



MARK ANDRIST

Writing for the Natural Countertenor Voice

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Mark Andrist's path to composition began during his vocal studies, when his search for repertoire suited to his natural countertenor voice prompted him to write his own music. Drawing inspiration from Mozart and the poetry of William Blake, he created Songs of Innocence, a work that bridges classical elegance with playful storytelling. Having received recognition in several international music competitions for his writing, Andrist continues to compose with a deep connection to the vocal line. In this interview, he reflects on his creative beginnings, his approach to melody, and his current projects.

WITH YOUR BACKGROUND IN SINGING, WHAT FIRST SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN COMPOSING MUSIC OF YOUR OWN?

I was like a lot of kids whose first forays into song writing occur when they form their first garage or basement band. I didn't have any inclinations toward serious composition until I started working toward my graduate degree in Church Music. I was a vocal major — and because of my voice range, a voice professor coaxed me into singing some countertenor pieces. I felt comfortable with Handel and Purcell, but I really struggled with pretty much all of the modern compositions written for the countertenor voice. My voice was not the developed falsetto that seems most prevalent with modern countertenors. I had more in common with Freddy Mercury of the rock band Queen — a natural male alto.

My frustrations grew exponentially as projects were discussed concerning a final Senior recital. It was an offhand conversation with a composition instructor that sparked the idea of just writing something. The result was the very first incarnation of “Songs of Innocence”, a short song cycle featuring a couple of William Blake's poems. And the proverbial writing bug had bitten me.

YOUR COMPOSITIONS HAVE EARNED STRONG RECOGNITION IN RECENT COMPETITIONS, INCLUDING TWO ABSOLUTE WINNER TITLES. WHAT DOES THAT APPRECIATION MEAN FOR THE PLACE OF COMPOSITION IN YOUR MUSICAL LIFE?

I don't think there is a plethora of music out there written specifically for the countertenor voice. To be honest, there seems to be a bit of a stigma relative to countertenor singers in general — unless they are singing as part of a group like Pentatonix or Chanticleer. Even among the musical academic community, some love the voice and others absolutely can't stand it. We probably need support groups for us countertenors — the most maligned and misunderstood category of singers in the world.

So, to have received such a positive response to a work that features a countertenor soloist is extremely gratifying and significant to me. I hope those accolades will open the doors of opportunity for the work to find audiences in more places.

IN COMPOSING “SONGS OF INNOCENCE,” WHAT DREW YOU TO MOZART’S MUSICAL LANGUAGE, AND DID YOU FEEL A KINSHIP WITH HIS WAY OF WRITING?

I fell in love with Mozart when I played the role of Cherubino in “The Marriage of Figaro” — the teenager who continuously finds himself caught in places where he is not supposed to be. (And, yes — Cherubino is a “trousers role” that is typically played by a woman. Because of my voice range, the director of the production was delighted to cast the role with a real, live boy!!)

The youthfulness and playfulness of Mozart’s music was such a natural inspiration for the tone and atmosphere of William Blake’s poems in “Songs of Innocence.” I also feel that the natural countertenor voice is so wonderfully suited to the musical styles of the Baroque and Classical eras.

WHAT OUTSIDE MUSIC MOST OFTEN SPARKS YOUR IMAGINATION AS A COMPOSER, AND CAN YOU RECALL AN IDEA THAT FOUND ITS WAY INTO A PIECE?

Outside music — oh, my goodness. I currently have Billy Strings (a Bluegrass phenomenon) playing on a continuous loop on my iPhone. There really isn’t any genre or style of music that I won’t find something to like. I sometimes play a little game with some of my students — I’ll play a snippet of something I’m currently writing, and I’ll ask, “Can you guess what I’ve been listening to lately?”

Because I’m principally a singer, the most common elements that seep into most of my writing involve the emotive aspects of vocal production. Even my instrumental scoring involves vocal lines. And I particularly love the theatrical balance between the singer and the storyteller. I try to create melody lines that emulate the natural flow of speech — not just rhythmically, but with the dynamic rise and fall of energy and emotions.

IS THERE A NEW PIECE OR MUSICAL IDEA TAKING SHAPE IN YOUR MIND THAT YOU'D LIKE TO BRING TO LIFE?

I laughingly thought about tackling William Blake's "Songs of Experience" — the counterpoint to "Songs of Innocence". But, a countertenor wouldn't work for that set of poems. They call for a baritone. And . . . that's about as far as my thinking has gotten on that subject.

I'm currently working on a collection entitled, "Not Quite a Prelude (A Little More Than a Hymn Intro)" that features short piano or organ pieces for church musicians who want a little more creativity in their introductions to hymns and songs, but don't want an elaborate three or four minute recital piece.

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