

Christopher James

FIVE LYRICAL FRAGMENTS OF SAPPHO

For Soprano and Chamber Orchestra

(2007)

1. Dark is the night sky
2. My sweetest mother
3. Sweet apple
4. Epithalamion
5. Eros hath afflicted

Melissa Fogarty, Soprano

North/South Consonance Ensemble, Max Lifchitz, Conductor

Duration: about 10 minutes

Introduction and Notes

Sappho, dubbed the “tenth muse” by Plato, lived between about 630 and 570 BC on the island of Lesbos and in exile (from 604 to 594) in Sicily. Held in the highest esteem in the ancient world, very little of her work survives: only one complete poem, the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, and some one hundred fifty fragments.

The fourth of the present songs, *Epithalamion*, was the first to be written, in 1989, as a wedding gift for my friends Noah and Cynthia Caplin.

In 2007, I completed several large ballad type songs for my cycle *Songs of the Tragic Generation*. It then occurred to me that it would be an entirely different sort of challenge to write some brief, epigrammatic songs, and I knew at once that I should investigate Sappho. The composition of the original version of the cycle for voice and piano, in Greek, proceeded smoothly and rapidly through the summer and fall of 2007. I then prepared the English version, and after that I arranged the cycle for the so-called Pierrot Lunaire ensemble and sent it to Max Lifchitz. Max responded with a question, “would you like to arrange the songs for chamber orchestra?” I assented, and now this is the only one of my works to exist in three versions.

The “Five Fragments” of the title is perhaps a little misleading: actually there are seven, as the fourth and fifth songs each stitch together two separate fragments of poetry. The music is, I think, direct and straightforward, and does not require any special explanation. I am grateful of the kind assistance of professor Michele Lowrie of the Classics Department of New York University, whose advice in matters of ancient Greek prosody and diction proved invaluable.