

Christopher James

SONGS OF THE TRAGIC GENERATION

For Baritone and Piano

(2007)

A 70th Birthday Tribute for David Del Tredici

1. In the Stalls (Arthur Symons)
2. In the Gold Room (Oscar Wilde)
3. The Voice (John Davidson)
4. Spleen (Ernest Dowson)
5. To Morfydd (Lionel Johnson)

Duration: about 17 minutes

Introduction and Notes

The poets whose work is set to music in this group of songs were all members of the informal literary society known as the Rhymers' Club, which met in London in the 1890's. William Butler Yeats, a fellow Rhymers' Club member, knew them all well. Yeats' essay entitled "The Tragic Generation of English Poets", appearing in his 1922 book *Autobiographies*, contains reminiscences of their unhappy and often brief lives, and at a thirty years' remove, offers a critical evaluation of their work that is sympathetic and fair. By 1902 three of the group, Wilde, Dowson, and Johnson, were dead, all young, and by 1909 suicide and madness had claimed the other two, Symons and Davidson. These "decadent" minor poets are sometimes regarded as the English counterparts of the French symbolists (usually with the observation that Verlaine and Mallarmé are *major* poets.). For better or for worse, they are not read much nowadays. Delius set a number of Dowson's poems to music, and Griffes several of Wilde's. Curiously, Schönberg set Dowson's poem *Seraphita* (in Stefan George's German translation) as the first of his Four Orchestral Songs, Op. 22. Few other composers seem to have set the work of these poets in at least eighty years, but clearly something here must resonate within me.

Arthur Symons' *In the Stalls* (1892) is characteristic of his early poetry, with a current of bitter alienation, a fascination with the low life, and a certain amount of self-loathing. I have set it as a sort of tipsy waltzing ballad wherein stalk the ghosts of Ravel, Puccini, and Elgar. It doesn't approach the "vulgar" idiom of the English music hall ballad head-on, but it is clearly a "theatre song".

Oscar Wilde's *In the Gold Room: A Harmony* (1890) was a lucky find for me, because I knew that most of the best Wilde poems had been snapped up by Griffes – and set so consummately well by him that I did not wish to invite the comparison. The music of this song unfolds in a free fantasy, informally evoking the play of color and imagery. The harmony is rich, chromatic and sensual.

John Davidson's *The Voice* (about 1891) might be said to be a young man's nihilistic and intemperate rant, but it contains striking and apposite imagery. I feel that while Davidson sometimes had a bit of a tin ear for verbal music, nevertheless his mode of expression possesses great force. My music is harsh and at times deliberately lurid.

Ernest Dowson's *Spleen* (1896) was also set by Delius, in his *Songs of Sunset*. But while there is much in Delius that I love, I must confess I am not much taken by his setting of this poem. My setting is moody and obsessive, but also quiet and subdued. I think it's a very fine poem, deeply felt, with perfect balance and control.

Lionel Johnson's *To Morfydd* (1895) is a sort of inchoate proto-poetry, more a sort of incantation, that evokes powerful but primitive emotions. While the tune came to me very quickly, the working-out in strophic variations cost me much effort. I ultimately decided to let go of certain prejudices and follow my instincts. The metric scheme is inflexible and strictly periodic. I have tried to achieve the greatest intensity in the cumulative effect.

Christopher James
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