

Nature, Love, and Death

Song Cycles by Eric Choate, Joseph Stillwell, and David Conte



Brian Thorsett, tenor | Jeffrey Thomas, conductor
San Francisco Conservatory Chamber Orchestra

...and fall (2016)

by Eric Choate (b.1990)

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|---|---|------|
| 1 | I. Sleep — <i>text by Todd Davis (b. 1965)</i> | 3:27 |
| 2 | II. Neighbors in October — <i>text by David Baker (b. 1954)</i> | 2:16 |
| 3 | III. All Hallows — <i>text by Eric Choate (b. 1990)</i> | 4:30 |
| 4 | IV. Theme in Yellow — <i>text by Carl Sandberg (1878–1967)</i> | 1:14 |
| 5 | V. November Night — <i>text by Adelaide Crapsey (1878–1914)</i> | 2:17 |



Songs of Love and Solace, Op. 10 (2013)

by Joseph Stillwell (b. 1984)

Texts by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

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| 6 | I. Brown Penny | 2:55 |
| 7 | II. He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven | 4:08 |
| 8 | III. When Your Are Old | 5:09 |
| 9 | IV. The Lake Isle of Innisfree | 4:46 |

American Death Ballads (2015)

by David Conte (b.1955)

Texts by Anonymous

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|----|----------------------------|------|
| 10 | I. Wicked Polly | 4:59 |
| 11 | II. The Unquiet Grave | 4:07 |
| 12 | III. The Dying Californian | 4:58 |
| 13 | IV. Captain Kidd | 3:51 |

...and fall (2016)

Eric Choate (b. 1990)

My favorite season is autumn. Having lived a considerable part of my life in rural, small towns in the Midwest, I grew up experiencing the profound change of seasons and all of the associated rituals - parades, apple picking, pumpkin carving, Halloween festivities, elaborate Thanksgivings, etc. This particular change in season is poignant to me. ...*And Fall* consists of five poems about autumn by 20th and 21st-century American poets. Each poem draws upon different aspects of the season: the summer drawing to a close; the busy preparations for a cold winter to come; the transparency between the worlds of the living and the dead on All Hallows; children celebrating



Halloween by dancing around jack-o'-lanterns; and finally, the falling of leaves. All of the poems are held together by a common element of the swiftness of time and passage from summer to winter, and from life to death. ...*And Fall* was commissioned by Virginia Tech and is dedicated to my friend Brian Thorsett. This version for voice and orchestra was commissioned by Sinfonia Caritas, Paul Schrage, director.

Songs of Love and Solace, Op. 10 (2013)

Joseph Stillwell (b. 1984)

Songs of Love and Solace traces a young man's journey of love and heartbreak. The cycle of four texts by Irish poet William Butler Yeats begins with "Brown Penny." This short poem depicts a young man who is enamored with the idea of falling in love and then becomes awestruck as he contemplates the depths of love's power. In the second poem, "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," the poet, speaking to his beloved, realizes he has nothing of value to offer but his dreams. "Tread softly," he implores, "because you tread on my dreams." In "When You Are Old," we find our poet heartbroken. In his grief, he peers into the future. He sees a vision of his beloved in old age. Then, he remembers the depth and purity of their forsaken love: "But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you, And loved the sorrows of your changing face." In the final song, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," the poet, saddened but wiser, wistfully resolves to escape the struggles and heartbreaks of his modern existence and seeks solace in the beauty and calm of nature. *Photo Credit: Carlin Ma Photography*



American Death Ballads (2015)

David Conte (b. 1955)

American Death Ballads were composed especially for tenor Brian Thorsett. We have been frequent collaborators since 2011, when he premiered my *Yeats Songs* for string quartet and tenor. At his urging, I transcribed and published my *Three Poems of Christina Rossetti* for high voice, which he premiered at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in 2014.



The choice of texts for *American Death Ballads* was inspired partly by Aaron Copland's *Old American Songs*, which I deeply admire, and even more by my dear friend and colleague Conrad Susa's *Two Murder Ballads*. The ingenuity of Susa's accompaniments for his ballads in imagining anew the original source material owes a great deal to Copland's accompaniment for his songs. Though the content of my songs is completely original and not based on preexisting melodies, I have tried to expand on this further, as the texts are much longer, and go through many different moods and characters. The four texts I chose include stories about murder, death, and dying. Though two of the texts were written in England, they traveled to the colonies almost immediately, and the subjects of the texts had spent time in America, and their stories were well known to Americans.

"Wicked Polly" is a cautionary tale. Polly has lived a dissolute and immoral life, saying, "I'll turn to God when I grow old." Suddenly taken ill, she realizes that it is too late to repent. She dies in agony and is presumably sent to hell; young people are advised to heed. My musical setting is stately and preacherly in character for the narrator; for Polly it becomes pleading and remorseful.

“The Unquiet Grave” was brought to the attention of Alan Lomax, the great American field collector of folk music, by English folk singer Shirley Collins. The text is taken from an English folk song dating from 1400. A young man mourns his deceased lover too intensely, preventing her from obtaining peace. He begs a kiss; she tells him it would kill him. When he persists, wanting to join her in death, she explains that once they were both dead their hearts would simply decay, and that he should enjoy life while he has it. My setting is in a flowing andante with a rocking accompaniment. Three voices are delineated here; the narrator, the mournful lover, and the deceased lover, speaking from the grave.

“The Dying Californian” first appeared in the “New England Diadem” in 1854. Its lyrics are based on a letter from a New Englander’s sailor to his brother who is dying at sea while on the way to California to seek his fortune in the California gold fields. He implores his brother to impart his message to his father, mother, wife, and children. My setting opens with the singer alone, in a moderate dirge tempo, and, joined by the piano, moves through many tonalities and moods before ending with supreme confidence as the speaker “gains a port called Heaven/Where the gold will never rust.”

“Captain Kidd” was a Scottish sailor who was tried and executed for piracy and murder in 1701. The American connection to this ballad is that Kidd escaped to America, and for a time lived in New York and Boston, though he was a wanted criminal by the British authorities, and was extradited and hanged at “Executioner’s Dock.” The lyric was printed in Britain in 1701, traveling to the colonies almost immediately. Though the didactic tone of the text is similar to “Wicked Polly,” it expresses no regret until the final lines: “Take warning now by me, and shun bad company/Lest you come to hell with me, for I must die.” My setting is fast and spirited, expressing the confidence of a man who has lived life as he wanted.

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Pictured (L to R): Joseph Stillwell, Brian Thorsett, Eric Choate, David Conte, and Jeffrey Thomas.
Biographies, lyrics, and additional program notes are available at www.arsisaudio.com