

Three Whitman Songs

by
Joelle Wallach

Like the Walt Whitman poems on which they are based, the Three Whitman Songs display Whitman's views, his idealism, exhilaration and disillusionment. The ascending triplet melodic motif of the first song, Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun, reflects not only the natural rhythm of the text, but also Whitman's exuberant spirit. The song ends, as the poem ends, with the bitter suggestion of Whitman's post-Civil War despondency at mankind's cruelty. The second song compares the creativity of the soul's continual search to a spider's constant weaving. The instruments introduce a characteristic weaving figure which creeps into the vocal line as well as accompanying it. The clarinet does not play the last song. Reconciliation is both its subject and its title. As variants of the rhythmic and melodic patterns of the first two songs recur, recalling the work and worries of the soul, the singer heroically voices Whitman's resolution of his conflicting perspectives.

Joelle Wallach's Three Whitman Songs was composed during 1989. Like her other vocal chamber music it fuses Wallach's central ongoing concerns in chamber music with those in her vocal output. The voice is used in a natural, unforced way and explores the implicit rhythm and melody of the spoken word. As Whitman requests in the first song, the singer appears to warble "spontaneous" songs. The instruments take up the same musical ideas and in developing them, weave a context for the voice, all the while answering the voice and one another.

Texts

I

Give me the splendid silent sun, all of his beams full dazzling;
Give me the juicy autumnal fruit...a field where un-mowed grass
grows;
Give me an arbor of trellis'd grapes, od'rous at sunrise;
...a sweet breath'd woman, ...a perfect child,
...away, aside from the noise of the world.
Give me to warble spontaneous songs, reliev'd, recluse, by
myself, for my ears only.
Give me nature's primal sanities.

...Yet I see what I sought to escape...
and I see my own soul trampling down what it ask'd for.

(1865)

II

A noiseless, patient spider...
I launched forth filament, filament, out of itself;
Ever unreeling, tirelessly speeding them.

And you, O my Soul, where you stand,
Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, — seeking the spheres,
to connect them...

Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul.

(1868)

III

Word over all, beautiful as the sky!
Beautiful that war ... must in time be utterly lost;
That the hands ... of Death and Night incessantly softly wash
again and ever again, this soil'd world;

...My enemy is dead — a man divine as myself;
...he lies white-faced and still ... I draw near,
bend down and lightly touch his face with my lips.

(1865)