6 SONGS FOR MEZZO-SOPRANO

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6 SONGS FOR MEZZO-SOPRANO

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INTRODUCTION

Conception

6 Songs for Mezzo Soprano is a song cycle made up of six songs for mezzo-soprano and piano. I wrote what became the first song of this cycle, Today, at the end of my first year of graduate school. I set out to write a song for mezzo-soprano and piano as an exercise in writing an art song using the most common accompaniment instrument, the piano, and I also wanted to try setting a poem of my own. I came back to the idea of writing songs at the end of my second year when I decided I would like to try writing more songs and make a cycle of them for my thesis. At that time, I read widely and decided that it would be more interesting if I combined poems from different eras and writers to create a mosaic of thoughts and expressions rather than attempting a linear narrative (with only one character or voice such as some traditional models represent). I also decided to include two poems of my own (Today and Waiting) to serve as bookends and a frame for the entire work. It means that the cycle begins and ends with a single voice though there were significant formal and expressive differences between the songs I eventually wrote with those two poems.

History of the cycle

This cycle of songs began with writing just a single one. I had occasionally tried to write songs, for years, but without succeeding. I also had a number of poems I had written in the past, but only Today seemed to cry out for a musical setting. When I talked it over with my composition teacher, Professor Frank La Rocca, that spring, he admired
the poem, and suggested that in order to get started I could just set the part of the poem that inspired me. As I reread and thought over the poem, I realized there was a crucial shift in tone as the narrator and his mother move from inside to outside their house and they begin to pick cherries for breakfast. I began writing the music at that shift, and wrote a sketch that continued through the climax of the poem at the phrase “as we stand so still--.” I ended up using the vocal line that occurred at “as we stand so still--” as I had originally sketched it, and further, I used an intervallic collection of three notes that occurred there as a unified set throughout the entire cycle.

Source of the poetry

I came to music composition after spending years writing poetry and short stories. It has been a rich source of experience in reading and analyzing poetry which has made it easier and more enjoyable for me to set words to music. I looked at a variety of sources until I found the two Victorian poets included here, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Christina Rossetti; I liked their voices and read more of their other work to find the right poems. I finally chose two short poems by Christina Rossetti because they went together well as a contrasting pair and an unpublished poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins that was powerful and complex. I also like William Butler Yeats, and I found his The Lake Isle of Innisfree formed a nice contrast with the other poems. Yeats’ poem suggested a very different tone and tempo (faster) than most of the poems I had already chosen, so I added it to help balance the songs between slow and fast tempos.

1. Hilary Strain, Today [ca. 2003], in the author’s possession.
Having found a number of poems I thought might be suitable, I spent a lot of time trying different orders and combinations until I found the ones that seemed to belong together and to provide a good flow of both expression and contrast. The result was the six poems of this cycle: Today by Hilary Strain; Mirage by Christina Rossetti; Who Has Seen The Wind? by Christina Rossetti; The times are nightfall by Gerard Manley Hopkins (this poem is identified by its first line as it was not given a title by Hopkins); The Lake Isle of Innisfree by William Butler Yeats; and finally, Waiting, by Hilary Strain. The two poems of mine I chose were the two that seemed strong enough to fit within the set and to provide an inviting beginning and strong ending that would give the cycle an overall unity, rather than have it be a miscellaneous collection.

**Larger elements of form**

A primary source of form in this cycle arises from the contrast between through-composed and traditional forms. The cycle begins with a rhapsody, Today, followed by the through-composed Mirage, after which the songs alternate among traditional forms: binary, Who has Seen the Wind; through-composed, The times are nightfall; ternary, The Lake Isle of Innisfree; and finally, through-composed, Waiting. The overall form is further shaped by the tension between songs with key signatures and a strong sense of pitch-centricity, and those partially or wholly without them.

On a lower formal level, there is also tension within songs between areas of diatonic stability with a key signature (which often, especially in Today, tends to indicate a modal tonality), and areas of varying stability (from the chromatic inflection of the final stanza of Mirage to the chromatically atonal opening of Waiting). The songs rarely use
traditional harmonic progressions, although triads are frequently used. These are often organized above a stepwise bass, which helps to give a sense of direction.

The songs are further linked together by common accidentals between the end of one song and the beginning of the next. For example, *Mirage* ends with a harmony centered on a G-sharp minor triad and a C-sharp minor triad (which are enharmonically equivalent to four of the flats in the key signature of B-flat minor)—the key of the following song, *Who Has Seen The Wind*. These closer key relationships make for a smoother transition between songs.

An example of a rhythmic link between adjacent songs is the final rhythm of *Who Has Seen The Wind* (measure 39: eighth-note, dotted quarter note; short-long). This is picked up in the first measure of *The times are nightfall* with a slight lengthening of the long value (m.1: eighth note-half note). There is also a significant drop in register between *Who Has Seen The Wind* and *The times are nightfall*, which represents a darkening of tone and expression.

**Formal elements**

There is an intervallic cell linking the cycle together. It appears in slightly varied forms through the songs *Today* (1, Figure 1), *Mirage* (2, Figure 2), *The times are nightfall* (4) and *Waiting* (6). As already mentioned, this was the initial motivic germ of *Today*, and ended up woven throughout the cycle. Through its motivic clarity and many varied uses in repetition and development, it was essential to the internal cohesion of both *Mirage* and *The times are nightfall*, and helped to weave them together on a higher
Figure 1: Today, mm. 70-71, voice. The initial motive of the cycle.

![Figure 1](image1)

Figure 2: Mirage, mm. 4-5, voice. A re-ordered version of the cell.

![Figure 2](image2)

formal level. It also reappeared at the end of Waiting, and helped give the song a sense of completion as well as expectancy.

**How does it all fit together?**

The overall form of the cycle consists of a slow introduction (rhapsody) Today, followed by alternating slow and fast movements. The fast movements (Who Has Seen The Wind and The Lake Isle of Innisfree) are both in clearly traditional forms (binary and ternary respectively) and the slow movements are all through-composed (though Mirage has a refrain after each stanza). The slow movements are all linked to each other and to the first movement by the use of the closely related versions of the intervallic cell, and by similarities of expression and relative complexity. The times are nightfall represents the height of complexity in the cycle and the greatest depth of despair. The fast movements, being a scherzo and a folk song, function as breathing spaces. The final song provides
closure with its atonal and complex passages alternating with triadic or quartal/quintal sonorities; harmonically, it extends and summarizes the varied shifts of harmony of the entire cycle.

**Conclusion**

There were a number of challenges for me in choosing this project for my thesis: I had only ever written one song, *Today*; I had only studied two cycles (Schubert’s *Winterreis*se and Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*); I wrote very slowly; I had only written relatively short pieces; I had only ever written one piece with more than one movement (three miniatures for solo harp). Overcoming all of these difficulties took about two years. The writing sped up as I went along; although each song continued to present fresh challenges, I improved dramatically in my ability to come up with solutions in a reasonable amount of time (and with more confidence and independence).

When I chose the poems to complete the cycle, I looked for a rich, stimulating collection that seemed to fit together well and to reflect onto each other in interesting ways. As I chose the final poems to include, the need for strong contrasts of tempo and expression seemed more acute, and the need for depth grew as well. In composing this cycle, I learned that the greatest challenge of a longer piece, or a series of movements, is the increasing necessity for each succeeding event to both deepen our experience by providing a rich and subtle commentary on what has already happened while simultaneously providing enough stimulation and novelty to maintain our attention until the end. I began to see how the integrity of the cycle depended on respecting the essential connections between the different songs and the poetic ideas. That is why the choice of
G.M. Hopkins’ *The times are nightfall* was crucial to achieving a climax of drama and intensity at the necessary high point of the cycle. It was a terrifying choice because of the complexity and difficulty everyone faces in understanding this poem.

Setting the *Lake Isle of Innisfree*, thanks to its clear form and parallel structure, was a radically different experience. This clarity of form and structure freed me to write a more traditional and formally predictable type of song than I had earlier found possible. It was delightful to find myself achieving a lilting melody and simplicity, which created a vital sense of light and air after the intense darkness of the Hopkins. The final song, *Waiting*, rounded off the cycle by combining the darker element of atonality and chromaticism with the lighter elements of flowing melody and triadic harmonies. The juxtaposition of these contrasting elements allowed me to create an ending that retains a certain open-endedness.

The essential discovery I have made in writing this cycle is to trust the way in which different parts of my learning, life, and writing fit together. My experience in writing poetry helped me choose rich and lovely poems to live with and set; analyzing poetry helped me tease out structure to flesh out musically; my love of teaching and writing has led me to realize how much I love analyzing music (as long as it continually circles back to hearing and understanding the musical expression of a piece) and making it clear to readers. Finally, it has been a great pleasure to write these songs, living with them and the poems, while I worked out their musical forms.
CHAPTER 1: Analysis of Today

*Today*, by Hilary Strain

*Today I wake up in my warm bed,*
*push off my blankets,*
*and put on my shoes—*
*all ready for anything.*

*Then I go in your room*
*and pat your arm*
*and see your eyes open.*
*Daddy a quiet lump in the blanket—*

*but you get up,*
*and holding my hand,*
*go to the door and open it.*

*Outside, everything is still.*
*The cherries hang straight down*
*and still.*

*The birds are just beginning*
*to call to each other*
*as we stand so still—*
*almost forever,*
*until the sun moves*

*and we begin picking*
*cherries for the blue bowl,*
*and with it full*
*go inside for breakfast.*

The form of the poem is a miniature epic. Early in the morning a young child awakens, and after waking his mother they go outside together and both pick cherries for breakfast. The mood is expectant and gentle. The leisurely piano interludes that recur

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2. Ibid.
throughout the song also help to create a sense of timelessness and reflect the quiet stillness just after dawn.

The poetic form is reinforced musically by using the freedom allowed within a rhapsody. The rhapsody was a late nineteenth century form used most often in orchestral pieces. Rhapsodies portrayed epic journeys through the use of both instrumental tone color and lush harmonic colors and shading. In *Today*, the musical form is still based upon that conception of tonal and harmonic color, to create a small world of tone and feeling which the two travel within together.

The form of the song is strengthened by the rhythmic and harmonic arrivals at key moments in the text. The basic form is: introduction and beginning (mm. 1-31); long middle section with several sub-sections (mm. 32-73); and a return of the theme and ideas of the beginning so the end is similar to the beginning (mm. 74-90), but with a change of mode from pandiatonic (loosely outlining both E and A as potential pitch centers) to the key of E minor. This change to E minor at the end brings in a brighter color that helps suggest that he is now wide-awake and that the song is coming to an end; this is why the vocal part of the final section is rhythmically very active and improvisatory sounding, rather than sounding like the simpler and more recitative-like rhythm of the first section.

This song is modal rather than tonal, and there aren’t any traditional tonal progressions. There are subtle implied progressions, but they usually go to other places than the expected one. In Figure 3, it is possible to see the unexpected arrival at a D-flat
triad (in first inversion) over a rising step-wise bass as typical of the gentle series of surprises this poem evokes.

**Figure 3:** *Today*, mm. 43-48. A modal rather than a traditional tonal harmonic progression.

The changes of mode or pitch center help create a sense of surprise and arrival at each of the changes of direction in the text. They are accompanied and emphasized by changes of texture as well. Table 1 illustrates the primary divisions of both the music and the poem and their relationship to each other.

**Table 1:** *Today*. Table showing the sections in both text and music.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical sections</th>
<th>Poem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piano introduction m. 1-12</td>
<td><em>Today I wake up in my warm bed,</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 1 m. 13-27 +echo</td>
<td><em>push off my blankets,</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>and put on my shoes—</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>all ready for anything.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 2 m. 32-51</td>
<td><em>Then I go in your room</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>and pat your arm</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>[no stanza break]</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sub-section a m. 32-42
Sub-section b m. 45-48

and see your eyes open.

Daddy a quiet lump in the blanket—

Section 3 m. 52-73

but you get up,
and holding my hand,
go to the door and open it.

Sub-section a m. 52-59

Outside, everything is still.
The cherries hang straight down
and still.

Sub-section b m. 61-73

The birds are just beginning
to call to each other
as we stand so still—
almost forever,
until the sun moves

Section 4 m. 74-90 (quotes beginning)

and we begin picking
cherries for the blue bowl,
and with it full
go inside for breakfast.

The harmony moves from pitch collection to pitch collection through
juxtapositions or modulations at the ends of sections or phrases, remaining quite
consistently within each collection until it moves on to the next. Figure 4 demonstrates
the move from C Mixolydian to E-flat Mixolydian through the use of triads that move
from more complex quartal/quintal mixtures to a simple inverted triad (C minor in mm.
26-27), over a bass line that implies a harmonic progression in C Mixolydian. The
combined effect of a simple triad in the piano in mm. 26-27 and the vocal rhythm is to
create a “cadence” in measure 27 so the arrival at E-flat Mixolydian in measure 28 is a
surprising juxtaposition but doesn’t stop the forward flow.
Throughout *Today*, there are pan-diatonic and freely used major and minor triads though the most common ones are incomplete seventh chords, triads with added major seconds or fourths, or chords built of fourths and fifths (often with added seconds).

**Figure 4:** *Today*, mm. 21-33. An unexpected cadence in E-flat minor.

In Table 2 it is possible to see some examples of the most common harmonies used. The use of quartal/quintal sonorities helps to give the piece its tonal, but
harmonically ambiguous quality, as well as a brightness and lightness to the sound that
suits its serene quality.

**Table 2:** *Today.* Table showing the different kinds of harmonies present in *Today.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>m. 28</th>
<th>m. 49</th>
<th>m. 51</th>
<th>m. 71</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q5/Q4</td>
<td>Stack of P4ths: B displaced by 8ve (adding a M2nd flavor)</td>
<td>Gapped set of P4ths</td>
<td>e⁴ (1st inversion)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 2: Analysis of *Mirage*

*Mirage*, by Christina Rossetti

*The hope I dreamed of was a dream,*
*Was but a dream; and now I wake*
*Exceeding comfortless, and worn, and old,*
*For a dream’s sake.*

*I hang my harp upon a tree,*
*A weeping willow in a lake;*
*I hang my silenced harp there, wrung and snapt*
*For a dream’s sake.*

*Lie still, lie still, my breaking heart;*
*My silent heart, lie still and break:*
*Life, and the world, and mine own self, are changed*
*For a dream’s sake.* (Rossetti 1879)

The form of the poem is three four-line stanzas, each of which ends with the refrain: “*For a dream’s sake.*” The tone is one of regret and sadness.

In order to reflect the meaning of the poetry most strongly, the form of the song is defined by the reappearance of the refrain at the end of each verse. In Figure 5 we see the refrain as it appears the first time:

**Figure 5:** *Mirage*, mm. 17-18, voice. The first version of the refrain.

![Music notation]

---

The form is further emphasized by the use of contrasting textures in the accompaniment in each of the three sections of the song; to insure this contrast, both the
first and last stanzas begin with a series of harp-like rolled chords. The third stanza also begins with a transposition of the piano’s opening phrase. Using the piano introduction twice (at the beginning of the first and third stanzas), also helps create the overall sense of a traditional song form by outlining an ABA structure. The form is underlined and strengthened by the use of harmonic elements that echo traditional methods. For example, the piano introduction outlines a plagal cadence primarily through the movement of the bass line from A-flat to D-flat (Figure 6).

**Figure 6:** *Mirage*, mm.1-2. The bass line implies a plagal cadence. (The bass line outlines: I-tritone substitution-I-V-IV).

Suggestions of traditional harmonic functions are used in a subtle way throughout the piece to provide unity and cohesion. Though the chords themselves may be quartal/quintal or triads in any position, the piece as a whole is pitch centric—it begins and ends centered on the pitch of A-flat/G-sharp (slipping to C-sharp at the very end of the song). Also, the piano introduction returns at the beginning of the final stanza transposed down a tritone (to D, where it cadences before the voice enters)—this darkens
the color and within a few measures leads to a phrase in E major, which is the most
tonally remote part of the piece. At this point too, the chords become quite complex.
They are not just simple diminished triads but also use added, non-harmonic tones to
create a dark and dissonant environment. This is why it was impossible to use key
signatures for this piece—the final stanza is too complex tonally to allow for a key
signature to be used. The chromatic inflections throughout the song render key signatures
problematic, though the first two stanzas tend to be fairly stable diatonically and are pitch
centric around A-flat: the A-flat keeps reappearing at the beginning or ends of phrases—
like a firefly flickering at the edge of sight, it keeps appearing then disappearing, creating
a sense of key centeredness by frequent reiteration.

Melodically, there is an essential motivic cell at the heart of the refrain: it is heard
in the voice in mm 4-5 with the words “was a dream,” and consists of a minor third and
then a minor second that stays within the span of the original third (Figure 7). It is

**Figure 7**: *Mirage*, mm. 4-5, voice. A melodic example of the basic intervallic cell.

![Intervallic cell: (m3rd, m2nd)](image)

extended by a note, retrograded and inverted to create the basic model for the voice line
of the refrain (Figure 8).

**Figure 8**: *Mirage*, mm. 17-18, voice. The first version of the refrain.
This cell, in different permutations and with octave displacements appears often throughout the piece and serves multiple uses as a bass line, melodic unit and within the inner voices of the accompaniment as a linear element. It also appears at the climax on the text: “wring and snapt” in a transposed version of the cell (Figure 9).

**Figure 9:** *Mirage*, mm. 30-31, voice only. The basic cell transposed.

The intervals of the cell are also used to create chords or as a basis for chords. For example, the first chord of the piece (G, A-flat, B-flat) is built from this motive (Figure 10).

The other primary unifying linear element is the use of stepwise motion in the bass or an inner voice that generally occurs in descending lines at moments when tension is being released; more rarely it is found in ascending lines in moments of rising tension. This stepwise melodic line appears as a bass line motion throughout the song, but it also appears within the vocal line, most strikingly in mm. 8-12, when the voice follows ***Figure 10:** *Mirage*, pickup to m. 1. The cell used as the initial chord of the song.
a pattern of leaping down a minor third then stepping up a second for the rest of the phrase (with the exception of the last note which leaps up a minor third). This creates an overall pattern of stepwise descent. This phrase also ends with the cell mentioned previously as the last three notes of the vocal line. The presence of both the stepwise descent outlined by the voice and the cell at the end of the vocal phrase helps intensify the feeling of the poem as the words are also becoming heavier and sadder: “and now I wake/Exceeding comfortless, and worn, and old” (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Mirage, mm. 8-12, voice only. The voice line descends through a series of cells, outlining a stepwise descent.
The primary melodic shape of each phrase reflects the overall sadness, as both of the first two stanzas begin with the fifth of a triad and leap upward to another tone of the triad, then slowly arc downwards by small steps and leaps to land and finally end with a small rising inflection of a step or third upward (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Mirage, mm. 45-47, vocal line only: “Are changed.”**

![Figure 12: Mirage, mm. 45-47, vocal line only: “Are changed.”](image)

This reflects the yearning quality of this sadness and also its uncertainty. The vocal range between phrases becomes wider as the song progresses and the singer becomes more agitated, and the melodic phrases become longer. The final stanza has the greatest contrast in range and the most chromatic language of the song, as it climaxes on the word “Life”: “My silent heart, lie still and break / Life, and the world, and mine own self, are changed” then it slowly dies away as the voice ends with the refrain in a C-sharp minor tonality and an upward gesture, though the piano is still on G-sharp (where the song began) and only after the voice has stopped does the piano resolve to C-sharp while echoing the refrain. It dies away very softly, and uncertainly.
CHAPTER 3: Analysis of Who Has Seen the Wind

Who Has Seen The Wind? by Christina Rossetti

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by. (Rossetti 1893)

The form of the poem is two four-line parallel stanzas. The brevity of each phrase reflects the quick motion of the wind and the impossibility of seeing it. The tone of the poem is light and quick. This need for quickness and lightness led to the basic rhythmic motive of the vocal line (Figure 13). This vocal rhythm, of a dotted eighth followed by a sixteenth note (and after repetition) ending with a long note, is maintained throughout the piece (with small variations for the “trembling” and “bow down their heads” phrases).

Figure 13: Who Has Seen The Wind, mm. 5-6, voice. The primary rhythmic motive of the song.

The musical form is also binary. Section A is mm. 1-16; section B is mm. 17-39. Section A begins with a four-bar piano introduction, but section B begins with a piano interlude (mm. 17-20). This form underlines the parallel nature of the vocal phrases while
allowing for variation (and an interpolation in mm. 23-24) between the repetitions of the vocal phrases. The two halves are tied together by a four-measure link, which stands in for the original piano introduction and leads to a restatement of the first vocal entry a perfect fourth higher (with a new harmonization). The most significant changes between the A and B sections are a.) the beginning of the B section is transposed up a perfect fourth (in the voice), and b.) the piano introduction re-occurs in a condensed canonic version after the first two vocal phrases of the B section have already happened. Otherwise, melodically and harmonically, the two sections are quite parallel. The cadences that end the two sections are parallel and based upon a short pattern of running sixteenth notes which occurs at the end of both sections and outlines B-flat minor in the A section (while leading into the link to the B section), but is transposed in the B section to function as a subtle Phrygian cadence on B-flat. This cadence is underlined and rounded off by a final measure with the rhythm of the link between section A and section B, using B-flat in the bass and an F/B-flat fourth in the treble (Figure 14).

Both the melody and the harmony are primarily quartal in nature and fifths or diminished triads are used sparingly; the contrast between these sonorities helps shape the form. The piano introduction (see Figure 15) is obviously quartal in nature; it consists of descending fourths (with a bass line that also moves downward from e-flat a perfect fourth to b-flat in two measures and is then repeated with an ornament). However, in both

Figure 14: Who Has Seen The Wind? mm. 37-39. It ends with an implied Phrygian cadence.
Figure 15: *Who Has Seen The Wind?* mm. 1-4. The introduction is based upon quartal sonorities.

phrases beginning with the word “But,” either, “But when the leaves hang trembling,” or, “But when the trees bow down their heads,” the words “trembling” and “heads” are accompanied by the only diminished chords present in the piece; and in both cases, this conflict resolves in the next phrase to a quartal sonority based on the “first inversion” of a stack of fourths. The first resolution of this conflict is weaker, and involves only the voice (mm.12-14). The ‘stack’ of fourths involved is F, B-flat, E-flat—which is embellished with escape tones but can still be clearly seen as having as primary tones B-flat, E-flat and F in mm. 12-14 (Figure 16).

Figure 16: *Who Has Seen The Wind?* mm. 12-14, voice only (piano silent). “The wind is passing through” is a weaker resolution because the voice is alone.
When we reach the parallel phrase in section B, “The wind is passing by,” the cadence is reached together by both the piano and voice and includes an octave displacement (after a passing tone) in the vocal line to further strengthen the resolution (Figure 17).

**Figure 17**: *Who Has Seen The Wind?* mm. 34-36. This second resolution is stronger.

As the previous two figures demonstrated the parallel nature of the cadences (with the second one strengthened), likewise, the two phrases beginning with the word “*But*” are parallel. The diminished triad is expanded in range and the texture of the accompaniment is thickened and rhythmically more active in its’ second (and transposed) appearance. The second time also features quartal/quintal sonorites that help stretch the two bars into four bars for a dramatic climax on a lengthened diminished triad. This
contrast can be seen in Figures 18 and 19, which highlight the changes between these two phrases.

**Figure 18:** *Who Has Seen The Wind?* mm. 9-10. Phrase culminates on a diminished triad.

![Figure 18](image1)

**Figure 19:** *Who Has Seen The Wind?* mm. 30-33. This parallel phrase is lengthened and stronger.

![Figure 19](image2)

This diminished triad is resolved, as previously mentioned, by a stack of fourths, and then ends with the piano playing the transposed running sixteenth notes, which now insinuate a Phrygian cadence. The piece ends immediately afterwards (piano alone) with
a bass note B-flat and a fourth (F to B-flat) in the treble above it. The ending is an upward melodic gesture and creates a light graceful feeling. This song is the lightest of all the songs and is essentially functioning as a scherzo (Figure 20).

**Figure 20:** *Who Has Seen The Wind*, mm. 34-40. Figuration implies a Phrygian cadence.
CHAPTER 4: Analysis of *The times are nightfall*

*The times are nightfall*, by Gerard Manley Hopkins

*The times are nightfall, look, their light grows less; The times are winter, watch, a world undone: They waste, they wither worse; they as they run Or bring more or more blazon man’s distress. And I not help. Nor word now of success: All is from wreck, here, there, to rescue one— Work which to see scarce so much as begun Makes welcome death, does dear forgetfulness.*

*Or what is else? There is your world within. There rid the dragons, root out there the sin. Your will is law in that small commonweal…* (Hopkins 1918)

This is the most complex and difficult of the poems in this cycle. The mood is anguished and required Hopkins to use his highly original approach to rhythm and syntax to fully express the struggle it represents. It is divided formally into three parts: the first two are parallel in construction (being two four-line stanzas linked closely together by an identical rhyme scheme and by having no space between them) and the final stanza has only three lines ending with the only unrhymed line of the poem (which is incomplete because it trails off rather than ending definitely with a period). Each of these syntactical units has the most important word at the end: “distress,” “forgetfulness,” and “commonweal.”

The poem moves from a rather dark but fairly ordered syntax and impersonal tone to a state of disorder with the text, “Or bring more or more blazon man’s distress.” This sets up the shift to the first person and his cry, “And I not help.” which begins a complex section essentially stating his despair and helplessness either to help or to save those he
feels responsible for (he was a Catholic priest of a parish) to the point of desiring his own
death. The stanza break here is vital. It allows for a striking shift of mood. The syntax of
the final stanza is simpler and more ordered and is akin to prayer. It climaxes in its final
line: “Your will is law in that small commonweal...,” which is the only unrhymed line of
the poem. While this line provides closure on many levels it is also unresolved, as human
affairs are until they are resolved by death.

This song is through-composed and largely reflects the poetic structure. The sense
of time in the song (as contrasted with the poem’s time) is stretched in the beginning of
the song to allow the tension to be built by delaying the vocal entry between “winter”
and “watch,” and also, between “undone” and “They waste.” Between “winter” and
“watch” there is one measure of the introduction leading into a musical unraveling of “a
world undone” by letting the pattern in the piano break down to a simple interval and the
voice follow a very halting rhythm. After it is undone, the music has to begin again, but is
transposed lower and modulates to a G-sharp tonality rather than C-sharp using the same
pattern of intervals as the introduction (Figure 21). Throughout the first two sections of
the song constantly shifting meters also help convey the sense of agitation embodied in
the poem.

The essential melodic and harmonic unit of the song is a cell, closely related to
the one used in *Mirage* (their interval content is identical, but they have a different
melodic order, see Figures 22 and 23), and it is used throughout this song in several
different ways.

**Figure 21:** *The times are nightfall*, m. 24. Opening transposed down a perfect fourth.
Figure 22: *Mirage*, mm. 4-5. The intervallic cell as it appears in *Mirage* with the text “was a dream.”

There are two different basic voicings of the cell used in *The times are nightfall*. One is a harmonic voicing (it includes a major sixth and a half step) which functions as a harmonic unit (both as a chord, which can then be transposed, and as a harmony that
allows for “modulation” by transposition and variation). This harmonic version first appears in the first measure (Figure 24):

**Figure 24:** The times are nightfall, m. 1. The harmonic version of the cell.

The harmonic voicing forms the bulk of the material in the accompaniment in the first section, underpinning the vocal struggle forward (to the climax on “distress” in m. 34). The other voicing of the cell is melodic and includes a minor third and a half step (Figure 25).

**Figure 25:** A melodic example using the same pitches as m. 1: b d c-sharp.

Both uses of the cell are subject to the usual melodic manipulations including transposition, inversion, retrograde and so forth. The melodic version of the cell provides the foundation for a series of octatonic collections through the first and second sections
(to “forgetfulness” in m. 58); it also provides an essential melodic identity and occurs frequently in the section from measures 26 to the end; finally it provides a bass line for much of the second section: beginning with the word “distress” (m. 34) and carrying through to the word “forgetfulness” (m. 58).

The basic harmonic conflict is set up with the first vocal entry (a whole tone scale). The tension between whole tone and octatonic/diminished sonorities continues throughout the piece until they are united within the key of B-flat minor in the final section. This harmonic conflict can also be seen by looking at the bass line of the piano part in relation to where we are in the text. For example, the musical re-grouping, after the “world undone,” (m. 21) begins in the piano, as the bass very slowly steps down to G-sharp and begins a transposed introduction, then the piano’s bass line continues to step down to F-sharp (m. 26), and sticks there, going back and forth between G-sharp and F-sharp (with the exception of a single D-sharp which interrupts in a manner analogous to the G-sharp in m. 5). The accompaniment oscillates between the transposed cell (on G-sharp) and a minor third (opened up in the bass by two octaves)—this creates a tremendous tension as the harmony struggles to go onward and the voice slowly arcs upward above the same series of sonorities until the phrase climaxes on “distress” (m. 34) and arrives (becomes the completed cell as well) with the following F-natural, which continues to hold tension into “And I not help” to conclude the phrase (Figure 26).

The end of the phrase (ending on “help”) is tied into the beginning of the next phrase by the use of an elision in the piano: the last two bass notes of the previous phrase are F-sharp and F-natural, and the downbeat of the next measure contains the D-sharp
Figure 26: *The times are nightfall*, m. 26-37. These measures complete the cell and the phrase.

that completes a cell (displaced an octave), as well as being the first note of the next cell (the first three notes of the piano part [with octave displacements: D-sharp, E, C-sharp]).

The second section, from “Nor word now of success” (m. 38) to “forgetfulness,” (m. 58) is characterized by three elements: there is an intermittent high octave played in the piano, which slowly unfolds a diminished triad (G, A-sharp, and C-sharp); there is the cell, often shifting transpositions, used as a bass line consistently throughout this section (except for one diminished seventh triad); and finally, there is the pervasive use of the
cell in shifting transpositions to provide both a melodic line and the basis for many of the accompanying chords.

There is a common tone modulation at the end of the second section using A-sharp as a B-flat, also the bass note of F-sharp is equivalent to G-flat which is the (implied) third of the beginning triad in measure 59 (Figure 27).

**Figure 27:** *The times are nightfall*, mm. 58-60. Figure showing the common-tone modulation between the last sections.

This modulation leads to a final section in B-flat minor, which uses a passacaglia bass (stepwise, falling from B-flat to E-flat over the course of two and a half measures) and a version of the cell as a melodic unit to sustain tension until the final resolution. The bass line in the passacaglia falls from B-flat down to E-flat but the vocal phrasing insists on B-flat as tonic. This sense of B-flat minor is strengthened by the presence of A-natural (leading tone to B-flat) as one of only two accidentals in this section (the other being a C-flat [iv of E-flat] which helps solidify the sense of E-flat minor in the piano part as the
end approaches). Our certainty as to the key being B-flat is still slightly unresolved at the end, when in final iteration of the cell, the voice and the piano both conclude with differing, but harmonious, versions of the original cell (Figure 28).

**Figure 28:** *The times are nightfall*, m. 72-74. Voice and piano each assert a different version of the cell (and end by emphasizing different pitches).

The ending of the song suggests that there is resolution by rhythm and by reiteration (the final phrase leads to the expected cadence in B-flat minor in the voice), but it is a complex and necessarily incomplete resolution (due to the conflicting sense of E-flat minor created by the piano)—life and faith not being capable of total resolution before death.

There are two examples of word painting that I would like to point out: first, the use of the cell in “Makes welcome death,” allows for a sudden surprise when the final note is displaced by an octave upward at the word “death” (Figure 29). And secondly, in the last section, how many of the phrases use the cell in some transposition, then go outside their range to get to a final note (or two) that is outside of the cell (Figure 30).
Figure 29: The times are nightfall, m. 53-55, voice. The cell is used with word painting.

![Musical notation]

Figure 30: The times are nightfall, mm. 66-69, voice. The text states: “There rid the dragons (leaps up outside the cell to e-flat and f), root out there the sin” (“sin” lands on the leading tone).

![Musical notation]

Finally, it is useful to notice how register is used in the shaping of the dramatic flow of the piece. Both the piano and voice begin very low and the piece ends low as well.

The drama of the middle section is emphasized by the sudden, huge shifts of register in the piano. The use of different registers in different sections and the differing treatments of register throughout the song are important for the sense of darkness and struggle that pervade the song and are essential to its meaning.
CHAPTER 5: Analysis of *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*

_The Lake Isle of Innisfree_, by William Butler Yeats

_I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,_
_And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;_
_Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,_
_And live alone in the bee-loud glade._

_And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,_
_Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;_
_There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,_
_And evening full of the linnet’s wings._

_I will arise and go now, for always night and day_
_I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;_
_While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,_
_I hear it in the deep heart’s core._ (Yeats 1892)

The form of the poem is regular and highly structured. It is in three parts: stanza one is parallel to stanza three in structure (this is emphasized by the repetition of the opening phrase to begin the third stanza,) with a contrasting middle stanza. This creates a strong A B A form, a common song form, which Yeats was definitely following as a model. It is very rhythmic and energetic. The mood is purposeful and positive.

The most traditional of all the songs in this set, it is an art song based upon folk music models. It is a very clear A B A₁ with small changes in the harmony of the A₁ section to allow for ending in A-Dorian rather than A-natural minor. This song is modal rather than tonal, with open fifth/octave sonorities predominating rather than complete triads to help give it the flavor of folk song. This sense of “artlessness” is also helped by the lack of traditional functional progressions. The harmony is based more upon root
movement by thirds (for color) and the occasional fourth or fifth to keep things moving than by functional progressions.

The phrases are shaped very traditionally and clearly by rhythm, and by the movement in every phrase of the vocal part between the tonic and the dominant (either beginning with tonic and ending with the dominant or the other way around, with the corresponding fifth/octave chord). All of the phrases in the vocal part begin and end with the tonic or the dominant. In the first phrase, for example, the voice begins and ends with the dominant while the harmony moves from tonic to dominant in two clear sub-phrases (Figure 31).

Figure 31: *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, mm. 1-4. A good example of a phrase that is transparently clear in structure.

The frequent use of tonic and dominant means that the energy and satisfaction of the piece derives from the small variations from predictability that occur throughout—it is the small details that give it much of its liveliness.

The first section A, is made up of four four-bar phrases broken up by a cadential extension (m. 5), and a link (mm. 10-11), which makes the overall progress through the
double period more unpredictable. The final phrase of the double period is the only one which does not consist of two two-bar sub-phrases, but is a four-bar contrasting unit. When the material of section A returns (m. 43) in the final section, the first phrase is stated twice as it was originally in m. 1-4 [these phrases are also ornamented (m. 45 and 49) by a passing tone (F-sharp) in the bass which helps provide rhythmic variety and tension, but also helps prepare the final cadence in Dorian]; then it is followed by a close variation (mm. 52-54) which is harmonized for the first time by a stepwise rising bass line which climaxes with a dramatic arrival at a D major triad (at the end of the third phrase of the section,) and also links the harmony stepwise to the final phrase which begins with a complete E-minor triad and has new melodic material as well as cadencing (with a plagal cadence,) in A-Dorian. The final vocal phrase refers back to the setting of “peace there” (mm.23-24) and especially, “linnet’s wings,” (mm. 38-39) by being the second cadence, like “linnet’s wings,” that moves down by step melodically rather than ending with an upward gesture; however, in the final phrase it finally achieves a clear plagal cadence. This makes the ending much more satisfying because it has achieved both harmonic and melodic closure.

The first phrase of Section A is a good example of one that ends with an open melodic gesture (an upward motion) at its cadence (Figure 32). At the end of the B section we have the only area of relative harmonic obscurity and a momentary pause in the rhythm (Figure 33) for a very weak cadence, but we have a downward melodic gesture. These tensions are resolved finally at the end when both the rhythm and harmony come together with a plagal cadence and a downward vocal gesture (Figure 34).
**Figure 32:** *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, m. 1-4, voice. Notice how the phrase ends with an upward gesture in the voice.

![Figure 32](image)

**Figure 33:** *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, mm. 37-39. The music pauses to draw a breath (before going onward into the transition to the next section).

![Figure 33](image)

In an interesting use of word painting, the contrasting texture of the B section was suggested by the text. The phrase, “I hear lake water lapping,” suggested that the peace described in the middle stanza could be conveyed by a rocking, barcarolle type figuration throughout the entire middle stanza, which also led to the figuration of the modulation at the end of the section--leading back to the key of a minor (Figure 35). This particular modulation was possible because of the third relationship between the keys of F-sharp

**Figure 34:** *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, m. 55-end. The downward vocal gesture rounds it off and the music finally reaches a cadence (plagal).
minor and A minor. The use of broken-chord figuration in that modulation made it possible to use a passing chord to connect the V of F-sharp with the V\(^7\) of A minor, though this also works as a pivot chord modulation.

**Figure 35:** *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, m. 40-42. Passing chords outline the modulation back to the A section.

The other strong contrast with the A section involves the use of the only vocal melismas in the piece. For example, the word “glimmer,” uses neighbor tones to suggest
a shimmering quality that helps convey the luminous quality of the poem in the middle stanza (Figure 36).

**Figure 36:** *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, m. 34. The word “glimmer” is one of the few melismas in the piece.
CHAPTER 6: Analysis of *Waiting*

*Waiting*, by Hilary Strain

*Waiting*
inside these hot nights, I
swell, fill the room, can’t help
but go outside to watch
violet stars wash themselves and wink
as the sun comes between us.
Tonight, I throw Saturn back
upon itself past Jupiter;
spill myself into space
that can never be shortened;
stroke cold concrete with the soles
of my feet in the longest reach of my legs;
I spin myself in time,
hands and arms level; palms stroking
the textures of leafed trees. My mind is tall—
if I walk and sing loud enough, perhaps you’ll see
my wings—

The two poems written by me were intended to act as bookends anchoring both ends of the cycle. They are both free verse. *Waiting* has two complete sentences and then the final one is open-ended. I altered the poem to include the title within the poem for the purpose of setting it. The mood of the poem is one of mounting exhilaration, beginning with a sense of escape to the night outside and cresting at “My mind is tall—” where it pauses and then rounds itself off with the final image of wings.

The form of the song is through-composed, like songs two and four. Also like them, *Waiting* has no key signature, and is itself the least tonal of all the songs—in fact it is not pitch centric and has very few areas that are even triadic in nature. The harmony

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ranges from a highly chromatic atonality at the beginning (mm. 1-18) to the triads and progression of mm. 19-22, to the chords built of intervals above P4ths or 5ths (mm. 23-28), to the freely flowing implied harmonies of the rapidly running triplets and sixteenths (which are frequently whole tone with occasional interruptions of notes from outside the scale) (mm. 24-28 and on).

Most of the piece is built on the contrasts between different textures: there are essentially two significantly different textures that bounce off each other at the level of phrase—a more homophonic and sometimes narrower range melody, and a rapid gestural melody in which the voice and piano interrupt each other frequently (the piano usually interrupting with rapid streams of notes). Given this diverse series of textures, it makes sense then that there is only one very clear break between sections. At the end of the first sentence there is a cadence on “the sun comes between us” followed by a short four-bar piano interlude in the key of A-flat minor which leads to a dramatic entrance on “Tonight I throw” and a new texture and accompanimental element. After “Tonight” the piano begins alternating between flowing whole tone arpeggations (interspersed with P4ths and M2nds,) and chords built of a fourth or a fifth and another note (varied from a tritone to a M6th—three-note sonorities lead to four-note chords). These two elements have a longer range melodic quality as well-- each interruption of a textural element within a phrase can be heard as connecting directly with the previous one and leading to the following interruption of the same type of element (Figure 37). There is a second break between sections, which is accomplished by a significant change of texture, and the only moment
of silence in the piece, before the final statement (mm. 49-50) “If I walk and sing loud enough, perhaps you’ll see / my wings--.”

**Figure 37: Waiting, mm. 23-28 (with pick up in m.22). The textures alternate rapidly with each other, but each maintain their own line.**

Within the larger form there is also a thread of similar textures. The first example is the piano interlude, which includes triads (and a sense of key!) and a stepwise and very narrow ranged melody (mm. 19-22); this thread continues with the phrase beginning, “stroke cold concrete” (mm. 34-37), which also has a dramatically narrower range melody than elsewhere and is accompanied by a mixture of triads and stacks of P5ths/P4ths or a tritone; these two phrases (of this thread) are finally completed in the final phrase (mm. 50-56) with the use of open 5th/octave sonorities under a melody which
uses octave displacement and interval inversion to open up to a wide range (the final phrase spans a tenth, and is the widest ranging vocal gesture of the piece). The wide vocal gesture helps underline the sense of opening which is vital to conveying the sense of the poem.

The final (incomplete) phrase in *Waiting* refers back to two previous melodic uses of the cell in the other songs: in *Today*, the three pitches (E, F, G) are present at the climax in measures 70-71: “as we stand so still--” (Figure 38) and they also are the last three notes sung in *Waiting*. In *Mirage* this intervallic cell of three notes is reordered and,

**Figure 38:** *Today*, mm. 70-71, voice. Climax.

at the end of *Waiting*, an elided use of the cell from *Mirage* appears--first in retrograde and then as a retrograde inversion (which gives us a reordered version of the original three notes from *Today* as the final three notes of *Waiting*) (Figure 39). Harmonically, this final phrase suggests a cadence in d, but instead of moving to i it ends on a iv7. It suggests a plagal cadence, but crucially, it is not completed.

**Figure 39:** *Waiting*, mm. 54-56, voice. Cells are outlined with brackets.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


COMPLETE SCORE
6 Songs
for mezzo-soprano & piano

Hilary Strain

Poem by Hilary Strain

1. Today

Tempo I (q = 88) muito rit.

Pushing forward Relaxed, pulling back Tempo I (q = 88) molto rit.

To-day I wake up in my warm bed,
push off my blankets, and put on my shoes—all

ready for anything.

poco rit.  Tempo I (q = 88)  poco rit.  Tempo I (q = 88)
Then I go in your room and

A tempo ($q = 88$)

Then I go in your room and

A tempo ($q = 88$)

Then I go in your room and

A tempo ($q = 88$)

Then I go in your room and

Relaxed, pulling back
A little slower ($q = ca.88$)

Relaxed, pulling back
A little slower ($q = ca.88$)

Relaxed, pulling back
A little slower ($q = ca.88$)

Relaxed, pulling back
A little slower ($q = ca.88$)

Relaxed, pulling back
A little slower ($q = ca.88$)
rit. . . . . . . molto rit. . Broadly (\( \dot{\omega} = \text{ca.}60 \))

but you get up, and holding my hand,

rit. . . . . . . molto rit. . Broadly (\( \dot{\omega} = \text{ca.}60 \))

Faster (\( \dot{\omega} = 76 \))

rit. . . . . . . Tempo I (\( \dot{\omega} = 88 \))

go to the door and open it.

Outside,
Ev’rything is still. The cherries hang straight down and still. The birds are just be-

A tempo ($\frac{q}{=88}$)

Beginning to call to each other as we stand so still—

A tempo ($\frac{q}{=88}$)

Almost forever, until the sun moves

A tempo ($\frac{q}{=88}$)

Colla voce
and freely, much quicker rit. A tempo ($q = 88$)

cherries for the blue bowl, and with it full A tempo ($q = 88$)

go inside for breakfast.
2. Mirage
Poem by Christina Rossetti

Grave \( \text{\texttt{mf}} \) = 96

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{The hope I dreamed of} \\
\text{was a dream,} \\
\end{array} \]

Grave \( \text{\texttt{mf}} \) = 96

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{Was but a dream;} \\
\text{and now I wake Ex-} \\
\text{ceed-ing com-fort-} \\
\text{less, and worn, and} \\
\end{array} \]
old, For a
A little faster

Tempo I

dream's sake.

Tempo I

A little faster

hang my harp upon a tree. A weeping willow in a lake;
I hang my silenced harp there, wrung and snapt
For a dream's sake. A dream's sake...

Lie still, lie still, my
break - ing heart; My sil - ent heart, lie still and break:

Life, and the world, and mine own self, are changed

For a dream's sake.
3. Who has seen the wind?
Poem by Christina Rossetti

Who has seen the wind?

Neither I nor you: But when the leaves hang trembling,

The wind is passing through.
Who has seen the wind?

Neither you nor I:

But when the trees bow down their heads,
4. 'The times are night-fall'

Poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Slow, with intensity $d = 76$

The times are night-fall, look, their light grows less;
The times are winter, watch, a world

Gathering intensity

un-done:

They

Gathering intensity

poco a poco cresc.

wa-st, they wi-ther worse; they as they
run Or bring more or more blazon man's dis-stress. And

I not help. Nor word now of success:

All is from wreck, here, there, to rescue one—
Work which to see scarce so much as begun Makes
poco a poco cresc.

wel-come death, does dear for-get ful-ness.

Or what is else? There is your world with-in.

Gravely ($\frac{4}{4}$) $mf$

Gravely ($\frac{6}{8}$)
There rid the dragons, root out there the sin.

Your will is law in that small com-mon-weal...

5. The Lake Isle of Innisfree
Poem by William Butler Yeats

I will a-rise and go now, and go to In-nis-free.
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;

Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee.

And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

Slower $\frac{1}{4} = 48$

Slower $\frac{1}{4} = 48$
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes drop-ping slow.

Drop-ping from the veils of the mor-ning to where the cric-ket sings;

There mid-night's all a glo-mer, and noon a pur-ple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

Tempo I, but a little slower and little softer

I will a-rise and go now, for always night and day

Tempo I, but a little slower and little softer

I hear lake water lap-ping with low sounds by the shore; While
I stand on the road-way, or on the pavements gray,

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Wait-ing in-side these hot nights, I swell,

6. Waiting

Poetry by Hilary Strain

Moderate $\downarrow = 69$

Wait-ing in-side these hot nights, I swell,
fill the room, can't help but go outside and watch violet stars

wash themselves and wink as the sun comes between us.

Tonight I throw
Saturn upon itself past Jupiter; spill my self into space which can never be shortened; stroke cold concrete with the soles of my feet in the longest reach of my legs.
spin myself in time, hands and arms level, palms stroking the textures of leafed trees. My mind is tall. If I walk and sing loud enough, perhaps you'll see my wings.