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A COLLECTION OF UNPUBLISHED SONGS BY JOHN DUKE

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A Collection of Unpublished Songs by John Duke
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This research highlights a collection of unpublished art songs by the late American composer John Duke. A recording of these overlooked and forgotten songs has been approved for world-wide distribution. A further publication regarding these songs had been approved for publication in the NATS *Journal of Singing* for March/April 2014.

John Duke, a respected composer and pianist, served as Professor of Music at Smith College (Northampton, MA, USA) from 1923-1967. He gained national recognition for choral, symphonic and dramatic works, chamber music, solo compositions for piano, and especially for his art songs. Despite Duke's diligent endeavors to publish his works, 100 unpublished songs remain hidden away in the Smith College archives.

In the year preceding Duke's death, the "Society of the Friends of John Duke" was formed at Wheaton College (Wheaton, IL, USA). The Society was launched as the result of a friendship formed between Duke and Margarita Evans, from Wheaton's Conservatory of Music. The Society's mission was to increase the availability of Duke's songs by publishing as many of them as possible from their original manuscript form, and to re-print those that were out of copyright. Four publications resulted from these efforts. Since 2001, a few recordings have featured favorite Duke songs, along with other American art songs, but most of Duke's songs remain somewhat obscure.

For a final DMA project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, manuscripts of all Duke's unpublished songs and related correspondence were obtained to research reasons why the songs are still not available to singers and teachers. These songs were carefully evaluated, and are just as notable as their published counterparts with regard to composition and poetry. Evidence in the archives provides some explanation about Duke's efforts to publish, and the historical complexities of 20th century American art song development during his life.

By: Dr. Karen K. Bishop, DMA

A Presentation of Unpublished Songs by John Duke

The composer, on whose education primarily *as a composer* much money has been spent, finds himself in a perplexing situation; he discovers that his country will accept and pay readily enough for his services as teacher, performer, etc., but that it apparently has no use for him *as a composer*, the very thing he has been educated to be. What he has to give, his country does not want; and it does not tell him what it does want In fact, there is no connection at all, in a serious way, between the American composer and his country.

-Arthur Farwell, 1969

Such was the dilemma confronting American art song composers in the twentieth century. Changing trends in music, two wars, a Great Depression, and decreased profitability of published music presented unique compositional challenges to composers, and the waning frequency of intimate house concerts threatened the fragile, emerging voice of art song in American society. Ironically, this intense external pressure wrought a gradual appreciation of American art song as a clearly distinct and independent form from previous European models.

A surprising number of twentieth-century art songs are unpublished, residing in private or institutional collections. One exceptional example of these collections is American composer John Duke, who left behind one hundred unpublished art songs in the Smith College archives. While Duke built a successful career as a professor at Smith College (Northampton, MA), he also excelled as a composer, lecturer and performer. Despite his considerable talents, his keen interest and ongoing popularity was due in part to his special gifts as a composer of art song.

In 1983, the year preceding Duke's death, the "Society of the Friends of John Duke" was formed at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, launched as the result of a friendship formed between Duke and Margarita Evans, who was part of the Wheaton College voice faculty.

The Society's mission was to increase the availability of Duke's songs by publishing as many of them as possible from their original manuscript form, and re-printing those that were out of copyright. However, despite Duke's life-long endeavors to publish his songs, and the Society's assistance, one hundred unpublished songs remain virtually unknown.

Obstacles in Publishing

Duke's challenges to publish his art songs during his lifetime are well documented in his communications with numerous publishing companies. The following excerpts from letters in the Smith College archives provide insight into the ongoing complexities Duke faced:¹

1) His early manuscripts measured 9 ½ x 12 ½ inches, in contrast to later ones measuring 11 x 13 ½ inches. The initial format for publishing was an 11 x 17 inch format, folded to 8 ½ x 11 inches. This discrepancy reduced the manuscript size, which also compromised the legibility of the text. Duke maintained that singers might find value in having an exact copy of the composer's manuscript without a change from the original size. However, available commercial publications of Duke's songs are not in manuscript format. It is apparent that Duke made some sizing and engraving compromises which did not entirely suit his preferences.

2) Duke's ongoing contact with publishing companies included sending manuscript copy samples of specific works. Some of the responses he received illustrate the quandary of issues he faced to publicize his compositions, as described below:

a) From Arrow Press in a letter dated Jan. 24, 1940: "Recently, it has been found necessary to consider more than the artistic aspects in publishing works for Arrow Press".

b) From Galaxy Music Corp on Dec. 19, 1942, “the piece calls for more than average musicianship”, and from May 13, 1965, “we have many songs very similar to yours in our catalog”.

c) At times, Duke submitted chosen manuscripts only to have them returned, with a request for other works instead. From Bourne Music Publishers, a letter dated Jan. 12, 1949, “may I suggest that you use as a lyric one of the early American poets. Perhaps something roguish, or based on an early American folk tune”, or this letter dated Dec. 28, 1948, “at present I am looking for some interesting chorus originals or arrangements. If you have done anything in this medium recently, I would like very much to look over any manuscripts which you would care to submit. More specifically, I might add that SATB or SSA settings of American or English poets might provide a fresh idea”.

d) A response from G. Schirmer on March 12, 1975, reveals yet another challenge Duke faced, “I cannot encourage you to submit your recent songs for our consideration since we are not accepting works in this genre at this time. In the last twenty years things have turned around in the United States --- vocal/piano music, which had an excellent market in the past, now has minimal sales”.

e) Periodically, Duke would receive a response such as this one from Southern Peer, in a letter dated Nov. 26, 1980: “I am sure that you would like for them to come out soon, but we have an enormous backlog of works, and we are now trying to complete a number of major projects, some of which have been delayed for several or more years. Thus, we must proceed slowly, balancing large scale projects against smaller ones such as your songs”. Responses such as this would present Duke with the predicament of either waiting for an unspecified length of time, or withdrawing the manuscript altogether and submitting it to another company.

In his later years, Duke sought smaller publishing houses who could insure his music would stay in print despite the number of copies sold. He wrote to Recital Publications on March 19, 1979, “Nearly all publishers now seem to regard art songs as unprofitable. Hence I have been devoting more time to trying to have some of my songs recorded”.

Duke relied on the “Society of the Friends of John Duke”, in his last years, to assist him with publishing efforts. The “grass-roots” publicizing that the Society provided was just the impetus Duke’s songs needed for exposure. Margarita Evans stated to Duke supporters after his death in 1983, “it is our hope, and the hope of Mr. Duke’s immediate family, that the Society will be able to continue both to publicize and to promote the publication of the Duke songs and manuscripts. We are pursuing, as one of John’s last requests, the possibility of reprinting out-of-print songs and in-print singles in volumes, either by the companies who now hold them, or another company interested in the project”.

It is apparent from archive records that Duke made ongoing and persistent efforts to publish his works, over the course of his career. This was in addition to his busy academic career, his career as a composer, and his reputation as a lecturer and performer off-campus. The Smith College archives confirm Duke’s willingness to give copies of his songs to performers when special requests were made. This generosity undoubtedly helped with exposure to his music. The “Society of the Friends of John Duke” assisted by providing additional momentum and publication of Duke’s works, and they supplied the manpower to help publish Duke’s available song collections. Yet, despite these considerable efforts, Duke faced publishing obstacles correlating to the historical complexities of twentieth century American art song development that were unrelated to his talent as a composer.

Challenges for American Art Song

Historically, the reduced profitability of the art song in the twentieth century contributed to a diminishing interest in American art song publication. Many historical and musical developments were factors.

Prior to the turn of the century, an upsurge and popularity of American art song was initiated in part by a trend for American composers to study in Europe. The composers not only received traditional training in music, but also experimented with the integration of American composition and European tradition. Their exposure to German lied and the French *mélodie* emphasized the union of poetry and music, and put a distinctive American twist on European art song tradition. While more seasoned composers returned from such trips and followed traditional models, the younger composers were anxious to integrate new ideas into American composition.

One of the most important teachers of these sojourners was the French composer, conductor, and teacher, Nadia Boulanger. She believed in developing the potential of American composers by cultivating their compositional individuality. Boulanger's goal was succinctly summarized by Aaron Copeland:

Our concern was not with the quotable hymn or spiritual: we wanted to find a music that would speak of universal things in a vernacular of American speech rhythms. We wanted to write music on a level that left popular music far behind – music with a largeness of utterance wholly representative of the country that Whitman had envisioned.²

But, American interests soon turned to alternate musical idioms. The 1930's ushered in the Great Depression, and a questioning of the role of music in society. Neo-classicism trends clashed with the now outdated Romantic art song. The popularity of radio and film, along with

the dim economic situation, put many musicians out of work. Government-run programs, such as the Federal Music Project, provided employment by supporting performances and paying musicians to teach. American composers had their works premiered, especially those venturing into new music, through Composers Forum-Laboratory programs. World War II brought musical trends that were more experimental, such as works by Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Hindemith. The avant-garde, music and electronics, folk and jazz all contributed to experimental music and away from the Romantic art song model. Popular music continued its development in several veins, specifically in white dance bands, songs from Tin Pan Alley, rhythm and blues, country/western, and folk music. Eventually, idioms from white and black music culminated into the first hints of rock and roll, which together with jazz and musical theatre further diminished audiences for classical art song. The continued popularity of the phonograph, and the development of the radio, encouraged the general public to listen to music favorites, rather than performing in-home concerts. This development adversely affected sheet music sales, since home concerts had in the past been a primary means of circulating songs. Another detriment to sheet music sales included the demise of the Tin Pan Alley publishing houses, who found themselves suddenly bypassed. Popular songs became hits when they were recorded, not published. Fewer home concerts resulted in a decline of piano production, starting in the 1920's.

Decreasing demand for sheet music underscored the obvious fact that art songs weren't profitable to publish, either, summarized in Philip Miller's article "*When I Have Sung my Songs - The American Art Song 1900-1940*":

During World War 2, people depended more and more on live broadcast music, and from 1942 to 1944 recording approached a standstill because of the musicians'-union strike. In the late forties, as air travel became a way of life, singers who might have toured the country in recital found it more profitable to cover the world and its opera companies. Live radio music dwindled to practically nothing during the fifties, and television did little to replace it. A worse blow to the composer was the development of quick photo-reproduction, which makes it easy to copy rather

than to purchase songs. The once flourishing sheet-music business could not cope with this, for no one could enforce the copyright laws.³

Ned Rorem summarized the state of classical art song and opera by the 1950's:

By 1959 there existed not one American singer – not one!- who was first and foremost a recitalist; we could afford no equivalent of Souzay, Schwarzkopf, Fischer-Dieskau....the handful of composers still writing songs were the same as two decades earlier, if they were still alive. Younger composers were either trying to make it in opera, after Menotti's example, or were writing strictly instrumental pieces. More than ever American vocal training stressed opera to the exclusion of any other music, since only in opera might fame come.⁴

In the dissertation "*The American Art Song: An Inquiry into its development from the colonial Period to the present*", Leon Gray charted trends pertaining to the status of American art song in 1966. Of thirty-five publishing companies, some concurred there was no incentive to publish American art-song compositions because there was no outlet for their sale, and that they published very little because of the meager market. Gray found that art song was either not represented at all among types of music in published collections, or only in small quantities. Reasons given for this decline included decreased incentive to publish the works and little demand. Most publishing companies did not encourage prominent American composers to write art songs, since it was difficult to reach singers who could promote such works. Most publishers in the survey had the opinion that contemporary American art-song had been neglected in American culture, and that the future development of American art-song looked discouraging. Ninety-five percent the thirty-two major music publishing houses in America did not believe there was a market for the American art song to cover printing costs.

In another dissertation, "*Modernism and the American Art Song*", Anthony Markus suggests, "Although the art song was a favorite genre for American composers at the turn of the twentieth century, its favor declined rapidly and significantly during and after the 1910's, and for

the rest of the first half of the century the genre held a marginalized place in the output of the most significant American composers.”⁵

Finally, despite numerous musical influences through the years, Duke’s art songs reflect a definite sense of diatonic tonality. His allegiance to the Romantic-style art song stood in direct contrast to the rising modernism of his time, which assuredly presented one of the greatest challenges in the publication of his songs. This allegiance did not keep him from experimenting with contemporary nuances in his musical style. For instance, after his European sabbatical in 1929, his music displayed occasional rhythmic variety in vocal lines, irregular meters, unison sections with sparse texture, unprepared dissonance for emphasis and color, increased chromaticism in the vocal line, and in general, a more through-composed style. Duke was not inexperienced in modernistic techniques, and the time he spent with Boulanger in Paris allowed her to cultivate a progressive context in the development of his individual style. In “The American Song”, Duke described modern music in general as:

The tendency towards elaboration of the accompaniment in the direction of fuller and richer sonorities and color effects.....this elaboration of the piano part, while it is by no means necessarily detrimental to the quality of the vocal line, does tend on the whole to push it in the direction of a free declamatory style and away from what we have called songfulness as represented by the Schubertian ideal.⁶

This quote represents the epitome of Duke’s song-writing style, and his allegiance to the romantic art song model evident in his songs.

Duke’s use of text

Poetic factors also contributed to difficulties in publishing Duke’s songs. Much of the poetry Duke used for his text settings was from the genteel poetry tradition, popular after the Civil War and existing alongside modernism for a time. Themes of love, romance, patriotism, and nature generally prevailed in opposition to modernistic themes which expressed the realism

of life. As the twentieth century progressed, the acceptance of realism worked against the older Romantic poetry. Genteel poetry suited Duke's text requirements. The premise Duke used for his selection of texts was based on principles outlined in his lecture "What Is Song". He insisted his texts be recited aloud in performances, and preferred to print the poetry for his audience members in concerts. He paid careful attention to elements of poetry, such as sounds, word rhythms, the meaning of the entire line, stanzas, and subtle meanings. He also gave attention to the rhythmic sweep of the spoken line in his music, which challenges the interpretive singer to sing the phrases the way the text was meant to be spoken. He chose only texts that would not create a compromise between poetry and music.

Conclusion

The monumental changes throughout twentieth-century American music resulted in significant challenge for art song publication. These cross-currents of American musical history left behind a wealth of little-known works which poignantly take their place alongside the wake of their larger counterparts.

Duke's stylistic underpinnings to poetic and musical components produced a unique interpretation evident in his songs that make them worthy of publication. While these stylistic choices showcase Duke at his best, they also proved to be a detriment to the publication of his songs during an era of changing modernism in music.

We should not underestimate the value of unpublished, lesser-known works, as they provide insight into past music trends, and a multi-faceted glimpse into a composer's style. Unpublished music of contemporary American composers is an important record of evolving twentieth-century history, which contributed so significantly to American musical style. The

work of scholars to recover these works and make them available to performers further supports our American heritage and encourages intelligent and varied performances.

(A recording, “Songmaking” is available from the author of this article, showcasing twenty-five of these songs)

Sample Songs from the Collection:

“Freedom of the Sky” (1983) Poetry by James Stephens

It makes sense that this is a late Duke song, since it brings together all of the musical elements that define Duke at his very best. The piano accompaniment possesses a “larger than life” presence, to convey the vast sky in and around everything. Rolling arpeggios below dotted-quarter chords establish an *allegro tempestoso*. While the dynamics in the voice begin *piano*, the generally high tessitura of the piece contributes to its drama. The tempo and the dotted quarter rhythms keep the song moving. Duke uses both rhythmic elements and note choices to effectively convey the drama of nature. The dynamic spectrum of the piece alternates in each line from *piano* to *mezzo forte* to interpret the great ebb and flow of the sky, the wind, and the forces of nature. The spectacular end on a high A sharp is held over two measures of arpeggios and through the final piano chords.

This is a great encore or ending piece for a recital. The musical energy Duke finds in James Stephens’ text seems to carry over into the other six unpublished songs, set by Duke. The overall tempo of the song, along with the rolling piano arpeggios, the high vocal range, the dotted rhythms, and the spectrum of dynamics make this piece worthy of publication. Duke undoubtedly did not have time to pursue publication, due to his death in 1983, the same year this was composed.

“The Rivals” (1983)
Poetry by James Stephens

“The Rivals” proves without a doubt that not only was Duke a nature lover, but that nature truly inspired his musical gifts. This delightful exchange is a competition between singing birds in the piano, and the singer who is singing at the same time as the birds. The clever alternation between 4/4 and 3/4 throughout the piece, truly characterizes the song of birds. Just when we think we’ve gotten their singing pattern learned, they modify it slightly the next time and surprise us.

The singer begins by imagining the song of a bird outside, as she sings about the “dew on the lawn” and the “wind on the lea”. The next quirky entrance is slightly boastful, “but I didn’t listen to him, for he didn’t sing to me”, and this is the start of the competition. A slight crescendo increases the sense of competition between the birds in the piano and the voice. The piano interlude includes more bird singing, so that the singer can repeat “I didn’t listen to him”. The *forte* “I was singing at the time” is sung as if to drown out the piano, followed by “just as prettily as he” with a *piano* dynamic, and a sense of smugness. Another bird interlude precedes the next verse, as the singer just decides to sing anyway, despite the birds, and the piano and voice compete for the rest of the song. In the end, the birds must win, because they continue to sing in the piano postlude after the voice is finished!

“The Sleeping Beauty” (1984)
Poetry by Walter de la Mare

This was one of Duke’s last songs, and the magical qualities created by the text and Duke’s harmonies contribute to its beauty. The fairy-tale overtones can be embraced by the

singer with sensitivity to the text. The unfolding story is told in small segments with piano interludes.

Vivid images, such as “gold of evening in her hair”, “blue of morn shut in her eyes”, and “silver stillness of the day”, are accompanied by unexpected harmonic changes to emphasize the character of the text. Piano interludes embrace the magical qualities of the text, and bridge the text segments together. Sixteenth note quadruple figures in the piano on every beat under “oft flits the moth” effectively characterize the flying moth, as well as the fast and emphasized rhythm on “the cricket”. Harmonic changes after “from some still shadow in her hair” set up the piano interlude prior to the final verse, and piano arpeggios effectively capture the ending text “winter-haunted trees”.

Notes

- ¹ John Duke papers, Boxes 31-33, Smith College Archives.
- ² Aaron Copeland, Music and Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952) 104.
- ³ Philip L. Miller, When I Have Sung my Songs - The American Art Song 1900-1940. New York, 1977.
- ⁴ Ned Rorem, But Yesterday is not today, the American Art song 1927-1972. New York, 1977.
- ⁵ Anthony Marcus Lien, Modernism and the American Art Song diss., University of California, xii.
- ⁶ John Duke, "The American Song", Box 40 Folder 928, Smith College Archives.