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Meaning in art song transforms from poet to composer to performer to listener. Together, various layers of meaning form a genealogy of expression. In this paper, I articulate a theory of expression genealogy, using the song cycle *Becoming a Redwood*, poems by Dana Gioia (b.1950) and music by Lori Laitman (b. 1955). I argue that a rich and credible performance depends upon awareness of this genealogy. I investigate the process of transforming Gioia's poetry into art song and how knowledge of that process informs performance and listener response. The study provides a methodology for performance that may be applied to other vocal music.

To demonstrate the transformation of meaning in the multi-layered creative process, I employ several methods, including personal interviews with the composer and the poet, close readings of the four poems, and analysis of the musical settings.

*BECOMING A REDWOOD: A GENEALOGY OF*  
EXPRESSION IN DANA GIOIA'S POETRY  
AND LORI LAITMAN'S SONG CYCLE

by

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To John, my life's delight

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## INTRODUCTION

Meaning in art song transforms from poet to composer to performer to listener. Together, various layers of meaning form a genealogy of expression that builds from the poem's inception through the song's reception. A performer has the responsibility and privilege of exploring that genealogy in order to express the richest meaning possible. In this paper, I use the song cycle *Becoming a Redwood*, poems by Dana Gioia (b. 1950) and music by Lori Laitman (b. 1955), to articulate a theory of musical expression based upon these multiple layers of meaning.<sup>1</sup> While many of Laitman's songs have been reviewed, no one has reviewed her song cycle *Becoming a Redwood* as a composite expression of its poetry, its music, and its performance. I argue that credible performance relies upon awareness of this layering and upon listeners' participation in the process. This methodology for performance could be applied to other vocal music.

To demonstrate the transformation of meaning in the layering process, I have employed several methods, including personal interviews with the composer and the poet, close readings of the four poems, and musical analysis of the songs. The document comprises the following sections:

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<sup>1</sup> Lori Laitman, *Becoming a Redwood*, poet Dana Gioia (Enchanted Knickers Music, 2005). This and all subsequent textual and musical examples from *Becoming a Redwood* are used by permission.

- Music and Meaning
- Poet and Composer
- Overview of *Becoming a Redwood*
- Analysis and Layers of Meaning
- Conclusion

## CHAPTER I

### MUSIC AND MEANING

How—or even if—music expresses meaning has been the subject of debate among philosophers and psychologists since the time of Plato. Classical aesthetics considered music an imitative art, and that imitation itself created meaning. This mimetic doctrine of art dominated theories of musical expression up through the eighteenth century. Gradually, the perception of music’s character changed, and in 1785 Michel de Chabanon (1729-1792) articulated a new theory concerning the nature of music in *De la musique considérée en elle-même et dans ses rapports avec la parole, les langues, la poésie et le théâtre* (On Music Considered in Itself and in Its Relations with Speech, Languages, Poetry and the Theatre).<sup>2</sup> He rejected the idea that music is imitative—either of nature or of language. Instead, Chabanon theorized that music is a distinct language of its own, with the potential to convey *meaning*. By the nineteenth century, music attained a powerful position, “capable of expressing feelings and ideas beyond the limits of rational knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Max Halle Paddison, “Expression,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), 8:463.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

By the middle of the twentieth century, music scholars had proposed new explanations of music's expressive power. For example, the main thesis of Leonard Meyer's 1956 book *Emotion and Meaning in Music* is that meaning in Western music derives from the process of tension and resolution:

Embodied musical meaning is, in short, a product of expectation. If, on the basis of past experience, a present stimulus leads us to expect a more or less definite consequent musical event, *then that stimulus has meaning*.<sup>4</sup>

Meyer categorized musical meaning into three stages: hypothetical meaning based on expectation, evident meaning based on realization or frustration of expectation, and determinate meaning realized only after the full experience of the music. He schematized the ongoing process as a sequence of stimuli (S) leading to consequences (C):  $S_1 \dots C_1, S_2 \dots C_2, S_3 \dots C_3$ , etc.<sup>5</sup>

British musicologist Deryck Cooke's 1959 book *The Language of Music* is another mid-twentieth-century attempt to scientifically explain how music expresses meaning.<sup>6</sup> Cooke created a lexicon of musical expression that included, for instance, the assumption that different musical intervals create different emotional expressions. Retrospectively, the early work of Leonard Meyer and Deryck Cooke may be referred to as *pre-semiotic*.

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<sup>4</sup> Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 35; [emphasis added].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

Semiotic theory is the systematic study of signs and their meanings—signifiers and signified. Both language and music are sign systems, capable of expressing complex and varied meanings. Semiotics was developed independently by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Peirce (1839-1914). The application of semiotic study to *music* is a twentieth-century development, first proposed in 1958 by ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (b. 1930). Musical semioticians distinguish themselves by their quest for a rational method of understanding music's meaning by identifying musical materials and their structure in the same way that semioticians study meaning through words and structure. Musical semiotic studies include the work of international scholars, among them American philosopher Susanne Langer, French theorist Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Finnish musicologist Eero Tarasti, and Ghanaian musicologist Kofi Agawu.

Agawu regards music as *discourse* that includes both explicit and implicit considerations. He posits that a search for meaning in a musical work involves theoretical analysis as only a starting point for a conversation about meaning.<sup>7</sup> Conventional scholarly methods that deal exclusively with explicit musical materials may overlook other and perhaps more significant methods that uncover meaning through extra-musical material. He summarizes his view of the intermingling of explicit and implicit analyses:

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<sup>7</sup> Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

The stated and the implied are equally functional. Inexperienced or downright insensitive analysts who confine their interpretations to what is directly observable in scores often draw their patterns of salience from what is stated rather than what is implied; the result is a dull, impoverished, or untrue analysis.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of historical efforts to find a method for determining meaning in music, Gioia contends that meaning remains virtually undeterminable by the very nature of the art. He sent me this email that addresses assessment of meaning in both poetry and music:

A good poem exists independently of the author, and it accommodates different readings by different people. A poem is not a laser with a single beam of meaning. It is a lamp that illuminates the space around it in which different people notice different things, including both light and shadow. Poems radiate meanings. What meanings depend on the angle from which you view it.<sup>9</sup>

Poets, composers, performers, and audience all participate in the construction of meaning, and that meaning varies from person to person and from performance to performance. Therefore, I build my theory of meaning upon several premises: meaning inhabits the musical code, that language of music that we understand within our western culture; meaning is formed in layers; meaning is on-going; and meaning is elusive. Although meaning may be elusive and variable, the search for meaning is vital for integrity in performance.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Gioia, email to the author, 10 March 2009.

## CHAPTER II

### POET AND COMPOSER

#### Dana Gioia

Laitman and Gioia are both significant artists in contemporary America. Gioia retired as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts in January 2009 and now divides his time between creative writing and working at the non-profit Aspen Institute in Washington, D.C.<sup>10</sup> He is the institute's first director of the Harman-Eisner Program in the Arts.<sup>11</sup> His essays, poems, and critiques have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times Book Review*. He is widely known as the author of the essay "Can Poetry Matter?" (1991), and his critical collection *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* was a finalist for the 1992 National Book Critics Circle Prize. Gioia has published three full-length books of poetry: *Daily Horoscope* (1986), *The Gods of Winter* (1991), and *Interrogations at Noon* (2001). With his third book of poetry, he won the prestigious American Book Award. Gioia has been American cultural correspondent for BBC radio; has translated poetry from Latin, German, Italian and Romanian; and has written two opera librettos, *Tony*

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<sup>10</sup> Dana Gioia's official web site, <http://www.danagioia.net/about> (accessed 8 February 2009).

<sup>11</sup> The Aspen Institute is an international organization with a two-fold mission: "to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, and to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues." Official web site, <http://www.aspeninstitute.org> (accessed 15 March 2009).

*Caruso's Final Broadcast* (2000) with composer Paul Salerni, and *Nosferatu* (2001) with Alva Henderson.

Gioia is the son of West Coast working-class parents of Italian and Mexican descent. He often refers to his religious upbringing and its influence on his life. When asked in a 1991 interview with Robert McPhillips about the church's role in his childhood, Gioia claimed that "Catholicism was everything to me. Growing up in a Latin community of Sicilians and Mexicans, one didn't feel the Roman Catholic Church as an abstraction. It was a living culture which permeated our lives."<sup>12</sup>

Gioia was a successful businessman before he was an acclaimed poet. He holds a B.A. and an M.B.A from Stanford University and an M.A. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. In 1977, he moved to Manhattan to begin a business career and rose to vice-president of marketing at General Foods, where he relegated his passion for poetry, literary criticism, and editing to evenings and weekends.

Gioia is married and has two living sons. When a first son Michael Jasper Gioia died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in 1987, Gioia began to re-prioritize his goals, eventually abandoning his business career. Gioia was asked in the McPhillips' interview if his writing style was influenced by his son's death:

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<sup>12</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by Robert McPhillips, December 12 and 16, 1991. Interview conducted at General Foods in White Plains, NY: published in *Verse*, summer 1992. <http://www.danagioia.net/interviews/mcphillips.htm> (accessed 20 February 2009).

It utterly transformed my life. How could it not also transform my consciousness as a writer? Tragedy inevitably simplifies your vision. It sweeps away everything that isn't essential. Losing my first son made me realize how little most of the things in my life mattered to me—and how desperately important few remaining things were. There was a searing clarity to the grief. I stopped writing for a year. It took all of my energy to get myself and my wife through each day. When I gradually began writing again, I saw poetry somewhat differently. Writing took on a spiritual urgency I had never experienced before—at least in so sustained and emphatic a way.<sup>13</sup>

Gioia's poetry reflects a non-academic approach in his blending of rhyme and meter with free verse. In the mid-1980s, he was part of a movement by young poets who were rebelling against academic suppression of rhyme and meter. Critics gave these young poets the disparaging name *New Formalists*. Gioia clarified the term *New Formalist* as those who sometimes write in rhyme and meter, who borrow from popular culture, and who attempt to make poetry accessible by being "intelligent without being pedantic."<sup>14</sup> In his collection of essays *Can Poetry Matter?* Gioia considers his juxtaposition of formal and informal elements:

In my own poetry I have always worked in both fixed and open forms. Each mode offered possibilities of style, subject, music, and development the other did not suggest, at least at that moment. Likewise, experience in each mode provided an illuminating perspective on the other. Working in free verse helped keep the language of my formal poems varied and contemporary, just as writing in form helped keep my free verse more focused and precise. I find it puzzling therefore that so many poets see these modes as opposing aesthetics rather than as complementary

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

techniques. Why shouldn't a poet explore the full resources the English language offers?<sup>15</sup>

### Lori Laitman

Lori Laitman has composed nearly two hundred songs, numerous chamber works, several film scores, and one opera.<sup>16</sup> Her opera *The Scarlet Letter*, with librettist David Mason, premiered in November 2008 at the University of Central Arkansas. Her reputation is well-established; most of her music has been published and recorded, and reviews of her work indicate her significance as an American art song composer. Carol Kimball devoted a chapter to Laitman's songs in the 2005 edition of *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*,<sup>17</sup> and in 2004 and 2007, *Journal of Singing* published significant articles about her music.<sup>18</sup> Laitman's songs have been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Gramophone Magazine*, *Journal of Singing*, and *Opera News*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1992), 45.

<sup>16</sup> Laitman's first opera, *The Scarlet Letter*, premiered on November 6, 2008 at the University of Central Arkansas. *Come to me in Dreams*, sometimes cited as her first opera, is actually a dramatic compilation by David Bamberger of fifteen of her songs. It was performed in 2004 in Cleveland in a program celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Anne Frank's birth.

<sup>17</sup> Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2005), 339-345.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Carman, *Journal of Singing*, 60:3, (Jan/Feb 2004) 313-315; Sharon Mabry, "The Masterful Lori Laitman," *Journal of Singing*, 63:1, (Sep/Oct 2007) 95-97.

<sup>19</sup> Lori Laitman's official web site, <http://www.artsongs.com/meet/reviews.html> (accessed 10 March 2009).

Laitman is an astute business person who has managed her song distribution through Classical Vocal Reprints and has released four CDs through Albany Records. Her most recent CD, *Within These Spaces*, was released in May 2009.<sup>20</sup> She is now under professional management by Jona Rapoport Artist Management.

In addition to composing, Laitman maintains a busy lecture schedule. In 2007, she was composer-in-residence at the Longy School of Music in Boston and Towson State University in Maryland. In April 2008, she addressed students and faculty at Westminster Choir College about the direction of art song in the twenty-first century, and in the spring of 2009, she and poet David Mason conducted poetry and music seminars at Elon University in North Carolina and at Pilgrim School in Los Angeles.

Laitman was raised in a musical family of Jewish heritage in New Rochelle, New York. At family gatherings there was abundant music-making, both classical and jazz. Her mother was a trained singer, and members of her extended family all played instruments. Laitman's parents supported her study of piano and flute, and at the age of sixteen, she entered Yale as a freshman music major. Laitman received an M.M. degree from Yale School of Music.

Laitman first imagined that she could be a composer when she noticed that many of her college friends were composers. Among them was her future husband of thirty-two years, Bruce Rosenblum. During her college years, Laitman

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<sup>20</sup>Lori Laitman, *Within These Spaces*, performed by Sari Gruber, Randall Scarlata, Jennifer Check et al., Albany Records, CD-Troy 1118, 2009.

wrote only one art song, a setting of Christina Rossetti's poem "Remember Me." When student Katie Albert performed the song, composition faculty member Robert Morris, now teaching at Eastman School of Music, compared it to the music of Pierre Boulez. Laitman admits that such an accolade should have been a clue to her that art song would become her special genre. Still, based on her enthusiasm for Frank Lewin's film music class, she ignored her song success and focused on chamber and film music. Laitman's transition to art song was instigated by a 1991 request for a song from her friend, soprano Lauren Wagner. With the success of that first song, "Metropolitan Tower," Laitman claims she "found her voice." While Laitman had initially rejected song composition, she now had discovered a genre that not only suited her artistic instincts, but was compatible with the responsibility of having three young children. Laitman now has three grown children—two sons and one daughter; she and her husband live in Potomac, Maryland.

In both her prolific output and her compositional style, Laitman has been compared to notable twentieth-century American songwriter Ned Rorem. Reviewer Lawrence Johnson writes that it is "inevitable that any American art-song composer will at some point be compared with Ned Rorem . . . It's a testament to the quality, melodic richness, and subtlety of Lori Laitman's songs that for once the comparison is not inapt."<sup>21</sup> Singer Adelaide Whitaker describes Laitman's songs as utilizing "contemporary musical language that frees the

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<sup>21</sup> Lori Laitman, review by Lawrence A. Johnson, *Gramophone*, March 2007: A7. <http://www.artsongs.com/meet/07.pdf> (accessed 25 March 2009).

expressive qualities of the poetry and the music: varying barline lengths, free color associations and an accompaniment that is a full partner in a complex, integrated web.”<sup>22</sup>

There are several characteristics that I notice immediately in Laitman’s songs. First, she chooses excellent poetry, including the poems of Sara Teasdale, Emily Dickinson, and William Carlos Williams. In addition to Dana Gioia, her contemporary poets include David Mason, Mary Oliver, and Joyce Sutphen. Second, she is meticulous in her instructions to performers. Her scores are filled with markings like “relax a touch” and “stretch a bit.” Most importantly, Laitman carefully follows speech rhythms, creating declamatory sections and relying on mixed meters to accommodate the vocal rhythms. Her vocal lines are generally tonal with frequent large, ascending intervals. Although her text-setting is sensitive to meaning, interpretation sometimes requires vocal experience to accommodate the more angular moments.

### **Collaboration of Gioia and Laitman**

In an interview with the author, Laitman shared her thoughts concerning how she first learned of Gioia’s poetry:

Dana Gioia and his works first came to my attention in early 2003, when a mutual friend of ours, mezzo-soprano Virginia Dupuy, called me to ask if I might like to accompany her performance of my Dickinson song “They Might Not Need Me” at a poetry event at The White House on February 12, 2003. She excitedly told me about the new Chairman of NEA, Dana Gioia, and how he was a poet and how he loved art song. I was not familiar with

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<sup>22</sup> Laitman’s official website, <http://www.artsongs.com> (accessed 5 March 2009).

Dana's poetry so I immediately purchased several of his books and was fascinated by his lyrical style and his narrative poems.<sup>23</sup>

After several failed attempts to connect in person, Laitman and Gioia finally met in November 2003. In the meantime, she had asked for and received Gioia's permission to set some of his poems to music. Since 2003, Laitman has written eight songs on Gioia's poems: "The Apple Orchard," "Money," "Being Happy," and "Equations of the Light," plus the four poems that form the cycle *Becoming a Redwood*. The individuality of Laitman's work is clear from these eight songs. For example, "The Apple Orchard" has a compelling lyrical vocal line supported by a repetitive legato figure in the piano, and "Money" exhibits a playful style with surprise accents in its fragmented vocal line and dance-like bass rhythms in the piano.

Laitman and Gioia have a comfortable relationship and clearly have high regard for each other's work. Gioia attended the debut of Laitman's opera in 2008, and they meet periodically for social occasions. Laitman confesses that she was delighted to have found a wonderful poet who lived in her area. She recalls thinking of Gioia as her "Sara Teasdale." Now, though, she thinks that is not accurate, saying, "He's my 'Dana Gioia' and I feel so lucky to be working with him."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Laitman, interview by author, Potomac, MD, 27 March 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Laitman, email to author.

**CHAPTER III**  
**OVERVIEW OF *BECOMING A REDWOOD***

When Laitman discovered Gioia’s poetry, she was in the planning stages of composing a cycle for her husband’s fiftieth birthday celebration. Since she was already delving into Gioia’s work, she decided to use several of his poems.<sup>25</sup> Laitman began composition of the songs in August 2003, intending to set some of the love poems. Gradually other poems entered the work, with “The Apple Orchard” and “Money” being part of an early version of the birthday cycle. Once Laitman discovered the poem “Pentecost,” however, she changed the cycle’s direction. “Pentecost,” a poetic lament dedicated to the memory of Gioia’s deceased infant son, became the emotional centerpiece of the cycle. Laitman explains how she envisioned using the poem:

This was such a powerful poem, and I knew when I read it that it could make for a stunning song. Obviously, setting a poem about the death of a child isn’t exactly what one would imagine for a birthday cycle; but I decided to alter my conception . . . to create a cycle that I loved for one that I loved.<sup>26</sup>

The four poems of *Becoming a Redwood* are collected from various sources in Gioia’s oeuvre, and their meaning in the cycle becomes subject to their

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<sup>25</sup> Laitman, email to author, 30 March 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Laitman, interview by author, Potomac, MD, 27 March 2009.

interconnectedness (Fig. 1). The implication that “The Song” involves a shared experience leads to the lament expressed in the second song, “Pentecost,” and the third song’s commentary on the brevity of life relates back to the lament of “Pentecost.” “Becoming a Redwood,” the title song, contrasts the enduring character of the natural world to the brevity of human life as expressed in “Curriculum Vitae.”

Laitman explains the sequence as a “dramatic arc,” describing the first song as a love song that leads to the creation of a child. “Pentecost” concerns the death of that child, “Curriculum Vitae” then becomes a commentary on the helplessness of our lives, and “Becoming a Redwood” is an observation of eventual healing. She notes in the preface to the score that the songs “reflect on love, death, and healing.”<sup>27</sup> Her specific interpretation is made by the ordering of the poems.

Gioia’s interpretations of the poems are not as direct as Laitman’s readings; he prefers that his poems remain open to varied interpretations of meaning. Remarkably, Gioia wrote the poem “Pentecost” *before* his son’s death, connecting the poem to that death only after the fact. The title poem, “Becoming a Redwood,” was written just before that son’s birth, so Gioia privately associates it with him. In spite of these associations, Gioia insists that his poems encompass unrestricted interpretations. Using the poem “Becoming a Redwood” as an example, he explains his view:

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<sup>27</sup> Laitman, *Becoming a Redwood*, Introduction.

The title poem of the cycle chronicles the changing perceptions and emotions of someone standing alone in a country field. It does not tell anyone how to vote, endorses no brand of religious faith, offers no official view of California wilderness policy. . . . My poems try to be about being alive—feeling, thinking, remembering, longing, fearing, imagining, dreaming . . . <sup>28</sup>

Laitman has organized the songs not only to show a narrative, but also to give coherent musical structure. The lengths and styles of the four songs are comparable to a four-movement symphony: primary themes are introduced in “The Song”; “Pentecost” mirrors a slow second movement; “Curriculum Vitae” serves as a break between the heavy second song and the end song, not unlike the minuet/scherzo movement of a symphony; the title song becomes a summation of the work. The form of the cycle combines with the sentiment of the poems to give structural unity to *Becoming a Redwood*.

The world premiere of *Becoming a Redwood* took place at The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. on May 5, 2004.<sup>29</sup> The composer accompanied mezzo-soprano Barbara Quintiliani, and before the performance, Dana Gioia read the poems. Albany Records recorded a third CD of Laitman’s songs in 2006, featuring the new cycle, *Becoming a Redwood*.<sup>30</sup> Laitman has orchestrated the cycle for chamber orchestra; as of this writing, the orchestrated version has not

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<sup>28</sup> Gioia, email to author, 10 March 2009.

<sup>29</sup> “The Apple Orchard,” “Being Happy,” and “Money”—also Gioia-Laitman collaborations—premiered at that same occasion.

<sup>30</sup> Lori Laitman, *Becoming a Redwood: Songs of Lori Laitman*, performed by Jennifer Cheek, Patricia Green, Sari Gruber et al., Albany Records, CD-Troy 865, 2006.

been published or performed. I have based my reading of *Becoming a Redwood* on the piano/vocal version.

SONG	GENERAL SENTIMENT	POEM	LENGTH Of SONG	FORM	METER/ TEMPO	TONALITY
#1 "The Song"	A strong but not altogether willing bond formed from shared experience	From <i>The Gods of Winter</i> (1991)  After Rilke's 1907 poem "Liebes-Lied"  Previously published in <i>Sequoia</i>	61 measures 3'	Through-composed  Melodic motives and recurring rhythmic patterns  Text inspired	3/4  ♩ = 96	B-flat centered (alternate version centered on C)
#2 "Pentecost"	A guilt-tinged lament of great devastation	From <i>Interrogations at Noon</i> (2001)	59 measures 3'55"	Through-composed  Ostinato based Text inspired	Alternating, primarily 6/8  ♩ = 46	B-flat centered
#3 "Curriculum Vitae"	A comment on the brevity of life	From <i>Interrogations at Noon</i> (2001)	21 measures 53"	AA' Coda  Text inspired	Begins in 5/8 Changes often  ♩ = 96	B-flat centered
#4 "Becoming a Redwood"	An empathetic communion with nature	From <i>The Gods of Winter</i> (1991)  Previously published in the <i>Paris Review</i>	112 measures 5'40"	Through-composed 5 main sections, delineated by piano interludes ABCDA Text inspired	Alternating, primarily 3/4  ♩ = 80	Oscillates around D, settles in G minor, then ends in G-flat major with added C

**Figure 1. Table showing the trajectory of the cycle.**

**CHAPTER IV**  
**ANALYSIS AND LAYERS OF MEANING**

Each of the four poems in *Becoming a Redwood* projects meaning and emotional implications that are more or less clear. However, Laitman's musical settings, verbal indications, and placement of the poems tend to refract these meanings. Because meaning is first layered by the poet, I begin each analysis with a reading of the poem.

**The Song**

How shall I hold my soul that it  
does not touch yours? How shall I lift  
it over you to other things?  
If it would only sink below  
into the dark like some lost thing  
or slumber in some quiet place  
which did not echo your soft heart's beat.  
But all that ever touched us—you and me—  
touched us together  
    like a bow  
that from two strings could draw one voice.  
On what instrument were we strung?  
And to what player did we sing  
our interrupted song?

(After Rilke)  
Dana Gioia, *The Gods of Winter*<sup>31</sup>

The cycle's first song is based on a loose translation of a poem by German lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). Rilke's poem, titled "Liebes-Lied" (Love Song), was published in December 1907 in the collection *Neue Gedichte*

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<sup>31</sup> Dana Gioia, *The Gods of Winter: Poems by Dana Gioia* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1991), 8.

(New Poems).<sup>32</sup> Gioia first printed “Liebes-Lied” as “The Song” in a limited edition *Planting a Sequoia* by Aralia Press.<sup>33</sup> The poem was subsequently reprinted in 1991 in Gioia’s collection of poetry *The Gods of Winter*, and that volume was dedicated to the memory of his infant son with the following epigraph, “Briefest of joys, our life together.”<sup>34</sup>

When I asked Gioia about his use of Rilke’s poem and what aspects of the poem were important to maintaining the integrity of its expression, he noted that musicality was central to the poem’s expressive aesthetic. Consequently, he strove to keep Rilke’s iambic tetrameter and line breaks intact. Irregularities of form coexist: the poem’s fourteen lines number one less than a sonnet, and while the poem contains no perfect rhymes, there are several slant rhymes. Slant rhymes, also known as imperfect rhymes, use only assonance or consonance to add an aural richness to the text. End-line examples of slant rhyme in this first poem are “it-lift,” “things-thing,” “beat-me,” “bow-voice,” “strung-sing-song.”

The two questions posed at the poem’s beginning and end create an overarching ABA form. The first part of the poem names the soul, slumber, and echo—things that cannot be perceived visually. These intangibles then become understood through the physical image of the bow and strings of a musical instrument. This move from the intangible to the tangible gives a clearer

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<sup>32</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Neue Gedichte* (1907). Reprinted as *New Poems*, trans. Edward Snow (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Dana Gioia, *Planting a Sequoia* (West Chester, PA: Aralia Press), 1991.

<sup>34</sup> Gioia, *The Gods of Winter*, v.

understanding of the affect of the poem. The most significant line break in the poem, “touched us together / like a bow,” occurs as the poem moves from the abstract to the concrete. Line breaks in poetry are one way of drawing attention to the text, and this break intensifies one’s attention to the word “together.” The break serves as a visual suggestion that presages the word “interrupted.” The importance of that intensification is only realized at the end of the poem, when Gioia alters Rilke’s words to suggest an apparent disruption of the bond.

Several alterations in Gioia’s loose translation cause changes in the poem’s affect. First, by translating “Liebes-Lied” as “The Song” and not as “Love Song,” the meaning is immediately ambiguous. Second, the last two lines of the German poem are “Und welcher Geiger hat uns in der Hand? / O süßes Lied.” (“And what player holds us in his hand? / O sweet song.”) Those lines become “And to what player did we sing / our interrupted song?” Gioia further adjusts the sense of the line with a verb tense change from present to past tense. Now the poem is no longer a certain love song, but an enigma that may evoke a strong but not altogether willing bond developed from shared experience.

Laitman says she works intuitively by “setting the vocal line first, taking great care to craft a musical line that will work well for a singer. This in turn allows the singer to effectively communicate the words to an audience.”<sup>35</sup> Examples of Laitman’s synthesis of textual meaning and vocal line appear in the first and last phrases of “The Song.” In the first phrase, the melody has small

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<sup>35</sup>Laitman, email to author, 30 March 2009.

intervals on the words “that it does not touch yours”; the singer is compelled to step carefully. On the last phrase, the melody has an expansive leap on the words “And to what player did we sing our interrupted song?” The drama of the large interval parallels the passion of the question being posed, making the expression of that emotion almost effortless for the singer.

Laitman’s setting parallels the irregularities in Gioia’s poem. Low B-flats in the first measure establish the key center, but Laitman does not follow traditional tonal syntax (Ex. 1). Instead, major and minor extended chords move by thirds as indicated in the piano score of the example.<sup>36</sup> Like Debussy, Laitman uses harmonic movement and chromaticism to provide depth of color for amplifying the text.

Example 1. “The Song,” mm. 17-20. Harmonic movement by thirds.

14 *relax*  
 dark like some lost thing or slum-ber in some qui-et place which

*relax* *a tempo*  
 C-sharp minor E major G major B minor  
 Ped. Ped. Ped.

<sup>36</sup> Laitman wrote an alternate version of this song, centered on C. The decision to have two versions was simply a practical matter, made to accommodate the higher tessitura of a singer. I use the original B-flat version for my analysis.

The melodic motives and gestures of “The Song” not only give structure, cohesion, and meaning to the first song, they also give cohesion to the rest of the cycle. The first motive, motive a, is a descending, step-wise eighth-note pattern introduced by the piano and persisting throughout the first four measures (Ex. 2). This pattern continues in variation, sometimes ascending in exact retrograde and sometimes only suggested by the bass of the piano. In the third measure, the voice introduces motive b, an ascending outline of a minor ninth chord. Laitman juxtaposes these first two motives, one descending intervals of seconds and one ascending intervals of thirds. Because the motives are moving in contrary motion and because the text is a question concerning how one might break free of another, the two motives help to signify containment (motive a) and escape (motive b). The close repetitive eighth-note figure and the broader ascending line pull apart from each other.

Example 2. “The Song,” mm. 1-4. Motives a and b.

The musical score for Example 2, "The Song," measures 1-4, features two distinct motives. Motive a is a descending eighth-note pattern in the piano, while Motive b is an ascending eighth-note pattern in the voice. The score is written for Voice and Piano in 3/4 time, with a tempo of quarter note = 96. The piano part consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and a bass line in the right hand. The voice part enters in the third measure with the lyrics "How shall I hold my".

**Score Details:**

- Tempo:** quarter note = 96
- Time Signature:** 3/4
- Key Signature:** B-flat major / D-flat minor
- Motive a:** A descending eighth-note pattern in the piano, starting on G4 and moving down to B3 over four measures.
- Motive b:** An ascending eighth-note pattern in the voice, starting on B3 and moving up to G4 over four measures.
- Lyrics:** "How shall I hold my"
- Dynamic Markings:** *mf* (measures 1-2), *p* (measures 3-4)
- Performance Indications:** *mp* (measures 3-4), *leg.* (legato) markings under the piano part.

An important three-note gesture, a descending minor second followed by a descending major third, appears repeatedly throughout the cycle. In “The Song,” this gesture introduces an expansive, ascending motive that I label the “love motive” (Ex. 3). I refer to this full statement as the love motive because it appears in the text when love is the primary emphasis and because the term “love motive” helps to distinguish it from a later motive that begins with the same three-note cell. The piano and voice share equally in the love motive as if in conversation as they alternate in initiating or responding to the other. In the piano’s response, Laitman uses parallel thirds to deepen the significance of the love motive. Parallel thirds have cultural resonance as romantic agreement, and in this instance, the thirds follow the text’s mention of a violin’s double-stopping—“like a bow / that from two strings could draw one voice.” The consonant agreement of thirds further signifies the broader concept of unification implicit in the reference to love.

Example 3. “The Song,” mm. 33-42. The “love motive.”

The musical score for Example 3, "The Song," mm. 33-42, is presented in two systems. The top system is for the Voice, and the bottom system is for the Piano. The Voice part is written in a single staff with lyrics: "like a bow that from two strings could draw one voice." The Piano part is written in two staves (treble and bass clef). The score includes dynamic markings (mf, mp, f, mf, mp), performance instructions (push, broaden, a tempo, relax), and articulation marks (accents, slurs). The piano part features parallel thirds in the right hand and a bass line with slurs and accents.

Two significant melodic leaps punctuate the vocal line of “The Song.” The first leap draws attention to the word “one” of “one voice.” In Rilke’s poem, the word is italicized; Gioia abandoned that emphasis, but Laitman has restored it through this melodic accent. The second prominent leap occurs on the altered phrase mentioned earlier, “And to what player did we sing . . .” This forte octave movement happens as the song arrives harmonically and textually to its dramatic conclusion. The piano ends the song with a truncated version of the first descending eighth-note motive followed by high B-flats. Like the poem, with questions framing the beginning and the ending, the song returns to the beginning tonality for closure.

In the introduction to the score, Laitman refers to her favorite expression in the poem as, “But all that ever touched us—you and me— / touched us together/ like a bow / that from two strings could draw one voice.” She claims that this line forms the climax of the song. However, I read the last phrase—the phrase that Gioia changed—as far more significant, because it is the line that employs the most dramatic musical material. Laitman says she felt the poem made a perfect love song for the cycle because she and her husband had “married so young and shared so much.” That may be, but other potentially more profound layers of meaning exist. Layers of meaning are not finalized by either the poet or the composer, or even by the performers.

### **Pentecost**

Neither the sorrows of afternoon, waiting in the silent house,  
Nor the night no sleep relieves, when memory  
Repeats its prosecution.

Nor the morning's ache for dream's illusion, nor any prayers  
 Improvised to an unknowable god  
 Can extinguish the flame.

We are not as we were. Death has been our pentecost,  
 And our innocence consumed by these implacable  
 Tongues of fire.

Comfort me with stones. Quench my thirst with sand.  
 I offer you this scarred and guilty hand  
 Until others mix our ashes.

Dana Gioia, *Interrogations at Noon*<sup>37</sup>

Gioia's poem "Pentecost" is comprised of four three-line stanzas of free verse. As the lines in each tercet grow progressively shorter, they create a visual effect as each stanza shrinks. The lines have approximately seven, five, and three poetic feet, and line breaks appear to be based on these rhythmic feet rather than on linguistic syntax. The narrowing of each line concentrates the intensity of the poem.

Gioia says that he consciously chose the rhythm of this poem to recall the King James Version of Old Testament poetry.<sup>38</sup> Pentecost was originally a Jewish agricultural celebration of the first fruits of the harvest; it later became a celebration of God's gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai.<sup>39</sup> The last three stanzas end with references to flame, fire, and ashes which are associated with the Christian Pentecost. According to New Testament accounts, Pentecost is that event when

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<sup>37</sup> Dana Gioia, *Interrogations at Noon* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Gioia, email to author, 30 March 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Lev. 23. Exod. 23, 34.

the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit through tongues of fire.<sup>40</sup> Gioia does not capitalize the word “pentecost,” suggesting that he has not referenced any specific event of either the Hebrew or Christian liturgical calendars, but rather he has referred to a *generic knowing* that comes through acquaintance with death, no less powerful than the disciples’ Pentecost experience.

The first line of the final stanza shows Gioia’s careful choice of words: “Comfort me with stones. Quench my thirst with sand.” Clearly, he has used words that do *not* connote comfort or quenching as if the bitterness of this sorrow is, in fact, *unquenchable*. The careful use of certain words, like the careful use of certain notes, expresses the great anguish in this poem.

Laitman composed two versions of “Pentecost.” The first version had only a left hand accompaniment, which she originally thought would emphasize the starkness of the poem. Later, she added a fuller piano part with the right hand echoing the vocal lament. Laitman kept this second version, deciding the repetitive echoing of the voice expressed a more intense grief. The grief being expressed is, like an echo, repetitive and ceaseless.

The piano’s incessant 6/8 ostinato accompaniment is one of those “enabling mechanisms” in our culture that allows us to understand the expressive content of music.<sup>41</sup> In our culture, a repetitive 6/8 pattern evokes many things: a

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<sup>40</sup> Acts 2.

<sup>41</sup> Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41.

lullaby, a waltz, a dirge, or a work song. However, in the context of this song concerning the death of a child, it is a dark reference to a dirge or a lullaby.

Although Gioia wrote “Pentecost” before the death of his son, Laitman understood the poem in the context of death.

In spite of the prevalence of the 6/8 pattern, Laitman has inserted other meters at irregular intervals, giving “Pentecost” an improvisational quality. In her performance notes, Laitman summarizes her musical intention in using these mixed meters: “This song should surge and ebb in its tempi—as indicated by ‘push’ and ‘relax.’ It should have a hypnotic and improvisational quality.”<sup>42</sup> By mesmerizing alternations of meter, tempo, and rhythm, Laitman creates a trance-like effect, invoking a possible reaction to loss.

The first melodic motive of “Pentecost” begins in the third measure where memory of love is evoked from the three-note gesture that began the first song’s love motive—the descending minor second and major third (Ex. 4). Now, though, rather than expanding upward for the love motive, the motive descends. “Like a bow / that from two strings could draw one voice” becomes “neither the sorrows of afternoon, waiting in the silent house.” Because the new melody is associated with sorrow, I refer to it as the “sorrow motive.” The heavy sadness is further layered with a conjunct, faster paced motive that, according to Laitman, suggests a death lament (Ex. 5). In the preface to the score, Laitman describes this cell as “repetitive in nature and suggestive of keening.”<sup>43</sup> A keen is a high-pitched wail,

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<sup>42</sup> Laitman, *Becoming a Redwood*, 10.

usually associated with women lamenting the deceased. The repetitive nature of the wail and the repetitive nature of Laitman's motive add another layer to the song's expression of grief.

Example 4. "Pentecost," mm. 1-5. The "sorrow motive."

Example 4 is a musical score for the first five measures of "Pentecost." It features a voice part and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 46, with the instruction "but push and relax tempi throughout." The key signature has one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is 6/8. The voice part begins with a rest in the first measure, followed by the lyrics "Nei-ther the sor-rows of af-ter-noon," in measures 2-5. The piano part consists of a repetitive eighth-note pattern in the bass clef, starting with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and becoming mezzo-forte (*mf*) in measure 4. The piano part is marked "extremely legato throughout" and includes a "simile..." instruction in measure 4. The score includes dynamic markings (*mf*, *mp*) and phrasing slurs.

Example 5. "Pentecost," mm. 15-18. The "keening motive."

Example 5 is a musical score for measures 15-18 of "Pentecost." It features a voice part and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 46. The key signature has one flat, and the time signature is 6/8. The voice part begins at measure 15 with the lyrics "mem-o-ry re-peats its pro-se-cu-tion." in measures 15-18. The piano part consists of a repetitive eighth-note pattern in the bass clef, starting with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and becoming piano (*p*) in measure 18. The piano part is marked "poco rit." in measures 15-16 and "A Tempo" in measures 17-18. The score includes dynamic markings (*mp*, *p*) and phrasing slurs.

Like the first song, “Pentecost” centers on B-flat with non-functional dominant movement and tonal shifts. The harmonic motion alludes to traditional tonality, but it does not progress accordingly. One prominent shift occurs early in the song, as the singer recounts unremitting grief. The abrupt change in the harmony makes an unmistakable suggestion of daybreak as the words continue, “Nor the morning’s ache for dream’s illusion.” The move is a half-step drop away from B-flat, leading to the seventh tone, the most unstable position in common practice harmony, mirroring the restlessness in the text.

Laitman uses other musical signs that add layers of meaning to the poem. First, portamentos appear throughout the vocal melody. These downward slides evoke a yielding to grief as they indicate a loss of control. Second, in the most dramatic moment, the voice has repeated fortissimo octave leaps that require a fully energized vocal sound, and the wailing characteristic of this sort of utterance evokes intense emotion (Ex. 6). Third, the words “flame” and “fire,” which end verses two and three, respectively, are imbued with great drama by their placement on progressively higher and more sustained pitches. Fourth, the song repeats several words for dramatic emphasis. For example, Gioia’s phrase, “Death has been our pentecost” becomes, “Death, *death* [emphasis added] has been our pentecost.” Finally, in the last measures of the song, when words no longer suffice, the voice has two fragments of the sorrow motive and a repetition of the keening motive on “ah” (Ex. 7). By expanding the sorrow motive and associating it with keening in these three fragments, the composer’s expressive intent is

apparent. Laitman calls this ending a “wordless vocalise which hints at a diminished but prevailing sadness.”<sup>44</sup> As the emotion of this moment exceeds the expressive capability of words; the music, not the words, expresses the ineffable.

Example 6. “Pentecost,” mm. 43-45. Octave wailing.

Musical score for Example 6, "Pentecost," mm. 43-45. The score is for Voice and Piano. The voice part has lyrics: "Com-fort me with stones. Quench my thirst with". The piano part features a wailing octave line with "Lea" markings. Performance instructions include "wailing", "ff", and "rit."

Example 7. “Pentecost,” mm. 52-59. Wordless lament.

Musical score for Example 7, "Pentecost," mm. 52-59. The score is for Voice and Piano. The voice part has wordless vocalizations "Aah" and "Aah". The piano part features a wordless lament with "Lea" markings. Performance instructions include "like sighing", "mf", "mp relax", "Slightly Slower", "push", "relax", "freely", and "with grief".

44 Ibid.

### Curriculum Vitae

The future shrinks  
Whether the past  
Is well or badly spent.

We shape our lives  
Although their forms  
Are never what we meant.

Dana Gioia, *Interrogations at Noon*<sup>45</sup>

Of the four poems that Laitman chose for her cycle, “Curriculum Vitae” is the shortest and most formal. The poem’s six brief lines mirror the brevity of life. Certain words like “shrinks,” “shape,” and “forms” add to the image of compressed time. “Curriculum Vitae” is both rhymed and metrical, and it uses assonance to color its expression.

Laitman’s music complements the simplicity of Gioia’s poem (Ex. 8). The piano register is high, emphasizing the lightness of the poem compared to the gravitas of “Pentecost.” Open intervals of fourths and fifths plus repeated single notes at the end invoke bells that mark the passing of time. The piano phrases become smaller fragments as the song progresses. Linguistically, this compression is reminiscent of real conversation—stopping, starting, and repeating words and short phrases.

Surprise dominates Laitman’s setting of “Curriculum Vitae.” The music stops and starts unexpectedly, the meter changes almost every measure, and the piano and voice have several improbable pitches. For example, the phrase “Is well

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<sup>45</sup> Gioia, *Interrogations at Noon*, 39.

or badly spent” ends with the voice and piano competing for dominance between a G-natural and a G-flat. These are not musical mistakes; they are Laitman’s way of conveying the unexpectedness of our brief lives.

Example 8. “Curriculum Vitae,” mm. 1-4. Intervals of fourths and fifths.

Voice

*mp*

*very legato throughout*

The fu-ture shrinks\_\_\_\_\_ Wheth-er the past Is

Piano

*mp*

*Red.*

When I first began working on “Curriculum Vitae,” it seemed oddly out of place. Laitman reported that Gioia, too, was surprised she had chosen it for this cycle. Nonetheless, both the poem and song do have depths of meaning that belie their outward simplicity.

### **Becoming a Redwood**

Stand in a field long enough, and the sounds  
start up again. The crickets, the invisible  
toad who claims that change is possible,

And all the other life too small to name.  
first one, then another, until innumerable  
they merge into the single voice of a summer hill.

Yes, it’s hard to stand still, hour after hour,  
fixed as a fencepost, hearing the steers  
snort in the dark pasture, smelling the manure.

And paralyzed by the mystery of how a stone  
 can bear to be a stone, the pain  
 the grass endures breaking through the earth's crust.

Unimaginable the redwoods on the far hill,  
 rooted for centuries, the living wood grown tall  
 and thickened with a hundred thousand days of light.

The old windmill creaks in perfect time  
 to the wind shaking the miles of pasture grass,  
 and the last farmhouse light goes off.  
 Something moves nearby. Coyotes hunt  
 these hills and packs of feral dogs.  
 But standing here at night accepts all that.

You are your own pale shadow in the quarter moon,  
 moving more slowly than the crippled stars,  
 part of the moonlight as the moonlight falls,

Part of the grass that answers the wind,  
 part of the midnight's watchfulness that knows  
 there is no silence but when danger comes.

Dana Gioia, *The Gods of Winter*<sup>46</sup>

In its nine verses, “Becoming a Redwood” uses traditional and non-traditional means to express an empathetic communion with nature. The lines of this free-verse poem range between four and six beats, with rich phonemic repetitions and alliterations throughout. The third verse, for example, describes the scene with phrases like “fixed as a fencepost,” “steers snort,” and “smelling the manure.”

Gioia’s abundant use of imagery gives the reader a vivid experience of the scene he describes. The depiction of the giant redwoods in verse five is particularly evocative: “rooted for centuries, the living wood grown tall / and thickened with a hundred thousand days of light.” Many of the poem’s images

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<sup>46</sup> Gioia, *The Gods of Winter*, 55.

appeal to our vision: “stone,” “grass,” “redwoods,” “coyotes,” “feral dogs.” Other images appeal to our sense of smell: “smelling the manure” or to our sense of hearing: “the crickets,” “the steers snorting,” “the windmill creaking.” The poem creates a near-visible reality through these tangible examples.

By using the piano interludes and the words’ semantic meanings as guide posts, I divide this last poem into five main sections (Fig. 2). The first three sections evoke the passage of time, and the last two sections concern transition and assimilation, respectively:

Figure 2. Sections of meaning in “Becoming a Redwood.”

SECTION	VERSE	MEANING
1	1 and 2	Sounds you hear while standing
2	3 and 4	Conditions of your standing
3	5 and 6	Particularity of your standing
4	7	Transition from observer to observed
5	9 and 10	Assimilation into nature

Gioia chose words and phrases that gradually move the reader deeper and deeper into the scene. The poem shifts from separateness to absorption as the “you” transforms from observer to participant.

The piano plays a vital role in making that transition as the text can be understood and re-considered during the long piano interludes. The poem is long, and the listener is inundated with images. Because the piano is not burdened with words, when prominent melodies return from earlier songs, the listener may make new associations. For example, the love motive emerges in its entirety in the first extensive interlude that appears between sections two and three (Ex. 9). The sorrow motive from “Pentecost” re-appears in the piano

postlude (Ex. 10). In romantic era song cycles like Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben*, recalling motives from previous songs in the cycle gave closure to the music. In *Becoming a Redwood*, the lengthy postlude and the re-emergence of the love and sorrow motives from earlier songs give closure to Laitman's cycle. In Schumann's cycle, though, the final death song ends with a thematic memory of young love. In this cycle, the order is reversed, and the final song about life continuing ends with a thematic memory of death.

Example 9. "Becoming a Redwood," mm. 38-42. Love motive in interlude.

Example 9. "Becoming a Redwood," mm. 38-42. Love motive in interlude. The score shows the Voice and Piano parts. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 96 (slightly faster). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music features a love motive in the piano part. Performance instructions include "push" and "broaden". Dynamics range from *mf* to *f*. The piano part includes a bass line with "Red" written below it.

Example 10. "Becoming a Redwood," mm. 106-107. Sorrow motive in postlude.

Example 10. "Becoming a Redwood," mm. 106-107. Sorrow motive in postlude. The score shows the Voice and Piano parts. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 80. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music features a sorrow motive in the piano part. Performance instructions include *mf* and *mp*. The piano part includes a bass line with "Red" written below it.

The fragmented descending minor second-major third gesture from earlier in the cycle also appears in this concluding song. A particularly effective use occurs on the words “accepts all that” (Ex. 11). The piano repeats the cell, eventually descending into the final “assimilation” section of the poem.

Example 11. “Becoming a Redwood,” mm. 78-82. Three-note fragment.

The musical score for Example 11, "Becoming a Redwood," mm. 78-82, is presented in two staves: Voice and Piano. The Voice staff begins at measure 78 with a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 80$  and dynamics of *sub. mp*. The lyrics are "stand-ing here at night ac-cepts all that". The piano part features a three-note fragment (D, C, B-flat) in the treble register, which is repeated and eventually descends. The piano part has dynamics of *sub. mp* and *p*. The tempo changes to  $\text{♩} = 96$  at measure 82. The piece ends with the word "Red" written below the piano part.

Although the first three songs all center on B-flat, this last song centers on D, indicated by the first measure’s repeated Ds in the treble register of the piano. Originally, I thought Laitman had wanted either to signal imminent change or to invoke a simple, natural scene. When I mentioned these possible interpretations to Laitman, she told me that those notes had only been added later to help a singer find the starting pitch. My interpretation did not match her intention, but it was a creative misunderstanding that added another possible layer of meaning.

The poem suggests assimilation, but the song resists closure. “Becoming a Redwood” ends in G-flat major with an added C, creating a mysterious and ambiguous quality by the song’s inability to reach complete harmonic resolution



## CONCLUSION

Laitman introduced *Becoming a Redwood* to me when I was working with her on another project in spring 2008. From my first read-through, I felt a powerful connection to the text and music, and hearing the cycle in its entirety, I sensed multiple levels of meaning. Reading the poems, I saw an enduring magnificence in the depth of Gioia's words. Gioia creates an outward, visible reality of inner, inexpressible emotion by using the tools of his craft: rhyme, rhythm, meter, line breaks, assonance, etc. As I began to learn the songs, I saw how the composer created another layer of meaning. Laitman uses musical materials of melody, rhythm, and harmony, creating meaningful impulses as they behave in patterns of expectation and resolution. Gioia acknowledges that additional layers of meaning are added to his own when he writes "a good poem exists independently of the author." In the cycle *Becoming a Redwood*, the poems and songs differ as their contexts generate a new and more specific narrative.

Layers continue to accrete in the process of performance and reception. While performers should consider the poet and composer's intentions, we also create our own layer of meaning. Performers are, in fact, responsible for interpreting meaning in music and deciding how to express that meaning to an audience. It is this burden of interpretation for an audience that authorizes

performers to transcend a composer's detailed performance instructions and create new meaning. Laitman acknowledged as much when she told me that "real" musicians do not require all the instructive markings in her score. And yet, meaning is not finalized by performers, as listeners bring their own associations to determine what music means for them.

Music is not a mimetic art; music is an expressive art, imbued with layers that are all a result of the creative process. The significance of music is its ability to express these multiple layers of meaning; and when poet, composer, performers, and listeners all participate, they create the fullest possible genealogy of expression.

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University of Central Arkansas Opera Program. *The Scarlet Letter* by Lori Laitman (David Mason). Reynolds Theater, Conway, Arkansas. 6 November 2008.

**Appendix**  
**Consent Forms**

fromLori Laitman <yale75@gmail.com>  
toLucy Hoyt <lohoyt@uncg.edu>

dateSat, Mar 28, 2009 at 12:30 PM  
subjectRe: Permission to quote  
mailed-bygmail.com  
signed-bygmail.com

hide details 12:30 PM (3 hours ago) Reply

Dear Lucy,  
You have my permission to include excerpts from the following of my Dana Gioia songs:

Becoming a Redwood song cycle  
Money  
The Apple Orchard

Best,  
Lori

mdg1265@gmail.com to me  
show details Apr 8 (3 days ago) Reply

You have my permission to use and quote the text of all those poems.

Dana Gioia

Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T  
Reply Forward Invite mdg1265@gmail.com to chat

- Show quoted text -

-----Original Message-----

From: Lucy Hoyt  
To: mdg1265@gmail.com  
Sent: Apr 7, 2009 9:43 PM  
Subject: Lucy needs permission to print

Dear Dana,

May I have your permission to include your poems The Song, Pentecost, Curriculum Vitae, and Becoming a Redwood in a document for my doctoral lecture-recital scheduled for May 7, 2009 at UNCG? ( I will also be singing snippets of Money and The Apple Orchard, but do not plan to print those texts.)

If you are not the copyright owner of these four poems, please let me know who I need to contact for this permission.

Thanks so much,  
Lucy Hoyt