’s ear is filled with a constant chirping, which is represented by eighth notes in the fourth song of the cycle,
Crickets. As one can see in Example 3.10, Earnest switches between meters (never staying in one meter longer than two measures), but always keeps the eighth note consistent, and generally keeps the right hand playing thirds, fourths, and fifths.

He juxtaposes a long lyrical vocal line against the busy, rhythmic accompaniment, and the words merely flow through the line:

*On warm summer nights*

*I listen to crickets sing*

their love songs to God.

Earnest intends the piece to be rather slow and lazy, and therefore, sets the tempo marking at \( \frac{3}{8} \) = c. 96. I suggest a slightly faster tempo, perhaps \( \frac{3}{8} \) = c. 116 so as to give the piece a bit more momentum, but not so fast that one loses the laziness of a “warm summer night.”
V. Preposition

Earnest ends the cycle with a humorous haiku entitled *Preposition*. He knows the audience will anticipate the joke in this poem, and therefore chooses a whimsical, waltz-like accompaniment to enhance the humor. The text of the poem is as follows:

*A preposition*

*is something you must never*

*end a sentence with.*

The vocal line is disjunct (see example 3.11), and Earnest assists the singer by doubling the part in the accompaniment. Earnest credits Richard Hundley for teaching him the art of “covering” (or doubling). He believes that it is permissible to double, but only in parts which make sense, and not the entire line. This is a practice which Earnest employs throughout all his music, and is a tool that makes his music very singable, even with the most disjunct melodies.

Example 3.11 - Earnest, *Crickets and Commas*, “Preposition,” mm. 13-18
3 John David Earnest, interview by author, Walla Walla, WA, October 3, 2008
4 ibid.
5 ibid.
6 ibid.
Chapter 4

In Tomorrow’s Fields

The song cycle In Tomorrow’s Fields is comprised of four songs: Invocation, Passing, Night: Scherzo, and Hymn. Earnest set the poem “Passing” first, and from that experience, decided to create a song cycle. He approached Bode about his idea and asked him to write three more poems to create a four-song song cycle. Similar to Crickets and Commas, Earnest orders the tempi of the songs in the cycle: fast, slow, fast, slow. This order helps to dispel any monotony that may arise, and keeps the listener engaged throughout the cycle. Invocation is indeed an invocation, calling upon the sun; Passing delves into the question of mortality; Night: Scherzo is a poem of the stars; and Hymn reflects upon man’s relationship with God.

I. Invocation

Come forth, O Sun!
Awake and take the sky!
Helios, banish poor night.
Hyperion, exile the moon!

I call you to come out, and break to me your dawning!
Burn me with your music, enflame me with your song!

Who dares to stand in the wind and call your name?
Only one who has heard the voice of the dove rising from the valley floor, gently singing the dawn, softly cooing the morn.
Remember, O Eden, the brightness of the first day!
Invoke with me again, fair Adam, and golden Queen:
Awake, awake, O sun
and take the sky!

Webster defines the word “invocation” as the act or process of petitioning for help or support.¹ Bode’s “Invocation” petitions the sun to cast light upon the darkness and bring forth a new day. Bode makes reference to two Gods of Greek mythology: Helios and Hyperion. Helios was the God of the Sun and Hyperion (Helios’ father) was said to be the original Sun god.² Many poets and writers have referenced Helios and Hyperion: Shakespeare makes reference to Hyperion twice in *Hamlet*³; and John Keats wrote two poems about Hyperion entitled “Hyperion” and “The Fall of Hyperion”⁴; and Homer references Helios in *The Iliad⁵* and *The Odyssey⁶*.

Earnest intends the setting of *Invocation* to be in a neo-Baroque style, and he accomplishes this by the use of dotted rhythms and homophonic textures. He looked to Handel for inspiration as one can see in the opening of “Alexander’s Feast.” (Example 4.1 and 4.2) Earnest creates a triumphant, processional which sets the appropriate mood for an invocation.

![Example 4.1 - Earnest, In Tomorrow’s Fields, “Invocation,” mm. 1-2](image)

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¹ Webster defines the word “invocation” as the act or process of petitioning for help or support.
² Many poets and writers have referenced Helios and Hyperion:
³ Shakespeare makes reference to Hyperion twice in *Hamlet*.
⁴ John Keats wrote two poems about Hyperion entitled “Hyperion” and “The Fall of Hyperion”.
⁵ Homer references Helios in *The Iliad*.
⁶ Homer references Helios in *The Odyssey*.
Throughout the song there are several meter changes, which Earnest uses to accommodate the text. A common tool used by musicians to accurately understand rhythm is to sub-divide the beat. In this piece, it is crucial to sub-divide in order to accurately navigate through the meter changes. It is imperative to sing a legato line and not be coerced by the accompaniment, which is articulated with many staccatos. As in the songs of *Crickets and Commas*, Earnest juxtaposes a lyrical line against and agitated rhythmic accompaniment.

Earnest has an affinity for the sonority of the six-four chord. He uses this harmonic structure to create a dissonant, suspenseful sound for the listener that will only be alleviated by resolution of the chord. This characteristic sound of Earnest’s is featured throughout the body of his work.

The final vocal line of *Invocation* is rather unique and one that Earnest says he struggled with for a long time. As one can see in Example 4.3, the leap of an octave is
Example 4.3 - Earnest, *In Tomorrow’s Fields*, “Invocation,” mm. 61-64

rather unusual in this piece since there has been no leap larger than a fourth thus far. Furthermore, the leap down from upper middle voice to lower middle voice results in a noticeable color change. Although Earnest found it troublesome, in the end he decided to keep the descending octave saying, “It’s where I thought it needed to go.” He aids the singer by allowing time with the passage, by marking “broaden slightly,” and also by eliminating the piano so the voice can be heard in its low register. Similar to the beginning, Earnest ends the piece with a homophonic, triumphant coda which helps to reiterate the title.
II. Passing

Beautiful, rich with age,
Heavy with memory and rain,
The leaves are falling.

I walked under these leaves all summer
Drinking their green coolness,
While high above me, they waved their gentle hands
And caressed the sky.

Now they fall, curling toward me
And past, to settle in quilted layers
Of color and decay
On the changing ground.

I gather them up in handfuls
And smell the brittleness of age:
I fold them to my breast like
Family: old and passing:

Above me the trees remain,
Chastened and stripped, as if fasting.
And, holding their future in their outstretched arms,
They dance in the darkening air.

*Passing* was the first composed piece of this song cycle, and the one that Earnest says is “one of the best songs I have written.”\(^8\) It contains long lyrical melodic vocal lines with a rich accompaniment underneath. Unlike some of his other songs which have lyrical lines juxtaposed against a discordant accompaniment, *Passing* has an accompaniment that is equally lyrical to the vocal line and contains what Earnest calls, “a walking tune.”\(^9\) This “tune” makes its first appearance in mm.12 (Example 4.4). It is set up wonderfully by the *rallentando* in the previous
Example 4.4 - Earnest, *In Tomorrow’s Fields*, “Passing,” mm. 11-14

measure, which creates a sense of anticipation for the tune. *Passing*, like many of Earnest’s songs, is rich with tone painting, and begins with music that invokes a sense of wind moving through the branches of the trees as the leaves fall gently to the ground. This musical language echoes the sentiment of the text, “heavy with memory and rain, the leaves are falling.” The mood is then followed by the “walking tune.” Again, the accompaniment is painting an image of the words “I walked under these leaves all summer” which is enhanced by a change to a faster tempo, and propels the piece forward. This motion continues until a very noticeable lack of movement happens, beginning on the third beat of mm. 40 on the word “old.” (Example 4.5) Earnest slows the harmonic rhythm by employing longer note values. Earnest underscores the poetry which calls for pause and reflection. This pace continues
Example 4.5 - Earnest, *In Tomorrow’s Fields*, “Passing,” mm. 61-63

for the next seven measures, only to return to the familiar “walking tune” and the
*andante* tempo fittingly at the text, “the trees remain.” As is customary in most of
Earnest’s songs, the ending gives us a sense of coming around full circle, returning to
the music associated with the wind before giving us a sense of resolution, thus
bringing us full circle.

III. Night: Scherzo

*The settling hours chase the final fleeting beams*
*And draw the flickering shards of day*
*Into their black and airless beds.*

*The swiftest sparks fly up*
*And cluster along the raven dome*
*To taunt the night and crackle there*
*As Cancer, goat and Scorpio.*

*Into our dreams they fly,*
*Falling in silver showers,*
*To settle in tomorrow’s fields*
*As Prophecy and Desire.*
The Harvard Brief Dictionary defines scherzo as a movement, usually the third one...varying from allegretto to a full presto. Other characteristic traits are a vigorous rhythmic element, strongly marked accents, and often a certain abruptness of thought involving elements of surprise.\textsuperscript{10} Scherzos are typically in a rounded binary form (||:A::B+A::||), in which the B section, varied from the A section, ends with a slight return to the A section. This is exactly the structure Earnest uses for this piece, with a fast and abrupt A section, followed by a calm, complacent B section, and ending with the return to the fast A section. Earnest says that he had the image of Van Gogh’s The Starry Night vividly in his mind as he was composing this piece, specifically all of the swirls and overall movement in the painting. The following two measures from the introduction (Example 4.6) show that Earnest certainly captured

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example46.png}
\caption{Example 4.6 - Earnest, In Tomorrow’s Fields, “Night: Scherzo,” mm. 3-4}
\end{figure}

the spirit and character of the painting, which sets the mood for the vocal line that follows.

Earnest asked Bode to write a poem that had speed and words infused with action. Bode presented him with words such as fleeting, flickering, shards, sparks,
cluster, and crackle. Earnest, inspired by these words, composes music that parallels them. For instance, flickering and crackle, are both set as triplets, and cluster is slightly syncopated (Example 4.7). Along with these descriptive words, Bode also

Example 4.7–Earnest, In Tomorrow's Fields, “Night: Scherzo,” mm. 15, 30, 26-28
makes references to the astrological signs of Cancer, Capricorn, and Scorpio. All of the descriptive words and constellation references put forth in the A section are in stark contrast to the words and mood of the B section.

Earnest bridges the gap between the A section and B section with a five measure interlude that provides a feeling of free falling, as if coming down from the stars and settling down. The B section has a much more relaxed feel signified by longer note values in the vocal line juxtaposed against a syncopated line in the accompaniment. This relaxed and settled feeling is short-lived for the listener, for as soon as the ear becomes accustomed to the new mood, the original wild and turbulent sound returns to end the piece.

IV. Hymn

My heart is an expectant size,
Alert for sounds of love;
Awake to breaths of truth and grace,
Regardless of disguise.

My eyes are trained upon a light
More seen in dreams than day,
On unimagined prophecies,
Yet held in memory.

My soul pretends it is asleep,
Yet walks upon the world,
A hunter of remembered bliss
And promised ecstasies.

I see the shape of God’s right hand
Reflected in my own
And hear the whisper of His love
In silence and in song.
Earnest was raised in the Presbyterian Church and has been surrounded by hymns his entire life. He says that “he has included references to hymns in almost everything he has written,”\textsuperscript{11} and with hymnody being such a large influence in his musical upbringing, it would only make sense that he has a song written in that style. Earnest’s *Hymn* is strophic and homophonic, much like traditional hymns. But, unlike church hymns, his hymn incorporates several meter changes and ends with a postlude. Strophic songs are defined as songs where all the stanzas of the poem are sung to the same music.\textsuperscript{12} Bode aids in the strophic style by utilizing an 8-6-8-6 syllabic structure in each stanza, and Earnest keeps the accompaniment consistent throughout.

One of the most compelling aspects of this piece is the postlude. When asked why he added a postlude, Earnest responded, “I thought the tune needed to be brought back again and closed.”\textsuperscript{13} Earnest composed a sixteen measure postlude that recaps music from the opening vocal melody and from the previous two verses. Earnest’s music invokes a sense of reverence and closure by the use of augmented rhythm

Example 4.8 - Earnest, *In Tomorrow’s Fields*, “Hymn,” mm. 59-62
(Example 4.8) with a ritardando on the final two measures, and resolves to a G major chord which should be allowed to dissipate into silence.

   http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O142-Hyperion.html
3 Shakespeare, William. Hamlet, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997), 1.2.139-140, 3.4.54-58. References are to act, scene, and line. 1676, 1721.
8 ibid.
9 ibid.
13 John David Earnest, interview by author, Walla Walla, WA, October 4, 2008
Chapter 5

Four Songs of Sophistication

Four Songs of Sophistication reflect the light, whimsical sides of Earnest and Bode. These humorous songs contain references to well-known figures in history, to exotic locations, and to delectable dishes and sauces. Two of the poems used in this cycle, Cuisine d’amour and A Poet to His Muse, won first prize in the category of Best Comic Poem for the Washington State Poets Association in 2002 and 2003. Earnest employs a cabaret-style sound, inspired by Arnold Schoenberg’s Brettl Lieder, composed in 1901, containing eight songs in cabaret style. After attending a recital of a friend on which the Brettl Lieder was programmed, Earnest was convinced that the cabaret-style would be suitable for the poem Cuisine d’amour. The Oxford Companion to Music states that the quintessential cabaret song is a strophic ballad in which the text—usually satirical, erotic, or sentimental—is as important as its musical content, and is frequently delivered in a style poised between speech and song.¹ Earnest said that Cuisine d’amour became such a hit to audiences that he decided to set three more of Bode’s poems in the same manner.
I. Inspiration

What did Mister Shakespeare read on Sunday afternoon? Did he read the latest sonnets in the Stratford Daily Picayune?

And what did Mozart whistle as he shopped with Mrs. M? Was it his own tune, I wonder, or Salieri’s latest gem?

It makes me ponder Socrates, before his tragic end: did he quote Homer to his best Platonic friend?

And maybe witty Oscar Wilde, when at a loss for words, delivered bon mots as his own that he had overheard.

Was there art before Picasso? Or design before Chanel? And whose bolero did the trick before Maurice Ravel?

The thinkers who think first thoughts first leave second thoughts behind; They’re busy thinking things unthought by lesser humankind.

To be a genius is a chore as every scholar tells us; It must be hard to think your thoughts and never someone else’s!

Inspiration is a witty song that questions the origin of true inspiration. Did Mozart really create all of those well-known tunes, or did he get them from Salieri? Did Oscar Wilde really think of those clever retorts, or did he overhear someone else saying them? Does inspiration really come from the depths of the minds of geniuses, or is inspiration drawn from mundane, everyday occurrences? These are the questions posed in this song, which is enhanced further by the whimsical accompaniments.

Earnest begins the piece with a strong, yet light-hearted, rhythmic motive (Example 5.1) which is prevalent throughout the piece. The strong downbeats
Example 5.1 - Earnest, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, “Inspiration,” mm. 1-3

followed by the eighth notes provide a fun, “catchy” motive that truly captures the mood of the text. There are two instances in which Earnest pays tribute to the composers Mozart and Ravel. The first instance occurs in measure 11, two measures before the words, “And what did Mozart whistle,” (Example 5.2) when we hear the main theme, 1st movement, to Mozart’s Symphony 40. The second tribute comes later in the piece after the words, “And whose bolero did the trick before Maurice Ravel?” After this phrase, Earnest writes a brief portion of the theme to Ravel’s *Bolero* (Example 5.3). Following the musical quote of Ravel, the tenor of the text and music

Example 5.2 - Earnest, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, “Inspiration,” mm. 11-14

Example 5.3 - Earnest, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, “Inspiration,” mm. 11-14
changes to a more introspective look at these geniuses, and Earnest’s music also shifts so that the rhythmic motive is eliminated and longer note values are written. This allows the singer more liberty to deliver the text \textit{a piacere}. Earnest returns to the rhythmic motive eleven measures later in order to set up the punch line, “and never someone else’s” which is set predominantly “a cappella” to ensure the audience receives the text.

II. The Poet’s Choice (with apologies to Ogden Nash)

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
\textit{On any given day-}
\textit{What would you say?}
\textit{Would Dorothy Parker and Millay}
\textit{Prefer for lunch}
\textit{A Daiquiri?}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
\textit{Or would you guess,}
\textit{If you were pressed,}
\textit{That they’d confess}
\textit{A fondness, say,}
\textit{For Tanqueray?}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
\textit{It matters not to me, my friend,}
\textit{Not a little nor a lottle,}
\textit{The form that holy genius takes,}
\textit{Nor the color of the bottle.}
\end{center}
\end{quote}
This poem has a rather glib and carefree attitude, which makes references to three literary writers. In order to understand the humor of this poem, one must know some background information on the three main characters: Ogden Nash, Dorothy Parker, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Ogden Nash was a writer of light verse, and one of America’s most notable poets of humor. He was best known for his wit and odd rhyming words, which he would concoct to fit the rhyme (e.g., “Farewell, farewell, you old rhinoceros/ I’ll stare at something less prepoceros”).² Bode’s Nash-like rhyme scheme comes in the last stanza of the poem:

\[
\text{It matters not to me, my friend,} \\
\text{Not a little nor a lottle,} \\
\text{The form that holy genius takes,} \\
\text{Nor the color of the bottle.}
\]

Dorothy Parker was an American poet and writer, best known for her wit and sharp-tongue. She was a founding member of the Algonquin Round Table, which was a group of writers, poets, critics, and actors, who met for lunch each day at the Algonquin Hotel in New York. During lunch, they would take part in jokes, wordplays, and witty repartee. An example of Dorothy Parker’s sense of humor can be seen clearly in the final stanza of her poem Love Song:

\[
\text{My love runs by like a day in June,} \\
\text{And he makes no friends of sorrows.} \\
\text{He'll tread his galloping rigadoon} \\
\text{In the pathway of the morrows.} \\
\text{He'll live his days where the sunbeams start,} \\
\text{Nor could storm or wind uproot him.} \\
\text{My own dear love, he is all my heart, --} \\
\text{And I wish somebody'd shoot him.³}
\]
Edna St. Vincent Millay was a poet and playwright who was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923 for her collection *The Harp-Weaver, and Other Poems*. Millay was not only known for her writing, but for her eccentric lifestyle and many love affairs.

Earnest explains that in *The Poet’s Choice* the music is rather “flippant.” He captures this quality by integrating grace notes that interrupt the carefree melody (Example 5.4) beginning in the third measure. The melody in the accompaniment is then distributed to the vocal line. The line should not appear rushed to the listener, however, it does need momentum so as not to drag. Focus is then drawn to the question being asked, “Would Dorothy Parker and Millay prefer for lunch,” by syncopation in measure fourteen, a slight ritardando in measure sixteen, and several beats of rest leading up to the end of the question, “a daiquiri?” Earnest then moves the text of the next stanza by setting the rhyming syllables on the second strong beat of each measure as Example 5.5 shows. Furthermore, he keeps the compound duple
Example 5.5 - Earnest, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, “The Poet’s Choice,” mm. 14-25
meter constant, which gives the text motion and a swing sensation. The final stanza has a return to the original melody of the first stanza, again bringing focus to the final text, “nor the color of the bottle,” by the slight use of syncopation and a ritardando (Example 5.6).

Example 5.6 - Earnest, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, “The Poet’s Choice,” mm. 30-32, 37-39

III. A Poet to His Muse

*I pray to places in my dreams to magnify my art:*
*Emblazon me with Tuscany and Amsterdam my heart!*

*My arteries lack Burgundy, my limbs could use more Spain;*
*I don’t have good absorption of Tunisia in my brain.*
My eyes pine for the mighty Rhein and for the golden Seine;
my soul craves days spent in Marseille and nights, Parisienne.

I’d like to Cannes my office and St. Tropez my home;
I’d spread Nepal from wall to wall, the air I’d fill with Rome!

If I could see more Venice, or hear Kiev, perchance,
My barcarolle would be more droll, my villanelle would dance!

I call to you, my Muses: I beg you, come tonight!
Transport me to the South of France, inspire me with your light!

I know these places in my dreams, each rock and every bench;
And oh! The poems I could write if only I spoke French!

A Poet to His Muse is a fun poem about visiting the many places of the world. Bode cleverly transforms some of these proper nouns into verbs, such as “Cannes my office” and “St. Tropez my home.” Earnest employs an “active, busy, sprightly accompaniment” to match the adventure of the song. In keeping with the cabaret feel, the first stanza of poetry is musically expressed in a free rather speech-like manner. He then sets the next five stanzas to a fast accompaniment, changing the tempo from $\frac{\text{m}}{\text{m}} = 76$ to $\frac{\text{m}}{\text{m}} = 120$. The first line of the final stanza returns to the speech-like style used in the beginning, however, the second line is set to the faster tempo and increases in volume and tempo to the end. As in Inspiration, Earnest inserts a musical quote from another composer. This time it is from Respighi’s symphonic poem “Pines of Rome.” Following the text, “the air I’d fill with Rome” he incorporates the main theme of Respighi’s symphonic poem (Example 5.7).
IV. Cuisine d’amour

I have dined in all the finest spots,
New York to Monte Carlo.
I have breakfasted al fresco
In cafes beside the Arno.

And though I treasure each soufflé
And the chefs who did prepare them,
It’s the sauces I remember most
And the men with whom I’ve shared them.

I’ve had Béchamels with barons
And bernaises with marquis’.
I’ve had remoulades and curries
That would drop you to your knees.

I’ve had truffle sauce at Buckingham
And caper at Versailles.
I’ve had tartar at the Vatican
And hoisin in Shanghai.

I’ve had hollandaise in Amsterdam
On Benedictine œufs;
I’ve had Worcestershire and Paprika
On shepherds pies and wurst!
But of all the sauces that I’ve shared
With lovers strong and true'
There is none, my dear,
That can compare, my dear,
To the roux I had with you!

As in the opening of the previous song, he begins *Cuisine d’amour* with a type of speech-like singing. In the beginning of the piece he notates that it should be sung “freely, in cabaret style,” and writes a sparse accompaniment to allow the singer the freedom he/she needs to accomplish this style. In contrast to the previous piece in which the perspective is an exciting fantasy about visiting exotic places, *Cuisine d’amour* is reflective as the singer looks back at all the wonderful places and wonderful people with whom great sauces were shared.

In contrast to the preceding song, Earnest does not quote composers, but rather, uses sonorities to invoke locations. For example, after “truffle sauce at Buckingham” he writes rather stately chords (Example 5.8) to acknowledge the

Example 5.8 - Earnest, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, “Cuisine d’amour,” mm. 32-33
royalty at Buckingham Palace. He captures the solemn tone of the Vatican by offering hymn-like chords (Example 5.9), which he notates as half notes to give it a more reverent mood. He also writes a rather predictable and, in the composer’s words, 

Example 5.9 - Earnest, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, “Cuisine d’amour,” mm. 39-40

“cheesy” accompaniment when the pentatonic scale rings out during “hoisan in Shanghai.” (Example 5.10) The slower tempo and speech-like feel of the beginning 

Example 5.10 - Earnest, *Four Songs of Sophistication*, “Cuisine d’amour,” mm. 41-42
returns when the singer begins to reflect on the one true love, and again, Earnest writes a rather fluid accompaniment which allows the singer to take liberties and emphasize those words he/she feels are most important. This all culminates with the “big finish” in which the singer, given high, half notes, sets up the final word, which is held out over an extended period of time. Earnest then chooses to return to the quick accompaniment which provides the momentum to the final chord.


5 ibid.

The song collection, *The Future in My Hand*, is comprised of three songs: *At Dusk*, a lyrical, romantic poem; *Autumn*, a rather brash, angry poem; and *Villanelle*, which is an actual villanelle, and narrates a fun story. The three poems are dissimilar to one another, and the musical settings of music are equally contrasting. The emotional content of this song cycle is wide ranging and challenges the singer to convey these emotions not only in expressive line, but in actual phonation. For example, there should be a color difference in the voice between *At Dusk* and *Autumn* in order to help portray the dramatic contrast between the flowing, romantic line of the first song, and the ominous, dark sound of the second song. *Villanelle* requires the use of two very distinct voices: one voice that represents the narrator, and a second voice that portrays the voice of the Gypsy. Earnest is very explicit in his musical notation which provides insight for the performers.

I. At Dusk

*The white bridge glows warm in the deepening shade;*
*The handrail splits the yellow moon into luminous sisters:*
*The Countess and Susannah singing again their song of love and revenge.*
Timid stars float lightly on the pond;
They cling to the water's edge, then fall away into the twilight,
Trailing silver threads on the black surface.

The evening air thickens and the water slows its rhythmic washing.
An owl asks its lonely question.
The day breathes once more, and is gone.

Darkness fills the valley with her old, slow song.
She bends low, and pulling the night around her once more,
Sings the broken world to sleep.

At Dusk is written in a style that is very reminiscent to the Imagist school of
poetry. Imagist poets, such as Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, and James
Joyce, believed that the poetry should be an “expression of ideas and emotions
through clear precise images.” The “precise images” in Bode’s poem are inspired by
the landscape of a previous home. The grounds surrounding this home were rather
lavish, with five small bridges, a stream that encompassed the entire property, a pond,
and wonderful trees throughout. These images helped create poetic lines such as, “the
white bridge glows warm in the deepening shade,” “the handrail splits the yellow
moon into luminous sisters,” and “timid stars float lightly on the pond.” With the
many references to nature within this poem, Earnest felt it necessary to compose a
pastoral setting.

The Harvard Brief Dictionary of Music defines pastorale as “instrumental or
vocal music suggestive of a pastoral scene. Typical features are 6/8 or 12/8 meter in
moderate tempo, [and] a tender and flowing melody in the rhythm of a lullaby.” Earnest
chose the compound meter to best depict the flowing motion of water and
helps set the overall mood of the poem. This fluid motion of eighth notes is steady
throughout the piece with only minor disturbances. The most notable interruption happens between measures 36-50 (Example 6.1), when the text reads:

The evening air thickens and the water slows its rhythmic washing.
An owl asks its lonely question.
The day breathes once more, and is gone.

Earnest slows the momentum of the music to correlate with the meaning of the text and does not return until the words, “and is gone.” This is yet another example of how careful Earnest is in reading the text and representing the meaning. Another example is seen toward the end of the piece, in the piano accompaniment, in measure 72 (Example 6.2, pg. 60), when he deliberately writes a G natural to create a dissonance that signifies the “broken world.”
II. Autumn

We are the harvesters;
We attend the reaping and aid the agony
Like midwives to the world’s rebirth.

We bless what we know:
that to be fully free means to be fully torn
from the comfortable breast,
and to be thrust beyond the world of imagining,
into the land of fear.

So why do we forget and cry out
as if surprised or betrayed,
when our own hearts,
too small or too full,
answering the call of our very own Nature,
tear at the edges and break toward the Sun,
with little agonies and quiet tears?

Bode displays a rather angry and pessimistic tone in this poem, which is in stark contrast to the previous poem. Earnest states that the words “harvester” and “reaping” brought images of Death swinging his scythe back and forth, striking down
people like wheat in the field. He created a sound that would represent this swinging, something that was “relentless” and “inevitable.” He therefore chose an ostinato. Aaron Copland defines an ostinato as “a short phrase—either an accompanimental figure or an actual melody—is repeated over and over again in the bass part, while the upper parts proceed normally.” Earnest believes that using a repeated bass line throughout the piece creates an interesting technical challenge, one he had not tried before. He chose the pattern below (Example 6.3) to be his “scythe” swinging to and fro. Earnest uses this rhythmic motive for the majority of the piece, but chooses to withdraw it in a few situations. He uses the low D on the downbeat of every measure to help reinforce the image of the unavoidable scythe. The piece ends with three rolled chords which gradually get softer that finally resolve in the final measure. Perhaps these chords signify the “cry out” that eventually goes unheard and dissipates into the air.

III. Villanelle

I saw the future in my hand,
And maybe, not surprisingly,
It's not what I had planned.
The gypsy from Uzbekistan
Introduced my palm to me:
I saw the future in my hand.

She clucked and moaned and then began
To sigh, despairingly;
It's not what I had planned.

She croaked, “Looked here.” At her command,
I focused somewhat dizzily;
I saw the future in my hand.

“You see this line, you poor young man?
It should contain some poetry.”
It’s not what I had planned.

“Instead, your love-life will prove bland
Until you die at ninety-three.”
I saw the future in my hand.
It’s not what I had planned!

Villanelle is Earnest’s second experience with setting a villanelle (the first,
being The Waking). He finds this poem fun and decided to set it with an energetic
accompaniment. He notes in the score that the accompaniment should be “lively and
manic,” but there is some discrepancy about the tempo. Earnest has notated that the
\[ \dot{\text{c}} = 120, \] but in performance, the piece feels as though it lacks the liveliness desired,
and therefore should be performed at \[ \dot{\text{c}} = 160. \] This becomes a decision more for the
performer rather than the composer, and Earnest has admitted that setting tempi is one
of the harder aspects of composition. Villanelle contains some uncommon melodic
lines (such as the whole tone scale) but he helps the singer again by doubling the
Example 6.4 - Earnest, *The Future In My Hand*, “Villanelle,” mm. 29-30

vocal line in spots (Example 6.4).

Another important aspect of this piece is the use of a character voice. Earnest calls in the score for “an old gypsy hag’s voice,”

$saying that he knew of no better way to describe the voice he had imagined. This piece becomes rather theatrical since one has to act out the bewildered narrator and quickly change to the gypsy. One of the more difficult (and funnier) passages happens at measures 55 and 56, when having sung as the gypsy for several measures, the singer must switch to the narrator voice for those two measures, and switch immediately back to the gypsy. If portrayed
Example 6.5 – Earnest, *The Future In My Hand*, “Villanelle,” mm. 55-64
correctly, it can be one of the funnier moments of the song. The most amusing moment, however, falls in measures 62-64 (Example 6.5), where Earnest has asked for “shrieking” while singing the line, “Until you die at ninety-three.” The shriek is more of a cackle, but the effect is still the same, and the audience is sure to laugh. The final accompaniment line takes the listener through a series of accelerated harmonies (Example 6.6), until the final chord is struck with an accented sforzando.

Example 6.6 - Earnest, *The Future In My Hand*, “Villanelle,” mm. 82-84

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War Dreams was completed in the fall of 2008 with small alterations leading up to the premiere in January of 2009. These poems were written in response to the current Iraq War. Earnest found them so compelling he decided to set them to music. They span different military conflicts in our nation’s history. The first poem, Battleground, is about World War I; the second poem, Memorial, the attack on Pearl Harbor; and the third poem, Little Big Horn 2007, Custer’s last stand. Typical of Bode’s poetry, these poems are very descriptive and present poignant images of the horrors of war and the memories that have been left behind.

After the songs were completed, the cycle took yet another new shape in the Fall of 2008 when Earnest, along with the collaborative ideas of others, felt that the cycle should be performed as one continuous movement with very little pause between songs. With this idea in mind, Earnest added a Prologue and Epilogue for the piano. Earnest wrote the Prologue to flow seamlessly into the first song, Battleground. The Prologue references the sound of a horn in the distance, which can also be perceived as a battle cry, foreshadowing images that are to come later in the cycle. The Epilogue brings back the distant horn call, and allows us to reflect on the
memories of war. Both the Prologue and Epilogue have become so woven into the fabric of the cycle, that it is difficult to imagine that they were added last to the cycle rather than being the seed from which the cycle grew.

I. Battleground

*Why do these ghostly rows appear?*
*Who are they, silent, buried here?*

*Here lies boys and boys, my dear,*
*Who fell, blameless, into fear.*

*Why must lonely bugles blow?*
*What may ordered crosses show?*

*It is, my dear, that boys may know.*
*It is that grass again may grow.*

*Battleground* is a conversation between two characters, one asking questions about war, and the other (perhaps a higher being) answering with rather ambiguous answers. Earnest likens this conversation to one in the *Bhagavad Gita*, an old sacred scripture of the Hindu faith. There exists a conversation within the *Gita* between Prince Arjuna and Krishna (the supreme God) while on the battlefield as to why Arjuna must fight in a war against his relatives, friends, and teachers. Krishna’s answers are designed to guide Arjuna to salvation by having Arjuna follow three paths: knowledge, actions on earth, and devotion to God.¹ The answers in the *Gita* are vague and open to interpretation, but seem to suggest that even though evil acts occur in life, there is hope for a better life in the aftermath. This is the same intention of the final line in *Battleground* which states: *It is that grass again may grow.*
Earnest feels that it is important to represent these two characters in two distinct keys: F minor and D major. The minor key depicts the sentiment of the character asking the question, and the major key depicts the higher being answering. Earnest modulates the keys without using functional modulation, and instead writes a

Example 7.1 - Earnest, *War Dreams*, “Battleground,” mm. 9-10

Example 7.2 - Earnest, *War Dreams*, “Battleground,” mm. 20-21

measure and a half of chords that transition from one key to another (Examples 7.1 and 7.2). Similar to constructions in previous songs, he writes a strong rhythmic motive that is consistent throughout, with the exception of the modulating bars. He wants to create a march like quality that helps underscore the strophic setting of the
The song ends with strong, accented chords written in a descending motion and helps lay the groundwork for a dramatic contrast in the piece to follow.

II. Memorial

Sing to me, white gull;
Swing above and circle to the sea.

Hover softly where they died:
The beautiful, unfinished ones,
Who slipped from war’s fiery raging
Into the cold, slow silence.

Sing of the vanished boys,
Whose caps floated for a while
Like white blossoms on the gentle tide,
And then scattered,
As if going home.

Circle slowly where they lie;
Now no wreath
Nor lingering sound:
Only the soft wisdom of the stars
And the inextinguishable sea.

In contrast to Battleground, Memorial has a gentle, undulating feel that is more contemplative. The mood is set from the very first notes (Example 7.3), which give a sense of waves swelling and seagulls hovering above. Working in tandem with

Example 7.3 - Earnest, War Dreams, “Memorial,” mm. 1-2
this gentle accompaniment is a lyrical vocal line that never becomes too aggressive, and therefore does not disturb the somberness of the piece. The most captivating point of the song can be found in the last four measures with the text, “and the inextinguishable sea.” Earnest writes in such a way that the word, “inextinguishable” (a very unique word to set) becomes very nondescript (Example 7.4). He does this to help reflect the meaning of the text. By eliminating the syllabic stresses of the words in this line, Earnest is better able to convey the emotion of the text. The accompaniment also gives a sense of “inextinguishable” by rolling open fifth chords and without resolution.

III. Little Big Horn 2007

The field is bare now.

The last stars fade
and the morning spreads over the land.

The birds listen for the dawn and grow still.

Example 7.4 - Earnest, War Dreams, “Memorial,” mm. 33-36
And then, across the field,
a breeze;
now a wind,
bending the grass and
rolling down the hill:

It is around me now,
charging,
turning,
screaming the wild calls,
the war music;
horses, wet with fear,
stumble and tear the ground.

“Turn!”
“To the hill!”
“Stand!”
“Hold!”

And the circles and flashes,
and the shrieking sun,
the bleeding sun,
burning all,
blinding all.

And now the field is calm;
the wind turns over the hill,
and the last star disappears into the morning.

The final song in the cycle, Little Big Horn 2007, is perhaps the most theatrical. Earnest chooses to begin the piece with perfect 4ths and 5ths, so to invoke a “bare” quality, but also to allude to a Native American quality. Earnest desires a sense of “r awness and primitiveness” to correlate with the setting of Little Big Horn at the time of Custer’s last stand. As the scene changes so too does the music. With the text, “and then, across the field, a breeze, now a wind, bending the grass, and rolling down the hill,” Earnest is rather abrupt with his change in music. In the setting
of the words, “surging, charging, turning, falling, screaming,” he explains that he set it in an obvious manner (words being stressed in an unstressed position, thereby creating more attention to the words), but confesses that “obvious can be good sometimes.”

To represent the horses’ galloping, he changes from a compound meter to a simple meter. As the battle becomes more intense, he moves back into a compound meter, and creates an accompaniment that is more chaotic. This too happens to be the highest and most demanding part of the vocal line. With a higher tessitura in the vocal line and a more abrasive accompaniment line, Earnest captures the confused state that one feels during battle. As quickly as a battle arises, it quickly fades, and at, “and now the field is calm,” the music becomes somber and motionless. The singer is allowed the freedom to truly convey the meaning of the text, and therefore, Earnest adds the terms, *rubato* and *a piacere* in measure 52 over the text, “the wind turns over the hill” to allow this freedom. One of the more difficult aspects of this song lies in the last few measures of the vocal line where Earnest has created a six bar phrase, slightly ascending in pitch and incorporating the use of *messa di voce*. This phrase requires firm breath control and needs to span the dynamic range of *mezzo piano* to *forte* to *piano* so not to disturb the mood in the conclusion of the song. The final accompaniment ends rather subdued; however, there are some motives in the right hand that are taken from the beginning of the piece (Example 7.5). The Epilogue is seamlessly added to the end of *Little Big Horn 2007* to conclude this rather poignant and emotional song cycle.
Example 7.5 – Earnest, *War Dreams*, “Little Big Horn 2007,” mm. 1, 64


3 Ibid.
Conclusion

Author Claire Seymour in her book, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: expression and evasion*, writes about a special symbiosis that existed between librettist Ronald Duncan and composer Benjamin Britten during the creation of *The Rape of Lucretia*. Britten writes in the original score of *Rape of Lucretia* that, “the composer and poet should at all stages be working together in the closest contact, from the most preliminary stages right up to the first night.”¹ She writes that Duncan remembered something similar stating, “we had written *Lucretia* working closely together, almost at one desk, each influenced by the other, I willing to add a line or verse to suit the flow of the music, and he equally able and anxious to make the most out of any musical opportunity when the librettist accidentally or deliberately gave him one.”²

The special symbiosis that exists in the creative process between John David Earnest and Robert Bode is not unlike the one described by Seymour. The insight and intimate details that Earnest and Bode have shared about their art have enhanced my preparation of not only this document, but informed my performance of these five song collections. It is my hope that by sharing these details within this document, the reader will receive a greater understanding as to the thought process of two great artistic minds, and how they work together to bring musical ideas to manuscript.
Earnest’s gift as a melodist, his tonal language of rich harmonies infused with heart-felt emotion, and the imagery and lyrical texts of Bode have resulted in some of the finest songs composed in this first decade. Their collaboration will certainly produce further works that will help lay the groundwork for American Art Song in the 21st century.

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2 ibid.
List of References


Appendix A

Complete List of Works by John David Earnest

Choral Music

• A Moment in Time (1989) (10’) (TTBB, Chamber Orchestra)
  text by Mervyn Goldstein
• A Van Doren Triptych (1983) (20’) (SATB, Wind Ensemble)
  text by Mark Van Doren
• Cantus Humanus (1986) (14’) (SATB, Brass)
  text by Richard Eberhart
• Celebration (1985) (6’) (SATB, Treble Choir, Flute, Clarinet, Harp, Piano)
  text by Mervyn Goldstein
• Crickets and Commas (2003) (5’) (SATB, Piano)
  1) Comma; 2) Tumbleweed; 3) Lightning; 4) Crickets; 5) Preposition
  texts by Robert Bode
• Fading Riches (1990) (10’) (SATB, Percussion, Two Horns, Piano)
  text by Mervyn Goldstein
• I Waken to a Calling (1996) (SSAATTBB)
  text by Delmore Schwartz
• In After Time (1982) (12’) (SATB, Piano 4-hands)
• In After Time (1982) (12’) (SATB, Orchestra)
  text by Richard Eberhart
• In Dreams (2003) (4’) (SATB)
  text by Robert Bode
• In Early Light (1982) (3’) (SATB)
  text by Lisa Tracy
• In Solemn Defiance (1992) (7’) (TTBB, Oboe)
• Jubilation (1986) (11’) (SATB, Brass and Percussion)
• Motet (1990, 2001) (SATB)
  1) Portrait; 2) Behold the Man; 3) Creation
  texts by 16th century metaphysical poets
∞ My Papa’s Waltz (2009) (SATB, Piano)  
  text by Theodore Roethke
∞ Night (2003) (4') (SATB)
∞ Only in the Dream (1983) (8') (TTBB, Brass and Percussion)
∞ Only in the Dream (1983) (8') (SATB, Brass and Percussion)  
  text by Richard Eberhart
∞ Postcards from Frank (1997) (5') (TTBB, Piano)  
  1) Hydra, Greece, August 1986; 2) Hydra, Greece, August, 1995;  
  3) Jaipur, India, March 1987  
  texts by Frank LoScalzo
∞ Rhapsody on a Sonnet (1995) (8') (TTBB, Oboe, Horn, Piano)  
  text by Michelangelo (in English)
∞ Second Symphony, "The Hastening Light" (2000) (32') (SATB, Soprano, Orchestra)  
  text by Walt Whitman
∞ Shine On Me (1983) (SSAATTBB)  
  text by Tray Christopher
∞ Sun Songs and Nocturnes (1991) (26') (TTBB, Orchestra)
∞ The All of Everyone (1998) (8') (SATB, Mezzo-soprano, Brass)  
  text by Art Kirn
∞ The First Day (2006) (10') (SATB, Baritone, Clarinet, Harp)  
  text by Robert Bode
∞ The Incomparable Light (1984) (14') (TTBB, Two Pianos, Two Harps)  
  text by Richard Eberhart
∞ The Son Has Risen (1979) (SATB, Brass)  
  text by Tray Christopher
∞ The Waking (1988) (9') (SATB, Piano 4-hands)  
  text by Theodore Roethke
∞ Three Snow Songs (2005) (12') (SATB, Piano 4-hands)  
  1) Fanfare to Winter; 2) In the Silence; 3) Angels in the Snow  
  text by Robert Bode
∞ Variations on Three American Folksongs (2001) (15') (SATB, Piano 4-hands)  
  1) Sweet Betsy; 2) Streets of Laredo; 3) Clementine  
  Traditional texts
∞ Voices (1991) (8') (SATB, Piano 4-hands)  
  text by Mervyn Goldstein
∞ Who Is That Fat Child? (1978) (3') (SATB)  
  text by Tray Christopher
Vocal Music

"And with this vow..." (Songs of Commitment and Union) (1998-2004) (Voice and Piano)
   1) I and Thou; 2) Two Hearts; 3) A Promise Made
texts by Rumi and Robert Bode

Crickets and Commas (2001) (5') (Voice, Piano)
   1) Comma; 2) Tumbleweed; 3) Lightning; 4. Crickets; 5. Preposition
texts by Robert Bode

Four Songs of Sophistication (2003-04) (15') (Voice, Piano)
   1) Inspiration; 2) The Poet's Choice; 3) The Poet to His Muse;
   4) Cuisine d'amour
texts by Robert Bode

In Tomorrow's Fields (2001-02) (XX') (Voice, Piano)
   1) Invocation; 2) Passing; 3) Night: Scherzo; 4) Hymn
texts by Robert Bode

Love Song (2005) (3') (Voice, Piano)
text by Robert Bode

Postcards from Frank (1996) (5') (Voice, Piano)
   1) Hydra, Greece, August 1986; 2) Hydra, Greece, August, 1995;
   3) Jaipur, India, March 1987
texts by Frank Lo Scalzo

Songs of Hadrian (2005) (30') (Tenor, Piano)
   1) Hadrian's Prayer; 2) Hadrian's Love Song; 3) Hadrian's Ecstasy;
   4) Hadrian's Sorrow; 5) Hadrian's Madness
texts by Arch Brown

Tales of Terror and Murder (1988) (15') (Soprano, Trumpet, Cello, Piano)
   1) Karl Freund's "The Mummy"; 2) Murder in the Kitchen
texts by Mervyn Goldstein and Alice B. Toklas

The Blue Estuaries (1986-89) (20') (Soprano, Flute, Clarinet, Violin, Cello, Vibraphone, Harp, Piano)
   1) Come, break with time; 2) Question in a field; 3) To be sung upon the water
   4) The Daemon; 5) Knowledge; 6) Variations on a sentence; 7) Night
texts by Louise Bogan

The Future in My Hand (2004) (10') (Voice, Piano)
   1) Autumn; 2) At Dusk; 3) Villanelle
texts by Robert Bode

   1) when god lets my body; 2) love is more thicker; 3) in Just-spring
texts by E. E. Cummings

March of Enthusiasm (1978) (8') (Voice, Piano)
text by Tray Christopher

We Are Held (2004) (3') (Voice, Piano)
text by Robert Bode
War Dreams (2008) (11’) (Tenor, Piano)
1) Battleground; 2) Memorial; 3) Little Big Horn 2007

text by Robert Bode

Operas

A Desperate Waltz (1992) (50’)
opera in one act (14 scenes); libretto by Mervyn Goldstein
voices: soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone
instrumental ensemble: clarinet, cello, piano

Howard (1979, rev. 1986-87) (30’)
opera in one act (4 scenes); libretto by Tray Christopher
voices: sopranos (2), mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritones (2), bass, narrator (male)
instrumental ensemble: clarinet, cello, piano

Opera of the Worms (1979, 1981, 1983) (15’)
a miniature garden fantasy; libretto by Rene Ricard
voices: soprano, dancers or mimes (2-4)
instrumental ensemble: flute, clarinet, cello, vibraphone, piano

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow (1997) (50’)
opera in one act; libretto by Mervyn Goldstein
voices: soprano, mezzo-soprano, baritone
instrumental ensemble: piano

The Theory of Everything (2007) (120’)
opera in two acts; libretto by Nancy Rhodes

Orchestral Music

A Permian Symphony (1981) (33’) (Orchestra and Two Narrators)
text by Thomas Moore


Chasing the Sun (Scherzo for Orchestra) (1987) (6’) (Orchestra)

Dance Rhapsody (1996) (8’) (String Orchestra)

Piano Concerto No. 1 (1994) (30’) (Piano and Orchestra)


Second Symphony (2000) (32’) (Orchestra, Soprano Solo, Chorus)

Southern Exposure (2002) (9’) (Orchestra)

Symphonic Dances (1993) (12’) (Orchestra)

Wind Ensemble/Concert Band Music

Bristol Fanfare (1986) (2’) (Concert Band)

Fanfares and Dances (1979) (12’) (Concert Band)
Chamber Music

- **Aria and Chorale** (2004) (6’) (Violin, Piano)
- **Romeo and Juliet Transcript** (1986) (17’) (Two Pianos)
  transcription of the overture by Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky
- **Sonata for Piano** (1999) (25’)
- **The Blue Estuaries** (1986, 1990) (22’)
  Seven Songs for Soprano and Seven Instruments
  text by Louise Bogan
- **Trois Morceaux** (1976) (10’) (Clarinet, Violin, Cello)
- **Winter Dances** (1985, 1991) (16’) (Clarinet, Cello, Piano)

Solo Instrumental Music

- **Argyle Rag** (1994) (3’) (Piano)
- **Aria and Chorale** (2001) (6’) (Piano)
- **Lullaby on a Theme of John Corigliano** (1996) (6’) (Piano)
- **Sonata for Piano** (1999) (30’) (Piano)
- **Three Bagatelles** (2004) (Piano)
  1) *Gremlins*; 2) *Clouds*; 3) *March*
Appendix B

Complete List of Works by Robert Bode

A Clearing, Walla Walla, WA., July 2003
A Note to Santa, Bedias, TX., 2002
A Poet to His Muse, Walla Walla, WA., March 24, 2002
* Angeles in the Snow, Bedias, TX., 2002
Antietam, Walla Walla, WA., October 1994
At 47, Portland, OR., July, 2005
At Dusk, Walla Walla, WA., July 2003*
Autumn, Walla Walla, WA., July 2003
Autumn (revised), Walla Walla, WA., July 2003*
Bethlehem, Bedias, TX., 2002
Carol of the Elves, Walla Walla, WA., 2002
Caverns, Walla Walla, WA., 1993
Chime, Portland, OR., July, 2005
Crickets and Commas: Five Haiku, Walla Walla, WA., 2003*
Cuisine d'amour, Walla Walla, WA., 2000 *
Dawn, Valdosta, GA., April 2008
Enough, Santa Fe, NM., July 2002
Gettysburg (Battleground), Walla Walla, WA., July, 2003*
Haiku for the Land, Santa Fe, NM., 2002
How To Find Yourself, Walla Walla, WA., January 1994
Hymn, Walla Walla, WA., November, 2001*
Hymn (Memorial), Santa Fe, NM., March 20, 2002
In Dreams, Santa Fe, NM., Summer 2002
In Dreams (abridged), Walla Walla, WA., 2003*
In the Silence, Walla Walla, WA., 2006*
Invocation, Santa Fe, NM., Summer 2002
Invocation, Walla Walla, WA., November 24, 2001*
Little Big Horn, 2007, Walla Walla, WA., Jan. 2007*
Love Song, Walla Walla, WA., July 2003
Memorial, Walla Walla, WA., August 2003
Minnows, Santa Fe, NM., 2002
MISSED CONNECTION, Portland, OR., July 2005
Mr. Moses, Walla Walla, WA., October 1994
My Father's Moustache, Walla Walla, WA., 1993
New Music, Walla Walla, WA., Aug. 2005
Noel Carol, Bedias, TX., 2002
Ocean Dance, Santa Fe, NM., July 29, 2002
Passing, Walla Walla, WA., 1993*
Red Maples, Walla Walla, WA., October 14, 1994
Santa Fe, Santa Fe, NM., 2002
Santa Fete, Santa Fe, NM., August 2002*
Take My Hand, Walla Walla, WA., Nov. 2008*
Tenth Anniversary, Walla Walla, WA., October 1993
Thanksgiving, Walla Walla, WA., October 1993
The Ash, Portland, OR., July, 2005
The Camels' Lullaby, Bedias, TX., 2002
The Carol of the Angels, Bedias, TX., 2002
The First Day, Santa Fe, NM., July 2002
The Merchants' Carol, Bedias, TX., 2002
The Poets' Choice, Santa Fe, NM., March 18, 2001*
The Settling Hours (Night:Scherzo), Santa Fe, NM., Summer 2002 (rev.)*
The Spider's Gift, Bedias, TX., 2002
The Vow, Walla Walla, WA., October 2004*
To Winter, Walla Walla, WA., 2006*
Top Gun, Santa Fe, NM., Summer 2002
Veteran's Day, Walla Walla, WA., 1993
We Are Held (Hymn), Santa Fe, NM., March 19, 2002*
Winter, Walla Walla, WA., 1993*

* set to music by John David Earnest
*1 set to music by Perry Jones
*2 set to music by Eric Barnum
# Winner WA Poets' Assn.
    Charlie Proctor Award:
    Cuisine d'amour - 2002
    A Poet to His Muse - 2003
Appendix C

Interviews with John David Earnest

October 3-4, 2008, composer’s office and residence, in Walla Walla, Washington; between author and John David Earnest.

Dennis Bassett: Can we start with early biographical information, such as place of birth, your family, etc.

John David Earnest: Lubbock, Texas, August 11, 1940. Before the United States entered the Second World War. So I’m not a baby-boomer, I am a pre-war baby. When I was about one year old, my parents moved to Odessa and that is where I grew up, in west Texas. In the desert, in the oil country. And it was there where all of my early musical activity as a child took place. I sang in school choirs, played clarinet in the elementary school band, but always was singing. Then around the age of ten I began to study piano with a neighborhood teacher and started writing pieces around the same time which were imitative, carbon copies of Mozart. One of my most important influences was my mother and my grandmother. Mother exposed me to a lot of music, not necessarily concert music or classical music, but there was a lot of music in the house because my father owned a night club for awhile right after the war. My father was an auto mechanic and opened up a garage in Odessa, but right next door to the garage was a big honky tonk named Dance Land. It was very, very popular with the soldiers stationed at the Midland Air Force Base which was active at the time as an airbase during the war. So a lot of those guys would come into Dance Land and a lot of the roughnecks. Do you know what a roughneck is?

DB: Afraid not.

JDE A guy that works in the oil fields. They’re called roughnecks.
DB: Did not know that.

JDE: So Dance Land was a real honky tonk and Odessa was a real boom town during the 40s. Lots and lots of oil coming out of the ground and it was a rough and ready town, very blue-collar and Dance Land is where a lot of people went to have fun on the weekends. Well, Daddy owned the place so I was in and out of that place a lot. Not during business hours of course, but during the afternoon. After school I would go in and play the jukebox and dance around by myself with just the bartender in there. He was a sweet, kindly guy and he would give me nickels to put in the jukebox. And then a lot of those records from the jukebox came home and were played on the record player. I listened to all those records and started singing the songs. I would memorize the songs I heard and I would sing them. So there was always a sense of music going on.

DB: Country Western music? Or some other form of popular music?

JDE: Some Country Western, some just standards from the 40s, like Andrews Sisters. All those songs that were very popular during the war years and post war years. Also my mother and grandmother, seeing my interest in music, took me to concerts which were usually held at the local high school auditorium. Odessa High School auditorium, which I think was the only performance space in town at the time. During those days there was a national organization called Civic Music Association (CMA), it was a big producing organization that toured all kinds of soloists and ensembles around the country. CMA still exists, but is under another title now. Anyway, so I heard a lot of memorable music. I remember hearing Gold and Fisdale, which during the early 50s was a famous two piano team. I heard lots of piano soloists, those were the most typical and I learned a lot of literature just by listening to that, and of course from studying piano, because I was playing little pieces by Bach. So music was always around me and mother was a very important nurturing part of that experience.

Then in High School I sang, of course, in the a’capella choir, just like every kid does. The a’capella choir was the big choir in school. Then in college I sang in choirs and continued to write while I was at Austin College in 1958. I graduated Odessa High School that year and enrolled at Austin College that year in Sherman, Texas. Was there for two years:
Freshman and Sophomore years, in pre-med. I spent lots more time in the music building working with the chorus and playing the piano, and those sorts of things and realized at some point that I wasn’t going to be a doctor. The idea of becoming a doctor came from my admiration from mother, who was an RN. When I was quite small I was raised around the hospital where she worked. So naturally I thought I wanted to be a doctor, but that was not meant to be. I entered Austin College in ’58 studying pre-med and then at the end of my sophomore year I realized that I needed to stop that and start over again. So, I left Austin College after a wonderful two years there and went to the University of Texas in Austin in 1960 and started all over again. I enrolled as a music major there studying composition. I was able to transfer some credits, but in those days transferring credits from a small Liberal Arts College was not always easy. So I had to add another couple of years on in order to play catch up so I didn’t finish with my Bachelors until ’64 when I would have finished in ’62. I loved the University of Texas, it was a wonderful experience. And I dove right into the life of the music department. Singing in the a’capella choir and after being there a year or two I auditioned and was excepted into the Chamber Singers with a wonderful conductor, who was a major influence on me. His name was Morris Beachy. Morris Beachy was also Robert’s teacher at the University of Texas, although Robert was at UT many, many years after I left. Beachy was a great musical mind. IS a great musical mind, he is still alive, but long since retired. He really had musical vision and we all knew it and he was a terrific inspiration to me and I learned everything I knew about choral music from him and singing in his groups. And I wrote a few pieces for him which he performed with the Chamber Singers. So he was a terrific influence, plus the other teachers I had there, Kent Kennen, composer and author of a famous orchestration book was one of my composition teachers. He is known mostly for his book, The Technique of Orchestration, which is used all over the country. It is sort of a standard text at universities and colleges, and it’s really a terrific book. And he was a brilliant man. Also my theory teacher, a wonderful woman named Janet Begoy, who was a terrific person. The faculty at UT were quite exceptional, and I loved it there. It was a big department, and there were recitals and guest artists, there was a very serious emphasis on contemporary music because each Spring one of the composition teachers, Cliff Williams, organized the Southwest Contemporary Music Festival. Because UT had so much money because of oil and
the state, we were able to meet some extraordinary people. One year John Cage came and spent a week with the Festival. One year Igor Stravinsky came, and we spent time with Stravinsky and we had master classes with him. Stockhausen came one year, Aaron Copland came one year. It was very impressive for someone in their 20s then, and it was a very impressive atmosphere, filled with music and wonderful things, and I just loved Austin and UT and I loved University life. And even to this day I think those are some of the happiest days of my life. I don’t know, maybe many people think about their college years as the happiest time of their lives.

DB: I think so. It’s a big changing period and a time when young music students begin to take shape and find their musical identity. They begin to become influenced by their professors and many eventually move on to graduate school.

JDE: And that’s exactly what I did. It’s just what you did, you moved on to graduate school. Especially if you wanted a serious career in music. So I finished in ‘64 with my Bachelors and immediately went into the graduate program in composition. By that time, another composer had come onto faculty, Luther Cline. I studied with him, and wrote an orchestra piece and some smaller pieces with him. I took three years to finish my masters, although the program could have been done in two, I took three years because in 1966 the second year I was in graduate school the Chamber Singers went on a tour of Europe and the Middle East that was sponsored by the State Department. We had this huge itinerary that had us on tour for about six weeks, throughout Europe and the Middle East. It was terrific, an extraordinary time in our lives.

So I finished my Masters Degree in composition in ’67. By that time I started writing songs and getting student performances. Songs and song cycles, piano pieces, and I was really actively writing a lot in those days. What I was writing is kind of curious. Because like all students in the 60s, the dominant stylistic influences were the serial composers, and the Second Viennese School, and later serial composers, Boulez and Stockhausen, and so on. So most of us felt that we needed to hook into the writing of the serial manner or using 12 tone composition in some way. I did write a few compositions, actually maybe two pieces using serial techniques and they were extraordinarily unsuccessful. Because they were not
temperamentally right for me. My compositional personality was not able to bloom with that technique. I clearly was a tonally based composer and I think that was because I was a singer as well. Not to say that singers can’t be serial composers, but I knew that I had a lyrical gift and I was always able to write a tune. In fact, I have always had such easy facility writing tunes that sometimes I was a little embarrassed about it, like well, this is too easy or I should be doing something harder or more complex. Until I began to discover that there were other composers that had no idea how to write a melody. And I thought, OH! I have a special gift.

I fell under the influence for awhile under Anton Webern. I collected all of his music, which I still have. But I gradually grew away from the Webern influence. I gravitated a lot to 20th century music in general, so I learned a lot of the repertory. A lot of Bartok, who was always a big influence on me, Benjamin Britten, a major influence. Brahms, a non-20th century composer that I loved. Lots and lots of Stravinsky. I was a composition student, and I made it my business to learn all of that.

DB: Stravinsky went through several different periods of composition. Did you have one particular period that was most influential on you?

JDE: Probably the neo-classical period, which was the biggest chunk of his career. It was a period that I loved and still do. Knowing all those composers filled me with many influences, and like all young composers, you get pulled in many different directions, and you are under the influence of whatever is your passion at the moment. Out of that whole experience at the University of Texas, gradually a personal voice began to emerge. It was a lyrical, tonally based voice, but with extended tonality with lots of rhythmic activity. So in ’67 I finished.

While working and listening to music, I was also doing a lot of reading of poetry. I would go over there and go to the poetry section and grab a handful of these chat books, these small volumes of poetry. I would sit there reading these poems, mostly American and British, from the 20th century. I discovered so much and developed a real love for poetry just by continuously reading it. I got a feel for the rhythms and the cadences the imagery of poetry was. Many times I discovered poetry that just began to sing to me. So I started a file of
poems. The important thing was that I developed an eye for what I think will make a good song. Usually I can tell very rapidly now because of my immersion in reading poetry.

In ’67 when I finished I was at a loss for what to do. I wanted a college teaching job, but without a DMA or work towards a DMA it was very difficult to find anything. So I went back to West Texas and for a month I did nothing and kind of in despair about what to do with my life. And then the universe intervened, and from that point on my life was guided and shepherded by my angels. Because a series of events began to happen which were totally unplanned, but led me to better things.

DB: Starting with?

JDE: Starting with a call from an old high school friend who was now working in Philadelphia. The call came out of the blue and I hadn’t heard from him in a long time and he knew that I had graduated with my Masters, so his name was Geta. He and I were friends in high school and he lived in Philadelphia where he was doing some work in interior direction. He called and asked, “how would you like to move to Philadelphia?” I said why? He said that there is a teaching position here in the public schools that doesn’t require certification because it is an after-school program. The program involved music and art, and Geta knew a women that worked in the program, and inquired, and she said to call your friend in Texas and tell him about the program. So I packed up, and my father was not happy about it, but my grandmother was very supportive of the idea, she knew I needed to get out of West Texas, and mother was supportive too. Eventually my daddy was won over, so I packed up my things and took a plane to Philadelphia. I was in Philadelphia for 4 or 5 months. It was a short stay, but God, it felt like years. Philadelphia in the late 60s was grim, and gray, and big, and lonely. I was terribly lonely there because I never saw much of Geta. I felt so stranded in this big, industrial city and it always seemed gray and rainy there. But I did have some great experiences. I listened to the orchestra, saw a lot of theater, and concerts.

DB: How much composing was going on at this time?

JDE: Some, but not an awful lot, although I had a place to compose. I didn’t do a lot because I was so absorbed in this city, but I did
teach in this program, and it was great fun. I had to make up everything I did for them so we did creative drama, music programs, we made up little plays, and musicals. I did whatever I needed to do to keep them entertained. And then the next event happened.

Also, because of a friend from Texas. This friend graduated from UT a few years before me and moved to New York and was a conductor. His name was, Ainslee Cox, and Ainslee was a tremendously important person in my life. And Ainslee called while I was living in Philadelphia, and Ainslee said, “How would you like to move to New York?” So I jumped at the chance, I wanted to get out of Philadelphia. He said that there is a job waiting for you here as a copyist. A friend of Ainslee was a professional copyist, and he needed an assistant because his business had grown so much, and had bigger accounts with dance companies and needed help. Ainslee knew that I had a good hand and had done some copying at UT. So I said yes, and in January of 1968, I packed up and headed on a bus to New York.

I was very happy to be there and I moved into the Westside YMCA on 63rd Street. So I lived at the Westside Y and started working for this wonderful man named, Anthony Strilko. And from him I learned tremendous amounts. He was a composer and very successful copyist and businessman. He ran a music preparation service and he really trained me and groomed me into the profession of music notation and consequently the kind of polish and refinement I bring to my own writing. So Tony Strilko was a wonderful influence and a wonderful composer. Through Tony Strilko I had worked on music for Leonard Bernstein, music of William Schumann, Lee Hoiby, and many other composers, Robert Starer, and many composers in the New York area who wrote a lot for the dance companies, like Martha Graham, and so it was a tremendous training period. I was with Tony full-time from ’68 to ’72 or ’73, and then I continued to work for him in the 70s, but on a part-time basis. Tony helped me get a piano; I got an apartment on the Westside and plunged into being a New Yorker.

So started writing then, got back into writing and gradually began to build up a body of smaller works. Pieces for piano, I did write some pop songs as well, but I did get into doing some film scores as well. I did music for a small film company and that was a tremendous experience, because I learned how to
orchestrate. Writing film score cues, you write the cue and you’re in the studio two days later recording it. The company had enough in the budget that I could hire musicians for large ensembles and small ensembles. I wrote lots and lots of music for this film company and that was a great experience because I learned how to orchestrate, I learned how to put material together quickly and effectively. So I was being a composer and being a copyist and learning, learning, learning and meeting lots of people. I worked with Lee Hoiby on sections for his opera *Summer in Smoke* and then through Lee in 1978, I met Samuel Barber and worked for him part of that summer in ’78. Then met John Corigliano, also through Lee, and I copied the score and did the layout, the score preparation for John’s first film, *Altered States*. And that, of course was a huge influence on me because John is a spectacular composer. This was a big orchestral score and John wrote a spectacular score for that movie which just bowled me over. I learned all sorts of techniques, many of which John originated. And I learned how to make the orchestra sound, because John has an extremely fertile imagination. He really is a brilliant creative mind. So I worked with John on that, then I worked with him again for a film in the 80s called *Revolution*, starring Al Pacino; and then on a smaller film called *Tell Me A Riddle*, which was written by a friend of John’s. So my association with John has been long and productive and I’ve learned an awful lot from him. He has been very good to me, has sent me work many, many times, and has sent me students.

Meanwhile, I met Robert in 1984 when he was in New York to conduct a concert with the University of Cincinnati Men’s Chorus, and because Robert had gone to school at UT with Pam Elrod. Pam was teaching at Trinity School in New York and invited Robert and his chorus to come to New York and sing at Trinity. Pam called me, because I knew Pam through Morris Beachy at UT. Pam called and said that a friend of hers was bringing his choir to Trinity and please come to the concert. So I did and that is when I met Robert. Robert and I continued to stay in touch and he even spent a year in New York working for Mid-American recruiting.

So Robert, about his third or fourth year here [Whitman College], was in touch with me and wanted to commission a piece for the Whitman Chorale and I did, and I chose a poem that I have wanted to set for a long time by Theodore Roethke called *The Waking*. So I set it for Robert and he premiered it in
1988. So after that I was writing lots of choral music during that period. During the 80s I wrote a piece for the United States Air Force Singing Sergeants, and I wrote a big piece for concert band and chorus on the poems of Mark Van Doren, who was a famous New York poet that taught at Columbia for many years. I selected three poems by Van Doren. And then there were many choral pieces. The main thing in choral music was that I began writing for the Gay Men’s Choruses around the country. Because I did a very successful piece for the Gay Men’s Chorus in New York, conducted by Gary Miller, in 1983. The early 80s was when all these Gay Men’s Choruses began to start and now they are huge and everywhere. I was a member of the first generation of composers who were writing for them and I got commissions for many of these choruses for at least a decade maybe longer. I had a wonderful decade in the 80s and into the 90s. That’s where a lot of my choral music came from, much of which is for men’s chorus and much of it has been published. My first published choral piece was for mixed chorus and was a little Christmas Carol. After that E.C. Schirmer published this big piece for the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus called Only in the Dream. And that began a whole series of pieces. Then came Robert’s piece in ’88 and I was writing some orchestral music during the ‘80s. In ’83 I wrote my first big orchestral piece for my hometown symphony, the Midland-Odessa Symphony in West Texas. Then I was working with John, so the ‘80s were an extraordinary rich and productive time for me and into the ‘90s as well.

The songs, however, came a little later. I was writing songs, but your particular interest, that came mostly after I began working here [Whitman College].

DB: When did you start working here?

JDE: In 1999, ten years ago. The college has a program of endowed professorships. Some of which are one year appointments. The particular professorship that was available at this time was called the Johnston Professorship. It passes each year from department to department, and the goal of it is to bring in people from the professional world, that is non-academics, to come in and bring their professional expertise to the students in a one year appointment. The Johnston Professors are invited to shape their own curriculum for whatever course they would like to teach. So in the Fall of 1999, the Johnston came to the
Music Department and they were looking for candidates, so Robert and Lee jumped in and recommended me, which was OK with the faculty, and in September of 1999, I was the Johnston Professor. I taught composition privately to about six students and I organized a course called, “American Music and the Arts in the 20th Century.” So I taught that course in the Fall of ’99, but I didn’t want to stay for the Spring, so I asked if I could split my appointment into two Fall Semesters and the Dean agreed, so I returned for the Fall of 2000. When the Johnston ended in the Fall of 2000, the composition department had grown and looked viable, so they asked if I would be willing to come back on a part-time basis as adjunct, and we worked out a schedule so I could do that, and it’s exactly the schedule that I have today. That is six weeks in the Fall and six weeks in the Spring, divided up into four parts so that I’m here for the students four different times. My first year doing this I lived in an apartment, but then Robert and Lee asked me to come stay with them.

I believe the first thing Robert and I did together was Crickets and Commas. I’m pretty sure. I didn’t know he was writing poetry all the time. Actually, Robert was a closet poet. He didn’t really tell anyone that he was writing poetry for a quite a long time. So when I found out that he wrote poetry I asked to see some of it. He declined at first, but eventually did, and it’s just spectacular. And because Robert is a singer and such an extraordinary musician, he has a great facility for writing lyrical poetry. Everything I read sang to me and I, as I told you, had developed an eye for poetry that I know will work musically, because much poetry doesn’t work musically, nor should it. But Robert’s poetry invited music and began to sing off the page. And I’m almost positive, though I don’t remember the details, that Crickets and Commas was kind of a whimsical idea we both had. I said write some haiku and I’ll set them, and it was rather fun to do because he could write them so fast and I set them very fast. That was part of the challenge to see how many songs you could write in just a few days. And before you know it, we had this cycle of five haiku. I don’t remember what the next thing was, there were many solo songs plus the cycles, but as we collaborated more and more, it was apparent that we had a serious collaboration. We have done choral music together as well as the cycles that you know. And it’s been a joy to work with him. I love working with Robert. There is nothing that he has written that I couldn’t set almost, I mean we are such a natural team together.
Well this is a great segue way into the cycles. The first one is *Crickets and Commas*.

Some good things happen; you pull something off the top of your head. What did Robert tell you about the poems themselves?

On *Crickets and Commas*?

Uh-hm.

Well, he said two of them; he said he had written a bunch of haikus for some friends of his that were dedicating their land somewhere in New Mexico. And that the, a couple of the, the ones that are, *Tumbleweed, Lightning, Crickets*, were kind of inspired from being down there at this time too. And then the *Comma* and *Preposition* came up… that one might have been more of the dare or something along those lines.

So this is beginning to make more sense. The people he’s talking about are Jamie and Joha because Robert and Lee had a house in Santa Fe because Lee worked for the Santa Fe Opera for four seasons, I think, coaching in the apprentice program. And they had, Robert and Lee had a house there and their neighbor, nearby neighbor, Jamie and Joha, and they were dedicating the land and I suppose that’s what he meant. So there were these haiku that were written before. And I guess I saw the haiku and said I was just itching to write something. And I wanted to write something fast. I, completion is a big deal with me, and so I thought I want to do something that I can do at the school while I’m working, teaching, but that I can do and get finished. And short songs is a good way to go, so, and then a haiku of course, lent it itself to that right away.

Do you have the music, the haiku music?

No, I don’t have it, I don’t have a copy of it here.

What is coming… how does *Comma* come about, how did *Comma* inspire the writing?

Ok, so let me back up and tell you what the idea was to create very tiny little worlds both poetically and musically and in musically speaking to do, to find one idea that would prevail.
throughout the song. So the songs in a way are like little etudes. And I knew I wanted to open with something fast because the poem is so short it had to be fast and thrown away, which is, because it’s a joke. And like any joke it has to be told quickly and without stopping and to strive for the punch line and you’re out. And when I read the poem I thought well this is perfect. And I don’t know how I came up with the figure, but I wanted it to be very busy and hence the title, Fast and Busy. And as you can tell, it’s one figure throughout, just with changing pitches and intervals. Um, and I actually, I usually write the accompaniment first, I don’t mean for the whole song, I mean I start the accompaniment because it’s out of that the melody, the melodic material springs. You have to establish the mood and the tone of the piece.

DB: Actually, this would be a great time, and you can put that on hold then, to talk about your creative process and how you approach in these particular cases, I assume you find the poetry that might speak to you, how do you approach writing, you know, the accompaniment for it?

JD: Well, first of all I read the poem over and over. I read it aloud a lot and do some analysis of it, scanning the poetry, scanning it for meter and so on, but mostly I read it for mood. And what kind of mood what kind of atmosphere does the poem create. And with Robert’s poetry it’s so clearly atmospheric that the mood of the poem suggests itself pretty quickly, instead of something lyrical and romantic. And I put myself in that frame and I think that’s the way a lot of composers start. You don’t have ideas about notes, you don’t know what the notes are, but you do know what the shapes might be. And the shape might be “ahhh” (high) or it might be “uhhh” (low). Or it might be “hahaha”. You follow me? You make a little theatrical gesture of it and to find out what is the atmosphere that you want to create. And then comes the work. And that is to translate that into notes.

For instance, if I knew that I wanted to write something dark and forbidding, I would probably just, I’d begin improvising, I would begin (plays on piano for short period of time). Just wandering. And gradually something begins to emerge. It’s like opening up the channel. Or letting the bloom open very slowly, but the only way you can do it, or the way I do it, is to first set myself into the mood of the poem, make a little world of it, like a little theater piece, I set the stage, and then I just
begin to improvise and let my hands wander. It’s a great way to open up the creative process. And I’ve heard many other composers speak of it the same way, improvisation, in fact even novelists do it.

I went to the McDowell Colony which is an artists’ colony in New Hampshire, I went there for about eight or nine years during the late 80s or 90s, and I talked to lots and lots of writers and painters and other composers. And we compared notes about this, like well how do you move on? Well, we improvise, you know, like a novelist will just start improvising lines and gradually the lines and the characters that evolve get to speak to you. It’s the same way the character (briefly plays) of the song begins to talk to me.

And it says, then I put the poem up in front of me, once I have kind of a (plays piano briefly) whatever it is (plays again) whatever the accompaniment suggests. Then I put the poem in front of me and continue to improvise and I begin to sing. Because I have to sing it myself, I have to let it feel. I mean I have to feel it. How is this going to feel when it actually comes out of the throat? And that, gradually all of this amorphous material, all this unfashioned bulk of information begins to coalesce, very gradually. And that of course is what technique is, is when you begin to bring together these all of these pieces of information which have no relationship to each other, you don’t think they do, but you have learned how to draw them in and mold them into a cohesive whole of some sort.

With the Crickets and Commas, as I said, I decided to adapt just one, let me bring it over, to adapt just one thing per song and let that be the guiding force. And actually I did write I’m sure I wrote that much before I (plays piano as he talks) I was probably, I knew I wanted it to be crunchy, dissonant (plays piano) that. It had to be edgy. Because it’s a joke and it’s a wry joke, it has a sarcasm in it. Actually this is very much like an old joke about McDowell Colony that a poet and a painter and a composer were sitting together at dinner one evening at the colony and the painter says, “Oh I had such a wonderful day at my studio. I started to do canvas and I got all of the basic sketching done and took it, a really wonderful day.” And the composer says, “Oh me, too. I had three pages already sketched out in the short score of my new symphony.” And they turn to the poet, “What did you do?” And he says, “I put a comma in.” Next evening, same conversation, and when it
comes to the poet, he says, “I took the comma out.” (Laughter from both). It’s a creative, it’s a kind of precious, joke for creative types, but that’s, this is, Robert had heard that joke before and I think that’s where he got the inspiration. But maybe not. But maybe his was totally, “adds a comma and then takes it out.”

So I knew the words are all monosyllabic, for the most part, they’re punchy and short, it’s a haiku. So it has to be fast, busy, active and it has to flit by you just like that. And that’s what happens in performance, because when Lee, I love the way he does this, whenever its programmed, and Lee has played it, he comes out on stage, and without taking a breath, he sits at the piano and immediately (plays on piano). And he’s off and racing and before you know it, it’s over. And the audience, it’s like they’re in shock, like “What just happened?” And that was exactly the effect I wanted.

DB: Well, we coached it yesterday and he played the first three measures and I stopped, I was like, “Really?”

JD: (Laughter) Yep!

DB: And that’s exactly what it was. He just was like, “All right well, I guess we can get going (mimics music playing).”

JD: (Laughter). It’s almost like a jackhammer and (mimics a noise) tears its way through and before you know it, you’re done. And it’s very successful because of that, because it only does one thing, pianistically and then it juxtaposes a long lyrical line over all of this staccato busy-ness and then of course comes the punch line. And if these poems, these songs, are really, are about the words more than anything. The words, *prima la parola*, they really have to be enforced with clean diction, because if the listener doesn’t get the poem, then the whole point is kind of lost. Especially with the funny ones, this one and the *Preposition* poem. It’s really essential because that’s the joke. And in fact, some audiences almost can anticipate this. We have another song, what is the other song that…the audience anticipates the end, I’ve forgotten what it was, but it can be great, great fun to sing this, I, well, I presume, I’ve never sung it. But you’re singing it and I can’t wait to hear you. Am I going to hear you at all?
DB: Well, I hope so. Well, maybe tomorrow perhaps if you’re around.

JD: That would be wonderful. This one of course: “In dry summer wind, a tumbleweed lifted up and danced in the sun.” Well, that’s a very lazy kind of image. And for those of us who come from tumbleweed country out in west Texas, I know exactly what that means.

DB: Are they not just kind of spinning a lot –?

JD: They roll, they tumble, hence the name tumbleweed, and they’re big dried weeds and they’re very unique and they have a life of their own. So, and I love dry summer winds because I grew up in those dry summer winds, and so this poem had a special place for me. But I wasn’t, I knew it had to be lyrical, I knew I wanted it to be slow, because it occupies it’s the second haiku and I wanted a kind of fast, slow, fast, slow, fast arrangement of the songs. Very simple, very direct, simplicity. I wanted directness and simplicity in this cycle. So that each song would just be presented like a …course. And here is the next course and it’s one simple thing, you delectate that and then move on to the next. I don’t know where I came with this figure, but the figure is important because it’s the push. It’s the wind, it’s the wind and that dryness (plays piano). Lee plays it so beautifully, and I can’t play it at all (plays again). So lazy (continues to play as he talks). …it has to be very lethargic. (Sings): “In a dry summer…” and so on. And the figure is brought back. So you see, it’s unified by these kind of very melancholy chords, long note values, and then the whirl of the little wind. And that’s, that’s how that happened.

Also, I’m very fond of triplets. Quarter note triplets, half note triplets. And because the effect of a triplet, like here, it elasticizes, elasticizes, is that a word? It makes elastic the rhythm. It kind of pulls it this way, and as a consequence, the whole thing breathes. It’s like going (breathing noise), that’s what triplets do in my ear anyway. Especially if you’ve established kind of beat, some perceptible beat or unit. And then have a triplet it goes (breathing noise) it does that. So I love triplets and especially where you want to stretch the rhythm, make it a little bit more elastic. And this of course well right away this title gives it away (fast movement noises). You know that’s what that is. So these are very, all of these are very specific in terms of word painting, or at least, mood painting. Because
each one contains, well not so much the first one but certainly Tumbleweed, I have the visual of the tumbleweed, so it’s, it’s a real attempt to do some, some tone painting there and create the tumbleweed.

Here it certainly is very much about lightning because of the “bum-beeduh-bum-bum-bum”. You know it’s (noise), the jaggedness (same noise). That’s what that figure is about. And then, hitting the stride of the accompaniment, but then of course the poem fools you, right here, because you think it’s going to keep on going, and, but the sky is pale blue, because that, it’s part of the haiku thing, is to set up one world in a tiny line and then immediately juxtapose it with a contradictory line. “Even in the dark, the sky is pale.” Something rather violent juxtaposed against something very lyrical and almost meditative. And that’s why the end of the song- but you need to hear just a bit of the lightning and Lee plays this so beautifully, it’s like the lightning in the distance and the thunder (imitates accompaniment line). And that’s the very last thing that you hear very well.

I love this one. More tone painting though. And this one, well again, it’s more tone painting and word painting. What do crickets do? Well they (imitates cricket noise), that and katydids, and they know they make those rhythmic noises. And so that’s what this is about (plays piano). That’s what it’s meant to do is be (plays again) sorry.

DB: Now, Lee says there’s a bit of discrepancy in tempo. As far as who, who likes one more than the other.

JD: I think yeah, now what was the, I can’t remember though – it was that I liked it slower and he likes it faster?

DB: Correct.

JD: Um, cause 96 is actually a good clip (listens to metronome). Yeah, every time I play it, I play it slow. But that’s not what I’ve learned. It’s actually (plays piano). In fact it’s much faster than I thought it was. (Plays again). But, take Lee’s tempo. I always hear it very lazy. (Plays again). I don’t know why! But Lee’s tempo is better than mine. But it is about – and you hear the crickets in the evening. So there’s nothing in this that bursts out of its little box. It kind of stays there and always the repetition of eighth notes. And very simple. In fact it’s almost
like a little piano exercise in a way, like a, for a beginning piano student who has to sit down and play their thirds and their fourths and so on. So, but once again, it’s meant to express an image that I have about this poem and that is something that happens in the evening with a little meditative tag to it, which again is very haiku-esque.

DB: And then *Preposition*?

JD: And *Preposition*! I thought, well, we need a big closer. And again it’s a joke. “A preposition is something…” Oh this is the one audiences sometimes anticipate. Because once you get to “…end a sentence” and they know it’s coming. And some in the audience, not all of them, but those who are aware in the audience, start laughing right about there, because they know it’s coming and you get to fulfill that. And I thought well, something crazy but (plays piano) something mad and gay and lively and, and it’s a hard song. This line is especially hard (plays line). And I worked on it a long time. I thought, you know that’s a very tough line, it’s chromatic and it leaps a lot. But I know it can be done and sure enough every – it takes some doing.

DB: Well, you help out many singers in several of your pieces by doubling it in the right hand.

JD: I like to cover when I can cover the voice at least partially. I don’t like covering an entire line because that can be a little Mickey Mouse sometimes. And, but covering the voice is a very good practice, and everybody who has written for the voice does it. Puccini obviously, and Verdi has done it, and Richard Hundley does it. Richard taught me to cover sometimes just part of a phrase not the whole thing. But it has a way of anchoring the whole composition where you hear the two colors, voice and piano, either in octaves or unisons, and I like that a lot. And it on the practical side, it does help the singers a lot. So, that really, this, cycle was written quickly, it was revised a couple of times, but basically it was, a quick inspiration and a pretty quick write. And it was premiered, I think, by Laurel, the soprano who used to teach here who now lives in Seattle, I think she did the first performance of it. And it has been done by others, but I’ve – has a tenor done it before? I don’t know.

DB: Well, I know, I don’t know Brad, but I’ve heard –
JD: Has Brad done it?

DB: I know he’s doing it here soon, I don’t know if he’s done it before or not.

JD: So, that’s *Crickets and Commas*.

Interview continued at residence on October 4, 2008.

JDE: Well, it all started with *Passing* which was a poem I read of Roberts along time ago. I read it, and re-read it, and re-read and loved it so much, it’s just so beautiful. This was not the original version of the poem, he re-wrote it a couple of times. In fact there is an additional version that came after this song was written. He took a poetry course, and under the influence of that course he went back and revised some of his poetry, and I’m pretty sure this was one of them. This began it, because I wanted to very much set this song. That was actually the first composed song, and then we decided to do a cycle. By this time we were on a roll and we wanted to start collecting songs into cycles, so we agreed to do this cycle.

He wrote *Invocation*….I think he wrote it for this cycle.

DB: I believe he said that you had asked for a fast song.

JDE: Yeah, I wanted fast and I wanted this opening to be like a Baroque dotted-rhythm thing. You know, like in the Grand Baroque style, like in the manner of Handel (plays piano). Something that comes off stately and majestic, an invocation. And it needed to sound processional. But it was really about the dotted-rhythm, very much like a Handel Concerto Grosso. So that was kind of the inspiration for the song. And to make it triumphant, because it is a hymn to the sun. And those are the basic things about *Invocation*, and knowing those things gets you a feel for the whole thing. It has a very thick piano part, with all the parallel 6/4 chords, which I am very fond of. And then the occasional meter changes. These meter changes seem to work. They are predictable meter changes…
DB: They flow with the text…

JDE: They flow with the text. Yeah. So that is all I really have to say about *Invocation*, unless you have any questions.

DB: Well, I do have a question about the end and what your preference is regarding the notes in the penultimate measure of the vocal line?

JDE: What is the question?

DB: The question is whether or not to stay on the B and then go D to E, or do what is written.

JDE: (Plays the piano) Oh…well, what do you know. I had forgotten this. Lee would remember. I’ll make a note and let you know. I don’t know what my preference is. (Plays again) What are you singing?

DB: I’m singing what’s on the page.

JDE: (Plays again) I really don’t know what my preference is, that’s the problem going back to old material. I’ve lost the internalization of the song. What would be the more vocal thing to do?

DB: Well, that’s a tough question since I already have one version ingrained in my head. But to me, this makes sense, by having the line ascend to the big finishing note.

JDE: (Plays again) I do like the C, because as you pointed out it leads you to the E. The problem with this phrase is that leap. (plays piano) Because you are passing out of this very bright range down into the darker less forceful range. I struggled with that because I knew that the color would change over the leap of the octave and it felt so right. I was thinking instrumentally, like a cello or a horn, something that wouldn’t have that much drop out in the lower octave. I remember saying to myself that this is going to be a little bit of challenge for most all singers, but I’m going to keep it. (plays again) And then we have the big Baroque ending like a big Concerto Grosso or something like that. I like this song a lot. It’s difficult to hold together because it moves through these different moods. Now let me ask you, how is this register for you, since it was originally written for medium voice?
DB: Oh, it’s fine. It doesn’t go too low for me, which is my biggest concern.

JDE: OK, good. Now, Passing was the first song written in the cycle. And I think there is a consensus among Robert, and me, and Lee that this is one of the best songs that I have ever written, and I do like it a lot; and Lee plays it so beautifully and it’s such a wonderful poem. It’s wistful and I love quintuplets, so there they are, and this sets the tone. I’m not sure where this came from (pointing to social score), I think of this as a walking tune, because that kind of thing happens a lot in my work, and I know in the work of other composers. Things begin to emerge that you are not conscious of. It’s not like I say, “Oh, I need some walking music.” It happens because of your association with the poem. “I walked under these leaves,” and it wasn’t until much later that I had written this gentle, strolling music (plays piano). It’s very easy and gentle, and there is no aggressive motion in it, but there is forward motion. It’s meant to sound almost child-like. Like something you would hum, something simple. The whole song is very nostalgic, because the poem is about nostalgia and memory; and the beauty and pain of memory and the passing. Nothing more about that unless you have a question.

DB: No, you covered it well.

JDE: Night: Scherzo is…..

DB: I’m very curious about your thinking in the introduction.

JDE: What was I thinking….Let me go back and look at it. I remember that I asked Robert for something that would have words that had speed in them. Or words that implied action. Because even though it’s at night, it’s not a nocturne. It’s about stars…think of Starry Night by Van Gogh, that’s not a nocturnal painting, it’s about the happy violence of the heavens, and the swirls and the stars. That was what I had in mind. These swirling stars, I guess that was kind of an image, the painting; because it’s so dynamic and everything is in motion and the stars and heaven are rejoicing.

“Flickering shards of day,” (plays piano) those are wonderful words and the set well. It was those kinds of words that I urged Robert to find. Flickering, Sparks, Cracke; and the reference
to the two constellations. I wanted the thing to sound wild and ferocious in a way with a lot of turbulent energy. It’s a tough song because it’s less vocal than the other songs. It’s more declamatory. It’s really about that, declamation because the piano has the action. It’s really a scherzo for piano with voice. It’s a hard piano part, especially the ending, which is terrifying the way Lee plays it and that’s how it should be. It has to be very explosive.

Then to close the cycle, something totally different….a hymn. Because I was raised in the Presbyterian Church in West Texas, even though it was West Texas in the 50s, it was rather liberal by West Texas standards which was pretty heavy Southern Baptist country. I loved the Presbyterian hymnal and I grew up knowing all those hymns, and I also knew the Episcopal hymnal, of course they share a lot of the same tunes. I’ve included references to hymns in almost everything I’ve written in one way or another. Hymnody is something that I’ve always loved. It’s so deep in my cultural past. So it was natural to have a hymn here and since Scherzo is so violent and exuberant, this is the exact opposite. It’s meant to be reverential and meditative. There’s not a lot to say about it. It speaks a lot for itself. It’s strophic. It simply plays the music twice because it’s a strophic poem.

DB: What about the postlude?

JDE: The postlude, I thought there are two times that we get the music with the words, and then, I couldn’t help but think that we need the tune one more time. It needs to be brought to a close in a very quiet way, so let’s do a postlude. I also remembered that Schumann had done a postlude for Frauen lebe und leben, which is so marvelous. So that was my inspiration, the Schumann postlude. To hear the postlude, was exactly the right choice in my ear. And I love seeing a singer on stage not singing as the postlude is played. Because as in the Schumann you are still hearing the singer, but no sound is being made. But you still experience the singer because you hear the same music again’ and the singer by physically present has a warmth. Do you see what I’m saying? It’s theater, a little theater at the end. Any questions?

DB: Nope, that’ll do it for that cycle. How about The Future in My Hand?
JDE: Let’s see….how did this cycle happen. Well, I don’t really remember, except that it’s for Brad and Lee. So it could be that they needed some songs for a program. I think that’s exactly what happened. They had a program in Georgia they needed music for. Nor do I remember what order they were written, so we’ll just go with number one, unless I dated the songs. Oh wait, I did! So we’ll start with *At Dusk*.

At the time, Robert and Lee were living on Home Street. Now you never saw the Home Street house, but it was quite spectacular. It was like a small southern mansion with white pillars in front, a two-story home. It a magnificent grounds, with a big pond out front, and beautiful plantings all around, and there was a little bridge that went across the stream that fed the pond; and the stream encircled the entire house. The back yard had a beautiful sloping lawn. It was really a wonderful place. They lived there for three years or so. This reference to the white bridge is about that white bridge on the grounds. That is where the image came from. Probably Robert was sitting out one evening, looking at the little bridge that crossed over the stream. I wondered about that too, and he said, “Oh, it’s the bridge at the house.” And this is a very lyrical poem and a very romantic poem. I thought about the implication of water in it, the white bridge crossing the water, the pond, cling to the water’s edge, trailing silver threads…..all of this referencing water. This is very much like the Imagist poetry of Amy Lowell. Do you know the Imagist poets of the early 20th century?

DB: I’m afraid not.

JDE: This is very similar to that kind of poetry. It’s taking natural imagery from the earth and translating it into metaphors for interior feelings. Amy Lowell was one of the most famous of the Imagists. The water is the reason why I chose the compound meter, because it flows and compound rhythms tend to associate with things that are pastoral, and this has a pastoral feeling about it. I wanted it to sound kind of old fashioned in a way. That’s why it has the arpeggiation, so that the piano arpeggiates all the time and keeps the water flowing. It’s a very romantic song and it sings well. It lies in the voice well and it’s supported well, and it’s a very pretty piece. It’s about nature and nostalgia again. Robert’s poems have a lot of nostalgia in
them, and some of the nostalgia is passive and some of it is active.

The second song, Autumn, is one of my favorites. I actually decided to do this as a technical challenge. That was one thing, but two or three ideas can together. First of all the poem is not nostalgic at all, this is Robert in his edgy mode. It’s filled with pessimism and a kind of doom, and anger. The word “harvesters” and “reaping” immediately brought something to mind, the tall black robed figure of death with a scythe. Sweeping and slashing through the fields, mowing down lives like wheat. I kept hearing that great scythe swooshing back and forth. So I thought, well, it needs to sound relentless and inevitable, and what’s more relentless that the same note being played over and over again. So I set that as a technical challenge, that I would use exactly the same bass line throughout the entire song. I thought this would be a real piece of work, just don’t change the bass line; but change the harmony in the interior voices (plays piano). This was pretty much my idea for the entire song, along with having the piano and voice create little duets. I also made sure that the words were declamatory.

Then we needed something totally different, and so came this wonderful, silly song, the Villanelle. Do you know what a villanelle is?

DB: It’s a poetic form.

JDE: Yep, and this is a real villanelle. When you see the text printed you can see the structure of it, alternations of A and B lines, but they have to be repeated in a certain order. So this is just a funny little song. It’s meant to sound spritely and again theatrical, especially with the Gypsy voice. I just put Gypsy voice because I didn’t know how to notate anything else. It just needed to sound different. The point was to sound different because you are another character, so you have to play the character. Brad kind of made a crackling voice, what are you doing?

DB: Well, I’m still working on that. I don’t want to steal Brad’s character voice.
JDE: Yeah, you have to imagine yourself as an old Crone, with a wart on your nose. And that’s pretty much it, it tells a funny little story with a big finish.

DB: Nope. Now how about the War Songs?

JDE: Now these are recent.

DB: Yes.

JDE: Um, yeah….summer ’06. Let me see when the others were written. These haven’t gone to the publisher yet, because I haven’t heard a performance, but I will. Very soon.

DB: Yes you will.

JDE: Oh and this one lapped over into ’07. This was Robert’s idea. I’m pretty sure that Robert mentioned to me one day that I’d like to write some War poems and I think he was thinking about the Iraq War and it was getting us all down, and I….Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s how this happened. He really wanted to write these poems and he really wanted them to be songs. So, once again, the challenge of setting something with just a repeating bass line that wouldn’t alter very much. Again, to give it that feel of inevitability, ruthlessness, and relentlessness. That’s why this line, and it’s also a march (plays the piano). It’s that kind of “brrrrum, brrrrum, brrrrrum!” And you see these “ghostly rows appear,” I mean this is so filled with imagery, you see these “ghostly” soldiers marching, with their heads bowed and down trodden. I mean, it’s a very powerful image. And it’s also strophic, the whole song is strophic. And it’s a conversation because in the poem the question is asked and then it’s answered. The question is asked out of the despair, our human despair, and it’s answered from the point of view of something beyond our human comprehension. Like a Cybil, you know one of the great soothsayers of legend, that the Cybil answers, like an Oracle, and it changes key, so as to establish a new character. The second character comes into the song.

DB: The “dah, dah, dah, dah” connecting the two ideas. What was you thought process on that?

JDE: Well, it’s a way of modulating to the next key without using functional modulation. And it’s also to close that section and
making a switch over to the next character. Which is this…you need a distinct characterization between the one who asks the question and the one who answers it. Because actually this plaintively….ah….looking at that now I think well, maybe actually it should be a little bit more sarcastic than plaintive. I don’t know, I’m having different thoughts about it now. “Ah, hear lies boys and boys my dear, who fell blameless into fear,”….ah…..from the point of view of someone or of a non-human or an immortal soul answering, “Ah, this is the lesson you must learn.” These are the lessons out of despair. So it’s very distinctly two characters or two entities involved in this song. And then it repeats with another question. “Why must lonely bugles blow?” The question that despairing humanity always asks, “Why does there have to be war?” is the question. “It is my dear that boys may know, that grass again may grow”……it’s an answer that is not a satisfactory answer. It is the way things are. Do you know the Bhagvad Gita?

DB: No.

JDE: The great text of Hinduism, it’s called the Song of the Beloved One and the Bhaghvad Gita is one of the most ancient text in all world literature and it is the primary source of Hinduism. It’s actually a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna. Arjuna is a young prince, an Indian prince, and his kingdom is at war with a neighboring kingdom, which is governed by his cousins, and war is inevitable between the two kingdoms. So all of the soldiers are lined up of the opposing foe on one hilltop and Arjuna and his forces are lined up on another. He’s standing in his chariot and he’s torn because he is about to go to war and shed the blood of his kinsmen. And at that moment, an incarnation of Vishnu, who is one of the three major Gods of Hinduism, appears and begins to tell him that this is the way things are. It’s a very long piece of literature, and this is kind of a little bitty Bhagavad Gita in a way. A conversation between our question and the answer that will never be satisfactory, because that’s the way things are. You should learn about the Bhagavad Gita, it’s fantastic…really wonderful.

Then the second song is….well….exactly what it says it is, a memorial. And Robert again using natural images, or images out of nature to emphasize poignancy and nostalgia of the moment.

DB: And you’re just creating the waves, a calm, serene scene?
JDE: Yeah….that’s good….that’s a good way….yeah that’s exactly it. Now that I’m looking at these, so many of these songs, well certainly this one and that one, they all do the same figure over and over, and the bass line doesn’t change until deeper into the song. It’s kind of anchors right away. (Piano playing) It’s that sea, and also the white gull gently gliding, “swing above, and circle to the sea.” That is the Dylan Thomas influence in Robert’s poetry, because the references to the sea and the use of the word “swing,” Thomas was very fond of that. So it’s a hymn, a eulogy, a requiem if you will, hence a Memorial. I like this song, it’s very sustained and harmonically doesn’t move around very much. It’s mostly white key music, like pantonal, which I like a lot. And then at the end, I especially love the way it finally settles here (plays piano). That chord (plays again), I love chords that have the ninth, it’s just two stacked fifths, but it forms a ninth on the outside, and the fifth inside. And there’s something very satisfying, because it is ambiguous to me. (Plays again) That’s two octaves anchored. That’s open.

Lee Thompson: Is this when I can ask the question? I would like you to consider leaving this off (the last two bars of the piece).

JDE: You know I played through this yesterday, and when I played that I thought, hmm, I think Lee doesn’t like this. (laughter)

LT: For the reason you just said. It settles it and I would like to have it…..I just love the idea that it’s “inextinguishable.” (Lee plays piano)

JDE: Because when I heard you and Brad do it (plays again), when you did it, I think you did leave it off.

LT: I think we talked to you about that, but since this is…you know…it’s about to go down for God and everybody…..

JDE: Well, I kind of like the idea…(plays again)

LT: Can I play it from here. (plays again) You see I leave the pedal down the whole time.

JDE: Oh, well I love that. That makes more sense.

LT: Rather then changing it, yeah. (plays again) Rather then going (play again).
JDE: Yeah, that destroys the mood. It takes away the mood.

LT: Rather than this (plays the final measure), it finalizes it, rather then floating out there endlessly.

JDE: Well, I’m going to pray about this. I think you maybe right.

LT: It’s just an idea.

JDE: Yeah, but it’s a very good idea and you have very convincing arguments. So I think for the sake of this performance, that probably we’ll leave it off and do it Lee’s way. This will be the Lee Thompson edition of the song. Anyway, questions about this?

DB: No.

JDE: Well, this one is a really tough piece. Yikes! Well I’ll tell you what I was trying to do, because this of all the pieces is the most theatrical. You really…..it is a piece of theater. First of all it tells a story, without actually stating all the facts of the story. Because the listener, we assume, will know what Little Big Horn is. Um….I had a problem finding the harmonic sound that would convey the rawness and primitiveness of it without actually writing (plays stereotypical Native American sounds on the piano), I didn’t want it to sound Indian….American Indian movie music, but it had to have a reference to something, from the kind of music the Native Americans…..it was important to set that…to have that flavor. So what I came up with was the open fifths and fourths (plays piano), so that business….because it’s perfect intervals sounds more like authentic Native American music, rather then “Bum-bum-bum-bum, Bum-bum-bum-bum.” In other words that’s what I wanted to avoid, because that’s stereotypical and cliché, and would just sound silly and offensive. But I did want some sort of reference though (plays again). So with that in mind, all these perfect intervals. You don’t really get many thirds and sixths until you get a little deeper into it, and then the chords begin to fill out more. You see “the field is bare now,” well the music needs to be bare too. It has to be very stark and you’re looking out over this field in bright sunlight and the glare is there, yet the smell of death is there because it was the site of a great battle. It was a very tough song to do. In a way, I think
the piano part is little overwritten, and I may need to take another look at it. But for right now, I don’t know, because I haven’t really heard it ever sung. And then here the poem changes, “and then across the field a breeze,” something happens, so the music had to reflect that. So the story changes, usually I would never do this in a song, change so abruptly from one mood and attitude to another, but something had to happen here, because it is telling a story. It’s like a campfire story almost. So this gets more and more active, and I have to….you can’t have words like “charging, turning, falling, screaming, wild calls, war music,” these are words, by there very nature, demand something active. They could have been set a different way, but I decided to go for obvious, because sometimes obvious works really well. I tried to get the hoses galloping, and all of those things I was trying to incorporate here without making it too busy and too obvious. That’s why there are a lot of meter changes, and a lot of these brutal figures. It’s meant to convey action, violence, turbulence, and confusion, all of that stuff that would happen in a battle scene. I love these lines “and the circles and flashes, and the shrieking sun, the bleeding sun.” It’s very exciting poetry, and I like this passage too (plays piano and sings the line) I love these chords, and the relentlessness of them over and over. And then the battle subsides and the field is calm, so we are back down to that (plays piano). Very nice, comfortable Db, so that it feels calming and we can rest now. And the rest of it trails off gently (plays piano), with just a reminiscence here (plays piano), and there (plays again). Still just a little bit of that music from the beginning (plays again). Now Lee doesn’t particularly like this, but I do (plays again)

LT: No, I do like that.

JDE: Oh, for some reason I thought you didn’t. I like it because it reminds us of the horror of the song and immediately pulls back. So this is a tough piece because it is so narrative and needs to be treated like a….it’s a tiny little opera in a way. So that’s the War Songs.

DB: Finally, *Four Songs of Sophistication*.

JDE: Well, *Songs of Sophistication*, it was written for Noelle Woods, wasn’t it Lee?
LT: I don’t know if it was written for her, but we premiered them. At the time there were only three songs in the cycle: Poet’s Choice, Poet to His Muse, and Cuisine d’amour. We premiered them at the Greenwich House in New York.

JDE: Well, it’s (Cuisine d’amour).....exactly what it’s about, not sure if I have much to add. It’s a comic song, a cabaret song. I think of it as a cabaret song and in fact, all of these are cabaret songs because I....it wasn’t long before I wrote this song I saw a performance of a soprano, a friend of mine in New York, she did the Brettl Lieder of Schoenberg. What a lot of people don’t know about Schoenberg is that he wrote a lot of cabaret music, and the Brettl Lieder, which are wonderful, are cabaret songs that he wrote early in his career, and “brettl” was the word that was applied to a kind of a make-shift stage that was thrown up in Cabarets and Cafes for the performers to sing and comics to do their shtick. So he wrote these Brettl Lieder, and I heard this soprano sing them, and I just loved them because they were clearly sophisticated art songs, but at the same time with a cabaret sensibility, and that’s what we wanted to do. Write artful cabaret songs and things that would demand good singing and have some sophistication about them, hence the title of the cycle. Mostly these songs are about the word play because all of the these cute word plays.....and you know that Robert won a prize for this poem? He entered the Washington State Poets association contest, and two years in a row he won for best comic poem, and this was one of them.

DB: Oh, well Robert neglected to tell me that in his interview.

JDE: We were all so excited because he had won a prize for this poem. Uh....and the song has been a smashing hit every time it’s been performed (laughter), what more can I say. It’s a great closer because it does that.

So, I don’t really have a lot to say about it, each section of it try’s to make a little reference to the local it describes, that’s not always possible. For instance, Buckingham (plays the piano), this is meant to sound magisterial, because of the palace, I mean this is pretty obvious. Again, it’s a little piece of theater, and “caper at Versailles,” that’s not necessarily French, but I did like the Buckingham chords. They sound so grand and British. Uh....Vatican, was suppose to sound...(plays again)....and the chords are suppose to sound reverential (plays again), like big organ chords, something religious like. And
then “hoisin at Shanghai” (laughter while playing), I mean it’s really cheap and cheesy sometimes, but cheesy is good sometimes, and especially in cabaret songs. So I kind of like that. “Hollandaise,” I don’t think that’s Amsterdamish…it’s just a few of those little things. The important thing is, do you know what a roux is?

DB: I do.

JDE: Ok, good. Because…well…a roux is actually two things, flour and butter thing that you make a béchamel out of, but a roux is a brown sauce. It actually refers to a basic brown sauce, so it is a sauce, or what it is made of, and “roux with you,” is that wonderful rhyme. So that’s what I have to say about that.

So once we had success with this song, we decided to write more of them. Uh…I don’t know what came next…might have been Poet, yeah, and this song…..you can certainly tell that Robert loves place names, because the Sauce song, Cuisine d’amour, has places in it, as does this (A Poet to His Muse). This is kind of interesting, and I hadn’t thought of this before, because Cuisine d’amour is from the singer’s point of view, it’s telling about experiences that have been in the past, but this…from the singer’s point of view is a longing for something that might happen in the future, a longing to visit these exotic places, and absorb the culture and be a part of a big world. Where as the sophisticate in Cuisine d’amour has already been there and has done all that stuff. There’s not a lot to say about this, just that it needed to be active and busy and the accompaniment needed to go “Doo-ta-dootle-do” over and over again. It needed to be spritely. Lots and lots of word play, “I’d like to Cannes my office, and St. Tropez my home,” that’s wonderful because it’s actually turning a place name into a verb. The idea of St. Tropezing anything, or Cannes anything, And “I’d spread Nepal from wall to wall,” you know that’s Robert……In fact I think this is the poem that won Robert the prize the next year. Oh, and here’s one thing that nobody gets, but I get it. “Air I’d fill with Rome,” (plays the piano) Do you know that tune?

DB: No

JDE: (Plays again) Do you know Respighi? The composer Respighi?

DB: I do, yes.
His, probably, most famous orchestral piece is called *Pines of Rome*. And the last movement of *Pines of Rome* is called the *Appian Way*, and it is his orchestral imagining of an ancient Roman army marching back into Rome victorious from battles in the East along the Appian Way, which was a triumphant procession route. And it begins with (plays piano), timpani, you hear the drums, and then you hear the horns, the distant horns, as the army gets closer to the city (plays again). And then it’s answered by more horns and trombones, and then as the army gets closer and closer to the city until finally they enter the city, and it’s just hair raising when they enter the city and the entire orchestra is blasting this tune. If you don’t know the *Pines of Rome* you should get to know it. It’s a great, great show piece, and Respighi at his best, he was a brilliant orchestrator, and it’s just orchestral virtuosity of the highest order. So that’s my little (plays again), but it changes instantly and goes on, so I know it’s there. Then it ends with this plea, “If only I spoke French.” So a *Poet to His Muse*, then came a *Poet’s Choice*. Oh, this is the one about lady’s who lunch and drink. Which is what all like to do when they lunch (plays piano). Well, I don’t know what to say about it. It’s rather flippant, “With Apologies to Ogden Nash,” that was Robert’s subtitle. Oh…Oh, that’s the reason. Do you know why it’s “Apologies to Ogden Nash?” He was an American humorist, and he wrote a lot of wonderful, funny poems, and his specialty was taking words and mangling words so that you still understood the meaning, but they were pronounced in a funny way. So if you look at the second page you’ll see the Ogden Nash word, “it matters not to me my friend, not a little, or a lottle, the form that holy genius takes, nor the color of the bottle.” (laughter) That’s something very Nashian to do, to rhyme a word with another word that makes no sense, “not a little or a lottle.” Meaning that it doesn’t matter if it’s a little or a lot, so he changes “lot” into “lottle” to rhyme with “bottle,” that’s very Ogden Nash. You need to read some Nash, you’d love it. So do you know who Dorothy Parker is? She was another American humorist, a playwright, a columnist, and a famous wit. She was part of a group of writers and witty professionals in the publishing world who formed, what was called the Algonquin Round Table, because there is a famous hotel in New York called the Algonquin Hotel, and they would meet there for lunch two or three times a week. It included Robert Benchly, Dorothy Parker, and three or four….it was a kind of a loosely formed group, mostly of these people who
were writers and in the publishing world. And this during the 40s and 50s, and Dorothy Parker had a wicked, razor sharp wit. Let's see, let me think of a Parkerism.

LT: The Radcliff one, “If all the virgins at Radcliff were laid end to end, I wouldn’t be a bit surprised.” (Laughter)

JDE: One of the games they used to play at the Algonquin Round Table was to give one word at the table and everyone at the table had to make a sentence with the word. And one day at lunch the word of the day was “horticultural.” And it went around the table with each person including that word in a sentence and then it came to Dorothy Parker, and she said “you can lead a horticultural, but you can’t make her think.” (laughter) So that’s Dorothy Parker, and there are lots and lots more stories. Get a collection of Dorothy Parker and then you’ll get it right away. And that’s the reference here. Millay, is Edna St. Vincent Millay, who is a poet and her poetry has been set a lot. So “Dorothy Parker and Millay prefer for lunch, a daiquiri?” This is a real….it’s kind of a ladies who lunch song as I said. It’s meant to be a little flippant, a little arch, and….you know, that kind of wit of sophisticates. And of course there is the Ogden Nash reference. And it’s just a of throw away kind of song, that’s why it’s a cabaret song.

Inspiration…..how did this start? Hmmm, I don’t remember. Let me look at the date…2004. By the way these were all written in Walla Walla. These were also assignments or assignment songs, assignments from Robert and Lee. I had to get these things finished in one or two days…..oh the abuse of it all. (plays the piano) This is a….yeah…I tried to make some little references to the words that are used, and especially the names. “And what did Mozart whistle,” here we get just two bars before that (plays piano), what is it? Mozart Symphony in G minor, Symphony 40. So included this clever little quote (laughter) from the G minor Symphony of Mozart and then we have it continue under the line “And what did Mozart whistle, as he shopped with Mrs. M,” You see that’s tricky, you have to actually spell out Mrs. Because that’s just an abbreviation, so we decided to spell out Mizzes M. Lee, what was the dust up about Homer, and Platonic friend, and Socrates. Was it because Homer was before Socrates, who was before Plato.

LT: Yeah I think it was something about that.
JDE: But we decided to ignore it, because history be damned. History was not important here, but these three people did not exist at the same time, which is part of the humor. So these are all questions about how does inspiration happen? How did this all happen, suggesting that most inspiration comes out of not particularly inspiring situations, it comes out of really ordinary situations and then it is taken from there to be works of arts. “Or did Oscar Wilde deliver bon mot” as his own because he had just over heard them. “Was there art before Picasso or design before Chanel?” Just one question after another…what is this, “and whose Bolero did the trick, before Maurice Ravel?” And I think I put a quote in here (plays piano), and there’s the Ravel. This sort of stuff is great fun, I love doing this. So that’s what it is, it’s a comic song that asks the question, where does genius inspiration come from? “It must be hard to think your thoughts, and never someone else’s,” (laughter) which is the punch line. Because he has asked several times throughout the song, is this stuff they stole from somebody else. So that is the Songs of Sophistication.

DB: And we’re done, thank you.
Appendix D

Interview with Robert Bode

October 3, 2009, Poet’s office and residence, Walla Walla, WA; interview between author and poet, Robert Bode.

Dennis Basset: Thank you so much for doing this.

Robert Bode: Glad to!

DB: Ok, so let’s get started with your earlier biographical information. How did you become interested in music? Where did you grow up?

RB: I grew up in Austin, Texas. From the time that I can remember I have always wanted to be a conductor. I remember I would conduct everything. I would have the stereo playing and conduct, I would make guests that were visiting the house to listen to Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, the last movement, the “Ode to Joy” movement and I would conduct. For some reason it was something that I always did.

DB: Has the interest in choral music always been there?

RB: No, it started out as orchestral music. I have always sang. I sang in high school and all through college, but I played the French horn too. I think my first interest was in orchestral music, my interest was orchestral music, but at the same time I was always involved in choral music. Actually, I spent my freshman year at SMU in Dallas, because I was considering the Methodist ministry. I’ve been really interested in Theology and issues around the ministry since I was a high school senior. So while I was there, I sang in the choir and I took graduate conducting.

DB: As a freshman?
As a freshman. I had quite a bit of experience just on my own. My high school teachers were really supportive and helpful. So during that year I realized that I had to do music. So that meant I had to leave SMU and go to the University of Texas which had a bigger program, a bigger choral program, a bigger music program. I could stay at home, which would be cheaper. So when I got back to UT I was a sophomore, I sang in a large mixed chorus and had a great experience there. I sang in the Chamber Singers, and just began to do more and more in choral music. There simply just wasn’t an opportunity to do orchestral music. So I let that go and developed my love for choral music. In my third year at UT, my mentor left, Chuck Smith, left and took a job at Michigan State, and he recommended me to take over his position at First Methodist Church, which was this really big significant church choir. I probably had no business taking over that choir, but I didn’t know that I had no business. I loved it and was there for four years. Two years of undergrad and two years of masters. And that was a terrific experience. And then also working with Morris Beachy, who was the conductor of the Chamber Singers and a terrific conductor.

After my Bachelors degree, that summer I went to Aspen and sang with the chamber Choir and studied Opera conducting. So I was really, really, interested in conducting. I shifted my focus to choral music, and started my Masters. Then I spent a year after my Masters in Cardiff, Wales. Morris Beachy had a strong connection with the conductor at the University College at Cardiff. Following my Masters, I applied for some jobs and I didn’t get one, and I really wanted to do something else, a new musical experience. And he suggested I go to Wales and work with this conductor. So when I got there, the conductor was in charge of the Opera Program, the Orchestra Program, the Choral Program, so he was glad that I came, so he gave me the Choral Program for the year. So I had that wonderful and unexpected experience, and sang at a terrific Catholic Church choir, and watching that work, it was a choir of boys and men. Stayed there a year and from there applied to the University of Cincinnati. I only applied to one place.

I was there for three years. While I was there I conducted the Men’s Chorus and the Women’s Chorus, and then in my second year we formed a Jazz Choir, which was not necessarily a great fit for me, but was an added experience. To this day, I
don’t know why I got three choirs and other TA’s didn’t get anything. So I was there for three years, and then my predecessor here at Whitman left, and they had a failed search, so they were looking for a year replacement and called Cincinnati where he had gone and Elmer Thomas, my conducting teacher, recommended that I go there for a year. So I did, and then applied the following year for the permanent position, and have been here ever since. So that is sort of that trajectory, and at the same time I was also still interested in orchestral conducting. So I applied for and became Music Director for the Mid-Columbia Symphony, which is a semi-professional orchestra, with some paid and some unpaid players. So for 15 years I conducted that group, and loved that experience, that was my orchestral outlet. In 1993 I entered a conducting competition in the Czech Republic and won it. So as a result of that I got to have a three month residency with a Czech orchestra, as a resident guest conductor, essentially conducting there Children Programs and Pops Concerts. A result from winning that competition I get these invitations to go to Eastern Europe and do concerts, so it’s nice now. I no longer do the Mid-Columbia Symphony, I get one or two invitations a year to conduct orchestral concerts and that’s enough. Sometimes those invitations are in the form of doing an opera, so I feel like there is a nice balance there. Two years ago I applied for the position of Artistic Director of a group called Choral Arts, a professional group in Seattle and got that. Last year was my first year with them for 2007-08; I’m beginning my second year. That’s a great professional outlet. So I gave up the symphony in order to do this. It requires traveling to Seattle to rehearse and do concerts, and I love doing that too. So I’m really excited about this next professional chapter. We are doing a recording this year.

DB: Are they a particular ensemble, meaning singing a particular genre?

RB: Well they were. My predecessor who founded the group was really interested in Scandinavian choral music, and also German Romantic choral music. It seemed to me that this was the best chorus in the Northwest and the niche was too narrow, so we’re doing 20th Century American Choral music and we are recording 20th Century Choral music. Otherwise we did Bach’s St. John’s Passion last year, we are doing more eclectic programs, and frankly we are encroaching on other people’s
areas. I just thought they were too narrowed and focused. So that brings us up to today.

DB: Now, do you not do something in Santa Fe as well?

RB: No, not anymore. For a number of years Lee and Joyce Farwell, and I did a vocal workshop that was based in Santa Fe. Other things starting taking over, so we stopped doing that. For five years, Lee was on staff at Santa Fe Opera, which meets only in the summer so I was there anyway. And Joyce would come. We would work mostly with Graduate students helping them make the transition from being a Graduate student to getting ready for auditions. That is such a difficult time. But we no longer do that.

DB: Now, you also had some experiences conducting opera?

RB: Yes, certainly here at Whitman I conduct the operas. There is an Opera Company located in the Tri-Cities called Washington East Opera, and I’ve done one thing with them. We did Marriage of Figaro last January. Whenever I can, I do an opera. It’s such a great, satisfying art form. Because I love singers so much, it’s just a great genre, and I’d like to do more of it.

DB: Well, that covers your musical background. What about your writing background?

RB: My parents were both teachers and very interested in language, and poetry, and writing. I remember going on vacations, I would be in the back seat, they would be in the front seat arguing grammar or complaining about something they heard on TV. So I grew up with words and I grew appreciating the sounds of text and the sounds of poetry. I guess it was just in my blood. I took in college, I took every English course and Poetry course I could take. Not necessarily because I wanted to do it or write, but because I wanted to experience more poetry. I’ve done one writing workshop, five years ago; I attended one and really got some terrific and specific training in terms of writing poetry. But I don’t consider myself a trained poet in that way, certainly I don’t have a degree and have done any extended study of poetry.

DB: What got you to start writing and submitting?
RB: Well, OK! My first sabbatical, which was in ’93, was a real confounding experience for me. In order to have my sabbatical and do what I wanted to do, which was about teaching voice and learn the Alexander Technique. In order to do that, I wasn’t doing anymore performing. I was doing no rehearsals, I was doing no concerts, except for the orchestra in the Tri-Cities. And I went into a real tailspin. I discovered that I was lost without performing, and I really, at that point, got a sense of self from performing. I consider rehearsals and teaching performing. It’s all about presenting yourself and getting feedback, and I was getting none of that feedback. So I became depressed, and I went to our minister to talk about this. Because I was feeling like a crisis coming on, and he said, “Why don’t you find another creative outlet? Something not music.” He asked what it would be, and I said, I don’t know, I guess I could write something. He said to come back next week and bring him something I had written. Well, I had no idea that that would be something that would be interesting. But I sat down, and I don’t know if they are any good or not, but I wrote five fully formed poems just in one sitting. It was as if there was this backlog of poems waiting for me to type them. That is truly the experience I had. I would enter into an emotional state or place, and in that place words begin to come. Only rarely now, do I have the experience of sitting down and taking dictation, which is what this felt like the first time I was writing during this time. Even as those poems have been set to music, and I believe most of them have, I have done very little revision. I don’t know where they come from, but certainly I had the experience over and over again of what poets, and composers, and writers talk about as inspiration. Where I know that I am ready to write a poem. I don’t know what it is until I start to write it and then I discover that there is one. I have tried at times to be more systematic about it. I’ve tried over summers when I have more time to concentrate. I’ve tried to just go to work, go to a specific room in the house to sit down and write everyday, and that is not nearly successful. It doesn’t feel like the poems are ready. I don’t know how they get ready. They get ready subconsciously and then essentially it’s about writing them down and then reworking them and revising them. Some poems, like humorous poems with very specific rhyme schemes, those I just sit down and craft. That is different, those poems don’t have an emotional attachment or come from an emotional place. Those poems that are more serious do have an emotion, and I know that they are successful when I return to them later and revisit that emotion. I think that this is such a
great gift of John David’s settings, because they are always true to the emotional content of the poem as I conceived them. I don’t know what that is either, because we don’t talk about that. He says that more often than not, he can read a poem of mine and hear its music. So for him, it becomes a process of dictation. Although there is more working out and crafting. It’s a fascinating process! I now have had the experience of working with couple other composers, and it’s interesting, most of them have a similar comment. They say I saw this poem and immediately began to hear the music. I don’t know if that makes them good or not, but I do know that with my experience as a singer and musician that I’m interested in sound and I’m interest in rhythm. Some people have analyzed certain poems of mine and commented on the relation of vowels and how the vowels are so unified and the poems tend to have open vowels. I’m interested to know all that, but it doesn’t occur to me. It does make sense that from beginning to the end of a poem there should be some sense of organic unity. I don’t always understand what that organic unity is, I think it’s emotion, but I think there are other things in play. I think there is a selection of sounds over other words and sounds, because they are similar throughout the poem. I don’t realize that I’ve chosen words with a lot of “s” sounds or something with softer sounds. I don’t understand that process and I don’t think I need to understand that process.

I think I approach writing with an ear to the sound and an ear to the music. I think that some composers are grateful and begin to hear music too.

DB: Who are your poetic influences?

RB: Well, lyric poetry for sure. Yeats, and more modern poets, Elizabeth Bogan, Sharon Olds, and Mary Oliver, Theodore Roethke, Dickinson. If you go back and look at the poets I just mentioned you will see a similarity. They are lyric poets who have an emotional truth in what they write, and a lot are interested in nature and comparing nature to an emotional state and human conditions. So I’m attracted to those writers. I get really excited, for instance when I read a Mary Oliver poem, because it is just so beautiful and I think that I want to write something. But she short-circuits me and I can’t write a poem after reading her poems. I really can’t.

DB: Do you read a certain poet to put you in a mood of any kind?
RB: No. Do you mean in a certain creative mood?

DB: Yes. For instance with the War poems….

RB: Walt Whitman! I forgot Walt Whitman!

DB: The War poems, did you read any Wilfred Owen?

RB: No. I couldn’t do that, because then I would steal at some level and not be aware of it. I think that is what we do anyway. The fact that I don’t read a Wilfred Owen poem today in order to write a War poem tomorrow, doesn’t mean that at some level I don’t remember the Owen poems I read years ago. But no, if I was to say that I need to prepare for this by reading Walt Whitman’s *Civil War* poems, I’d be short-circuited and all I’d be able to do is admire Walt Whitman.

Here is the way it works, most of the time. John David will say we have two songs, and do two more and we can have a set. I think OK! And that is the last I think of it until I’m ready to write, and I don’t know when that is going to be. But I trust that it will come. If I force it, it will be just awful. And if I don’t force it and allow an image and emotion to come…for instance, I just began to remember my feelings of walking across the battlefield at Little Big Horn…just remembering that geography. I wasn’t remembering it to write about it, I was just remembering it. Again, it’s the subconscious presentation of something. So my experience of writing that poem, Little Big Horn 2007, my experience was I wanted it to be known that we were looking back. My assignment from John David was to write a War Poem that had action in it. So I knew that would come. Several weeks later, I begin to think about my experience at Little Big Horn, not because I wanted to write about it, but just because that was what I was thinking about. So the thoughts come subconsciously at first and then I just sat down and began to write. Then after a couple of hours you have a poem. Then I look at it the next day and fix it and work on it. You know, try and apply some sort of craft to it because I know that it’s going to become a song. And a song needs a certain shape. The idea comes as a gift and I then I work with the gift.

DB: How do you describe your style of poetry?
RB: The comic ones are somewhat like Ogden Nash and have a rhyme scheme and are tightly bound by the rhyme. I think that’s fun and I think that’s funny to have rhyme. Serious poems that I write don’t have rhyme because I don’t want them to be funny. So they are lyrical, they are visual. I think you can read them as one image after another. I think that is what John David is attracted to. Because they are not so verbal as they are pictorial. Does that make sense?

DB: Sure, imagery is the dominant characteristic.

RB: Yes.

DB: Now do you see these images and the words come out, or the words flow and the images form?

RB: You know I think that I first will see an image. I’m thinking about a poem that you’ve not read, it’s a new poem. I was just sitting thinking about daybreak and how it looks. And had the idea of a door in a kitchen. From the outside the door is slightly opened, and the sunrises, and the light comes through that door. So I saw that and began to write about that. I think the image comes first. I’m thinking now about the poem, At Dusk. So I had an image of our pond where we used to live, and it wasn’t that I was seeing the pond, I was thinking about the pond. I saw the moon over the pond, reflecting on the water, at the same time split, because there is a handrail, so you essentially get two moons. So the image comes first and with that image there is an emotional quality and I can just attach words to the emotional quality. It’s not what I plan to do, it’s just what happens. I’m only now sort of noticing the process. I don’t plan this process. The closest I get to a plan is that John David tells me that he needs one more poem and it needs to be fast. So I know that I’ll be using short words, I know that I’ll be using words together to create rhythms. I know that I’m going to create, and then I simply let it go and trust that whatever I write, he’s going to make sound better in the music. I really just trust and let it go and don’t control it. I do rewrite, that is what I have learned in my experiences at the writing workshop and other places. The importance of rewriting until it makes sense and is coherent and trimmed of its fat. I must say that I write completely differently when I am expecting the poem to be set to music. Because I write in a much more modern style, when I’m writing something that is just a poem. Fewer words, harder realities. There is a softness to a song, a
gentleness, a roundness to text that is going to be sung. So when I write pieces I expect to be sung they turn out to be kind of old fashioned. Yet, I’m also interested in writing much more modern, much more emotionally, arid poems that just simply wouldn’t work as a song. They are just too abrupt, or harsh, or the sounds are too hard. I’m very interested in writing both those kinds. I think writing a poem that is going to be sung has a certain a quality in my mind, and somehow I need to remain true to that quality.

DB: Well that about finishes us up. Thanks.