

Philomel

dramatic song cycle for soprano and piano

Justine F. Chen

2008

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PERUSAL SCORE

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 3, 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

PERUSAL SCORE

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!

PERUSAL SCORE

Duration: ca. 15 min.

for jen, the loveliest muse

Philomel

based on the tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Declamatory ♩ = 48

I. Narrator I

text and music: Justine F. Chen

Soprano *calm, focused**

When prom-ised to Te-re-us by a fa-ther grate-ful for the res-cue of his be-sieg'd cit-y,

Declamatory ♩ = 48

Piano *ff*

Proc-ne jour-ney'd to Thrace, con-tent to ful-fill her du-ty of u-nit-ing their king-doms...

Ped.

② 3+2+4

Proc-ne re-

But af-ter five years a-way, Ath-ens called to her yearn-ing-ly; and Proc-ne re-

mf *f*

③ 2+3+2+4 (or 2+3+4+2, or 2+3+3+3) *with longing*

spond-ed, plead-ing with her hus-band to bring her most cher-ish'd treas-ure: The

mf *f*

④ 3+5

mf *f*

Ped.

*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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PERUSAL SCORE

⑤

gift of a glimpse of her dear sis - ter Phil - o - mel.

delicately

mp

II. Tereus

Lush ♩ = 38

suave, gallant

intense, focused

Most con - tent was I _____ to sat is - fy my wife's re - quest But when

Lush ♩ = 38

p

⑤ **Agitated** ♩ = 40

longingly

I caught sight of ra - di - ant, young Phil o - mel... ra - - - diant Phil - o - mel...

Agitated ♩ = 40

strummed

pp

Ped.

⑩ *searching, agitated*

Words strug - gle to de - scribe that mo - ment, this crea - ture, her ef - fect. E ven

14 *rit., lustfully*

Ath - en's_ fin - est_ robes were mere sup-pli-cants lap-ping her ex - quis - ite_ ex - quis-ite

18 *a tempo savoringly* *wondrous, lecherously*

limbs_ greed - i - ly. The splen- dor_ of this

22

un - earth - ly grace set me a - fire.

25

And my thoughts raced.

28 **Lush** $\text{♩} = 42$ *lustfully, predatory- like a wolf licking its chops upon seeing a tasty lamb*

Most con-tent was I to re - peat Proc-ne's re

Lush $\text{♩} = 42$

32 *exaggerated histrionics*

quest, And of how she wept un - con - trol la-bly for her

f *mf* *mp* *p*

36 *pleased* *overexaggerated sobs*

dear-est lit-tle sis - ter... I al-so shed tears add-ing

8va

40 *bursting with pride, predatory*

poign - an - cy. So ef - fec - tive was my per - for - mance that in - no - cent young

5

43 *lustfully, voyeuristically*

Phil-o- mel___ be-gan to plead for her de - liv-er -y___ Throw - ing her arms a-round her

46

fa - ther's neck, She begged, kiss-ing him o-ver and o - ver...

49 *barely able to contain himself*

And my mind raced.

pp

III. Philomel I

Swaying, uneasily ♩ = 72

① *mystified, spooked*

The way he stared at me e-ven in Ath-ens, Then, as we sailed, he kept a stead-y

Swaying, uneasily ♩ = 72

⑥

gaze Af-ter we docked in Thrace, Te-re-us spir-it-ed me through for-eign ter

♩ = 69

⑩ **a bit slower** ♩ = 60 (a tempo)

rain. Rid-ing through a dense-ly shroud-ed for-est, we stopped at a stone dwell-ing

a bit slower ♩ = 60 (a tempo)

⑭

As we en-tered, I asked for my dear sis-ter Proc-ne. As he lock'd us in, his in-tent be-came

18 *with urgency*

clear. I cried out for help to my sis-ter, my fa-ther, and the gods, But, a-

21 *with hopeless resignation*

las, all was in vain.

*

25 **livid** ♩ = 69 *humiliated, full of resentment and thoughts of vengeance*

livid ♩ = 69 Trem-bling, bruised, I sum-mon from the depths, all my rage:

trembling

pp

29 **stentorian** ♩ = 42 *defiantly, enraged, but controlled*

I swear Jus-tice will be mine. He shall be pu-nished pu-nished for his bar - ba - ri - ty

stentorian ♩ = 42

f

33

And all the world shall know of Te-re-us -'s crimes. And if root-ed for-ev-er to this

p

38

spot in the woods, the for - est will ech o thun d'rous with my cries

41

cries thun - d'rous cries. thun - d'rous thun - d'rous

44

cries. Un-sheath-ing his sword he comes at me a - gain,

warily

Red.

*

47 *bravely, with bitter defiance*

I of-fer my throat read-y for death's sweet re - lease. Te - re-us draws my head back,

Ped. * *P*

51 **cautiously** ♩ = 116

Forc-es pin-cers in - to my mouth, Cra-dling my tongue with met-al maw he

cautiously ♩ = 116

P *P* *P* *P* * *P* *P* *P* *P*

53 **forlorn** ♩ = 88

tight-ens his grip! A - las A -

forlorn ♩ = 88

p

P *P* *

56 **brisk** ♩ = 160

las With swift steel - y snip- (puh!)

brisk ♩ = 160

pp

60 (3+2)+(3+2) 3+2+4+3

Mum - ble be-comes jum - ble (SS) - Speech-(tchuh!)isrung swung... toss-(ss)-'d(uh!) It-(tuh!)

pp *ppp*

63 2+2+3 2+3+3+2

slips - (pss!) (pss!) writh - ing (SS) - Slick-(kuh!) slick (kuh!) (kuh!) slick - (kuh!) (kuh!)(SS)-

*Ped. *Ped.* *

66

stut - ter - ing (ss) - stut - (tuh!) (ss) - stut - (tuh!) (tuh!) (ss) - stut - ter - ing on the

68 3+3+2

ground - (duh!) (SS)-(tuh!) (tuh!)(ss) - strain - ing (sst!) (tss) - slith - er - ing slith - er - ing -

Ped. *Ped.* *8va*

71

throb- throb-bing. in - flam'd in - flam'd

crescendo

Ped. *

73

corn. searing, throbbing

ff

Ped.

77

miserable, with agony

dulled throbbing Stained, pil- laged,

mf *p*

Ped.

81

Grief spills out in tor-rents and floods. Though no Jus-tice could sate this wrath,

determined ♩ = 100

determined ♩ = 100

85 *calmly, coldly*

Venge - ance shall be thrust up - on the Thra - cian beast. |

87

prom - ised this to him and will hon - or that oath.

declamatory ♩ = ca. 60 IV. Narrator 2

① *with deep compassion*

declamatory ♩ = ca. 60

Af - ter a year of mourn - ing, Proc - ne is shown the un - speak - a - ble truth of

⑤

Phil - o - mel's ab - sence and Te - re - us's crimes a - gainst her fam - i - ly. This wo - ven tes - ti - mo - ny gifts Proc - ne the wile to

like a phantasm
ppp swa

⑧



res-cue her dear sis-ter and con-tem-plate a fit-ting re-sponse to Te-re-us's hu - mi-li-a-ting vi-o-la-tions.

brisk, chipper ♩ = 92

with a mischievous twinkle

⑪

At the pal-ace, the sis-ters pre-pare a sump-tu-ous feast, for Te-

brisk, chipper ♩ = 92

crisp, energetic, springy- almost mechanical

mp

⑫

re - us. En - joy-ing his meal in bliss-ful ig-no-rance,

⑳



Te-re-us calls for his child: 'I- tys! Where is that son of ours! Go fetch him, my love.'

with assured pomp and swagger

25 *with sweet schadenfreude*

Proc - ne smiles, _____ as she tells _____ him

28 *uncertain*

that his dear son's al-read-y with - in. Con - fused, Te-re-us search-es the

32 **Resolute** $\text{♩} = 42$

room, un-der-neath ta - ble and chair.

Resolute $\text{♩} = 42$

mf

p *pp*

37 *stentorian*

In comes Phil - o - mel, blood-ied and tri - um - phant, Thrust-ing the head of

41

I - tys in - to Te - re - us - 's face. Phil - o - mel o - pens her mouth with

45

glee - ful fe - roc - i - ty as Te - re - us shrieks with ter - ror, ag - o - ny. His on - ly child!

50

Wretch - ed, sick - ened, Te - re - us claws at his breast, too late to save poor I - tys.

mp

54

Un - a - ble to con - tain his an - guish Te -

p

58 *with increasing fury*

re-us grabs his sword, and call-ing up-on the Fu-ries, ra - ges af-ter the sis-ters...

62

f *mf* *mp* *p*

f *mf* *mp* *p*

f *mf* *mp* *p* (attacca)

V. Philomel 2

♩ = ca. 126 Over the course of the first 25 measures, the tempo slows down very very gradually from 126 - 110. This ritard should be fluid and virtually imperceptable.

① *alert and highly aware*

With Te - re - us at our

pp

③

heels, we race nim - bly towards the woods.

⑥

The pit-ter - pat-ter - ing of our

⑩

flut - ter - flight - y hearts, twit-ter- ing, flit-ter- ing,

easily, like a scarf caught in a gust of wind

(♩ = ca. 116)

⑭

in fits and starts, ah

mf

(♩ = ca. 116) *like beating wings*

sub p

⑱

The air takes us sud-den-ly, puff- ing ruf- fling our skirts and tress - es Un furl- ing and

23 *(♩ = ca. 110)* *like unpredictable gusts of wind*

hurl- ing_ us up - wards, Swift-ly lift - ing in-sist-ent - ly

easily, like a scarf caught in a gust of wind

28

The breez - es and ed-dies and gales of gust-ing blow - ing flow - ing

smoothly flowing

31

Waft - ing in the blus - t'ry_ at - mos phere we

gently

34

hov er, then sail

39 *buoyant breezy sprightly mysterious, ethereal*

Buoy - ant breez - y, spright - ly e -

detached

46 *rapturous, effortless*

the - re - al Our gos - sa - mer flight takes us whirl - ing ah

52

twirl - ing ah re - joic - ing re

56

joic - ing our su - per - na - t'ral heights, ah

like gently beating wings

8va

*Red. **

61

ha ha ha ha ha ha Ec-stat-ic cries fill the skies ring - ing ah

8

Ped.

64

ah ring - ring - ing the stars and heav-ens.

8

p

f

68

vocalize on "ah"

8

73

loco

76

80

83

87