

Songs of Light and Air (2017-2020)

by Lee Tsang

A collection of song texts for music by David Braid and Philippe Côté.

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Foreword

This collection of five poems was written during the period 2017-2020 in response to music developed by, and with, David Braid and Philippe Côté— my collaborators on a range of jazz-classical projects.

‘Air’ was written to the melody of an instrumental cadenza from Braid’s oratorio *Corona Divinae Misericordiae*. David and I worked on *Corona* during 2016-2017 as a part of a research lab of performances with my orchestra Sinfonia UK Collective. At that time we were experimenting with the work’s form, timbres and textures, making modifications for each event. This was just the beginning of that piece’s journey, which we would continue to develop for an album released in 2019, but it was back then during that tour while we were preparing for a promotional recital at the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum in Merseyside that we first experimented with turning extracts of *Corona* into an art song. After familiarising myself with how the melody might fit within my vocal range, I developed a first draft of the words while at the museum. We then revisited the song when we met up again at the Casalmaggiore International Music Festivals in 2017 and 2018, and the song ultimately received its public premiere when we performed it at Victoria Gallery Museum for Open Circuit, University of Liverpool on 13 March 2019.

‘Air’ had as its point of inspiration a painting in which a body is held up by a hand. While that image of lifting, upward motion pervaded the music, our next art song ‘The Hand’ was more searching both melodically and harmonically, and the upward sense would come towards the end; this ‘Hand’, as it were, would not be visible, but instead was a force that would provide guidance towards a higher moment. Again I developed this text first at Casalmaggiore (2018) following David’s introduction of a ‘new ballad’ that he had written for me to sing. We decided that the form would be strophic and I was free to develop the structure however I wished. ‘The Hand’ received its public premiere at the VGM on 13 March 2019, and we later experimented with a trio version for the Casalmaggiore festival on 25 July 2019 when we performed with cellist Bo Peng.

While these developments were taking place, the Director of Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra (WJO) Richard Gillis had suggested to Philippe Côté that he and David Braid might work well together on a new commission for his orchestra. David introduced Philippe to ‘The Hand’, sharing our performance, and Philippe introduced a sketch for a new piece which he had written. The composers invited me to write words for this complementary piece and so I wrote ‘Hope Shadow’, effectively as the other half of a diptych to ‘The Hand’. This diptych would ultimately receive its premiere as *Alliance*, and was sung by Karly Epp with the WJO, with David on piano and Philippe conducting. After various adventures in which we experimented with different voices, we later had these texts recorded with the voice of Sarah Slean for a new version of the piece called *Twisting Ways*, as part of an album of the same name (2020).

‘Nirvana. Lumière.’ dates back to the Casalmaggiore festival 2019 when David introduced me to a new piece that he was working on which had its roots in a Northwest Territories Inuit folk song. As a white Western male, David was most careful not to exoticify Inuit culture here. Instead, he focused on how an idea that emerged from the folksong, a kind of ecstatic moment, spoke to him musically. To my ears, his music’s sonorities and mannerisms nod towards a kind of French conception of musical ecstasy, and so it is with this Frenchness in mind that I embarked on the text. Whilst first and foremost my intention was to communicate appropriate sonorities and images, the song raises many interesting and competing ideas about musico-cultural accent, musical translation and how artists may suitably express shared concerns or draw on commonalities of experience. To date, this work has not yet had

its musical premiere; however, it received its poetry premiere in French and in English translation, when I recited it at a University-wide event at Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool, for National Poetry Day, 3 October 2019.

'Lydian Sky' was written in response to the David Braid sextet 2005 instrumental recording of *Lydian Sky*. I approached it as a study in colour both heard and seen. The track was sung by Karly Epp in a new arrangement for the WJO written after I had composed the text. It features on the *Twisting Ways* album (2020).

Air (2017-2018, rev 2019)

Mending ...

From the dark folds, breath emerging ...

Long blew the ribbons torn ...

Fluttering freely, unconstrained bonds.

And so did those thoughts retreat:

Released,

I moved through the gentle breeze

Suspended,

Free from despair,

Rose up higher

(Without intention, healing)

Where, by the myst'ries, I was urged

From the cold air.

The Hand (2018, rev, 2019)

I, the nightingale, do sing well
As darkness transforms my light,
Whistling here through all the shades and shine.
Am I fine –
Guided by the Thorns and Rose
Looking for places where I might repose,
Searching throughout the night unknown,
Finding where I've flown?

In dreams, misty, cold and weathered
I drift through the fear-filled night
Wondering now if I should trust my lead
To succeed.
Looking for a way to go ...
Here is a challenge for our world to show:
Should I trust providential signs
To make me more than blind?

Through the mirrors, I did look far.
I sought all that I could dream.
Twisting my ways, I would reach out there.
"It was fair!"

Compel me to follow Thee
Up to the heights from which I might then see.
Draw my heart's light and draw it near
So my heart might hear.

In the garden, I did wander
Through mazes where I found gold
Tarnished by all virtues I abused
I did choose
Blindly. Let the hand give way
Just as the Shepherd holds his fold in sway.
Steer me, Hand, take me, guide my sound,
Find the space profound.

I, the nightingale: I sing well
As darkness transforms our light,
Whistling here through all the shades and shine.
I am fine
Guided by the Thorns and Rose
Finding the places that I sought and chose,
Drifting all through the glorious night
Knowing that's my flight.

Hope Shadow (2019)

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 ...

Nirvana. Lumière. (2019)

Dans cet air, sentez l'espace wondreux.

Je ne suis rien et je suis le souffle blanc.

Écoutez, mes sons glorieux, au son de votre silence.

Sans les poids de tout, l'esprit est pur. Quelle différence!

Allez les flux, les tonnerres et l'impénétrable. (Ils s'enfuient.)

Quand le feu qui domine la vie s'est refroidi dans l'extase de l'absence, je suis tout euphorique.

Nirvana. Lumière.

Translation line by line

Dans cet air, sentez l'espace wondreux. Je ne suis rien et je suis le souffle blanc.

In this air, feel the wondrous space. I am nothing and I am the white breath.

Écoutez, mes sons glorieux, au son de votre silence.

Listen, my glorious sounds, to the sound of your silence.

Sans les poids de tout, l'esprit est pur. Quelle différence!

Without the weight of everything, the spirit is pure. What a difference!

Allez les flux, les tonnerres et l'impénétrable! (Ils s'enfuient.)

Go fluxes, thunders and the impenetrable! (They run away.)

Quand le feu qui domine la vie s'est refroidi dans l'extase de l'absence, je suis tout euphorique

When the fire that dominates life has cooled in the ecstasy of absence, I am quite euphoric.

Nirvana. Lumière.

Nirvana. Light.

Lydian Sky (2020)

High on high,
Fiercely shining there in the whites,
Light on light –
Whiter than the Boreal ice –
Drifting 'neath clear aether.

After that,
Radiant structures caught in a broad
Golden hold.
Winter's turned with gilt flames this time.
See her blaze: shimmering burn.
Bolder, the light
Starts to deepen lines that have turned warm.

[MUSIC]

Grander strands -
Glitt'ring brilliance - see where they stand.
Northern-formed.
Buildings find their frosts now thaw:
Burning squares, like bare flares ...

... Warm and tall;
Softer hues whose rhapsody brought
Purple there,
Bluer where this resonant air
Turns each thread from plain gold.
Watch how they rise
Whilst the dusk descends on the wide earth.