

A Discovery: Thomas Merton's Poetry As Art Song; Compositions by Bryan Beaumont Hays, OSB: A Bibliographical Note

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Bryan Beaumont Hays, OSB, is an accomplished composer whose music has been created largely within the context of his monastic vocation at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Among the numerous compositions which he has completed are many works which utilize Thomas Merton's poems.

Fr. Bryan Beaumont Hays was born in 1920. Before he entered St. John's Monastery in Minnesota, he pursued an active career in music. Father Hays was born on a farm near Clarksville, Tennessee. His Southern roots remain strong even after 48 years as a monk in St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota.

After serving in the Pacific during World War II, he returned to school and obtained a Master's Degree in music composition in the late 40s at the Chicago Music College (now the Music Department of Roosevelt College in Chicago). Hays won the Gershwin Memorial Award for a short orchestral composition, *Pastorale and Allegro* in 1949. This piece was performed at Carnegie Hall during the annual Gershwin Memorial Concert. He was awarded a summer scholarship to Tanglewood where he was a student of Aaron Copeland in 1950. That fall two of his compositions were performed at a concert of contemporary music at McMillan Hall, Columbia University in New York City.

In 1951, Hays received the first of two Guggenheim Fellowships in Music Composition and spent two years in Italy composing and listening to opera. In 1957 he entered St. John's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Collegeville, Minnesota where he has served as a teacher of French and English. He has composed five operas, numerous art songs, choral music and music for chamber ensembles.

In 1995, some of his choral and organ music was performed at St. Mark's Cathedral in Minneapolis. Hays continues to compose

for available local performers. The selections presented on a recent CD represent only a small portion of the vast collection of beautiful songs Bryan Beaumont Hays has composed for voice, piano and a variety of instruments.

He commented when this recording was released:

I am a frustrated opera composer in as much as I have not had my operas performed. But perhaps this has been a blessing. Maturing musically late in life, I realize now that I am a lyric poet. I generally prefer short poems that make their point quickly.

Although I occasionally write instrumental pieces, my true love is for the art song.

To me there is nothing so lovely and expressive as the human voice. I shall devote the rest of my creative life to this vocal genre. I am the poet of the short line, not the long. Not for me is the spinning of endless melody. As my device, I adopt the lines of Alfred de Musset: "Mon verre n'est pas grand,/ mais je bois de mon verre." (My glass is not a big one, but I drink from it.)

Hays's musical accomplishments are well represented on the CD released in 2000, entitled Uncommon Daisies. These songs reflect the range of his work only to a limited degree. Frequently, his songs are written in the tradition of the Nineteenth Century Art Song. This recording includes twenty-three pieces arranged in five categories. These are: 1) Six English Epitaphs; 2) Six Autumn Songs; 3) Five Spring Songs of Francis Ledwidge; 4) Nine Songs to Poems of Isaac Rosenberg; and 5) Two Trios. The recording, copyright 2000, is available from Granite City Records.

Hays's voluminous work also includes considerable Choral Music (A Cappella or with instruments); duets and trios (for women's voices and one duet for bass-baritone and soprano); instrumental music, operas and oratorios as well as considerable more songs for solo voice than those written "to poems by Thomas Merton." His work is ambitious and artful. He has written a full opera for Flannery O'Conner's "Parker's Back," and when asked once if he was disappointed about it not ever being produced, commented: "Oh, it would take a very good company"

Hays's interest in Thomas Merton's writing has been substantial. He has composed for at least 43 of Merton's poems. These compositions are arranged in 7 sets, grouped loosely according to

Merton's thematic interests. Hays's songs arranged for poems by Thomas Merton are designed within the following groupings:

Songs to Poems by Thomas Merton

7 sets, voice and piano. (These are listed chronologically.)

Songs to Poems by Thomas Merton, Set. No. 1

for baritone and piano.

1. Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing
2. For my Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943
3. Song for Nobody
4. A Messenger from the Horizon

Orchestra version exists.

Songs to Poems by Thomas Merton, Set No. 2

for low voice.

1. The Messenger
2. Saint Jason
3. Song for Our Lady of Cobre
4. The Flight into Egypt
5. The Winter's Night
6. Evening
7. Carol
8. The Man in the Wind

Orchestral version exists.

Songs to Poems by Thomas Merton, Set No. 3

for soprano and piano.

1. The Greek Women
2. Calypso's Island
3. Ariadne
4. Ariadne of the Labyrinth

Orchestral version exists.

Songs to Poems by Thomas Merton, Set No. 4

for high voice and piano

1. The Candlemass Procession
2. The Heavenly City
3. St. Paul
4. Trappists, Working
5. Poem
6. Dirge for a Town in France

Orchestral version exists.

Songs to Poems by Thomas Merton, Set No. 5

for high voice and piano

1. St. Agnes: A Responsory
2. Crusoe
3. Advent
4. When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple ...
5. April
6. O Sweet, Irrational Worship
7. Song from Crossportion's Pastoral

Orchestral version exists.

Songs to Poems by Thomas Merton, Set No. 6

for Baritone or mezzo-soprano and piano.

1. Night-Flowering Cactus
2. Landscape
3. What to Think When it Rains Blood
4. Song: In the Shows of the Round Ox
5. An Elegy for Five Old Ladies
6. Spring Storm

Orchestral version exists.

Songs to Poems by Thomas Merton, Set No. 7

for high baritone or mezzo-soprano

1. Lent in a Year of War
2. In Memory of the Spanish Poet-Frederico Garcia Lorca
3. The Captives—A Psalm
4. Aubade-Harlem
5. In the Rain and the Son

6. The Guns of Fort Knox
7. Elegy for the Monastery Barn
8. The Moslem's Angel of Death

Orchestral version exists.

Seven Sets of Songs to Poems of Thomas Merton

Complete set scored for full orchestra.

Hays's work is published. The Merton Poem Cycles are available through KSM Publishing Co., P.O. Box 3819, Dallas, Texas, 75208. The poems of Set No. 1 (for low voice and piano) include "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing," a composition of 6 pages.

This introductory note will alert future Merton scholars and musicians to the existence of Bryan Hays's sophisticated use of Merton's poetry as the foundation for so many compositions. Some of these works have been performed at St. John's University and Abbey, Collegeville.

This body of work would clearly afford an excellent opportunity for a knowledgeable Merton scholar. It draws largely on the more lyrical Merton. Study of Hays's compositions would clearly afford an opportunity for drawing specific connections with contemporary music. Such study might add to performances at future Merton-related gatherings.