

Performance Notes for Philippe Côté by Lee Tsang (2019-20)

These notes were supplied to conductor and composer Philippe Côté following my poetic response to his piano sketch, which he had earlier written as a response to 'The Hand'. The notes have been gathered into four parts:

Part 1: Notes on Word-Setting and Process in 'Hope Shadow'

Part 2: Notes on Narrative

Part 3: Notes on Performance Guidance for Singers

Part 4: Notes on Practical Adjustments for (Poetry) Performance Contexts.

Parts 1, 3 and 4 were sent to Côté and Braid during August 2019. Part 2 was sent to Côté and Braid for the attention of singers in April 2020 to supplement other notes drawn from Parts 3 and 4 of this document.

Part 1 is notable for introducing the concept of phonetic anchoring as a compositional device. Part 2 provides guidance on narrative in order to encourage dramatic nuance in singers' readings of the text. Part 3 highlights advice relating to specific points in the music. It refers to some challenges of setting the text to the music and offers solutions for execution, interpretively and technically, plus a suggestion for building improvisation into the structure. Readers should note that the technical advice here relates specifically to the original sketch version of the vocal line which extends to a wider range than later versions; the vocal lines in the later jazz orchestra score and subsequent performances were reworked to accommodate individual singer strengths. Part 4 advises a) on reasons for ordering of pieces and b) how poetic execution differs from the musical setting in terms of rhythm and pulse. In order to sharpen for a potential singer a sense of how the musical setting transforms delivery of the text, it includes a line by line illustration of where the pulse for 'Hope Shadow' may be felt in a potential non-music setting.

Part 1: Notes on Word-Setting and Process in 'Hope Shadow'

Re: word setting. I have written down the setting on the score attached. Basically there are no melismas. Each note has a separate syllable. For clarity 'opening' is two syllables as in 'ope-ning' and 'Everywhere' is three syllables as in 'Ev'rywhere'. All the rest should work out very naturally. I have given some explanation about process below this revised version. Text follows natural stresses to match the natural musical stresses.

Look upon the fields and the hills that
Shape the lands of 'noble' pain,
For our nightingale who flits through the trees does find his
Comfort there. Amidst the loss
My palm lays bare and
Openly stretches up above
Enveloping all that he has called his home.

It shines
Softly;
And it shines –
Oddly...
(While he's turning in the twilight
Casting shadows, now in plain sight.)

Hear the sound that whispers and dreams, and
Searches through his broken shame
Whilst my opening glimmers grow, climb and fly
Above, and strike out Everywhere; ...
see, these
Moments do reveal ...
a hope ... shadow, that he's
Hope's ...
Shadow ...

In terms of process I played through the piece and began improvising phonetically to find sounds that matched or enhanced some of the harmonies. I call this a process of phonetic anchoring, which is inspired by the context of the note harmonically and texturally and in terms of metrical emphasis. I developed a hierarchy (loosely) for which of these sounds should be retained and as the meaning of the text was shaped and developed I would sometimes lose some 'anchors' in favour of the emerging prevailing sense. It was often a matter of prioritising what felt natural and enhancing to the existing music and seeing what I could get away with losing in favour of developing a meaning that could be understood on different levels or at least had the capacity for different meaning resonances.

For this song it was important that the overall meaning of the text should intersect with the text for 'The Hand' but not replicate it. We needed to ensure that it said something new. So, whereas 'The Hand' is from the 'nightingale's' perspective (whoever that might be...) the perspective taken here was of a mysterious force i.e. 'The Hand' itself. But what is 'The Hand'? The overall idea here is to convey something about light and darkness, to make us reassess what 'light' and 'darkness' are and their multifarious relationships. What is the Hand if not that which guides through illumination or enables us to reflect on darkness and our relationship to it? And can light exist without darkness? The shadow is ultimately necessary for light. Or at least that's one of the meanings conveyed here.

In terms of the phonetic anchoring, high up on the list were the following factors:

1. Where the voice is lowest and least projected we needed words that would enable us to communicate something quietly but clearly and have the meaning behind it to rationalise this. 'Hear the sound that whispers and dreams' was the solution and felt very natural to me and came early on in the process.
2. Where the voice was highest we needed the vowels to maximise the possibility of as open a sound as possible, i.e., for me, given the song's range, making this as easy to perform as possible was a major priority. So, for the notes that lie at the top of the range '...strike out Everywhere...' - the 'E' of everywhere is super-open and bright and has no impediments for the top note i.e. it has the capacity to be a good top note! The trick here was to ensure I was saying something that matched the sentiment, so what I landed on here played a significant role in decisions elsewhere in the text. I was not married to this particular word at this point - there was quite a lot of to-ing and fro-ing going with the meaning in order to arrive here.
3. Wherever the sound is open or resonant/ arrives harmonically, we should convey something positive (e.g. 'hope') compared with something darker/poignant (e.g. 'shadow')
4. More generally, there were lots of details in terms of where I felt the harmony and texture led me, so if a harmony had a feeling of searching or finding or whatever, I would use a word that reflected that harmonic/textural sense. The narrative was then shaped or sculpted around that, trimmed and refined as necessary until it reached what for me was something coherent and said something new. I felt your piece had a different feel than 'The Hand' and it was important to reflect this and find a way of letting its distinctive characteristics 'shine' (so to speak).

Some more examples/elaborations/pointers to arriving at the sense:

I have been careful to emphasise the natural stresses and for the harmony to guide the sense e.g. "'noble" pain' and 'broken shame' have some sense of loss or loneliness here which I got from the texture as it 'lost' an inner voice.

The opening phrase has a simplicity 'Look upon the fields' which is led by the harmony and almost hymn-like texture. The harmony shifts for the word 'shape' so I liked the mutual resonance of that.

I felt the harmony began to take on a direction in bar 5 hence the shift towards focusing on the 'nightingale' and for me the vowels matched what the harmony was doing. Similarly words like 'find' matched the idea of harmonic finding; and there was a momentary warmth on 'comfort there'... but of course we move on quickly with 'Amidst the loss' (which I have explained in my performance notes). There is a harmonic open-ness to 'The palm lays bare' and of course the line stretches up for 'stretches' and harmonically we kind of arrive home for 'home'. (This was one of my anchors!)

I loved the resonance in b. 14 as it literally shone for me, hence the bright 'shines'. At one point in the process each of my 'shines' were followed in the next bar by other bright vowels; at first I was using the words 'brightly'/'nightly', but these didn't say much and presented other problems so in the end I felt it more interesting to go for 'softly' and 'oddly' to pull out a different meaning. I sense these bars as warm and generous sounding; they are not necessarily super quiet, but soft-edged. They are middling dynamics with 'shines' at most mezzo forte and 'softly' and 'oddly' perhaps mezzo piano, though I'm not being prescriptive here!

'While he's turning ...'repeat section - I explained already about this in the performance notes and the options available, so won't repeat what I said about that here, unless you need me to. All I would add is that bars 20-23 are like a bridge and whatever you do, it might involve anticipation of bars 24ff. In other words, as well as toying with light and shadow, you may anticipate the ideas of whispers and dreams...(possibly).

'Hear the sound that whispers and dreams...' - as mentioned already the voice has to not have much to compete with here. I would add that it could be performed as almost spoken and can be really quite breathy. Basically give the singer maximum space.

'Whilst my opening glimmers....' just like the harmony, this really opens up so that the voice can be supported to sing strongly for our top notes 'strike out Everywhere'.

Part 2: Notes on Narrative

Alliance comprises two original songs with texts by Lee Tsang and music by Braid (“The Hand”) and Côté (“Hope Shadow”). “The Hand” is sung from the perspective of a central character (expressed in the form of a nightingale) who is guided by the Hand, a mysterious force. “Hope Shadow” is a companion piece to “The Hand”; it takes the opposite subject position and is sung from the mysterious force’s omniscient perspective. Together these texts express aspects of imagery relating to the human spirit as it deals with its transgressions. They express the world in terms of a necessary interdependent balance, much like the yin-yang concept, which here combines with allusions to Christianity.

Here follows a narrative description of ideas underpinning ‘The Hand’ and ‘Hope Shadow’. It may prove helpful for the singer’s appropriate articulation of various subject positions and expressive structures. Other interpretations are also possible.

‘The Hand’

The nightingale is an embodiment of ‘the soul’.

The individualistic soul, aka the Self, appears to thrive. It is apparently accomplished in this ambiguous world of ‘darkness’ and ‘light’; it is aware of where it has travelled and, tired, is searching for a place to rest. But the true ‘soul’ of which the Self is a part is troubled. An individualistic path has been guided, at least superficially – even tokenistically – by suffering and divine Beauty. This doesn’t seem enough. The soul senses its lack.

In its unconscious, the Self is fearful and directionless, wondering if it should trust ambition. Will it be less blind if it looks for guidance through signs put out by the world?

The Self’s ambition is far reaching and manipulative. Although convinced (or trying to convince itself) that its actions have been justified, the Self cries out to be led spiritually. The essential energy of the soul desires the comfort of guidance; it yearns to hear the Call.

The Self wanders through life and, solving many puzzles and challenges, is apparently successful, but it recognises that it has unwittingly compromised the virtue of its soul in order to succeed. It asks for guidance from an invisible force (the Hand) so that its voice, its essence, may be taken somewhere ‘profound’ and fulfilling.

The nightingale has sung and realises that it has done so. The soul, more complete on reflection, now recognises its inextricably collective nature; it genuinely thrives and honestly acknowledges this good fortune. The Self is accomplished in this ambiguous world of ‘darkness’ and ‘light’, but the fulfilled soul recognises that such ‘accomplishment’ is not so important; it has indeed been enough to have been guided through by suffering and divine Beauty. The soul has searched and is aware of where it has travelled; it is content. No longer concerned about its ‘place to rest’, it embraces the unknown in the knowledge that this (darkness) is its gift, its journey and purpose.

'Hope Shadow'

The Hand is a mysterious, omniscient force with a divine power.

It observes the nightingale (the soul), and the narcissism, ambition, pain, sacrifice, loss – the twists and turns – of the soul's journey. As a result of the force, the soul finds comfort, an environment he can consider 'home'.

The force's power is immense. Indeed, everything that the soul identifies with and finds comfort in is 'enveloped' by the force.

The nightingale and the Hand are yin and yang, dark and light, a curious interplay necessary for each other's existence.

The soul speaks to itself through 'whispers' and 'dreams'; it explores its own transgressions. At its lowest ebbs, the soul's darkness reveals a light; this light cannot exist without the dark, and the dark cannot be aware of its own darkness without the light. That light is hope, and thus the soul is a shadow, a shadow that is necessary for Hope to exist.

Part 3: Notes on Performance Guidance for Singers

These performance notes relate to 'Hope Shadow':

1. Last quaver of bar 7 (Amidst the loss...) would benefit from a change of dynamic. This can work if you sing a little louder and create a change of colour in the voice – a switch in thought at this moment is essential to negotiate the transition effectively. It may be helpful for the accompaniment to give a little space before the chord on bar 8, though much depends on the tempo (the space may not be necessary).
2. Bars 20-23 are the section 'While he's turning in the twilight/ Casting shadows, now in plain sight'. There are a number of options which can be selected at will depending on the performance:
 - a. The lines can be omitted if an instrumental is preferred as they are not essential to the main sense of the text (though the instrumental music can convey the sense of the text here) OR
 - b. The lines may be sung simply as written, which relies on a single repeat as notated in the music OR
 - c. The section could be improvised with the instrumental taking over and interweaving. If there are multiple repeats of these four bars, the singer may sing the words that match the notes in fragmented ways, which then allows for different connections.

For example, a very straightforward way of doing this is:

'While he's turning...[followed by music for 2 bars]
Casting shadows...[followed by music for 2 bars] ...
[preceded by music for 2 bars] in the twilight...
[preceded by music for 2 bars] now in plain sight...'

but my suggestion only works if the instrumental takes over with interesting improvisations. You can be freer than this, too, substituting words/phrases for a gentle 'Ah' or 'Mmm', 'Nng', 'Aw', 'Oh'. Think of it as playing with light and shadow. If it doesn't work convincingly or cannot be sustained interest-wise, go for options (a) or (b).

3. Singers will find their own solutions to certain corners depending on what suits individual technique or performance manner. Here are two such corners:
 - a. 'Noble'. There are three key things to consider in relation to this word:
 - i. The idea is that despite what the nightingale has said/done/regrets in 'The Hand' there is something that could be considered as noble about his suffering, about his recognition of the need to be guided and about his acceptance of his 'flight'. It makes sense that he finds 'comfort there' even if it is a lonely place.

- ii. The original word I had for these two eighth notes [quavers] was 'lonely', so I still perceive a trace of that meaning here.
- iii. There is something slightly troubling about the idea of 'noble pain', so the inverted commas for 'noble' have been included here to help us question that.

The inverted commas present a challenge for the singer and I wouldn't want to dictate how this message is communicated, but it may be helpful for the singer to have operating in the background a conflicted understanding that the pain is a kind of comfort, lonely and a questionable or misplaced notion or a notion with questionable motives. On this last point, consider for instance:

- Does the nightingale think he is being noble? or
- Does he think others will think he is noble? or
- Might others consider his situation/perspective noble and perhaps they should not and/or
- Is there a historical problem with the notion that exists, for instance in some religions, where pain is glorified as noble? The bottom line is that the 'nobleness' of the pain connects with the idea of narcissistic motivations and actions which the nightingale has elsewhere expressed have caused him so much such angst.

I realise all these nuances of potential meaning are a lot to get across in one word; the singer has just one second to do so! It may well be impossible to communicate everything, but the performer should aim to execute the word in ways that permit these meanings/readings and ideally should not do anything to prevent them.

- b. 'Strike'. This is simply a technical suggestion for execution. As with many consonants for high notes, I would recommend that the 'str' is *not* thought of/executed as high but is instead executed in the lower position (i.e. where the voice sits in the note preceding this word). The singer can then spring up to the vowel '-ike' on the main note. Ignore this suggestion if this explanation is confusing or contrary to the singer's usual practice and if it seems unnecessary, but some singers find it helpful as a way of ensuring the quality of sound for the vowel in the upper range is maximally resonant rather than constricted.

Part 4: Notes on Practical Adjustments for (Poetry) Performance Contexts

Some contextual information relating to poetry as poetry:

- 1) The song text 'Hope Shadow' (2019) is a companion piece to my text 'The Hand' (2019). It is the latest addition to my collection of texts *Songs of Light and Air*. Currently, two other songs with music by David Braid are in this proposed collection: 'Air' and 'Nirvana. Lumière.' The proposed order of the song texts for the collection is 1. 'Air' 2. 'The Hand' 3. 'Hope Shadow' 4. 'Nirvana. Lumière.' There are no restrictions on the order of how the songs should be performed – each programme will have its own requirements and flexibility in execution is always welcome. However, if performed consecutively, 'Hope Shadow' works better after the 'The Hand'. This is because of a reference to 'fly' in 'Hope Shadow'; we should avoid this word pre-empting the notion of flight which becomes so important in 'The Hand'.

- 2) See below a reference to the text rhythm pulse for 'Hope Shadow'. This is the pulse of the text as written and spoken text rather than its musical setting. The information is provided here simply as a point of contrast or comparison with the musical setting that I have supplied, showing how certain modifications are made depending on the context of the output.

Each number for this written/spoken version refers to a new line. The number shows the number of pulses per line if the pulse remains consistent. The numbers include silent pulses. Numbers in brackets () relate to silent pulses where a pause between lines/stanzas may be desirable. A summary is provided below and is followed by a line by line illustration.

Summary of stresses

4,4,5,4,2,4,5

(+3)

2,2,2,2,4,4

(+2)

4,4,5,4,1,4,4,2,2

Hope Shadow with possible spoken recitation stresses (/)

/ x / x / x x / x [4]

Look upon the fields and the hills that

/ x / x / x / x x [4]

Shape the lands of 'noble' pain, For our

/ x / x / x x / x / x [5]

nightingale who flits through the trees does find his

/ x / x / x / x [4]

Comfort there. Amidst the loss My

/ x / x [2]

palm lays bare and

/ x x / x / x / x [4]

Openly stretches up above En-

/ x x / x / x / x / [5]

veloping all that he has called his home.

(//) x [(3)]

It

/ (/) [2]

shines

/ (/) x x [2]

Softly; And it

/ (/) [2]

shines –

/ (/) [2]

Oddly...

/ x / x / x / x [4]

(While he's turning in the twilight

/ x / x / x / x [4]

Casting shadows, now in plain sight.)

(//) [(2)]

/ x / x / x x / x [4]

Hear the sound that whispers and dreams, and

/ x / x / x / x x [4]

Searches through his broken shame Whilst my

/ x / x / / x / x [5]

opening glimmers grow, climb and fly A-

/ x / x / x x (/) [4]

bove, and strike out Everywhere; ...

/ x [1]

see, these

/ x / x / (/) x [4]

Moments do reveal ... a

/ (/) / x (/) x x [4]

hope ... shadow, that he's

/ (/) [2]

Hope's ...

/ (/) [2]

Shadow ...