

## Walt Whitman and Song

Notes from the EMI recording "To the Soul"  
by Thomas Hampson and Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold (1997)

*"I sing... the body electric, a song of myself, a song of joys, a song of occupations, a song of prudence, a song of the answerer, a song of the broad-axe, a song of the rolling earth, a song of the universal..."*

Walt Whitman caroled throughout his verse. For the Bard of Democracy, as America came to call our great poet, music was a central metaphor in his life and work, both as a metaphysical mindset and as a practical reality. Whitman was blessed with an extraordinary ear for inner rhythms which he then articulated in the radically free, rolling, thrusting verses which revitalized the entire world of poetic language. That same ear led him to the appreciation of classical music. For the poet this was a largely self-taught quest in which he relied on both his innate musicality and his experience as a music journalist to formulate aesthetic principles that would carry over into his poetry.

In the *Broadway Journal* of November 29, 1845, Whitman wrote his now-famous essay, "Art-Singing and Heart-Singing," in which he denounced as decadent "the stale, second-hand foreign method with its flourishes, its ridiculous sentimentality, its anti-republican spirit and its sycophantic influence, tainting the young taste of the Republic." The poet claimed he preferred untutored voices and folk groups like the Hutchinsons and the Cheney sisters to trained songbirds like Jenny Lind, whom he found "too showy." His initial objections stemmed from the same wary reserve he applied to all imported forms of culture, insisting America needed to create its own new frontier voice, vigorous and free.

"I say no land or people or circumstances ever existed so needing a race of singers and poems differing from all others," Whitman wrote in "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads." Yet despite his Emersonian insistence on "ignoring the courtly Muses of Europe," it was only by exposure to European opera and art song that Whitman began to discover the essentiality and universality of classical music's language. That exposure came during the 1840's and 1850's when the poet served as a member of New York City's working press, reviewing musical performances at Castle Garden, Palmo's Opera House, the Astor Place Theatre, and the Academy of Music. After enjoying a year of press seats for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Whitman admitted that foreign music was exercising an elevating influence on American taste. From the late 1840's onward his critical posture gradually shifted from a stance of tolerance to one of sophisticated pleasure and finally to one of total passion for classical music, especially for opera.

Whitman's conversion to Italian opera probably occurred in 1847 when he saw Don Francisco Marti's Italian company from Havana at Castle Garden. Years later in *Specimen Days* the poet wrote: "I yet recall the splendid seasons... the fine cool

breezes... the unsurpassed vocalism... No better playing or singing ever in New York." Among his favorite artists were Guilia Grisi, Giovanni Mario, and baritone Cesare Baldiali, whom he called "the finest in the world." He was also profoundly influenced by George Sand's novel, *Consuelo*, with its emancipated contralto heroine, and he imagined that the popular Marietta Alboni was a real-life incarnation of Sand's heroine. He called Alboni the supreme singer of all time, recalling toward the end of his life the impact she made on his youthful soul: "I doubt if ever the senses and emotions of the future will be thrilled as were the auditors of a generation ago by the deep passion of Alboni's contralto."

Indeed, it was passion that became not only the key to Whitman's appreciation of and response to singing but also became the hallmark of his emerging style as a journalist and ultimately as a poet. His vocabulary had an unabashed enthusiasm that is woefully absent from today's criticism. For example, in describing tenor Geremia Bettini in *La Favorita* at Castle Garden on August 11, 1851, he rhapsodized:

*His voice has often affected me to tears. Its clear, firm, wonderfully exalting notes, filling and expanding away; dwelling like a poised lark up in heaven; have made my very soul tremble.*

Though he never learned (nor perhaps never cared to learn) a formal musical vocabulary – he referred to orchestras as "bands," for example, throughout his writings – he replaced formula with freshness, as his language in describing music became increasingly metaphysical:

*...a sublime orchestra of myriad orchestras – a colossal volume of harmony, in which the thunder might roll in its proper place; and above it the vast, pure Tenor – identity of the Creative Power itself – rising through the universe, until the boundless and unspeakable capacities of that mystery, the human soul, should be filled to the uttermost, and the problem of human cravingness be satisfied and destroyed? Of this sort are the promptings of good music upon me.*

"But for opera I would never have written *Leaves of Grass*," Whitman acknowledged in his waning years. Indeed, the poet's experience as a music journalist was a significant prelude to discovering and shaping the themes and style that were to become his mature voice when the first edition of his life's work appeared in 1855.

Whitman's verse is crowded with allusions to song and the singer. The singer is poet, prophet, bard, mystic celebrator of the self – of the poet in everyman, in the worker, in the individual, in America en masse. Whitman's references to music are all-pervading and eclectic; in his various poetic songs he chants hymns to a range of people and experiences from "the plantation chorus of Negroes to the strong baritone of the big longshoremen of Mannahatta." While he, ironically, disliked the piano (calling it a parlour instrument), he loved the wide range of orchestral instruments & used them as images to people his poems. Drums became the march of nations; birdsong the freedom of flight; bugles were calls to valor or funeral taps;

trumpets suggested celebrations of joy and fanfares for ethereal bliss; the cello recalled a young man's heart complaint. Whitman's poems are, in fact, orchestrated with as full a range of color as any musical score – with voices which rise and fall in dialogue. Of these always emerges clearest and truest that of the poet. For Whitman the human voice was the most poignant and powerful of all instruments. To sing was to articulate both the soul and the Self.

Given the musicality of the poetry itself, it is a small wonder that over 1200 settings of Whitman's texts exist; (in preparation for this recording Thomas Hampson unearthed over 400 settings for voice and piano alone!) As Ned Rorem asserts, "Whitman is content... A poet's content in a musician's form." The earliest settings appeared in the last decade of the poet's life, though the first major surge of compositional activity coincided with the 1919 centennial of Whitman's birth. The range of styles, nationalities, and languages represented by these settings is as far-reaching as was Whitman's influence on world literature. While there are songs to be found in German, Italian, French, Dutch, Norwegian, Danish, and Russian translations of his poems, the focus of this recording is on the American and English repertoire.

In England, where Whitman already had a strong coterie of literary supporters (among them William Rossetti, Anne Gilchrist, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and John Addington Symonds), composer Charles Villiers Stanford, whose influence over several generations of famous pupils, made Whitman the poet of choice for the likes of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Rutland Boughton, Frank Bridge, Cecil Dougherty, Gustav Holst, & Charles Wood. Stanford's 1884 "Elegiac Ode" inspired Mrs. Gilchrist to write the poet "Your words will be sent home to hundreds of thousands who have not before seen them. How lovely the words read as themes for great music!" Among American composers of art songs, many were born while Whitman was still alive; most were nursed on his verse as one of the shaping forces of American thought; and all who moved in the small communal circles of American music, inspired each other in choice of texts and style of setting. To cite but two examples of the interconnected chain of inspiration: William Neidlinger worked in choral societies where David Bispham sang, while Whitman was a familiar presence in Bispham's Philadelphia boyhood; Charles Naginski, Charles Ives, and Leonard Bernstein all studied and worked at Tanglewood, while contemporary composers like Gerald Busby and Michael Tilson Thomas, and Craig Urquhart have been moved by Bernstein to create their own Whitman settings.

The early Whitman settings tended to fall into the big, Romantic genre of the late 19th century: songs whose musical idiom derived from European art song – Schumann, Brahms. They are songs which rely heavily on either the piano as a parlour instrument or on the piano as organ (for many of the composers had church affiliations). This vein continued into the 20th century with songs such as Stanford's "To the Soul," Vaughan Williams' "Joy, Shipmate, Joy!" and "A Clear Midnight," Bridge's "The Last Invocation," Neidlinger's "Memories of Lincoln," Dalmas' "I Saw the Ploughman Ploughing," and Remick Warren's "We Two."

Other composers, like Ives, Burleigh, Strassburg (and again Vaughan Williams), were attracted to the folk idiom of Whitman's verse – the vox populi with all its individuality and universality. Burleigh's ability to capture the voices of the downcast African-American in "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors," Ives' skill in replicating the poet's plain-spokenness in Walt Whitman, and Strassburg's cantorial rhythms and melodies in "Prayer of Columbus" are but three examples of this genre. Just as his literary descendants were drawn to the groundbreaking aspects of Whitman's language and his thematic innovations, mid-20th century composers enjoyed experimenting with musical forms in their settings of the poet. Naginski and Rorem both effect a haunting impressionism in their respective renderings of "Look Down Fair Moon;" in "Dirge for Two Veterans;" Weill recapped his political/humanitarian message in a New World idiom; and Bacon ("One Thought Ever at the Fore") and Hindemith, ("Sing on There in the Swamp"), also transplanted Europeans, looked to Whitman's verse to infuse their musical language with the energetic essence of their adoptive country.

Contemporary composers continue to return to the great Bard, finding relevant chords in both his thought and his form. Rorem ("As Adam Early in the Morning," "That Shadow My Likeness," "Sometimes with One I Love") Urquhart ("Among the Multitude"), Busby ("Behold This Swarthy Face"), Tilson Thomas ("We Two Boys Together Clinging") and Bernstein have all immersed themselves in the poet's liberated thought and in his passionate intellectual and emotional message. One of the most moving examples of this is found in "To What You Said," Bernstein's setting of an unpublished Whitman fragment – what may have been a private musing or an unsent letter to his friend Anne Gilchrist. With its combination of delicacy and militantism the song is at once an assertion of freedom and responsibility – a statement that the love of comrades is the highest human good and that that love may express itself in any infinite number of couplings – man to man, wife to husband – friend to friend, individual to society, and poet to democracy. "To What You Said" appealed to Bernstein, we are told, because he read it as a "repressed poem on a repressed subject." With his own psychological contraries, his unabashed Romanticism, his political activism and deep humanitarianism, as well as with his quest for a unique native idiom that blended American jazz and European melody, Bernstein found Whitman a kindred spirit. In that special fusion of thought, word, and music, composer and poet invite the listener to embark on a psychological, spiritual, and ultimately universal voyage in which matter is transformed into fleshy spirit, experience into art, and stasis into flux.

For Whitman, poetry, itself, was a journey and song the signposts along its path. "If you want me again, look for me under your boot soles," writes Whitman at the end of "Song of Myself." "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged/Missing me one place search another/I stop somewhere waiting for you."

And so the Bard beckons. In the last one hundred years artists and writers, composers and singers have responded in such generous measure that Walt Whitman would, no doubt, be pleased at the tenaciousness of his roots and the

prolific offshoots of his imagination. With that inimitable voice of ego and humility, with the lèse-majesté of the democratic poet, Whitman paid his own tribute to the music in his head and his heart and ultimately his pen:

*Composers! Mighty maestros!  
And you, sweet singers of old lands,  
soprani, tenori, bassi!  
To you a new bard is caroling in the West,  
obeisant sends his love.*