

John Patrick Thomas

NECESSARY SINGING

Music for Voices 1963–1994



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Notes by the Composer

I have an extreme opinion concerning singing: I think it's a profound human need, one of the most personal means we have to reach the deepest parts of our psychological and emotional beings and to express these feelings to others. At least that is the case in my life and in the lives of many people I've met. What do we really sing about most of the time? Love, grief, joy, spiritual conviction, hope? The physical sensations we experience when we sing or just listen to music have long been recognized as healthy phenomena. Of course, there are many kinds of singing, and we react to them with differing degrees of identification. My own interests are directed toward a way of singing which makes possible the broadest stylistic and coloristic spectrum, singing which strengthens and frees the vocal mechanism enabling the singer to fulfill her or his musical and expressive intentions with the utmost flexibility and endurance, singing which enables the singer to tell The Truth inherent in the music, whatever the piece may be — a chanson of Machaut, an aria by Mozart, or a song from "Hair". All this can take place against the background of the singer's own personality and be conveyed by the singer's own voice. For this recording, I've had the great good fortune to work with artists who have brought to my music a degree of conviction and identification which I think no composer can presume. Their performances propose to me that even the earliest pieces here may still contain

something that is alive and essential. Only the music I write can express to them my gratitude and return the devotion they have extended to my work.

Canciones (1963–1967)

This work, written over a period of years, is a setting of three poems by 16th and 17th century Spanish poets [see text sheet]. The songs are for baritone and clarinet — in fact written for Allen Shearer who sings here. I view the songs as a scene, painted perhaps by Velásquez, in which a man sits in a room, alone, except for an attendant-keeper placed there to guard, entertain, and humor him, and perhaps participate in his delusions.

Vier Goethe Mignon Lieder (1973–1974)

Mignon is a strange child of twelve in Goethe's great novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (published in 1795). Many generations of composers have set the texts of the four songs which she sings in the novel. In the summer of 1972, I was teaching and giving concerts in Austria with soprano, Judith Nelson, and cellist, Marijke Verberne. I decided to write something for them which would connect in some way with the great tradition of German Lieder. On re-reading Goethe's poems, I was struck by how modern they seemed. Looking through a number of the famous settings of these particular texts — by Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, Wolf — it occurred to me, that only Schubert conveys the fact that Mignon is a child, precocious, but nonetheless a child. These Mignon songs are dedicated to the English composer, Elisabeth Lutyens.

Sibylline Fragments (1994)

The Sibylline tradition of inspired prophecy dates from the 7th century BC in Asia Minor, though the Greek texts of the “*Oracula Sibyllina*”, written between 150 BC and 300 AD, were only compiled in Byzantium in the 6th century AD. It is this vision of the Sibyls which we see in the Sistine Chapel and the marble floors of the cathedral in Siena. One myth relates that the Sibyl was a nymph who offered herself to Apollo in exchange for eternal life. When she refused to consummate the agreement, Apollo nonetheless granted the Sibyl her wish, albeit as a punishment, for she’d neglected to ask for eternal youth. For a thousand years she lived on and on, aging and diminishing, until nothing was left of her but her voice: a hissing sound coming from a bottle. Most of what we know about the Sibyls is conjecture, but that the practice of Sibylline prophecy existed and was revered for centuries is demonstrated in numerous writings from ancient Greece and Rome. The Sibylline texts we have – monotheistic, with a taste for the apocalyptic plus visionary references to the Messiah’s coming – are heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian writings and are generally considered to be imitations, if not outright fakes. The texts prepared for the work at hand continue this tradition of adaptation, mistaken transcription, forgery, and invention which has characterized Sibylline writings throughout history. The work was commissioned by Judith Nelson and Anna Carol Dudley for their ensemble of three singers (with continuo instruments) “A Thrill of Sopranos”. The original ensemble consisted of three virtuoso singers whose diverse timbres blended remarkably well. I took advantage of their differing vocal characteristics in writing the piece. The work was first performed in California at the Berkeley Festival in 1994.

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Canciones
(1963–1967)

- 1** Del rosál vengo,
mi madre 3:23
2 La sierra es alta 1:33
3 Interludio 3:24
4 A un jilguero 6:50

Allen Shearer, baritone
Peter Josheff, clarinet

*Canciones and
Sibylline Fragments* recorded
26–30 May 2003
Hertz Hall
University of California
Berkeley, California

Vier Goethe Mignon Lieder
(1973–1974)

- 5** Heiß mich nicht reden,
heiß mich schweigen 5:47
6 Nur wer die
Sehnsucht kennt 2:20
7 Kennst du das Land 4:01
8 So laßt mich scheinen,
bis ich werde 2:24

Judith Nelson, soprano
Marijke Verberne, violoncello

Vier Goethe Mignon Lieder
recorded
December 1989
“Off Beat” Phon Fabrik
Hamburg, Germany

Sibylline Fragments
(1994)

- 9** Intrada 4:06
10 The Invocation 4:36
11 The Sibyl Speaks 2:03
12 Apocalyptic Visions 8:53
13 The Awakening 7:03

Cheryl Keller, Judith Nelson,
Anna Carol Dudley, sopranos
Paul Binkley, guitar
Sandra Soderlund, harpsichord
Dan Levitan, harp

Technician:
Sven Treeß
Design:
Ann Holyoke Lehmann