

in memoriam Arthur Simmonds

Songs to remember Arthur

for mezzo-soprano & piano

Pætry Tony Bowland
Music Michæl Maxwell Steer

March 2024

Michæl Maxwell Steer
125 Duck St Tisbury SP3 6LJ
07891 550849
m@msteer.co.uk
<http://uk.youtube.com/Maxwellsteer>
<https://soundcloud.com/mmsteer/tracks>

Songs to remember Arthur

In some ways I have no right to name these songs since the words are not mine. They are those of my fellow Quaker Tony Bowland. I came across them on Facebook, and bought his published volume, relishing his Sufi-themed poetry. All I know about Tony is that he lives in the Cambridgeshire fens near Ely, which have inspired many of his poems. I have now set eight of them: four for female acappella, and these four for solo mezzo-soprano.

I composed the first of this set during the last week of Arthur Simmonds' life, and the remaining three in the week after his death, and they seem particularly attuned to his ethos: with his love of walking in nature, his understated spirituality and his passion for social justice. As members of Shaftesbury Quaker Meeting my wife and I had known Arthur & Pat Simmonds for 30 years, and they were dearly loved F/friends. Arthur's cancer had been in remission for a number of years but in January he was given notice that it had returned and that he would not have long to live. In March he died at home, peacefully and mercifully fast.

The set had begun as an experiment. Singer-songwriter Olivia Chaney was a friend of our daughter Serafina at Chethams, and in February we had been to see her review her new album in Frome. I had been profoundly moved by the maturity and professionalism of her presentation, not least the way she has scaled the whole conception of her work to the orbit of her own skills. Olivia's original songs are beautifully atmospheric and she projects them with mesmerising simplicity. It suddenly reconnected me with the memory of my own thoughts /feelings as a young composer and what my hopes for my life had been. There's no way I could write songs that would be relevant for Olivia's self-expression, but I decided to employ some of the strophic constructional methods I observed in her songs myself. It is a strange irony that I have always thought my particular genius as a composer lies in the combination of words and music, being also a poet, yet almost all my professional life has been spent in one form of instrumental music or another. And I don't sing to any degree myself. I therefore have found the unaffected way both Olivia and Serafina have been able to integrate their voices and song-writing a wonderful gift. So it interested me to experiment with composing a set of songs that make use of the conventions of popular song without necessarily imitating it.

1. For Thich Nhat Hanh

Poetry to hear the words to contain
Music the listening soul hears in silence
A presence that needs no invocation
A sky that rings like a bell that no hand strikes
Sunshine and my awareness not two lights
A single generosity of gold
There's a leaf trembling in a breath of wind
I am that leaf this breath and sudden calm.
The sunshine shares its stillness and around us
The lit worlds follow concentric paths
And all that arises I hold in my arms
There's nothing to be known but tenderness

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) was a Vietnamese Buddhist who was exiled from his country for opposition to the Vietnam war. A tireless peace activist, he took up residence in France where he established an open monastery, Village des Pruniers in the Dordogne, which now has offshoots all over the world. These words also follow the sense of a classic poem by the 15thC Bengali mystic, Kabir.

Here the music is cast in a recurring seven bar pattern, while the word-setting overlaps in a quadratic form, except for the middle section where the harmonic movement takes on a freer kind of expression.

2. Wonder

Asleep in the land of forgetfulness;
If there were one thing you would remember,

One state of mind you would wish to wake to,
What single desire would you wish fulfilled?
Both past and future are illusory,
The only location of life is now,
Always was, always will be, right here;
Invoke no ghosts, pursue no paradise.
When water rises fresh from the wellspring,
It bears no story of mountains and plains,
When fire consumes wood it leaves only ash,
The flames do not grow weary of their dance.
Do you ever wonder in the mirror,
Who it is, who is looking throu your eyes,
Or for what purpose you left formlessness
To walk this path of happiness and tears?

This is probably the most musically elaborate of the songs, but also one of the most atmospheric.

3. Years end & stars die

The trees open their hands
New leaves for the season
Uncurl fresh and moist
And the blossom bursts
The great beauty appears
Is seen and is gone.
I smile and shed tears
Because time flows on
The years end and the stars die
Life loves to be known
New words will be made
And spring sung again

The beginning and end of the piece revolve around three repeated bars. The middle branches out with a sequence of descending chords.

4 everything is singing

everything is singing,
it's not the wind
sighing throu the reeds
for the air is still,
as if I can hear
the presence of things,
the spirit singing
in every being;
the translucent river,
the tranquil reeds,
the slender poplar,
the ancient willow,
and in my own heart,
songs of grief and joy
rise up from silence
and in silence die.

The accompaniment ripples in descending chords.

for Thich Nhat Hanh

Tony Bowland
Michael Maxwell Steer

6/3/24

1 *Unhurried. Treat each bar as a new thought*

Po- et- ry too pure for

Red.

5

words to con- tain Mus- ic the

Red.

9

list- 'ning soul hears in sil- ence A

13

pres- ence that needs no in- vo- ca- tion

13

Led.

17

A sky that rings like a bell that

17

21

no hand strikes Mus- ic the

21

Led.

25

list- 'ning soul hears in sil- ence

25

Led. 3

29

Sun- shine & my a- ware- ness not two lights - A sin- gle

29

32

gen- er- os- i- ty of gold There's a leaf

32

34

trem- bling in a breath of wind I am that leaf

34

Red.

37

this breath and the calm

37

41

The sun shares

41

Lead. 3

44

its still- ness and a- round us The

44

3

47

lit worlds foll- ow con- cen- tric paths

47

3

Lead. 3 *

50

And

50

Lead. 3 * *Lead.* 3 * *Lead.*

54

all that a- ris- es I hold in my arms

54

58

There's noth- ing

58

Red.

62

to be known but ten- der- ness ten- der- ness

62

una
Red.

Wonder

Tony Bowland
Michaël Maxwell Steer

9-14/3/24

1. $\text{♩} = 63$ *Dreamily*

A- sleep in the land of for- get- ful- ness;

p

Les deux Leds. toujours

2

If there were one thing you would re-

3

mem- ber,

4

One state of mind you would wish to wake to,

Red. *Red.* *Red.*

5

What sin- gle des- ire would you wish ful-

Red. *Red.* *Red.*

6

filled? Both past &

Red.

9

fu- ture are ill- u- so- ry, The on- ly lo- ca- tion of

anim

12 *f* *mf* $\text{♩} = 69$

life is now, (Al- ways was,

15 *f* *mf*

al- ways will be,) Right here; (In- voke no ghosts,

tr *una*

18

pur- sue no par- a- dise.)

20 $\text{♩} = 72$ *Lightly, with rubato* *f*

When

mf *tr* *una*

21

wat- er ri- ses fresh from the well- spring,

p

Led. *Led.* *Led.* *Led.* *Led.*

22

When fire con- sumes wood it leaves on- ly ash,

Riten

Led. *Led.* *Led.* *Led.* *Led.*

23

The flames do not grow wear- y

f

Led. *Led.*

24

of their dance.

Led. *Led.*

26 *Dreamily*

Do you ev- er won- der in the mirr- or,

p

Les deux *Red.* toujours

27

Who it is look- ing throu your

28

eyes?

29

Or for what pur- pose you left

* *Red.* * *Red.* * *Red.*

30

form- less- ness?

Led. *Led.* *Led.*

31

To walk this path of happ- i- ness

Led.

33

happ- i- ness & tears?

pp

Years end & stars die

Tony Bowland
Michael Maxwell Steer

15/3/24

1

The trees

7

op- en their hands New leaves

13

for the sea- son Un- curl fresh & moist

18

And the bloss- om bursts

18

22

The great beau-

22

* *Red.*

* *Red.*

24

ty app- ears, is

24

* *Red.*

* *Red.*

26

seen & is gone

26

* *Red.*

* *Red.*

28

smile and shed tears

28

Led. *Led.*

30

Be- cause time flows on

30

Led. *Led.* *Led.*

33

Tho years end & stars

33

39

die Life loves to be

39

42

known New words will be made

47

And spring sung sung a-

51

gain

*
Led.

everything is singing

Tony Bowland
Michaël Maxwell Steer

16/3/24

1 $\text{♩} = 100$ *mf* $\overbrace{\text{3}}$ $\overbrace{\text{3}}$
ev' ry- thing is sing- ing, it's not the wind sigh-

1 *p* *Red.*

3 $\overbrace{\text{3}}$
ing throu the reeds for the air is still,

5 *mf*
as if I can hear the pres- ence of things, the

7

spi- rit sing- ing in ev' ry be- ing;

9

mp the trans-lu- cent riv- er, the tran- quil reeds,

11

the slen- der pop- lar, the an- cient will- ow

13

and in my own heart, songs of grief & joy rise up from

15

si- lence and in si- lence die.

15

*