

# Cleopatra

song for soprano and piano

Justine F. Chen

2008

## Program Notes for *Cleopatra*

I originally met Cori Ellison for the first time when she was the dramaturg at New York City Opera. She had seen my first opera (*The Maiden Tower*) when adjudicating their VOX showcase for American Composers. In that hour or so we first spent together, she astonished me with her equally encyclopedic yet sensitive and meaningful understanding of my work, the operatic canon, and her sensitivity to me as a creative artist, as well as form, structure, prose, and the genre.

A few years later, after becoming more acquainted with my work, she asked me if I would be interested in working on a song with her translation of an Anna Akhmatova poem for the loveliest soprano Elizabeth Futral. Of course, I was elated at the opportunity.

The poem was written by Akhmatova while living in Stalinist Russia. Considered a danger of the state, she had seen her work banned, her first husband executed, the imprisonment of both her son and her third husband. The poem is particularly moving when I see how she channeled her experience so exquisitely. Or rather, Cori's exquisitely elegant translation captures all I perceive, since I cannot read Russian.

When I read this translation, the first image I had was the profile of a regal, stunning Cleopatra reclined on a golden throne, in the style of a Matissean odalisque; her skin and the air shimmering with gold dust, and I sensed incense in the room. The main piano figurations attempt to portray this image and environment, and the history, elegance, grace, beauty, and wit that embodies Cleopatra in this poem.

- justine f. chen/nyc 4.3.13

### *Text*

#### Cleopatra

"I am air and fire. . ."

- Shakespeare

Already, she's kissed Antony's dead lips,  
Already, she's knelt and wept before Caesar ...  
And been betrayed by her servants. Trumpets shriek  
Beneath the Roman eagle, and evening spreads its haze.

Now enters the last captive of her beauty,  
Tall and stately, he whispers, bewildered:  
"Like a slave ... you will be sent before him in his triumph ..."  
Yet the slope of her swan-like neck stays supple as ever.

Tomorrow her children will be chained. Little is left  
for her to do – except  
To toy with this peasant,  
And with indifferent hand, to lay the black snake  
On her swarthy breast, like a parting kindness.

—Anna Akhmatova, 1940  
(tr. Cori Ellison, 2008)

"I am air and fire"  
- Shakespeare

# Cleopatra

soprano and piano

music: Justine F. Chen  
text: Anna Akhmatova trans. Cori Ellison

with veiled repose  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 66$  *mf*

like incense floating into the air Al - rea - dy, she's kissed An-to-ny's dead lips.

Piano *p*

Ped. Ped. simile

Al - rea - dy, she's knelt and wept be-fore Cae - sar...

Ped.

And been be-trayed by her ser- vants. Trum-pets shriek Be-neath the Ro-man ea- gle,

Ped. Ped. Ped.

and eve-ning spreads its haze. Now en-ters the last cap-tive of her beau- ty,

Ped. Ped. *mf* *piu f* loco

18

Tall and state-ly, he whis-pers, be-wil - dered: "Like a slave... you will be

*mf*

21

sent be-fore him in his tri- umph..." Yet the slope of her swan - likeneck stays

*sub.p*

24

sup-ple as e - ver. To - mo-rron her chil-dren will be chained.

*sub.p*

28

Lit-tle is left for her to do ex-cept To toy with this

*sub.p*

32

pea sant, — And with in - di ffrent hand, to lay the black snake On her swar - thy

8<sup>va</sup>

36

breast, like a par - ting kind - ness.

(8)

*loco*

*pp*