Letter to the World



DAVID LEISNER, composer MUSIC FOR VOICE AND INSTRUMENTS



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Letter to the World

Vocal music makes up a large part of my composition catalog. After all, I got my musical start as a singer of folk and popular music in my teens, then gravitated to choral singing and conducting, and even sang some lves songs on my solo guitar debut recital in New York in 1979. Voice and guitar was the most natural combination for me to begin with in my early composing career. I branched out to voice and piano, and since then have written works for soprano, violin, saxophone and 2 guitars; baritone and string quartet; baritone and cello; and tenor, violin, oboe and piano. Four examples of my vocal chamber music are included on this album, from different stages of my career. Two are from the 1980's, one from 2002, and one from 2011.

CONFIDING

This cycle of ten songs, written in 1985-86 and set to poems by women, deals with various kinds and stages of confiding. The first and last songs act as prelude and postlude. Songs no. 2-5 trace the rise and fall of an intimate relationship, after which the "I" of the poems turns for confiding to the guitar (no. 6), pauses for reevaluation (no. 7), then turns to imagination (no. 8), and finally to a higher power (no. 9). *Confiding* exists in versions for both high and medium voice with piano, as well as its original high voice and guitar version. It was premiered by baritone Sanford Sylvan and pianist Patty Thom, and is dedicated to my husband, Ralph Jackson.

1. Savior! I've no one else to tell
Savior! I've no one else to tell –
And so I trouble *thee*.
I am the one forgot thee so –
Dost thou remember me?
Nor, for myself, I came so far –
That were the little load –
I brought thee the imperial Heart
I had not strength to hold –
The Heart I carried in my own –
Till mine too heavy grew –
Yet – strangest – *heavier* since it went –
Is it too large for you?

2. Ample make this Bed Ample make this Bed – Make this Bed with Awe – In it wait till Judgment break Excellent and Fair.

Be its Mattress straight – Be its Pillow round – Let no Sunrise' yellow noise Interrupt this Ground –

Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson

3. Wild Nights

Wild Night – Wild Nights! Were I with thee Wild Nights should be Our luxury!

Futile – the Winds – To a Heart in port – Done with the Compass – Done with the Chart –

Rowing in Eden – Ah, the Sea! Might I but moor – Tonight – In Thee!

Emily Dickinson

4. Signal

In my most autistic times, When verbal thought is drowning, And silence seems the only choice, I will motion to you from a raft.

Where am I drifting to? The past swims up, dreams surface.

A springlit evening, I stood on the shore, Holding a green balloon by its string. A sea breeze – careless fingers – And it slipped from my hand.

Waves swirled around my feet, And racing, I chased the dancing string. But it was floating upward And I was only swimming out.

It's just a smudge of emerald in the sky now. I wait for waves to lilt me back. So watch me from the sand. Watch my hands and watch my eyes. *Gene Scaramellino* ©1976, used with permission

5. Star-Crossed

On this far-flung black night, broad with blackness each star crawls with thick edges and rigid worms line the gravel like gravediggers in the rain, wet and respectful. my throat calls and calls a message scratchy from too many playings. listen we beat on against the needle and the restraining arm, a roll of old notes stuck in the deluge until someone separates them long enough to dry in the white heat that follows always and eventually, like a led dog after the night. You and I, master and mirror Crazyman and company we watch the sky shift with our half-hopes our creations we rip the linings of one another's pockets with fingers that pull away to touch blood to blood, edge to scarlet edge under that pouring star.

I slip and you sing under me, crazyman

and leave two rows of burnt Indian corn

Elissa Elv

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your teeth small and perfect until I pass my hand across them

a condemned house.

rotting, and hanging on the night

like bent nails hang on the door of

6. The Lady to her Guitar

For him who struck thy foreign string I ween this heart hath ceased to care; Then why dost thou such feelings bring To my sad spirit, old guitar?

It is as if the warm sunlight In some deep glen should lingering stay, When clouds of tempest and of night Had wrapt the parent orb away.

It is as if the glassy brook Should image still its willows fair, Though years ago the woodman's stroke Laid low in dust their gleaming hair.

Even so, guitar, thy magic tone Has moved the tear and waked the sigh, Has bid the ancient torrent flow Although its very source is dry! *Emily Brontë*

7. Love and Friendship

Love is like the wild rose-briar, Friendship like the holly-tree – The holly is dark when the rose-briar blooms But which will bloom most constantly?

The wild rose-briar is sweet in spring, Its summer blossoms scent the air; Yet wait till winter comes again And who will call the wild-briar fair?

Then scorn the silly rose-wreath now And deck thee with the holly's sheen, That when December blights thy brow He still may leave thy garland green. *Emily Brontë*

8. To Imagination

When weary with the long day's care, And earthly change from pain to pain, And lost, and ready to despair, Thy kind voice calls me back again – O my true friend, I am not lone While thou canst speak with such a tone!

So hopeless is the world without, The world within I doubly prize; Thy world where guile and hate and doubt And cold suspicion never rise; Where thou and I and Liberty Have undisputed sovereignty.

What matters it that all around Danger and grief and darkness lie, If but within our bosom's bound We hold a bright unsullied sky, Warm with ten thousand mingled rays Of suns that know no winter days?

Reason indeed may oft complain For Nature's sad reality, And tell the suffering heart how vain Its cherished dreams must always be; And Truth may rudely trample down The flowers of Fancy newly blown. But thou art ever there to bring The hovering visions back and breathe New glories o'er the blighted spring And call a lovelier life from death, And whisper with a voice divine Of real worlds as bright as thine.

I trust not to thy phantom bliss, Yet still in evening's quiet hour With never-failing thankfulness I welcome thee, benignant power, Sure solacer of human care And brighter hope when hope despairs. *Emily Brontë* 9. Faith

No coward soul is mine No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere I see Heaven's glories shine And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

O God within my breast Almighty ever-present Deity Life, that in me hast rest As I Undying Life, have power in Thee

Vain are the thousand creeds That move men's hearts, unutterably vain, Worthless as withered weeds Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one Holding so fast by thy infinity So surely anchored on The steadfast rock of Immortality

With wide-embracing love Thy spirit animates eternal years Pervades and broods above, Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though Earth and moon were gone And suns and universes ceased to be And thou wert left alone Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death Nor atom that his might could render void Since thou art Being and Breath And what thou art may never be destroyed. *Emily Brontë*

10. This is my letter to the World

This is my letter to the World That never wrote to Me – The simple News that Nature told – With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed To Hands I cannot see – For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen – Judge tenderly – of Me

Emily Dickinson

DAS WUNDERBARE WESEN (THE MIRACULOUS ESSENCE)

Richard Wilhelm (1873-1930), a German scholar who lived and studied in China for over 20 years, wrote some of the earliest and most profoundly understanding Western translations of classic Chinese texts like the *Tao te Ching* and the *I Ching*. For this set of five songs, I chose excerpts from his translations of Lao *Tzu's Tao Te Ching*. This little book and the tradition it represents have been close to my spirit for most of my life. These songs emerged less out of deference to the melodic line and more in response to a structure established in the cello part, e.g., a repeated alternating metric pattern or a melodic theme that is repeated in the fashion of a passacaglia throughout a movement. Meanwhile, the melodic lines often tend not to repeat in traditional circular structures, but rather to spiral outward, relating motivically to what has gone before, yet opening up to different phrase patterns. This is echoed by the harmonic structures. Unlike functional harmony, which tends to travel in closed circles, these harmonies might, for example, change one note at a time, moving progressively away from the center.

Das Wunderbare Wesen was written in 2011, at the request of baritone Wolfgang Holzmair, to whom the work is dedicated, and commissioned by Eleanor Eisenmenger.

[English translation of the German by David Leisner]

 Der Sinn (The Tao) [section #1] The Tao than can be expressed is not the eternal Tao.
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
 I call "non-existence" the beginning of Heaven and Earth. I call "existence" the mother of individual beings. Therefore the way toward non-existence leads to the sight of the miraculous essence, the way toward existence [leads} to the sight of spatial limitations. Both are one in origin and different only in name. In its oneness it is called the secret. The secret's still deeper secret is the door through which all miracles emerge. **2. Dreissig Speicher** (Thirty spokes) [section #11]

Thirty spokes encircle the hub: The wagon's usefulness is in their emptiness. One hollows out the clay and molds pots: The pot's usefulness is in its emptiness. One cuts out door and windows, which makes a room:

The room's usefulness is in their emptiness.

Therefore: what exists, serves as possession. What does not exist, serves as usefulness. **3. Der Mensch** (Man) [section #76] Man, when he enters life, is soft and weak, and when he dies, he is hard and strong. Plants, when they enter life, are soft and delicate, and when they die, they are dry and stiff. Therefore the hard and strong are companions of death; the soft and delicate are companions of life.

Therefore:

If weapons are strong, they do not triumph. If trees are strong, they are cut down. What is strong and tall is below. The soft and weak is above.

4. Schaffe Leere (Create emptiness) [section #16] Create emptiness to the highest! Maintain stillness to the fullest! Everything may then be exalted together. I see how they return. Things, in all their abundance, each one returns to its root. Return to the root means stillness. Stillness means return to destiny. Return to destiny means eternity. Knowledge of eternity means clarity. If one does not know eternity, one enters chaos and sin. If one does know eternity, one becomes tolerant. Tolerance leads to justice. Justice leads to dominion. Dominion leads to Heaven. Heaven leads to Tao. Tao leads to permanence. All life long one will not come to danger. **5. Ohne aus der Tür zu gehen** (Without going out the door) [section #47]

Without going out the door, One knows the world, Without looking out the window, one sees the Tao of Heaven. The further out one goes, the less one's knowledge becomes.

Therefore the Sage does not need to go And yet he knows everything. He does not need to see and yet he is clear. He does not need to make anything and yet he achieves.

SIMPLE SONGS

Simple Songs, composed in 1982, sets to music six poems by Emily Dickinson. It is dedicated to baritone Sanford Sylvan. Each song illustrates its poem's meaning by example. In "Madness", for instance, the vocal line is a simple chromatic scale that descends at first, and then ascends, but the notes are often displaced to another octave, which embodies the line, "Much Madness is divinest Sense". The fifth song, "Humility", is the chronicle of a brief love affair between a bee and a rose. It is a three-voice canon, with the vocal part in one key, while the other two voices are in the guitar part in another key. Toward the end, when "their Moment consummated", the voices join together in the same key, and then drift apart again.

1. Exultation

Exultation is the going Of an inland soul [out] to sea, Past the houses – past the headlands – Into deep Eternity –

Bred as we, among the mountains, Can the sailor understand The divine intoxication Of the first league out from land?

2. Beauty

Beauty crowds me till I die Beauty mercy have on me But if I expire today Let it be in sight of thee –

3. Madness

Much Madness is divinest Sense – To a discerning Eye – Much Sense – the starkest Madness – 'Tis the Majority In this, as All, prevail – Assent – and you are sane – Demur – you're straightway dangerous – And handled with a Chain –

4. Letter

Beel I'm expecting you! Was saying Yesterday To Somebody you know That you were due –

The Frogs got Home last Week – Are settled, and at work – Birds, mostly back – The Clover warm and thick –

You'll get my Letter by The seventeenth; Reply Or better, be with me – Yours, Fly.

5. Humility

A Bee his burnished Carriage Drove boldly to a Rose – Combinedly alighting – Himself – his Carriage was – The Rose received his visit With frank tranquility Withholding not a Crescent To his Cupidity – Their Moment consummated – Remained for him – to flee – Remained for her – of rapture But the humility.

6. Simplicity

How happy is the little Stone That rambles in the Road alone, And doesn't care about Careers And Exigencies never fears – Whose Coat of elemental Brown A passing universe put on, And independent as the Sun Associates or glows alone, Fulfilling absolute Decree In casual simplicity –

OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Just as sure as night follows day and day follows night, darkness and light, despair and hope shadow each other. To "know the light and "know the dark" is essential, especially in times of trouble. The great American poet, Wendell Berry wrote a number of poems on this subject between 1968 and 1970, at the height of the Vietnam War. I found these poems to have special resonance in 2002 as well, just after the 9/11 tragedy, as they would in any times of anxiety, fear or destruction. When the Stones River Players of Middle Tennessee State University commissioned me that year for a work for tenor, violin, oboe and piano, I turned to some of these poems that spoke to both the moment and to the ages.

The resulting piece, *Of Darkness and Light*, is a set of five songs that are joined into one large movement. The work begins with a violin-and-oboe arabesque that opens into the first song. Then comes a spare fragment of a song, a kind of meditation, which is followed by the third song of terror, as "the earth is poisoned with narrow lives". This leads to the anxiety of the fourth song, with its 10/8 and 13/8 meters restlessly alternating. The second song/fragment appears in a reprise and leads to the final song, an anthem of hope amid the rubble - a discovery of solace in "The Peace of Wild Things".

To Know the Dark

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

At night

(from Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer) At night make me one with the darkness. In the morning make me one with the light. To my Children, Fearing for Them Terrors are to come. The earth is poisoned with narrow lives. I think of you. What you will live through, or perish by, eats at my heart. What have I done? I need better answers than there are to the pain of coming to see what was done in blindness, loving what I cannot save. Nor,

your eyes turning toward me, can I wish your lives unmade though the pain of them is on me.

He has lived through another night

(from The Handing Down) He begins the knowledge of the sun's absence. He's likely to wake up

any hour of the night out of his light sleep to know – with clarity like

the touch of hands in the dark – the stillness of the room. The silence Stretches over the town like a black tent, whose hem the headstones weight.

Into it come, now and again, hard footsteps on the road, remote

sudden voices, and then a car coming in, or going out, the headlights

levering the window's image around the walls.

And he considers the size

of his life, lying in it there, looking up out of it

into the darkness,

the transparence of all his old years between him and the darkness.

*

Before it's light the birds waken, and begin singing in the dark trees

around the house, among the leaves over the dampened roofs of the still town

and in the country thickets for miles. Their voices reach to the end of the dark.

[reprise: "At night..."]

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,

I go and lie down where the wood drake Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things Who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

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BIOGRAPHIES

DAVID LEISNER maintains a triple career as guitarist, composer and teacher. As a composer, his catalog includes 3 works for orchestra, much chamber and vocal music, and works for the guitar. His music has been recorded on the Azica, Cedille, Sony Classical, ABC, Dorian, Centaur, Town Hall, Signum, and Acoustic Music labels. His publishers are Theodore Presser Co., G. Schirmer, Doberman-Yppan and Columbia Music. His music has been performed by such eminent artists as Carole Farley, Courtenay Budd, Katherine Whyte, Juliana Gondek, Susan Narucki, Devony Smith, D'Anna Fortunato, Heather Johnson, Rufus Müller, William Ferguson, Paul Sperry, Andrew Fuchs, James Onstad, Sanford Sylvan, Wolfgang Holzmair, Kurt Ollmann, Michael Kelly, Thomas Meglioranza, Robert Osborne, Patrick Mason, Warren Jones, Jon Klibonoff, Lenore Fishman Davis, Dimitri Dover, Tara O'Connor, Eugenia Zukerman, Sarah Whitney, Scott Bartucca, Zuill Bailey, Raman Ramakrishnan, David Starobin, Benjamin Verdery, Cavatina Duo, Arc Duo, Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, Brasil Guitar Duo, St. Lawrence Quartet, Enso Quartet, Rubens Quartet, Saturday Brass Quintet, the Eastman, Oberlin and New England Conservatory Percussion Ensembles, and a number of American orchestras. His most recent commission is a guitar concerto for Pepe Romero, to be premiered in 2023 with conductor Michael Palmer and the New American Sinfonietta.

About his vocal music, Richard Dyer of the *Boston Globe* wrote: "He shows imagination and taste in taking poems from disparate sources and putting them into cycles that trace emotional progress and develop dramatic shape. His prosody is excellent, and he sets words with an ear for sound, rhythm and sense...Best of all, Leisner has a gift for eloquently shaping a vocal line that is also grateful to sing."

A graduate of Wesleyan University, he studied composition with Richard Winslow, Virgil Thomson, Charles Turner and David Del Tredici.

www.davidleisner.com

Oboist **SCOTT BARTUCCA** is a strong advocate for new music and has performed with such ensembles as the International Contemporary Ensemble, Argento New Music Project, Ekmeles, New York Composers Circle, the Zorn@60 All-Star Orchestra, Chamber Orchestra of New York, and the symphony orchestras of Charleston, Queens, Binghamton, Tallahassee, and Key West. Additional highlights include performing with the first national tour of *Little Women the Broadway Musical* and on Björk's album *Drawing Restraint 9*. Scott has performance degrees from The Juilliard School, Stony Brook University, and Florida State University. When not performing, you're likely to find him baking or running marathons. www.scottbartucca.com

Consummate chamber musician, pianist **LENORE FISHMAN DAVIS** founded and directed NYC's boutique series St Urban Salons and Concerts from 2013 to 2020. Prior to that she founded and directed NJ's premier chamber music series, Arbor Chamber Music. Her multifaceted professional life has included international concertizing, commissioning and premiering new music, and multidisciplinary collaborations. Lenore is currently the board chair of Symphony Space, NYC's home for adventurous and impactful programming. She also serves on the board of The Wharton Institute for the Performing Arts in Berkeley Heights, NJ. Lenore received a Bachelor's of Music and a Performer's Certificate from Indiana University.

DIMITRI DOVER has performed a broad spectrum of repertoire as soloist and collaborator, most recently in venues such as New York's Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, Merkin Hall, Koch Theater, Symphony Space, and Park Avenue Armory. He has performed, in the presence of the composer, the works of Thomas Adès, Matthew Aucoin, Valerie Coleman, George Crumb, Daniel Davis, Herschel Garfein, Jake Heggie, Libby Larsen, David Leisner, Nico Muhly, John Musto, André Previn, Shulamit Ran, Kaija Saariaho, Gregory Spears, and many others. He holds degrees from Harvard University, Peabody Conservatory, and The Juilliard School, and joined the music staff of The Metropolitan Opera in 2016. Tenor **ANDREW FUCHS's** wide-ranging repertoire includes an abundance of early music, performing with such ensembles as New York Polyphony, Pegasus, ARTEK, TENET, and The Choir of Trinity Wall Street. Equally passionate about contemporary music, he has premiered a number of works including the principal role of ME in Daniel Thomas Davis's opera *Six. Twenty. Outrageous.,* song cycles by Alexander Goehr and Juliana Hall, and Zachary Wadsworth's oratorio *Spire and Shadon.* Other highlights include Reich's *Three Tales* with Ensemble Signal, *Liebeslieder Waltzes* with the Mark Morris Dance Group, and Bach's *St. John Passion* Evangelist at St. John the Divine. www.andrew-fuchs.com

Praised as "vocally splendid," American baritone and poet, **MICHAEL KELLY**, is celebrated for riveting interpretations of works performed at internationally acclaimed organizations including Carnegie Hall, Santa Fe Opera, 54 Below and Theatre du Châtelet. He is an avid interpreter of new music, collaborating to create, perform and record world premieres of works. As writer and performer, much of his focus is on the queer experience and LGBTQ+ advocacy. Michael is also the curator for the baritone volume of NewMusicShelf's Anthology of New Music. He is an alumnus of Eastman and Juilliard schools. For more information, please visit **www.michael-kelly.com**.

Cellist **RAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN** enjoys performing chamber music, old and new, around the world. For two decades, as a founding member of the Horszowski Trio and the Daedalus Quartet, he toured extensively through North and South America, Europe, and Asia, and recorded for Bridge Records and Avie Records. Mr. Ramakrishnan is currently a member of the Boston Chamber Music Society, and is on the faculty of the Bard College Conservatory of Music. In the summers, he has performed at the Marlboro, Vail, and Kingston Chamber Music festivals, and served on the faculties of the Kneisel Hall and Norfolk Chamber Music Festivals.

|ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS'

Praised by the Washington Post for her "marvelous violin acrobatics", violinist **SARAH WHITNEY** is known for her musical versatility and has performed worldwide throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and North and South America. She is a violinist in the acclaimed string quintet, SYBARITE5, whose latest album reached #2 on the classical Billboard charts. She is also founder of the interactive concert series, Beyond the Notes, and her diverse career has included everything from performing at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center to collaborating as a soloist with the Alvin Ailey and Jose Limón dance companies. www.sarahwhitney.com

KATHERINE WHYTE has performed on opera and concert stages across her native Canada, the United States, Europe and Asia. *Opera Today* has hailed her for her "keen artistic sensibility" while the San Francisco Classical Voice has praised her "her glamorous, vibrato-rich voice". This season will bring Katherine the thrill of her 10th production of *Nozze di Figaro* as the Countess and a recital in Belgrade. She has sung at the Metropolitan Opera Company for the last 12 years. Working on the music of David Leisner was such a gift during the pandemic. For more, see: **katherinewhyte.com @whyte_katherine**



Infinite thanks to the superb band of performers on this album, who gave this project their full commitment and a lot of love. This album is dedicated to my husband and soulmate for over 40 years, Ralph Jackson, who can make dreams and reality be one and the same.

Letter to the World

MUSIC FOR VOICE AND INSTRUMENTS BY DAVID LEISNER

CONFIDING			TT = 31:07
1	1	Savior! I've no one else to tell (Emily Dickinson)	2:00
2	2	Ample Make This Bed (Emily Dickinson)	2:11
3	3	Wild Nights (Emily Dickinson)	2:15
4	4	Signal (Gene Scaramellino)	3:30
5	5	Star-Crossed (Elissa Ely)	3:43
6	6	The Lady to her Guitar (Emily Brontë)	2:48
7	7	Love and Friendship (Emily Brontë)	2:00
8	8	To Imagination (Emily Brontë)	6:15
9	9	Faith (Emily Brontë)	4:18
10	10	This is my letter to the World (Emily Dickinson)	2:11

Katherine Whyte, soprano; Lenore Fishman Davis, piano

DAS WUNDERBARE WESEN

	(Fro	TT = 12:48	
11	I	Der Sinn	3:03
12	Ш	Dreissig Speicher	:44
13	Ш	Der Mensch	3:09
14	IV	Schaffe Leere	2:30
15	V	Ohne aus der Tür zu gehen	3:21

Michael Kelly, baritone; Raman Ramakrishnan, cello

PERFORMERS

Katherine Whyte (soprano), Andrew Fuchs (tenor), Michael Kelly (baritone), Sarah Whitney (violin), Scott Bartucca (oboe), Raman Ramakrishnan (cello), Lenore Fishman Davis (piano), Dimitri Dover (piano), David Leisner (guitar)

SII	TT = 8:40		
16	1	Exultation	1:06
17	2	Beauty	1:27
18	3	Madness	1:52
19	4	Letter	:51
20	5	Humility	1:53
21	6	Simplicity	1:32

Michael Kelly, baritone; David Leisner, guitar

22 OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT (Wendell Berry) 11:05

Andrew Fuchs, tenor; Sarah Whitney, violin; Scott Bartucca, oboe; Dimitri Dover, piano

Total running time is 63:40

Recorded June 4-6, 2021 at Oktaven Audio, Mount Vernon, NY Produced by Judith Sherman Engineered by Charles Mueller Engineering and editing assistant Jeanne Velonis Mastered by Judith Sherman and Jeanne Velonis Piano technician: Daniel Jessie Cover Painting: "Mountain Song" by Brenda Goodman The recording was supervised by the composer.