Philomel

dramatic song cycle for soprano and piano

Justine F. Chen

2008 rev. 2022



Program Notes for Philomel

Composers who know musicians who have an affinity with their work are fortunate; but composers who know singers who possess that understanding are truly blessed. Singers are a unique category of musician, for they are required to imbibe and completely embody the music they perform. As the first female lead to premiere my first opera *Maiden Tower*, Jennifer Zetlan holds a very special place in my composer heart. Since that first encounter, Jen has come to know and remains current with my vocal repertoire, so when she asked for a song cycle, I could not imagine a more perfect muse.

After finalizing the rest of her recital program, we discussed ideas for the cycle, considering the surrounding songs and relating other ideas of interest. During this negotiations period, a terrific performance of Argento's Chekov-inspired *Water Bird Talk* gave me the idea of creating a self-contained dramatic work, something more theatrical than the typical song cycle. After much thought, and particularly because of a suggestion Jen made about combining both sound and words, I realized which subject would best suit our needs and showcase the sweetness and dramatic flexibility of Jen, total performer: Philomel, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

My very first exposure to the gruesome tale was as a freshman in music history where Milton Babbitt's electronic masterpiece *Philomel* was required listening. I came upon his *Philomel* recording again, while researching the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center for my dissertation. A few years and a few operas later, I found myself drawn to the story, eager to delve into the daunting and fascinating task of dramatizing the extraction of the tongue as well as her wondrous transformation into a nightingale.

Though Prof. Babbitt served as gateway- and what a dazzling marriage of content and form to depict this story of transfiguration with electronics- my point of departure is theatrical: meant for realization by a live performer. This monodrama explores the stylistic textual and dramatic expanse between art song and opera. The text - my own adaptation, written after consulting translations by Martin, Hughes, Golding, and Miller - was fiendishly difficult to reduce to its final form. Many thanks to Ken Gass and Matt Boehler for sifting through my earlier drafts. My main influences are e. e. cummings' poem about confetti, Georges Aperghis' *Machinations* and *Récitations*, Akutagawa's multiple-perspective short story *In the Grove* (internationally renowned through Kurosawa's *Rashomon*), and Britten's *Rape of Lucretia*. It is perhaps bold to imagine that I was not influenced by Babbitt's *Philomel*, and though I do not hear it or even sense it in the music or text, I do not doubt the wit and majesty of Babbitt's own *Philomel* preside the psychic space of this cycle like perfume.

- justine f. chen/nyc 11.26.08

Philomel was premiered by Jennifer Zetlan and David Shimoni at the Church of Christ and St. Stephen in New York City at the Marilyn Horne Foundation concert series *On Wings of Song*, March 8, 2009

Septet Orchestration

A septet version (violin, cello, flute, bassoon, French horn, trumpet, and double bass) was created for Beta Collide for performances in Oregon April 2010. With this orchestration, I sought to benefit from the increased numbers of musicians and instrumental colors to amplify the moods, emotions, and drama of the text. The premiere of this version was given by Lucy Shelton and Beta Collide at Beall Hall at the University of Oregon, April 13, 2010.

When speaking to Brian McWhorter about our collaboration of expanding the instrumentation of *Philomel* for Beta Collide, the concept of conversion to a larger ensemble was tied to the possibility of introducing minimal staging into the presentation. Although I've listed a proposed layout, of course, this is merely a suggestion.

- jfc/nyc 02.02.10

I. Narrator I

When promised to Tereus by a father grateful for the rescue of his besieged city, Procne journeyed to Thrace content to fulfill her duty of uniting their kingdoms; But after five years away, Athens called to her yearningly; and Procne responded,

pleading with her husband to bring her most cherished treasure: The gift of a glimpse of her dear sister, Philomel.

II. Tereus

Most content was I to satisfy my wife's request. But when I caught sight of radiant, young Philomel... Words struggle to describe that moment, this creature, her effect. Even Athen's finest robes were mere supplicants Lapping her exquisite limbs greedily.

The splendor of this unearthly grace set me afire, And my thoughts raced.

Most content was I to repeat Procne's request, And of how she wept uncontrollably for her dearest little sister. I also shed tears, adding poignancy. So effective was my performance, That innocent young Philomel began to plead for her delivery Throwing her arms around her father's neck, she begged, kissing him over and over. And my mind raced.

III. Philomel I

The way he stared at me, even in Athens Then as we sailed, he kept a steady gaze. After we docked in Thrace, Tereus spirited me through foreign terrain, Riding through a densely shrouded forest, we stopped at a stone dwelling As we entered, I asked for my dear sister, Procne. As he locked us in, his intent became clear. I cried out for help to my sister, my father, and the gods, but alas, all was in vain.

Trembling, bruised, I summon from the depths all my rage I swear, Justice will be mine, He shall be punished for his barbarity. And all the world will know of Tereus' crimes And if rooted forever to this spot in the woods The forest will echo thunderous with my cries.

Unsheathing his sword, he comes at me again. I offer my throat, ready for death's sweet release. Instead, Tereus draws my head back, forces pincers into my mouth. Cradling my tongue with metal maw, he tightens his grip- alas!

With swift steely snip Mumble becomes jumble Speech is rung, swung tossed It slips, writhing slick stuttering on the ground straining, slithering, throbbing inflamed, torn.

Stained, pillaged,

Grief spills out in torrents and floods. Though no justice could sate this wrath Vengeance shall be thrust upon the Thracian beast. I promised this to him and will honor that oath.

IV. Narrator 2

After a year of mourning, Procne is shown the unspeakable truth of Philomel's absence and Tereus' crimes against her family.

This woven testimony gifts Procne the wile to rescue her dear sister and contemplate a fitting response to Tereus' humiliating violations.

At the palace, the sisters prepare a sumptuous feast for Tereus. Enjoying his meal in blissful ignorance, Tereus calls for his child, 'Itys! Where is that son of ours? Go fetch him, my love.' Procne smiles, as she tells him that his dear son's already within. Confused, Tereus searches the room, underneath table and chair.

In comes Philomel, bloodied and triumphant...

Thrusting the head of Itys into the face Tereus,

Philomel opens her mouth with gleeful ferocity as Tereus shrieks in terror, agony. His only child!

Wretched, sickened, Tereus claws at his breast, too late to save poor ltys.

Unable to contain his anguish, Tereus grabs his sword and, calling upon the Furies, Rages after the sisters.

V. Philomel 2

With Tereus at our heels, we race nimbly towards the woods.

The pitter-pattering of our flutter-flighty hearts

Twittering and flittering in fits and starts

The air takes us suddenly, puffing-ruffling our skirts and tresses

Unfurling and hurling us upwards,

Swiftly lifting, insistently the breezes and eddies and gales of gusting blowing flowing Wafting in the blustery atmosphere we hover,

then

sail

Buoyant, breezy, sprightly, ethereal Our gossamer flight takes us whirling, twirling Rejoicing our supernatural heights, Ecstatic cries fill the skies, ringing the stars and heavens.

Duration: ca. 15 min.

for jen, the loveliest muse

Philomel

based on the tale from Ovid's Metamorphoses

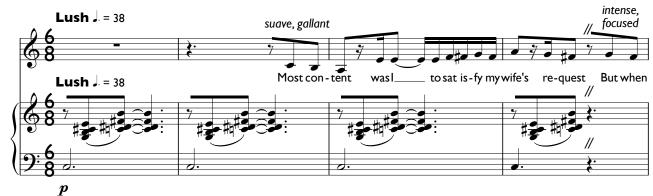


*These expressive markings for the singer were put in at the specific request of a performer and are not the 'rule', but merely one interpretation. Since I was also not inclined to indicate dynamic markings for the singer, while I would like to encourage the singer to experiment with the dynamics to reinforce the drama and meaning of the text, one must never risk losing the clarity of the words. - JFC

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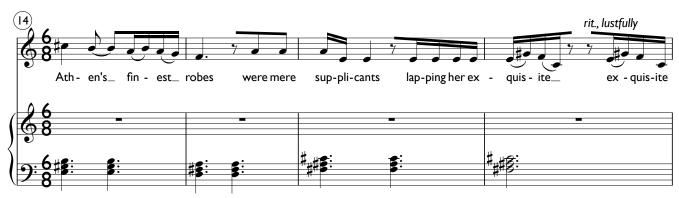


II. Tereus

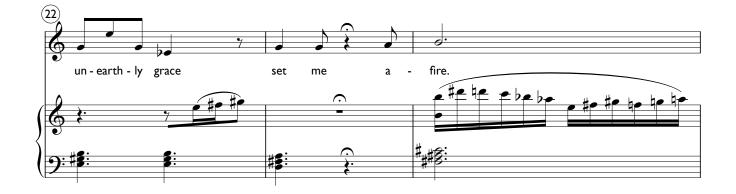


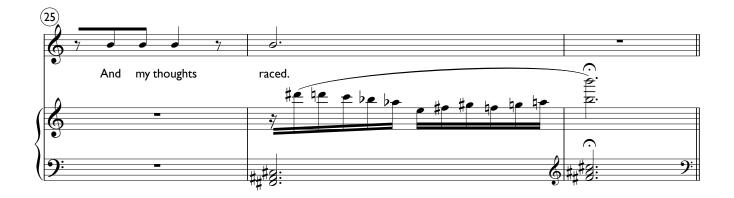


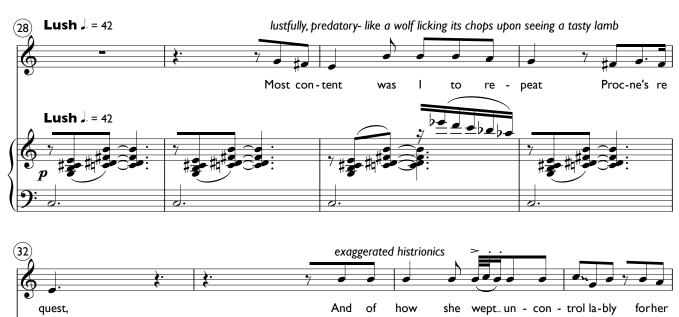
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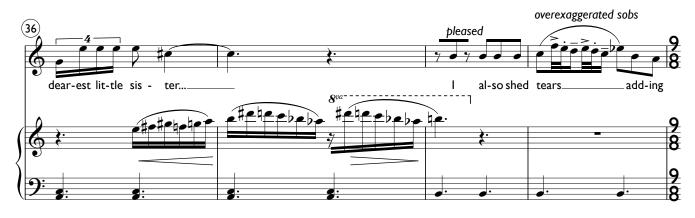






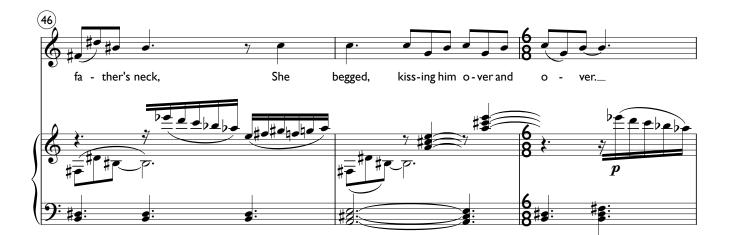


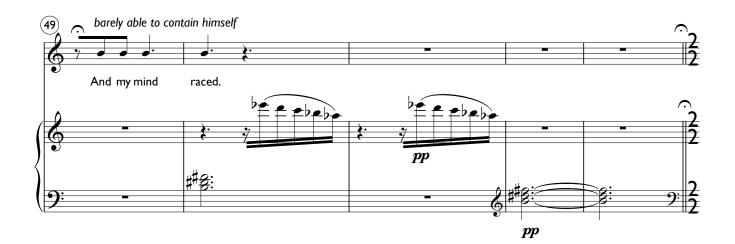












III. Philomel I





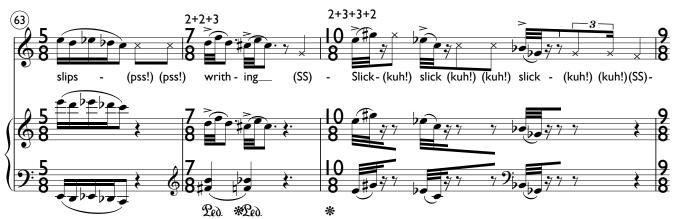


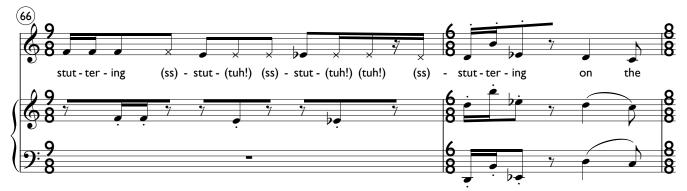
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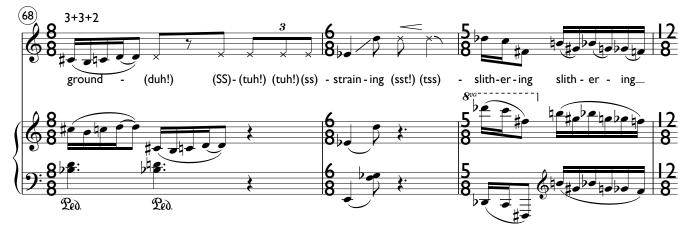
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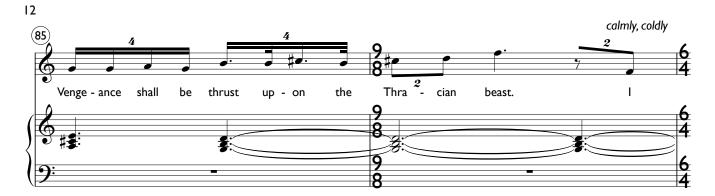




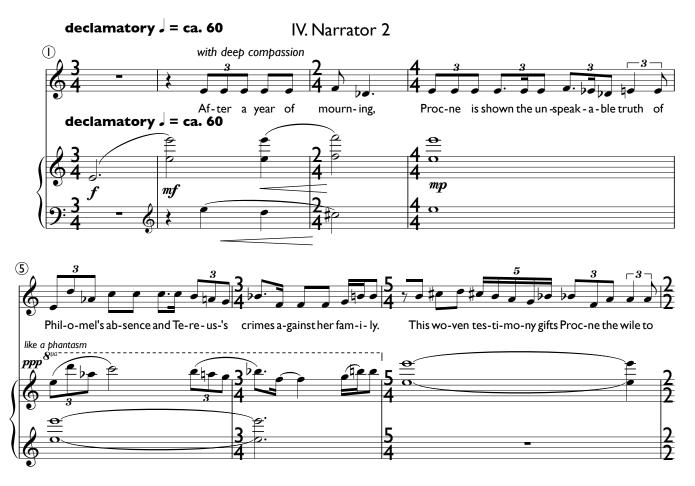




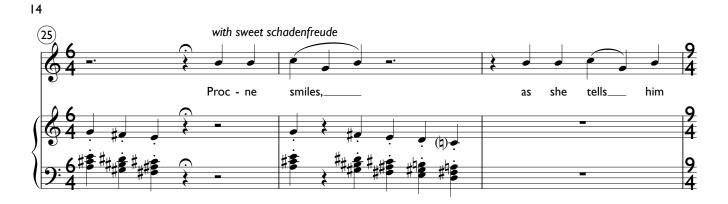




















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PERUSAL SCORE

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