

## Hayes Biggs: About me

The first music I remember hearing was the original cast album of *My Fair Lady*, which had opened on Broadway about a year before I was born. My parents played it a lot, along with other original cast albums, movie soundtracks, what used to be called “highlights” albums from favorite operas, and many standard classical pieces. My first formative musical experience was watching The Beatles on Ed Sullivan’s show in 1964 at the age of six, after which I became a huge fan, which I remain to this day.

About a year after beginning piano lessons, my classmates and I were assigned to read a story about Mozart in a fifth-grade reading class at Helena Elementary School. The class was taught by a very kind teacher named Carrie Garofas, who loved classical music; she also was a trained singer with a lovely lyric soprano voice. Soon after we read a story about Gershwin, and another about Beethoven, and I was hooked.

I became fascinated by the idea of composing and with musical notation, though I had little idea about how it worked. I was brought up in a fundamentalist evangelical tradition — I call myself a “recovering Southern Baptist” — but my first piano teacher was a nun, Sister Teresa Angela, who taught at the local Catholic school. She readily observed that I was very interested in the manuscript paper she kept in a drawer and used for writing out scales and exercises for students. I’d never seen music paper before but knew I wanted some. It wasn’t just the mystique of it: trying to draw staff lines on notebook paper was getting old fast. She also quickly figured out that a good way to get me to practice was to promise me a few sheets of it as a reward for a lesson well played. Whenever I had a spare moment, I was trying to write music, and learned by imitating as best I could what I saw in the piano pieces I played. I devoured all the music of whatever kind that I could. Soon my mind opened to modern music by way of my high school band director N. Stanley Balch, and the discovery of Vincent Persichetti’s book, *Twentieth Century Harmony*. My Christmas list for many years included recordings of classical works almost to the exclusion of anything else. I continued playing the piano, singing in choirs at church and at school, and accompanying vocal solos and choral music.

When I got to college (at what is now Rhodes College in Memphis, TN) in the fall of 1975, I was a piano major, but also took voice lessons, sang in the choir, and continued accompanying, mostly voice students. I learned a tremendous amount about how voices work from those experiences. I’d composed a few little pieces over the years but didn’t receive any formal training in composition until I was introduced by Tony Lee Garner, my college choir director, to Don Freund, who taught at Indiana University for many years but was then teaching at what is now the University of Memphis. Don took me on as a private student, as there was no composition program at Rhodes. He has had (and continues to have) a huge effect on how I think about composing and was particularly influential when it came to learning how to incorporate many different types of harmony and stylistic elements into my music.

I continued my education with a master’s degree in composition at SMU in Dallas, where my principal teacher was Donald Erb, and after meeting and taking lessons with Mario Davidovsky as a Fellow at Tanglewood in 1981 I decided to apply to Columbia University, where I earned a DMA degree. Mario was also a powerful influence on me, as different from Don Freund in aesthetic outlook as one could imagine, but also a tremendously enthusiastic and inspiring teacher. He could look at a sketch and immediately come up with fifty ways that it might be continued. I found that this usually spurred me to come up with my own fifty-first possibility.

I keep my hand in as a performer by singing with C4: The Choral Composer/Conductor Collective, a group in New York city that specializes in music composed within the past twenty-five years. They have given several excellent performances of my music, including several pieces that I wrote especially for them. As a composer I embrace eclecticism; for me stylistic purity is highly overrated.

Two favorite composers of mine, Alban Berg and Stravinsky, both exemplify something that has preoccupied me for years: the reconciliation of tonal and non-tonal elements in the same work. Being diametrically opposed in their respective aesthetics, they approach this reconciliation in very different ways. Berg goes for a seamless fusion of atonal elements with Romantic gestures and tonal-sounding harmonies, in a language that evokes Mahler, while Stravinsky in a work like *Agon*, seems to embrace discontinuity, the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous musics in the same piece.

## About the Music

The first three of my four piano preludes were commissioned by Thomas Stumpf, who has performed those three, including the premieres of the first and third. I am grateful to him for requesting these pieces and encouraging me to

return to writing solo piano music. The fourth is dedicated to my long-time friends and colleagues, David Rakowski and Beth Wiemann.

“The secret that silent Lazarus would not reveal” takes its title from a poem called “The Afterlife,” by Billy Collins. “While you are preparing for sleep, brushing your teeth, or riffling through a magazine in bed,” Collins writes, “the dead of the day are setting out on their journey. They’re moving off in all imaginable directions, each according to his own private belief...” Lazarus’s secret, the poet reveals, is that “you go to the place you always thought you would go, the place you kept lit in an alcove in your head.” He gives examples that run the gamut from “standing naked before a forbidding judge who sits with a golden ladder on one side, a coal chute on the other” to “approaching the apartment of the female God, a woman in her forties with short wiry hair and glasses hanging from her neck by a string.” Despite — or because of — my hellfire-and-damnation-filled Southern Baptist upbringing, I found this whimsical poem oddly reassuring. In this short piece I imagine a kind of jazzy march of the motley parade participants, tinged with hints of blues and gospel.

I began working on *Reveries. Passions.* in 1990. It is a piece that, it turns out, I was not yet ready to write when I began struggling with my initial ideas for it. In addition, the vagaries of life and various other projects got in the way, and, though I occasionally glanced at it and picked at it a bit, I basically put it away for about 20 years and really didn’t resume work on it in earnest until around 2012.

The quartet might be described as a reflection of my love of nineteenth century music, particularly in its more obsessive and extreme manifestations. My title refers to that of the opening movement of *Symphonie fantastique: Épisode de la vie d’un artiste ... en cinq parties* (*Fantastical Symphony: Episode in the Life of an Artist, in five parts*) by Hector Berlioz (1803-1869), that quintessential arch-Romantic. The beginning of the composer’s program for his symphony reads as follows:

“A young musician of unhealthily sensitive nature and endowed with vivid imagination has poisoned himself with opium in a paroxysm of love-sick despair. The narcotic dose he had taken was too weak to cause death but it has thrown him into a long sleep accompanied by the most extraordinary visions. In this condition his sensations, his feelings and memories find utterance in his sick brain in the form of musical imagery. Even the beloved one takes the form of melody in his mind, like a fixed idea which is ever returning and which he hears everywhere.” (N.B.: **Do not try this at home.**)

Berlioz’s inspiration — his *idée fixe* — was an Irish actress, Harriet Smithson, whom he had seen play the role of Ophelia in a production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in Paris in 1827. Berlioz became obsessed with her even before he met her, sending her passionate love letters, to which she — not surprisingly — did not respond. Eventually he sublimated his feelings for her into his work on *Symphonie fantastique*, which he completed in 1830. Smithson did not attend the premiere, but she was present at a later performance in 1832 and, being sufficiently impressed with Berlioz’s work (and presumably flattered to have provided the impetus for it), finally agreed to meet him. They married in 1833, but it didn’t work out; they went their separate ways after several unhappy years together.

Over the course of Berlioz’s symphony, the beloved and her associated melody haunt the artist’s opium-induced dreams, at times tormenting him. In the fourth movement, *Marche au supplice* (“March to the Scaffold”), he dreams of being hanged for her murder, and in the finale, *Songe d’une nuit du sabbat* (“Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath”), her melody is transformed into a mocking, orgiastic dance at his funeral, a dance in which she is an enthusiastic participant.

My first exposure to *Symphonie fantastique* occurred through watching one of the New York Philharmonic Young People’s Concerts on CBS in 1969, at the age of twelve. The title of this telecast was “Berlioz Takes a Trip.” Leonard Bernstein used Berlioz’s program to draw a connection between the drug-fueled dreams of the artist as depicted in the symphony and the use of hallucinogens such as LSD by hippies, rock musicians and other counterculture figures of the late 1960s. Bernstein touted *Symphonie fantastique* as “The First Psychedelic Symphony.” In fact, Berlioz had gotten the opium dream idea from having read, in his youth, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, a novel by Thomas De Quincey. (Berlioz himself did not use opium until his final years, when he was suffering from cancer and the drug was prescribed for him to alleviate his pain.)

While there are two quotations in my piano quartet from Berlioz’s symphony, including — in my first movement— the waltz melody from his second movement, *Un bal* (“A Ball”), I would say that, musically speaking, my piece owes more to the influence of Robert Schumann (1810-1856), another Capital-R Romantic who in his own way was every bit as

obsessive and impassioned as Berlioz. Schumann and Clara Wieck (1819-1896), the daughter of Robert's piano teacher, Friedrich Wieck, met in 1830, the year that *Symphonie fantastique* was composed. Clara was but eleven years old when Robert moved into the Wiecks' home to pursue his musical studies, and within a few years it was clear that the two were deeply in love. Clara, who had been a child prodigy, became known as one of the greatest pianists of the age, and was an accomplished composer as well. Over her father's objections, and only after prevailing against him in a protracted and acrimonious legal battle, Clara and Robert married in 1840. While they remained devoted to one another and their eight children, Robert suffered at various times from serious mental illness, which ultimately led to his attempting suicide by jumping into the Rhine River and his later commitment (at his own request) to an asylum, where he died at the age of 46. Clara, who remained an authoritative interpreter of and passionate advocate for her husband's music as well as that of their friend Johannes Brahms, outlived Robert by 40 years.

When I began writing *Reveries. Passions.*, I spent time looking at and listening to many quartets and quintets for piano and strings, from the standard ones by Mozart, Brahms, and Fauré to more modern examples by Aaron Copland and my first composition teacher Don Freund, but the one that had the most profound effect on me was Schumann's Piano Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 47, particularly its slow movement, with its beautiful *cantilena* and the *scordatura* low B-flat pedal point in the cello at the end. I quote from the opening of Schumann's first movement near the conclusion of my quartet.

Here is a synopsis of the three movements of *Reveries. Passions.*:

**I. Passion awakened.** The first movement, bearing the indication "Wistful," starts softly and tentatively and becomes increasingly agitated, building to an outburst in the cello, marked *appassionato*, accompanied by tremolo figures in the other instruments. Once this has subsided, a lyrical tune is introduced in the viola and developed, ultimately leading to a recapitulation of the opening material and a subdued, austere, and desolate sounding coda.

**II. Passion mocked. ("Barb'ry Allen.")** This scherzo is a flippant, bitterly sardonic take on the folksong "Barb'ry Allen" (see below). The lyrics of that song — which with the right performer is a sad, poignant, and moving one — concern a young woman spurning the love of her suitor, who is on his deathbed. She is angry that he once slighted her while drinking toasts with and to his friends at a tavern, and on her arrival at his bedside she greets him coldly with the words, "Young man, I think you're dying." After she leaves the young man confirms the aptness of her observation; Barb'ry Allen hears his funeral bell tolling and dies of a broken heart. In many versions of the song, the two end up buried in the same churchyard, and a rose growing from his grave intertwines with a briar growing from hers in a "true lovers' knot." My treatment of the song downplays these more heartwarming parts of the story. It begins with a pizzicato cello introduction, joined shortly by the viola after a brief rest, both parts marked "jaunty." After another rest, the violin and viola accompany the cello as it presents the tune in its lowest register, still pizzicato. The tune reemerges a few more times, notably in the slower middle section, played "a little drunkenly" by the piano, after which the music grows alternately frenetic and halting, ultimately lurching into Berlioz's *nuit du sabbat* before hitting a wall.

**III. Passion recalled. (Reverie.)** Marked "Lento (Wistful)," this movement commences with a ruminative, bittersweet piano solo that grows in volume and intensity, culminating in the sudden entry of the strings, which brings back material from the first movement, including the lyrical tune initially heard in the viola (the same instrument that plays it this time around). After the climax, all the instruments join to recap the material of the opening piano solo, eventually introducing the Schumann quotation and a quiet ending.

-Hayes Biggs

# Barb'ry Allen

(Traditional English Folk Song)



In Scar-let - town where I was born, There was a fair maid dwell-in', Made ev'-ry youth cry  
He sent his ser - vant to the town, Where Bar-b'ry was a - dwell-in', "My mas-ter's sick and



"Well - a - day." Her name was Bar - b'ry Al - len. 'Twas in the Mer - ry month of May Whengreen buds  
bids you come, if your name be Bar - b'ry Al - len." So slow - ly, slow - ly got she up, and slow - ly



they were swell-in', Sweet Wil-iam on his death-bed lay, for love of Bar - b'ry Al-len.  
she came nigh him, And all she said when she got there, "Young man, I think you're dy-in'."