

Most of the music on this program is concerned with hazy states of consciousness—things seen dimly or vaguely, that emerge and then disappear. In my works this evening, I am particularly obsessed with night, and with our Night Mind. Our Night Mind understands things differently than our Day Mind; whereas the latter is rational, organized, and clear, the former is emotional, free-associative, and misty. (These descriptions are poetic, not technical. I have found that depicting the Night Mind in art requires, if anything, *more* reason, clarity, and organization in the creative process.) All the insecurities that our Day Mind reasons away are poised to attack our Night Mind; but this same vulnerability leaves our Night Mind open to epiphanies and sudden insights. I approach this topic through the lens of literature and through engagement with traditional musical genres and gestures.

The most openly literary of my four works tonight is the brief song *Absence*. Here is Yiannis Ritsos's poem:

*The setting sun is a red lion.
Smell of sun and burned horsehair.
A rose girl at the door.
A yellow girl under the trees.
A blue girl on the mountain. Nothing
Broad, inexplicable, immaculate absence.
The sky lifts high the girls, the houses, the statues.*

Besides beautifully describing a Mediterranean sunset, the first two lines announce the onset of the Night Mind. This is signaled by, among other things, the confusion of the senses (what does the sun smell like?)—a technique reminiscent of Baudelaire, one of the great poets of these liminal states. Next, the epiphany: the three girls. Are they personal memories? Or are they, as the last line suggests, Greek *korai*—statues, cultural memories? Or are they prophecies? We hardly have time to decide, for the vision disappears in an instant.

The Distance of the Moon is modeled on the first story in Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics*. The charming story is cast in the mold of an old-timer spinning a tall tale. Qfwfq, the narrator, remembers a time when the moon used to arc close to the earth; you used to be able to take a boat out in the middle of the night, stand on a ladder, and touch the moon. You could even jump up, get drawn in by the moon's gravity, and go exploring. From this story, I drew three particular notions. First, the arcing motion of the moon's descent led me to explore curving musical lines that descend obliquely, all at different rates. Second, I worked with the idea of opposed gravities, and the implied split-second of suspended ambiguity between competing pulls. The piece begins in a state of suspension, and then resistance to the earthly mounts as the music aspires towards the lunar, the Night Mind. Third, I was captivated by the story's particular tone, which, despite its humor, is suffused with a certain nostalgic yearning.

My *Nocturne* embodies my nostalgia for the repertoire of the past, and it especially invokes Chopin. In his nocturnes, as in the serenades of earlier composers, the tune is always forthrightly expressed. In my *Nocturne*, the tune is dissolved, as though one is falling asleep and a few tones from a melody heard earlier keep drifting across one's consciousness. Perhaps the piece is less a nocturne than it is a memory of a nocturne. I think often of the first line of an unfinished poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins: "The times are nightfall, look, their light grows less." Hopkins wrote this long ago, but I share his feeling; and perhaps my attraction to the nocturnal topic has to do with the fact that I feel that this age of glowing high-definition screens is also an age of nightfall.

I originally conceived *Through Shadows* as a kind of companion-piece to my *Nocturne*. The *Nocturne* is largely euphonious—even rapturous—and I intended *Through Shadows* to be about a different facet of the Night Mind: the racing thoughts, the anxieties, the irrational fears. As I began working, I found that the tension within the musical material demanded a broader canvas; what developed is a piece on a large scale, similar in scope to a one-movement sonata. The piece moves through a shifting series of developments and variations, and its affect ranges widely—although the harmonies always retain their astringent edge.

The piano writing in the other three pieces of mine this evening is often very "wet," heavy with pedal. Similarly, in *Through Shadows*, the piano rarely stops resonating; but the particular color of the resonance is carefully controlled through the nearly constant use of the middle "sostenuto" pedal, which allows some notes to ring while

others are dampened. These resonances are like shadows of the sound; also shadowy are the low, dense chords characteristic of this work, and the ephemeral nature of its various sections. In my imagination was a passage from George MacDonald's "The Golden Key," part of which I set in an early song. MacDonald's fairy tale is about a quest, and this is one of the things the two travelers encounter:

Looking down, they could not tell whether the valley below was a grassy plain or a great still lake. They had never seen any place look like it. The way to it was difficult and dangerous, but down the narrow path they went, and reached the bottom in safety... It was no wonder to them now that they had not been able to tell what it was, for this surface was everywhere crowded with shadows. It was a sea of shadows... As they walked they waded knee-deep in the lovely lake. For the shadows were not merely lying on the surface of the ground, but heaped up above it like substantial forms of darkness, as if they had been cast upon a thousand different planes of the air.

I think of my harmonies in *Through Shadows* as "substantial forms of darkness," especially as they build into clusters towards the end of the piece. But, like the shadows in MacDonald, these are not necessarily sinister—some may be, but others are poignant, even tender.

I have long considered Janáček a composer whose poetic aims are akin to my own. The landscape of *In the Mists* is haunted by doubts and desperation; but the miracle of the piece is the way the dark moments are balanced by moments of genuine consolation. Rands's *Three Pieces* also find ways to mediate between opposites; the moods in the opening "Caprice" range from "Sprightly Dancing" to "Majestic" to "Jazzy." The second movement is an "Aubade," a song at dawn, and here Rands depicts the last moments of the Night Mind before the day sets in—the moments when one is still foggy, "indecisive," and "vague." (These latter are words from the score.) The "Arabesque" seems at first to be the Day Mind in full swing—the glare of sunlight, the rush of business—but the hurry periodically clears away to reveal other modes of consciousness. This sort of emotional shading is one of the qualities I value most in music. It excavates our inner lives more thoroughly than words can, because its logic is the that of the Night Mind.

—Daniel Pesca