

*Psalms, Hymns & Spiritual Songs* (2011) (World Premiere)

1. From Psalm 139
2. Psalm 121 (Metrical version by Michael Wigglesworth, 1631–1705)
3. Vertue (George Herbert, 1593–1633)
4. The Bliss of Brahman (Sri Aurobindo Ghose, 1872-1950)
5. Let Evening Come (Jane Kenyon, 1947-1995)
6. God's Grandeur (Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1844–1889)

*Psalms, Hymns & Spiritual Songs* is my first major cycle for voice and piano. Its title comes from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (5:19), in which he exhorts them to address one another "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" — virtually a definition of devotional poetry. The cycle's genesis was my desire to set Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur," a poem I've known and loved since I was introduced to it in high school by my English teacher Vera Miller. My initial musical idea for the Hopkins setting — which is dedicated to Mrs. Miller's memory — came in the late 1980s, years before I got around to the actual composition of the song, which I completed in 2005. The sheer length of the setting seemed to dictate that it would be part of a sizeable work, and the search for other suitable poetry ensued. The form that the cycle took was that of two large songs bookending the structure: the Hopkins at the end, and verses from Psalm 139 at the beginning. The four songs in the middle are of more modest dimensions, ranging from a metrical version of Psalm 121 by a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan minister to poems by George Herbert, Sri Aurobindo Ghose and the contemporary American poet Jane Kenyon. The entire cycle is dedicated to tonight's performers with gratitude, and a few other dedications should be mentioned: "From Psalm 139," to the memory of my father, William Winstead Biggs; "Psalm 121" to my friend and MSM colleague Mark Stambaugh, "Vertue" to the memory of my great-aunt and great-uncle Mary Jo and Phil McGary, and "The Bliss of Brahman" to the memory of Alexandra Montano, a great singer and wonderful artist. Thanks to the MacDowell Colony, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Yaddo for the residencies that allowed much of this work to be composed.