

LEONTIS, EVANGELIA SOPHIA, D.M.A. A Discussion of Jennifer Higdon's Setting of the Poetry of Amy Lowell in the Chamber Work *Love Sweet*. (2017)  
Directed by Dr. Carla LeFevre. 63 pp.

- I. Opera Role: April 4, 2014, 7:30pm., Aycock Auditorium. Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart)
- II. Solo Recital: Tuesday, February 17, 2015, 5:30pm., Recital Hall. *Quattro Rispetti Toscani* (Ottorino Respighi); "Traum leben", "Mädchenlied", "Ghasel", "Der Wanderer" from *Acht Lieder* Op. 6 (Arnold Schönberg); *As It Fell Upon a Day* (Aaron Copland); *Ariettes Oubliées* (Claude Debussy); *Four Poems*, Op. 16 (Marion Bauer)
- III. Solo Recital: Saturday, April 2, 2016, 3:30pm., Recital Hall. "Chanson", "Cantique", "Elégie" (Nadia Boulanger); "Be Silent, Blue Sea!", "The Nymph" (Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov); *Love Sweet* (Jennifer Higdon); *Vestige of a Woman* (Sarah Hutchings); *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (Samuel Barber)
- IV. D.M.A. Research Project. A DISCUSSION OF JENNIFER HIGDON'S SETTING OF THE POETRY OF AMY LOWELL IN THE CHAMBER WORK *LOVE SWEET*. This document provides biographical information for Higdon and Lowell as well as a discussion of Higdon's compositional style. It also includes a performance analysis of Higdon's musical setting of Lowell's poetry in the chamber work *Love Sweet*. Information is drawn from published materials, an interview with the composer, and an analysis of the score.

A DISCUSSION OF JENNIFER HIGDON'S SETTING  
OF THE POETRY OF AMY LOWELL IN THE  
CHAMBER WORK *LOVE SWEET*

by

Evangelia Sophia Leontis

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty at The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Musical Arts

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Approved by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Love Sweet* is a chamber work for soprano, violin, cello, and piano, composed by Jennifer Higdon in 2013 set to poetry by Amy Lowell. The work consists of five songs that together construct a narrative outlining the span of a romantic relationship from new love to death. This discussion provides a performance analysis of the work written from the perspective of a performer and is intended to offer deeper insight for other performers of the piece, as well as audiences. The performance analysis consists of a brief study of the poetry and of the primary rhythmic and melodic motives in each song, as well as the ways in which the songs come together to form a set. Information is drawn from published materials, the poetry, the musical score, an interview with the composer, and personal insight as a performer of the work. In reviewing scholarly research available on Higdon's music, a lack of study examining her vocal music became apparent. A number of Doctor of Musical Arts documents and dissertations have been written on her orchestral, chamber, and instrumental works, but as of this writing, no published research addresses her vocal music. This document aims to begin to fill this void by examining the vocal chamber work *Love Sweet*.

*Love Sweet* was composed by commission from the organization Songfest<sup>1</sup>, which requested that Higdon write a work for soprano, violin, cello, and piano set to poetry

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<sup>1</sup> Songfest is an organization that aims to ensure the future of art song by commissioning new works, presenting classes and concerts, and providing training to young singers and pianists.



authored by a woman.<sup>2</sup> Higdon chose to set poetry of Amy Lowell for two reasons. Necessary time constraints led to a need to select texts that were in the public domain, and several of Higdon's colleagues had previously used Lowell's poetry in their compositions, which led the composer to look into Lowell's work. Higdon chose five poems that spoke to her and created a narrative that traces a love relationship through various stages.<sup>3</sup> Each poem is written in first person and directly addresses the Beloved. The poetry is imbued with raw emotion and full of vivid, sensual, colorful images. The title, *Love Sweet*, which came to Higdon as she was composing, is a play on the sound of the words "Love Suite".<sup>4</sup>

Higdon composed *Love Sweet* immediately following the composition of *Cold Mountain*, her only opera (as of this writing). Over a span of two years, she composed vocal lines for the opera every day. Due to this practice, *Love Sweet* "flowed out much more easily than most pieces do."<sup>5</sup> She used the same compositional process for setting the text that she employed while writing the opera; "...reciting the lines, finding the rhythm and pacing, and then creating melodies that conveyed the words and mood effectively. I constantly check the setting of the words through singing, trying to make sure there is clarity of the lines, as well as a successful setting of the mood." The resultant vocal writing is full of singable melodies that often soar above the supporting piano trio ensemble while still retaining the integrity of the speech rhythms.

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Higdon, email message to author, October 24, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Higdon embraced writing for the instrumentation designated by the commission stating, "...the big advantage is that this is a great instrumentation in terms of colors that blend beautifully and work well in supporting the voice."<sup>6</sup> This discussion examines the ways in which Higdon creates a plethora of colors and timbres in the piano trio to aurally illustrate Lowell's vibrant poetry through the use of pizzicati, trills, and false harmonics in the strings, extended techniques in the piano, and rapid shifts of texture and harmony across all parts. The combination of this evocative instrumental music with compelling vocal writing for the soprano results in a chamber work that is a captivating addition to any recital.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

### THE POET: AMY LOWELL

At the time of her death in 1925, poet Amy Lowell was arguably the best known and most controversial woman in American poetry.<sup>7</sup> After publishing more than 650 poems and winning a Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1926, she had forged a sizable career and achieved a good deal of fame in a relatively short amount of time. This was due, in part, to her talent and influence as a poet, but also to her eccentric, theatrical, and occasionally abrasive personality. She is remembered for the advances she made in poetry as the self-appointed leader of the Imagist poets and for being a champion of “modern” American poetry.<sup>8</sup>

Amy Lowell was born in Brookline, MA in 1874 to a prominent and wealthy New England family who had made a considerable fortune in the cotton industry.<sup>9</sup> Her family included a long line of politicians, industrialists, bankers, academics, and clergymen who shaped the formation of the state of Massachusetts.<sup>10</sup> Lowell was born the youngest of five children and raised in the Brookline mansion in which she lived her entire life. In 1891, she was introduced to Boston high society as a debutante and spent her early adulthood traveling and involving herself in Boston community affairs. Lowell

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<sup>7</sup> Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich Richard, *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich, *Amy Lowell, American Modern* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), xii.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Benvenuto, *Amy Lowell* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

biographer Richard Benvenuto speculates that she seemed to be looking for her purpose during this period of her life. The Lowell family tradition dictated that women ought not speak in public, instead depending on the men of the family to converse with the outside world.<sup>11</sup> Once Amy Lowell had discovered her purpose—writing poetry—she quickly overcame this stifling family tradition, wholeheartedly pursuing a career as a poet and earning fame as an outspoken figure in American poetry. As Lowell put it, “Poetry is at once my trade and my religion”.<sup>12</sup>

Lowell educated herself by methodically reading works of great poets she admired, including Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge. Formal education beyond study with private tutors was not available to her as a woman of high society at the turn of the century.<sup>13</sup> Her first attempt to publish a poem came in 1910 when she was thirty-six years old.<sup>14</sup> She sent four sonnets to the *Atlantic Monthly*, including “A Fixed Idea” which is the text for the final song of *Love Sweet*. “A Fixed Idea” was subsequently published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August 1910. The publication of her first volume of poetry, *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass*, followed shortly in 1912.<sup>15</sup> A revelation came to Lowell in 1913, when she discovered a number of poems signed “H.D., Imagiste” and realized her own work fell into the same style.<sup>16</sup> The poems were written by Hilda Doolittle, who signed her poems only with her initials, “H.D.” Doolittle was a member of the new

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Melissa Bradshaw, *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Benvenuto, *Amy Lowell*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Bradshaw, *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> “Amy Lowell”, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/amy-lowell> (accessed 20 September 2016).

Imagism movement in poetry whose main proponent at the time was Ezra Pound.<sup>17</sup> As Benvenuto states, the Imagists “called for precision, economy, definiteness, and direct treatment; they warned against abstractions, rhetoric, and dead-stop iambic lines”.<sup>18</sup> Inspired by the discovery of like-minded poets and wanting to learn more, Lowell traveled to London to meet with Pound, John Gould Fletcher, and other members of the movement.<sup>19</sup>

Although Lowell befriended Pound at first, the two eventually disagreed over which direction to take their movement, ultimately leading Pound to distance himself from the Imagists.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, in 1915 Lowell became editor of an annual collection of imagist poetry entitled *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology*, a collection to which she also contributed her own poems. In the introduction to this anthology she details the criteria she felt were important to imagist poetry including, “To use the language of common speech...To create new rhythms...To present an image...”.<sup>21</sup> Analysis of the poems used in *Love Sweet* shows evidence of an adherence to these guidelines.

During the time of her editorship of the imagist anthology, Lowell published several volumes of poetry. One of these volumes was titled *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), which included two of the poems used in *Love Sweet*—“The Giver of Stars” and “A Gift”. *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* received critical acclaim and sold well among the public. In this poetry Lowell used what she called “unrhymed cadence” which

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Benvenuto, *Amy Lowell*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> “Amy Lowell”, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/amy-lowell> (accessed 20 September 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Bradshaw and Munich, *Amy Lowell*, xiii.

<sup>21</sup> “Amy Lowell”, Poetry Foundation.

she described in the preface to *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* as “...built upon ‘organic rhythm,’ or the rhythm of the speaking voice with its necessity for breathing, rather than upon a strict metrical system”.<sup>22</sup> Lowell adapted her “unrhymed cadence” from the French *vers libre* and from the work of previous American poets such as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman.<sup>23</sup> She stressed that even though these poems were not written in adherence to traditional form and meter, they still had rhythm. She stated, “Modern *vers libre*, far from being non-rhythmical as some people have supposed, is entirely based upon rhythm. Its rhythms differ from those of meter by being less obvious and more subtle, but rhythm is, nevertheless, the very ground and root of its structure”.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the advancements Lowell made in writing poetry, she also made a name for herself as an enthusiastic promoter of poetry in the United States. She believed that “Great poetry is and must be universal, above the customs and cliques of the initiated”.<sup>25</sup> She used her larger than life public persona, considerable family wealth, and charismatic nature to bring poetry to the American masses by embarking on lecture tours and by mentoring and promoting other American poets, such as Carl Sandburg.<sup>26</sup> Lowell became known for her dramatic poetry readings for which she was coached by the retired stage actress, Ada Dwyer Russell. Russell had become her partner with whom she openly cohabitated, despite the controversy that doing so prompted at the time.<sup>27</sup> Lowell was seen as displaying “masculine” qualities; she regularly smoked cigars, was the head of

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<sup>22</sup> Bradshaw and Munich, *Selected Poems*, xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Bradshaw and Munich, *Selected Poems*, xxxiv.

<sup>25</sup> Bradshaw and Munich, *Amy Lowell*, xv.

<sup>26</sup> “Amy Lowell”, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/amy-lowell> (accessed 20 September 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Bradshaw and Munich, *Selected Poems*, xix.

her household, lived with a woman, and never married.<sup>28</sup> This controversial public persona, in combination with the theatricality of her readings and the popularity of her poetry, earned her a large following that eagerly filled auditoriums to hear her speak.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to her volumes of poetry, Lowell also authored several critical works including *Six French Poets* (1915), *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), and a biography of the English writer John Keats.<sup>30</sup> *John Keats* (1922) is a lengthy, in-depth look at the life of the writer whom Lowell considered to be the forefather of imagist poetry. Lowell's health began declining in the 1920s, and in May 1925 she suffered a stroke that quickly led to her death. Dwyer Russell edited three additional volumes of Lowell's poetry after her death, including *What's O'Clock*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1926. In her time Lowell was remembered as "the embodiment of the new liberated woman" for her work and the manner in which she lived her rather short yet full life.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Bradshaw, *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*, 15-20.

<sup>29</sup> Bradshaw and Munich, *Selected Poems*, xxi.

<sup>30</sup> "Amy Lowell", *Merriam Webster's Biographical Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, 1995. *Biography in Context*, [link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/K1680055879/BIC1?u=gree35277&xid=f0ad441b](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/K1680055879/BIC1?u=gree35277&xid=f0ad441b) (accessed 7 January 2017).

<sup>31</sup> "Amy Lowell", Poetry Foundation.

## CHAPTER III

### THE COMPOSER: JENNIFER HIGDON

#### **Biography**

American composer Jennifer Higdon is one of the leading figures in contemporary classical music. Performances of her works number several hundred each year, making Higdon one of the most frequently performed living composers in the United States. She composes exclusively on commission from ensembles such as The Philadelphia Orchestra, The Chicago Symphony, The London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Tokyo String Quartet, and eighth blackbird, among others, and composes music in a number of genres including orchestral, vocal, chamber, operatic, and choral. Higdon has received numerous awards for her music, including but not limited to, a Pulitzer Prize for her *Violin Concerto*, the Grammy for Best Contemporary Classical Composition for her *Percussion Concerto*, the International Opera Award for Best World Premiere for her 2015 opera, *Cold Mountain*, and awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, ASCAP, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Koussevitzky Foundation. She has served as Composer-In-Residence with orchestras such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, the Fort Worth Symphony, and the Green Bay Symphony Orchestra. Higdon holds a Ph.D. and an M.A. in Music Composition from the University of Pennsylvania, a B.M. in Flute Performance from Bowling Green State University, and an Artist Diploma in Music Composition from the Curtis Institute of



Music. She currently maintains a rigorous schedule of composing, teaching, and traveling to performances of her work, where she often gives pre-concert lectures as well as works with performers of her work. As an educator, Dr. Higdon holds the Milton L. Rock Chair of Composition at the Curtis Institute of Music, where she works with the next generation of composers.<sup>32</sup>

Higdon was born in Brooklyn in 1962 and grew up in Atlanta and rural Tennessee.<sup>33</sup> Her father, Charles “Kenny” Higdon, was a professional painter and filmmaker, and frequently took Higdon and her brother to exhibitions of new and experimental art. “During the 1960s we saw things, and both my brother and I would look at these things and say, “This is art? I don’t know.” It helped me formulate early on what my idea of art was.”<sup>34</sup> As connected to the art world as the Higdon family was, classical music was a world away. Growing up in the south in the 1960s and 70s, Higdon instead cites bluegrass, rock, and folk music as the music of her childhood. She had a strong affinity for the Beatles, Bob Marley, and Peter, Paul and Mary. Higdon cites this early influence of popular music, particularly that of the Beatles, as the reason that much of her music is imbued with a strong sense of pulse.<sup>35</sup> She also credits her desire for communicating through her music to the influence of the Beatles. “The sheer number of Beatles tunes I listened to helped me realize the ability of music to communicate.” Communication remains one of her biggest goals while composing. She strives to

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<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Higdon, <http://jenniferhigdon.com/biography.html> (accessed 20 July 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Michael Slayton, *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music: Nine American Composers* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011) 142-143.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

compose music that is accessible to everyone, including those with no previous knowledge of classical music.<sup>36</sup>

Higdon also aims to make her music as easy to interpret as possible for performers by clearly marking what she wants from performers into the musical notation.<sup>37</sup> She has more control than most composers over the notation of her scores because she self-publishes all of her music through Lawdon Press, the music publishing company that she operates with her wife, Cheryl Lawson.<sup>38</sup> Higdon decided to create Lawdon Press after receiving advice from composer Philip Glass to maintain the copyright privileges of all of her music. Doing so allows her to process orders of scores more quickly and inexpensively.<sup>39</sup>

Higdon came to music rather late; her first musical experience came when she joined the percussion section of her high school marching band.<sup>40</sup> Shortly afterwards, when she was fifteen, she found an old flute and flute method book in the family attic and taught herself to play.<sup>41</sup> She continued to play flute throughout high school and eventually attended a flute camp at Bowling Green State University where she met and studied with flautist Judith Bentley, Professor of Performance Studies in flute at BGSU. Bentley made a lasting impression on the teenage Higdon, leading her to study with the flautist as a flute performance major at BGSU, despite her still-limited knowledge of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Kelly, Jennifer. *In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Kelly, *In Her Own Words*, 55.

<sup>40</sup> Virginia Broffitt. "The Music of Jennifer Higdon: Perspectives on the Styles and Compositional Approaches in Selected Chamber Compositions." Electronic Dissertation. University of Cincinnati 2010 (accessed 21 September 2016) [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=ucin1275656288](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ucin1275656288), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Slayton, *Women of Influence*, 143.

classical music. At this time Bentley ignited an interest in composition in Higdon, encouraging her to compose in addition to performing. From her studies with Bentley she learned the importance of musical line.<sup>42</sup>

Higdon recalls her time as a flautist as integral to her development as a composer because of the experience she gained as a performer. This experience helps her connect to the performers for whom she writes. Playing in orchestra led her to Robert Spano, who was the director of the university orchestra at BGSU at the time and with whom Higdon studied conducting. Spano went on to become the Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony. He took an interest in Higdon and encouraged her to apply to his alma mater, the Curtis Institute of Music. Upon graduation from BGSU, she enrolled in an artist's diploma program in composition at Curtis and began an intensive study of counterpoint and vocal writing, studying with David Loeb and Ned Rorem.<sup>43</sup> Rorem is well known as a composer of nearly 500 art songs that display his skillful text setting.<sup>44</sup> He has remained a supporter of Higdon over the years and has said of her, "Her music is honest, she has something to say, and she knows how to say it."<sup>45</sup>

After completing her artist's diploma Higdon moved on to the University of Pennsylvania, where she subsequently completed her master's and doctoral degrees in composition. It was here that she studied with George Crumb, the American composer known for creating "evocative soundscapes" in his music through the use of extended

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<sup>42</sup> Slayton, *Women of Influence*, 143-144.

<sup>43</sup> Slayton, *Women of Influence*, 145-146.

<sup>44</sup> Anthony Tommasini, et al. "Rorem, Ned." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed November 28, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/48611>.

<sup>45</sup> Slayton, *Women of Influence*, 146.

techniques (many of which he invented), which produce a wide range of timbral effects and musical colors.<sup>46</sup> Crumb encouraged her to explore color and texture in her compositions, an exploration that she has continued in her work and is evident in *Love Sweet*.<sup>47</sup>

Higdon's career took a big leap forward in 1995 with the composition of her first orchestral work, *Shine*. *Shine* was composed as the result of an ASCAP grant designed to give young composers the opportunity to compose their first symphonic work. It was written for James DePriest and the Oregon Symphony. Higdon submitted the score to the Philadelphia Orchestra as an example of her work, which led the orchestra to commission a piece from her. The resulting composition was her *Concerto for Orchestra*, which was premiered at the 2002 American Symphony Orchestra League Convention.<sup>48</sup>

### **Compositional Style**

Jennifer Higdon describes her compositional style as “intuitive”. When asked about her approach to composing she says that she “follows something in [her] inner ear” rather than following predetermined musical forms or harmonic progressions.<sup>49</sup> Several studies of her music have examined this compositional style, including “Comprehensive Analysis of Selected Orchestral Works by Jennifer Higdon” written by Christina L. Reitz,

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<sup>46</sup> Steinitz, Richard. "Crumb, George." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed November 28, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2249252>.

<sup>47</sup> Slayton, *Women of Influence*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> Christina L. Reitz. “Comprehensive Analysis of Selected Orchestral Works by Jennifer Higdon.” Electronic Thesis or Dissertation. University of Florida, 2007. <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UFE0021370/00001/pdf>, 22.

<sup>49</sup> Broffitt, “The Music of Jennifer Higdon”, 21.

which examines three of Higdon's orchestral works, and "The Music of Jennifer Higdon: Perspectives on the Styles and Compositional Approaches in Selected Chamber Compositions" by Virginia Broffitt which examines three chamber works. These authors identify many aspects of Higdon's compositional style that are also present in *Love Sweet*.

### Form

When asked about form in her music, Higdon has said, "I just let the music unfold."<sup>50</sup> Reitz and Broffitt both describe Higdon's music as sectional and lacking in traditional formal structure. Each new section within a work is characterized by changes in texture, dynamics, and mood. The most striking way that Higdon creates form in her music without the use of traditional formal structure is through textural shifts. Broffitt explains, "Higdon often uses textural variance to create diversity in the sound, thus increasing the complexity and intensity of the composition."<sup>51</sup> The following analysis of *Love Sweet* explores the ways in which Higdon uses this "textural variance" to create form.

### Harmony

Higdon rarely uses key signatures or key centers in her music, allowing her to modulate easily to remote or surprising key areas.<sup>52</sup> One example of this is a propensity

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<sup>50</sup> Broffitt, "The Music of Jennifer Higdon", 27.

<sup>51</sup> Broffitt, "The Music of Jennifer Higdon", 81.

<sup>52</sup> Jennifer Higdon, email message to author, October 24, 2016.

towards modulation by half step, a harmonic trait that has been discovered in Higdon's music and can be found in *Love Sweet*.<sup>53</sup> Reitz finds that although Higdon tends to avoid functional harmony and traditional chord progressions, her harmonic language still stems from the Common Practice Period, resulting in music that is mostly tonal.<sup>54</sup> Both Reitz and Broffitt note that one of the most prominent features of her music is the use of the perfect fifth. She often composes consecutive perfect fifths moving in parallel motion. This compositional device is found consistently in *Love Sweet*. Similarly, Higdon also composes running diatonic triads in parallel motion, often with added non-chord tones. Broffitt notes that during an occurrence of this device in the chamber work *Summer Shimmers*, these non-chord tones are found within the tonal center of the section and therefore "avoid obvious dissonance", while still adding interest by disguising the diatonic chords.<sup>55</sup> Similar devices occur in *Love Sweet* and are discussed in the following analysis.

### Lyrical and Motivic Trends

Previous studies of Higdon's music show that it is often either lyrically or motivically based.<sup>56</sup> Higdon's lyrically driven compositions have a strong emphasis on the direction of the melodic line, something she first learned from her flute studies.<sup>57</sup> Her melodic lines are often propelled forward by large ascending leaps, a trait that characterizes many of the melodies found in *Love Sweet*. She also frequently uses tritones

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<sup>53</sup> Broffitt, "The Music of Jennifer Higdon," 30.

<sup>54</sup> Reitz, "Comprehensive Analysis", 33.

<sup>55</sup> Broffitt, "The Music of Jennifer Higdon", 38.

<sup>56</sup> Broffitt, "The Music of Jennifer Higdon," 23.

<sup>57</sup> Slayton, *Women of Influence*, 144.

and seconds. Her melodies are characterized by the use of ties over bar lines, a device that creates rhythmic ambiguity. Additionally, Higdon often uses syncopation within melodic lines, which builds energy and increases the forward motion.<sup>58</sup> Both of these rhythmic characteristics can be found in the melodic lines of *Love Sweet*, particularly in the vocal lines.

Reitz describes Higdon's use of rhythmic and melodic motives in the statement "Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of her intuitive style is the subtle, yet consistent, appearance of unifying devices."<sup>59</sup> Broffitt explains that the use of these motives contributes to the form of the music; "Higdon's motivically driven compositions rely on short, energetic motives juxtaposed over others. The distinct motives provide diversity in the texture, creating motivic areas, and thus delineate the structural sections of the composition. The motives are short, [and] often rely on dissonant intervals (seconds, tritones)..."<sup>60</sup> Unifying rhythmic and melodic motives occur regularly in *Love Sweet*, both within single songs of the set and across the entire work. These motives are discussed further in the analysis of each song.

#### Use of Extended Techniques

Higdon often uses extended techniques in her music to achieve a broader range of timbres and colors. She attributes this tendency, in part, to her study with American composer George Crumb. In her orchestral piece, *blue cathedral*, she writes for water

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<sup>58</sup> Broffitt, "The Music of Jennifer Higdon", 47.

<sup>59</sup> Reitz, "Comprehensive Analysis", 32.

<sup>60</sup> Broffitt, "The Music of Jennifer Higdon", 23.

gong that is submerged in water and lifted out as the performer is playing a roll on it, a technique that she learned from Crumb. Another technique of his that she employs is dampening pitches on the piano, a technique in which the performer places his or her fingers on top of the piano string close to the dampers and then playing the corresponding piano key. The resulting sound adds a unique color to the soundscape of the piece. This technique is found in the chamber piece *running the edge*, as well as in *Love Sweet*.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



CHAPTER IV  
PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF *LOVE SWEET*

*Love Sweet* is comprised of five songs, each set to a different poem by Amy Lowell. The forms of the poems differ, but each is written in first person and directly addresses the Beloved. The poetry is evocative and full of rich sensory language that describes sights, tastes, sounds, and scents. Lowell's emphasis on natural, speech-like rhythms is apparent.

Higdon's settings of the poems are through composed. Each song can be described as sectional, like much of Higdon's music. In several of the songs Higdon uses the formal structure of the poem to determine the form of the song. Throughout the set she takes advantage of the speech-like rhythms of Lowell's texts, setting them according to the innate stress of the language. The vocal lines are driven by the text, which is primarily set syllabically, and stepwise motion is used frequently. Large intervallic leaps and short melismas are reserved for emphasizing important words or phrases.

Higdon explores a large palette of colors and timbres in the instrumental writing of *Love Sweet*, providing an intriguing soundscape of text painting to accompany the voice. She uses this range of colors to create distinct moods for each song, distilling each poem and producing a musical world that encapsulates it. Higdon achieves these unique soundscapes by employing techniques such as the dampened-piano string technique learned from Crumb, and artificial harmonics, pizzicati, and trills in the strings. A

number of the compositional techniques that previous authors have identified as being characteristic of Higdon's writing are also present in *Love Sweet*. These include an emphasis on perfect fifths, use of "textural variance",<sup>62</sup> diatonic triads moving by parallel motion, modulation by half-step, frequent use of melodic and rhythmic motives, an emphasis on lyrical melodic lines that include large ascending intervallic leaps to build energy, and the use of the extended technique mentioned above.

There is one specific recurring melodic motive that is present in all but one of the songs, and its inclusion connects the songs and provides cohesion to the set. It is a short tonal sequence that ascends by thirds (either major or minor) and descends by seconds (either major or minor). This pattern repeats two to four times and is labeled the *Love Sweet* motive for this discussion. It appears for the first time in m. 5 of the first song, "Apology" (Figure 1).

Figure 1. "Apology," mm. 4-5. *Love Sweet* motive.



Like much of Higdon's music, *Love Sweet* is devoid of key signatures, which allows the composer to shift tonal centers frequently. Higdon also uses a number of different scales and modes in the melodic lines of *Love Sweet*, including octatonic and minor scales, and Lydian, Dorian, and Mixolydian modes. For performers this scalar and

<sup>62</sup> Broffitt, "The Music of Jennifer Higdon, 81.

modal writing is useful in identifying the mood of each piece and in understanding the melodic lines. Despite this, Higdon states that she does not purposefully use particular scales or modes in her writing, citing instead the use of her characteristic “intuitive” compositional style. “I never think about what mode I am in. I couldn’t tell you specifically why I chose any of the modes. For me, the tonal language is just what seems logical for that particular poem at that particular point in time; it also sets the mood in a particular way. But all of these choices are made by ear.”<sup>63</sup>

### Apology

Be not angry with me that I bear  
Your colours everywhere,  
All through each crowded street,  
And meet  
The wonder-light in every eye,  
As I go by.

Each plodding wayfarer looks up to gaze,  
Blinded by rainbow haze,  
The stuff of happiness,  
No less,  
Which wraps me in its glad-hued folds  
Of peacock golds.

Before my feet the dusty, rough-paved way,  
Flushes beneath its gray.  
My steps fall ringed with light,  
So bright,  
It seems a myriad suns are strown  
About the town.

Around me is the sound of steepled bells,  
And rich perfumed smells  
Hang like a wind-forgotten cloud,  
And shroud

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<sup>63</sup> Jennifer Higdon, email message to author, October 24, 2016.

Me from close contact with the world.  
I dwell imperaled.

You blazen me with jewelled insignia.  
A flaming nebula  
Rims my life. And yet  
You set  
The word upon me, unconfessed  
To go unguessed.

“Apology” was published in Lowell’s 1914 volume of poetry *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. The poem is comprised of five six-line stanzas, each following the rhyme scheme AABBC. Unlike more traditional rhyme schemes, the rhyming lines have different meters and numbers of syllables. Lowell follows a larger metrical pattern across stanzas by giving the same number of syllables to corresponding lines in the different stanzas, thus creating her own formal structure. The first line of each stanza has eight or ten syllables, the second line has six, the third has five, six or eight, the fourth has two, the fifth has eight, and the sixth has four.

The poem captures the joy that surrounds someone newly in love. The speaker is looking at the world through rose-colored glasses, seeing the good in everyone and everything she passes. The title, “Apology”, is playful in nature as the speaker “apologizes” to her Beloved for wearing her heart on her sleeve. The language is full of colorful images that excite the senses as the speaker describes the brilliant sights, sounds, and smells that surround her. Light is a central image in the poem. The speaker finds light in the eyes of people going by, the rainbow and sun above her, and the “flaming nebula” that engulfs her as the new love she is experiencing seems to set her world on fire.

Higdon composes a luminous setting of “Apology” that captures the joy and light inherent in the poem. She brings the text to life through the use of speech-like text setting and text painting in the vocal line, and textural variance that creates a plethora of colors in the instrumental writing. She sets “Apology” in three distinct sections, giving it the form ABA'. Meter changes and textural variance are used to delineate these three sections. The A section comprises the first two stanzas of the poem, the B section comprises the third stanza and the first half of the fourth, and the A' section concludes the song with the second half of the fourth stanza and the entire fifth stanza. The A and A' sections are in compound meter (almost exclusively 12/8 except for one measure of 6/8), while the B section is in the simple meter of 4/4. These shifts from compound meter to simple and back again create distinct sections within the song that reflect the text.

The A section begins with an ostinato figure in the piano using the dampened-string technique (Figure 2). This ostinato consists of a continuously changing sequence of eighth and quarter notes on the pitches G3 and A3. The syncopated rhythmic patterns and percussive sounds create a dance-like effect that portrays the speaker walking light-heartedly down the street.

Figure 2. “Apology,” mm. 1-3. Piano ostinato motive.

\* Use tips of fingers to dampen strings (stopped sound), placing them on the strings close to the pins (between hammers and pins). The sound should be muffled, but pitch still clear.

The musical score is for a piano ostinato motive in 12/8 time. It consists of three measures. The right hand has whole rests. The left hand plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The first measure starts with a *mf* dynamic. The second measure has a *f* dynamic. The third measure has a *mp* dynamic. A horizontal line with an arrow points from the first measure to the second. Below the staff, the instruction "keep ped. depressed" is written with a line extending across the first two measures.

This ostinato continues throughout most of the A section and returns in a slightly altered form at the beginning of the A' section. A similar ostinato is found at times in the violin and cello parts using pizzicato notes (such as in mm. 8-9); however, these figures quickly change to incorporate more than two pitches. The repeated occurrences of this ostinato motive provide cohesion.

The text setting is almost exclusively syllabic. Higdon uses speech-like rhythms to convey the text and creates text painting in the vocal line using both melody and rhythm. One example of this is found in mm. 23-24 on the text “It seems a myriad suns are strown about the town” (Figure 3). An arching melodic line paints the motion described in the text while the rhythm supports and brings out the word stress of the language.

Figure 3. “Apology,” mm. 22-24.



Stepwise motion is common in the melodic lines, as are leaps by third. The *Love Sweet* motive appears for the first time in m. 5 (Figure 1) and occurs several other times in the vocal line, such as in mm. 21-22 and mm. 25-26. Short melismas highlight certain words such as “perfumed smells” in mm. 27-28. Large intervallic leaps also depict distinct words in the text, such as the upward leap of a tritone on the word “wind” in m. 29, which creates an unexpected twist in the vocal line that portrays the unpredictable nature of a gust of wind.

Along with the piano ostinato motive, Higdon uses other means of textural variance to define the sections of the piece. These changes in texture also provide vivid text painting. As previously mentioned, the violin and cello enter in m. 8 with dance-like pizzicato figures that match the percussive nature of the dampened-piano string sound. The violin and cello play pizzicato until m. 15 where the violin part calls for artificial harmonics to accentuate the text “peacock golds” by providing a shimmering color that depicts the evocative image. Throughout the B section the violin and cello alternate between short motives of eighth and sixteenth notes played pizzicato and more static figures made up of artificial harmonics. Each effect adds colorful, distinctive text painting as is found in mm. 26-27. Following the text “the sound of steeped bells” the violin and cello play artificial harmonics on alternate beats, giving the impression of bells

ringing brilliantly. The piano texture, meanwhile, changes from the dampened-string ostinato paired with the slow moving G Lydian scale of the A section, to running staccato sixteenth-note patterns of scales and arpeggios. This change gives the B section a brighter mood, depicting the light surrounding the speaker as she walks down the street.

The most striking occurrence of text painting transpires with a big shift in texture to accompany the text, “You blazen me with jeweled insignia. A flaming nebula rims my life” (Figure 4). In m. 35, the violin, cello, and piano each play long sweeping A Mixolydian scales, the violin ascending, the cello descending, and the piano descending and then ascending. The following two measures include artificial harmonics that outline an A major triad in the strings paired with block chords that move in parallel motion before arriving on an A major chord in the piano. The effect created is an effervescent soundscape bursting with the joy and light found in the poetry.



Figure 4. “Apology,” mm. 36-37. “Flaming nebula” text painting.

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system is the vocal line, starting at measure 36 with the lyrics "flam-ing neb-u-la rims my life." The melody is in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second system shows the piano accompaniment, with a treble clef part marked "non gliss." and "p" (piano), and a bass clef part also marked "p". The third system is the grand piano part, with a treble clef part marked "mf" (mezzo-forte) and a bass clef part. The piano part features a series of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand.

### The Giver of Stars

Hold your soul open for my welcoming.  
 Let the quiet of your spirit bathe me  
 With its clear and rippled coolness,  
 That, loose-limbed and weary, I find rest,  
 Outstretched upon your peace, as on a bed of ivory.

Let the flickering flame of your soul play about me,  
 That into my limbs may come the keenness of fire,  
 The life and joy of tongues of flame,  
 And, going out from you, tightly strung and in tune,  
 I may rouse the blear-eyed world,  
 And pour into it the beauty which you have begotten.

Like “Apology”, “The Giver of Stars” was also published in Lowell’s volume *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. It consists of two stanzas, the first of which has five lines and the second, six lines. It follows neither a particular rhyme scheme nor meter. Lowell uses alliteration several times to color the language, as in the phrases “flickering flames”, and “come the keenness”. In the first stanza, the speaker implores the Beloved to lay bare his or her soul. She wishes to find comfort and rest in the connection of their relationship. The language conjures images of peaceful serenity. In contrast, the second stanza has a greater sense of urgency and uses images that are full of motion. The speaker finds inspiration and joy in the soul of the Beloved and wishes to share this beauty with the world.

In “The Giver of Stars”, Higdon allows the form of the poem to dictate the formal structure of her composition as well as the nature of the musical material. The song consists of two sections, one for each stanza of the poem. Each section reflects the mood of the language found within the stanza. Higdon alters the instrumental texture, the tonal center, and the tessitura and contour of the vocal line to illustrate the differences between the first and second stanzas.

The instrumental writing in “The Giver of Stars” does not include the pizzicati, artificial harmonics, or dampening of piano strings found in the previous song. Rather, the violin and cello play *arco* and *con sordino* for the duration of the song, creating a muted, peaceful atmosphere. Textural variance is created through changes in rhythm instead of the use of extended techniques. These changes in texture occur mainly in the

piano and alternate between sections of block chords using eighth, quarter, and half notes, and motivic patterns that employ mostly sixteenth and thirty-second notes.

The song begins in a tonally ambiguous manner, with a unison melody in the strings that centers on A minor. It is accompanied by block chords in the right hand of the piano, which include Higdon's characteristic open fifths in the left hand. These chords do not settle into a specific key area until m. 5. At this point, the piano changes from block chords to a motivic figure of sixteenth and thirty-second notes that center around A minor, which remains the key area for the rest of the first section. The unison melody in the violin and cello begins with a three-note motive consisting of the pitches A-C-B (Figure 5). This figure is made up of an ascending minor third followed by a descending minor second and can be interpreted as the beginning of the *Love Sweet* motive.

Figure 5. “The Giver of Stars,” mm. 1-3. Unison melody in strings.

The musical score for measures 1-3 of "The Giver of Stars" is presented in three systems. The first system shows the violin and cello parts in unison, with a two-octave displacement. The violin part is marked *con. sord.* and *mf*, while the cello part is marked *mf*. The second system shows the piano accompaniment, with the right hand marked *mf* and the left hand marked *mp*. The third system shows the piano accompaniment in a different register, with the right hand marked *(norm.)* and *mf*, and the left hand marked *mp*. The score is in 3/4 time and features a unison melody in the strings and block chords in the piano.

The violin and cello play in unison (with a two-octave displacement) for four measures. This unison melody can be viewed as a representation of the two lovers traveling through life and, in combination with the block chords in the piano, creates a setting of tranquil intimacy for the first stanza of the poem. This melody returns in slightly altered forms at the beginning of the second section in m. 16 and once more in m. 26, providing a unifying motive for the song.

The second section begins with the same material in the piano as found in the first section and the unison melody in the strings. After four measures, however, the key area shifts to B minor as the piano resumes the motivic figure found in the first section. This unexpected tonal shift up one whole step in m. 20 sets the mood for the second section, producing a brighter sound to illustrate the lively images found in the second stanza of

the poem. B minor continues to be the tonal center until the return of the unison melody in m. 26, which is accompanied by a shift back to A minor. The section continues in A minor until m. 34 (the second to last measure of the song) where a Picardy third brings the tonal center to A major to end the song. By ending the song in a major tonality Higdon implies that the speaker has achieved her objective of sharing the love and beauty she receives from her Beloved with the world around her.

The vocal writing in “The Giver of Stars” is almost entirely syllabic and set to speech-like rhythms. Higdon adjusts her treatment of the vocal line from the first section to the second to reflect the differences between the two stanzas of the poem. The melodic lines in the first stanza are made up of primarily stepwise motion and small leaps of thirds and fourths. The one exception to this is in m. 13 for the line, “I find rest” (Figure 6). Higdon gives this line an angular setting that highlights its importance within the stanza.

Figure 6. “The Giver of Stars,” mm. 11-13. Vocal line.



The tessitura of the first section lies in the middle voice of the soprano, from E4 to D5. It does ascend to an F5 in the phrase in m. 14 to illustrate the word “outstretched”, but otherwise it remains primarily in the middle voice. The lack of large intervallic leaps and notes outside of the middle voice emphasize the peaceful nature of the stanza.

In contrast, the vocal writing in the second section accentuates the more energetic nature of the second stanza. While the vocal line does move by stepwise motion

frequently, it also includes leaps of fourths, fifths, and a dramatic leap up of a minor seventh. The tessitura is noticeably higher than the first section, lying between A4 to F#5, a part of the soprano’s voice that has more natural ring and projection. At the climax of the song, in mm. 24-27, the vocal line leaps up to A5 twice. This first occurs at the end of the phrase “the life and joy of tongues of flame,” with a leap from E5 to A5 on the final word. Higdon paints the image of fire in this text by building energy in this phrase, leaping higher and higher before arriving at the A5. She then continues the momentum in the following phrase of text, “and, going out from you tightly strung and in tune,” with another leap up to A5 in mm. 26-27, this time by the striking interval of a minor seventh on the word “and” (Figure 7).

Figure 7. “The Giver of Stars,” mm. 25-28. Vocal line.

25 *f*  
flame, \_\_\_\_\_ and, go - ing out from you, tight - ly strung and

27 *mp*  
\_\_\_\_\_ in tune, I may rouse the blear - eyed world, \_\_\_\_\_

### Absence

My cup is empty tonight,  
Cold and dry are its sides,  
Chilled by the wind from the open window.  
Empty and void, it sparkles white in the moonlight.  
The room is filled with a strange scent  
Of wisteria blossoms.  
They sway in the moon’s radiance

And tap against the wall.  
But the cup of my heart is still,  
And cold, and empty.

When you come, it brims  
Red and trembling with blood,  
Heart's blood for your drinking;  
To fill your mouth with love  
And the bitter-sweet taste of a soul.

Lacking in formal poetic structure, “Absence”, also published in Lowell’s volume *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, consists of two stanzas with contrasting subject matter. The first stanza is made up of ten lines and the second, five. The first stanza depicts the loneliness of solitude as a cold, austere world, lit by the white light from the moon. The speaker uses the bleak metaphor of an empty, dry cup to describe her heart. The second verse describes the change that occurs when the speaker’s lover arrives. The frigid, still scene is transformed as the cup representing her heart is filled with red blood. The image of blood represents the passion that fills the speaker whenever she is with her lover. Especially powerful is the sensual image of the lover drinking the blood from the cup and tasting the “bitter-sweet taste of a soul.” Lowell creates a dynamic contrast between the two stanzas, illustrating the strong feelings of loneliness and then ecstasy experienced by the speaker through the use of sensory language. She paints these differences by describing the scents, sounds, sights, and tastes experienced, creating an entire world within the poem.

Higdon illustrates the various contrasting images in the poetry through her treatment of the ensemble, which encompasses a wide range of musical colors. The vocal part contains almost all of the melodic material in this song, while the piano, violin, and

cello provide atmospheric sounds that support the text, including the dampened-piano string technique and trills in the strings. Higdon uses pitch, rhythm, and melodic contour to create vivid text painting in the voice. The vocal range employed is large, spanning two full octaves from B $\flat$ 3 to B $\flat$ 5. Through the use of expert text setting within this expansive range, Higdon is able to extract a number of colors from the soprano voice in order to best highlight the meaning of the text.

The song opens in 9/8 with a motive in the piano consisting of a repeating open fifth made up of the notes G3 and D4 that is played using the dampened-string technique (Figure 8). This motive consists of a combination of quarter and eighth notes that is altered slightly in each subsequent iteration. The time signature changes several times during mm. 2-9, modulating to 6/8 and 12/8 before finally settling in 6/8, however the use of compound meter is consistent. The effect produced by the ambiguous sound of the open fifth, the frequently-changing rhythmic pattern, and the percussive sound from the dampened-strings is one of anxious restlessness, reflecting the mood of the opening of the poem. The motive's rhythmic pattern in compound meter also suggests a pounding heartbeat whose pulse is constantly being disrupted by the overwhelming emotions experienced by the speaker. Dramatic crescendos from *piano* to *fortissimo* occur during each of the first three iterations of the pattern, articulating the growing intensity of the heartbeat as the speaker's anxiety increases. This G-D open fifth "heartbeat" motive occurs frequently throughout the piece, at times in an altered form in which the notes sound separately in alternating eighth notes, as in mm. 11-12. The repetition of the motive provides the piece with unity and a tonal center grounded in the note G.



Figure 8. “Absence,” mm. 1-3. “Heartbeat” motive in piano.



The vocal line enters in m. 10 with a melody that outlines a G minor tonality, establishing it as the tonal center. Until this point, the tonal center had remained ambiguous because of the open fifth motive; however, the minor tonality initiated by the vocal line echoes the loneliness of the text. The violin enters in m. 12 with a trill on B $\flat$ 3, further confirming the tonal center of G minor and enhancing the feeling of worry already created. In mm. 17-19 the *Love Sweet* motive is found within the G minor tonality on the words “the wind from open window.” This is the longest version of the motive found in the entire set, with four segments making up the sequence (Figure 9). Its placement in the third song, halfway through the set, underscores its importance as a unifying musical motive. Meanwhile, in m. 19 the violin plays a sweeping scalar figure up from D4 to C5, illustrating the chill from the wind found in the text. In mm. 20-21 Higdon uses pitch to highlight the text, venturing outside of the G minor tonal center on the word “void” (Figure 9). The vocal line rises from G5 to A $\flat$ 5, providing an unexpected twist in the melody that strengthens this evocative word.

Figure 9. "Absence," mm. 17-20. Text painting in vocal line.

17 *mp* *mf* *f* *mf sub.*

chilled by the wind from o-pen win - dow. Emp-ty and void, \_\_\_\_\_

In the next measure Higdon uses rhythm in addition to pitch to highlight an important word. She sets the words “It sparkles” syllabically and high in the soprano range on the notes A<sup>b</sup>5-G5-F5, with rhythmic values of eighth note-eighth note-quarter note. The instrumental parts are tacit here, leaving the voice completely unaccompanied. This texture change in combination with the high tessitura and rhythmic setting depicts the meaning of the text by giving it a twinkling quality.

Figure 10. “Absence,” mm. 22-24. Text painting in vocal line.

The image shows a musical score for three staves: vocal, piano, and bass. The vocal line is in treble clef and contains the lyrics "it spar-kles white in the moon-light." The dynamics are marked *mf* and *mp*. The piano accompaniment is in treble and bass clefs. In measure 28, there is a hemiola in the piano part, and a semitone interval is indicated by a plus sign and an arrow. The piano part also has dynamic markings *mf* and *mp*. The bass part has a dynamic marking *mf*. The score is numbered 22 at the beginning of each system.

In m. 28, rhythmic setting is used once again to emphasize the text, as the words “strange scent” are set on a hemiola. The pitch on the word “strange” descends from B $\flat$ 4 down to A4, further portraying its meaning through the use of the uneasy-sounding interval of a semitone (Figure 11).

Higdon also uses melodic contour to paint the text. In mm. 32-33 she sets “sway” on the notes F5-E $\flat$ 5-B $\flat$ 5, giving it a sweeping gesture that captures the motion of the wisteria blossoms swaying in the moonlight (Figure 11). Additionally, the high tessitura of the line adds intensity to the sound as it lies in a striking part of the soprano voice.

Figure 11. "Absence," mm. 28-32. Vocal line.

This line of text ends with the speaker describing the tapping of the blossoms against the wall. In this instance Higdon portrays the text with an explosion of melodic activity in the instrumental writing. Beginning in m. 35 the piano has a series of descending eighth-note figures, mostly by intervallic leaps of fourths, fifths, and sixths. This is joined in m. 36 by a melodic figure in the violin that is made up of a descending sequence of sixteenth notes, and then by the cello in m. 38, at which point both string instruments play descending scalar lines. This frenzy of melodic activity depicts the tapping of the blossoms and stands out as the one point in the song when the instruments rather than the voice have the melodic material.

The activity comes to a sudden halt on the downbeat of m. 39 when the piano, violin, and cello arrive at a jarring chord consisting of F, E $\flat$ , and A that is held into m. 42. This harsh-sounding chord includes the intervals of a minor seventh and a tritone, providing a troubled-sounding atmosphere into which the voice enters with the final line of the first stanza of the poem, "But the cup of my heart is still, and old and empty." The *Love Sweet* motive is found once again in the vocal line on the words "my heart is still," as the speaker reflects on the state of her "still" heart. The lack of the "heartbeat" motive in the is conspicuous and reflects this text.

The following measure brings a distinct change in character, marking the transition to the second stanza of the poem, in which the long-awaited Beloved arrives. In mm. 43-44 the dampened-piano string “heartbeat” motive returns; however, it is altered to use only the note D4, which is also the note found in the vocal line. This modified motive represents the speaker’s pulse as her heart begins to pound in anticipation of her Beloved’s entrance. The violin and cello join, playing the same note pizzicato in m. 43 before moving in contrary motion away from D4, the violin ascending and the cello descending. This temporary tonal center of D and the color change created by the pizzicato articulation in the strings create a tangible shift toward a feeling of expectancy as the second stanza of the poem begins.

When the vocal line enters in m. 45 the first three words, “When you come” are given a syncopated rhythm that echoes the impatience and excitement felt by the speaker. This line ascends and crescendos, rising to the pitch A5 on the word “blood” in m. 49. The phrase is accompanied by *forte* double stops in the strings and the “heartbeat” motive, to which the note G3 has returned. This additional instrumental activity adds intensity to the line of text “it brims red and trembling with blood.” On the downbeat of m. 50 the instrumental motion ceases except for a *fortissimo* open fifth in the low register of the piano. The use of this open fifth in such a low register creates an enigmatic effect that reflects the startling subject matter. Over this chord the soprano sings the rather shocking line of text “heart’s blood for your drinking”. Higdon emphasizes this important line by composing a melody that descends an octave and a half. Additionally, she uses text painting to illustrate the word “drinking” by composing a syncopated descending line

that elucidates the action of swallowing (Figure 13). The cessation of activity in the instrumental writing combined with this dramatic change in tessitura in the voice and the depth of the piano sound creates a powerful depiction of Lowell's text.

Figure 12. "Absence," mm. 46-50.

The musical score for "Absence," mm. 46-50, consists of three systems. The first system shows the vocal line starting at measure 46 with the lyrics "you come it— brims red and trem-bling with blood, heart's blood for your". The piano accompaniment is in the second system, with the right hand starting at measure 46 and the left hand at measure 47. The piano part features dynamic markings of *f* and *ff*, and includes the instruction "arco" above the right hand. The piano part concludes at measure 50 with a *mf* dynamic marking and a fermata over the final chord.

Figure 13. "Absence." mm. 51-53. Text painting in vocal line.

The musical score for measures 51-53 of "Absence" features a vocal line and instrumental accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the word "drink" followed by a long dash, and then "ing;" with another long dash, indicating a sustained note. The instrumental parts include piano and cello/bass lines. Dynamics include *>f*, *p*, and *pp*.

In m. 53 Higdon returns to the musical texture she used at the beginning of the first stanza, which includes the original “heartbeat” motive, trills in the violin, and double stops in the low range of the cello. By returning to this material, she signals that the song is coming to a close and returns to the feeling of restlessness that was palpable in the opening. She sets the last line of text “and the bittersweet taste of a soul,” in a descending line that reaches down into the low range of the soprano voice. By ending the vocal line on the note B $\flat$ 3, the lowest note sung by the soprano in the set, she gives the word “soul” a depth and profundity that compliments its meaning. In m. 59 the instrumental motion ceases as the strings have a whole rest, and the open fifth in the piano is carried over from

the previous measure with the pedal. Over this cessation of activity the soprano sings the words, “of a”. This texture change creates a moment of suspense that sets up the arrival of the powerful word “soul” on the downbeat of the following measure. Higdon also gradually slows the rhythmic motion of this line for these final three words, drawing them out by setting them on dotted half and dotted whole notes. In doing so she creates a mysterious color for the end of the song that matches the nature of Lowell’s poem.

### **A Gift**

See! I give myself to you, Beloved!  
My words are little jars  
For you to take and put upon a shelf.  
Their shapes quaint and beautiful,  
And they have many pleasant colours and lusters  
To recommend them.  
Also the scent from them fills the room  
With sweetness of flowers and crushed grasses.

When I shall have given you the last one,  
You will have the whole of me,  
But I shall be dead.

“A Gift” is comprised of two stanzas of unequal length and like many of Lowell’s poems it lacks formal meter and structure. It was published in the volume *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. In this poem the speaker likens the words spoken to her Beloved to “little jars”, giving them a tangible quality. She describes the shapes, colors, lusters, and scents of the jars in vivid detail and asks her Beloved to collect and keep them in a safe place. By describing the sights and scents of the jars Lowell is creating an interesting metaphor for the speaker’s words. Words are not usually described as having visual qualities or scents and by ascribing them these traits Lowell generates palpable imagery.



The speaker is consumed by such deep all-encompassing love that she desires to give everything she has to her Beloved. The poem is imbued with a sense of intimacy, however Lowell ends the poem with an underlying impression of uncertainty. The speaker worries that once she has given all she has to her Beloved she will lose herself.

Higdon's setting of "A Gift" captures the love and warmth inherent in Lowell's language as well as the slight trepidation the speaker is experiencing at giving herself away. She chooses the stately tempo of quarter note = 42 and begins the song in 4/4. The time signature modulates a number of times to 2/4, 5/4, and 3/4 to accommodate the melodic material but never leaves simple meter. Like the second song of the set, "The Giver of Stars," the piano, violin, and cello do not employ any extended techniques. The lack of these percussive sounds in the instrumental writing contributes to the tender sound present throughout the song and provides a sharp contrast to the striking soundscape of "Absence" heard immediately before. The frequent use of block chords in the piano creates a rich, heartfelt sound and is reminiscent of the steadfast quality of a hymn. The strings are given many lyrical melodies that seem to comment on the text. The vocal part uses a considerably smaller range than the other songs in the set, extending only slightly more than one octave, from D4 to E $\flat$ 5, giving a simple, straightforward delivery to the text that mirrors its direct language. The tessitura lies mainly in the middle voice, a vocal register that tends to have a warmer quality than the upper range for many sopranos.

The form of this musical setting of "A Gift" does not adhere to the formal structure of the poem. Rather than using the two stanzas as a basis for form, Higdon

creates two sections within the song, the first of which encompasses the first six lines of text and the second, the final five lines. The first section begins with a five measure instrumental introduction that creates the atmosphere of tenderness into which the voice enters in m. 6. The song begins with a C major chord in the piano part that includes an open fifth of C-G in the bass. This open fifth in the left hand of the piano begins a chromatic ascent in parallel motion on beat three and continues to move in a similar fashion through most of the song. The use of parallel fifths generates a wandering effect that disorients the ear, allowing Higdon to travel to surprising harmonies not usually found within the C major key area. The top voice in the right hand of the piano plays a melodic line that begins on G4 and descends chromatically, moving in contrary motion with the bass line. Together these outer voices create a twisting, chromatic sonority that contributes to harmonic ambiguity throughout the song (Figure 14).

Figure 14. "A Gift," mm. 1-2.



Despite this harmonic ambiguity, the tonal center of C major persists for much of the first section. The melody in the vocal line is primary to establishing this key area, returning again and again to the pitch C5. This section ends in m. 12 with an arrival on a

chord that has an open fifth of G-D in the bass of the piano. Although this is not a traditional G major chord as it lacks a third, it can be heard as an arrival on the dominant of the C major tonal center. After two measures of transitional material, the second section begins in m. 15 with a repetition of the material from the beginning of the song in the piano. The bass line begins its chromatic wandering once again and in m. 18 it ascends by whole tone scale, adding to the roaming feeling. This whole tone scale occurs as the text “you will have the whole of me” is sung, providing an intriguing connection between the text and music. In m. 20 the tonal center begins to shift to B $\flat$  minor, remaining there as the song comes to an end in m. 23. This modulation of sorts from C major to B $\flat$  minor reflects the respective moods of devotion followed by apprehension that the speaker expresses.

Higdon’s text setting in “A Gift” is exclusively syllabic and overtly driven by the speech rhythms of the poem, even more so than the others in the set, and contains no melismas at all. The vocal line is composed using very specific rhythmic values that convey the rhythm of the language. One example of this can be seen in her setting of the text “and they have many pleasant colours and lustres to recommend them” in mm. 11-12 (Figure 15). She sets “many pleasant” on a combination of thirty-second and dotted sixteenth notes, which underscores the rhythmic pattern of the English language. Likewise, the rhythmic values she gives to the words “to recommend them” emphasize the stressed syllable of the important verb “recommend”. This careful rhythmic setting lends a natural quality to the line that facilitates comprehension of the text.

Figure 15. “The Gift,” mm. 10-12. Speech-like text setting.

10

*mp*

3

shapes are quaint \_\_\_\_\_ and beau-ti-ful, \_\_\_\_\_ and they have man-y pleas-ant

12

col - ours \_\_\_\_\_ and lus - tres \_\_\_\_\_ to rec-om - mend them. \_\_\_\_\_

Stepwise motion is favored in the vocal line and there are very few intervallic leaps greater than a major third. The interval of a tritone is the largest interval found in the vocal line and is used three times to color special moments in the text. The first such occurrence is in m.7 on the word “Beloved” (Figure 16). This ascending tritone from A $\flat$ 4 to D5 is unexpected because it is the largest interval found so far in the vocal line. The striking nature of this dissonant interval gives the word a distinctive character and creates an aural representation of the exclamation mark that follows the word. The second instance of a tritone is in m. 10 on the word “beautiful” (Figure 15). The expansive quality of this descending tritone sets the word apart in the phrase, especially as it is set in contrast to the use of a semitone (the smallest possible interval) on the word “quaint” earlier in the measure. The final tritone in the vocal line occurs in m. 17 on the words “last one” (Figure 17). This is a crucial moment in the text because it is the point at which the speaker’s mood shifts from adoration to foreboding. Higdon emphasizes the importance of this shift with the descending tritone from D5 to A $\flat$ 4. Interestingly, this is

the inverse of the first tritone that was found in m. 7, perhaps suggesting the shift in mental state that occurs in the speaker's mind throughout the song.

Figure 16. "A Gift," mm. 6-7. First tritone in vocal line on "Beloved".



Figure 17. "A Gift," mm. 16-17. Third tritone in vocal line on "last one", inverse of first tritone.



In contrast to the limited scope of the melodic material in the vocal line, the violin and cello writing in "A Gift" is full of expansive melodies that encompass large ranges on the instruments. Their melodic lines often play off of each other, echoing melodic or rhythmic material, as in mm. 10-11 (Figure 18).

Figure 18. “A Gift,” mm. 10-11. Echoing figures in violin and cello lines.



At other times, their melodies have interlocking rhythms in which the two lines do not move at the same time but rather trade off moving to new pitches, as in mm. 4-6 (Figure 19). This interplay of the melodic material of the violin and cello can be interpreted as representing the relationship between the speaker and her Beloved, akin to the unison violin and cello duet in the previous song, “The Giver of Stars”. In this song, however, the melodies are not in unison but, rather, interact with each other as do two people in a romantic relationship.

Figure 19. “A Gift,” mm. 4-5. Interplay of melodic material between violin and cello.



### A Fixed Idea

What torture lurks within a single thought  
 When grown too constant; and however kind,  
 However welcome still, the weary mind  
 Aches with its presence. Dull remembrance taught

Remembers on unceasingly; unsought  
The old delight is with us but to find  
That all recurring joy is pain refined,  
Become a habit, and we struggle, caught.  
You lie upon my heart as on a nest,  
Folded in peace, for you can never know  
How crushed I am with having you at rest  
Heavy on my life. I love you so  
You bind my freedom from its rightful quest.  
In mercy lift your drooping wings and go.

Higdon chooses to close *Love Sweet* with a setting of “A Fixed Idea” (1910), which was the first poem published by Amy Lowell.<sup>64</sup> The poet employs the formal structure of a sonnet, a 14-line poem that can follow several different rhyme schemes and is made up of an octave (the first eight lines) and a sestet (the last six lines). This sonnet is a Petrarchan sonnet, meaning the octave follows the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA and the sestet follows the rhyme scheme CDCDCD.

The speaker of “A Fixed Idea” is left distraught by the death of her Beloved. She is tortured by constant memories of the joy they shared together and the incessant reminder that those happier times have ceased. The speaker is weighed down by this unending grief and implores her deceased lover to grant her reprieve from the intense suffering.

Higdon composes a powerful musical setting of this poem, concluding the chamber work in a memorable way as the narrative arch of the romantic relationship outlined in the piece comes to a finish with the death of the Beloved. She expresses the meaning of the text by creating an aural representation of the despair felt by the speaker.

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<sup>64</sup> Benvenuto, *Amy Lowell*, 9.

Higdon utilizes a wide range of colors to produce text painting in the piano, violin, and cello, and her compelling vocal lines reflect Lowell’s evocative language. As in previous songs in *Love Sweet*, form is constructed through the use of repeated motives (including the Love Sweet motive) that create cohesion. Musical colors and text painting are achieved through the use of the dampened-piano string technique, duet writing in the strings, the repetition of musical motives, and frequent key area shifts.

“A Fixed Idea” begins with four measures of the pitch C2 played repeatedly using the dampened-piano string technique (Figure 20). A *messa di voce* over the four bars and several accents in m. 2 add an air of mystery to the eerie sound created by the extended technique. The repetition of the pitch on a steady eighth note pulse represents the speaker’s fixation on the death of her Beloved as well as the anxiety and pain it causes her. This motive invokes the sort of throbbing misery a lover feels when there is no end in sight to deep-seated heartbreak.

Figure 20. “A Fixed Idea,” mm. 1-4. Dampened piano string motive.







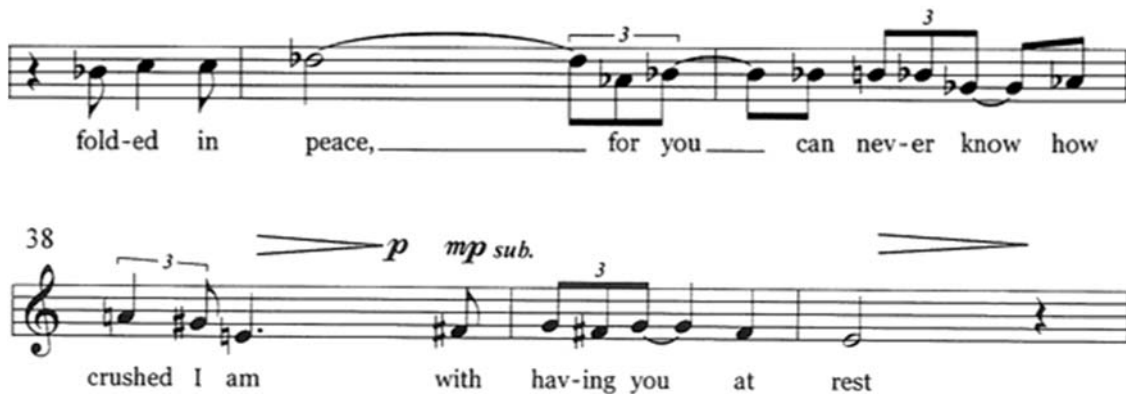


Figure 23. “A Fixed Idea,” mm. 14-16. Text painting in vocal line.



The vocal line often includes unexpected chromatic notes as well to color the text, as in mm. 27-28 on the words “all recurring joy is pain refined.” The words “joy is” are set to notes found in the key area of C major, but the vocal line then reaches chromatically to A $\flat$ 5, unexpectedly twisting the “joy” into “pain”. In mm. 36-40 Higdon weaves a chromatic line of music for the text “folded in peace, for you can never know how crushed I am with having you at rest” (Figure 24). The unexpected half steps give a heart-wrenching quality to the melody, illustrating the crushed spirit of the speaker as she struggles to cope with the loss of her Beloved. The wandering quality and descending range of these lines depict the disoriented nature of the speaker as she attempts to move through the world without the support of her lover.

Figure 24. “A Fixed Idea,” mm. 35-40. Wandering vocal line.



The writing for the strings includes periods of repetitive rhythmic motives and sudden outbursts of sweeping melodies, both of which provide vibrant text painting. On the upbeat to m. 17, immediately following the vocal line of text “aches with its presence” in m. 16 mentioned above, the strings erupt into a unison melody (Figure 25). This is the first instance of melodic material in the strings during this song and it begins in the high range of each instrument, as if echoing the wail the soprano just emitted on the word “ache”. The unison melody quickly breaks away into dissonance in m. 18 as the violin descends further and the cello ascends, representing the separation of the lovers and the different paths they have taken. In m. 19 the violin begins a motive consisting of a repeated A3 played with varying rhythmic patterns made up of eighth and sixteenth notes. This motive lasts for six measures, aurally representing the line “Dull remembrance taught remembers on unceasingly” that is sung above it.

Figure 25. “A Fixed Idea,” mm. 17-19. Violin/cello melody and violin repeated motive.



A similar motive appears at other points in the violin part, most notably in mm. 50-57. In this instance the violin plays an A $\flat$ 3 using a syncopated rhythmic pattern that symbolizes the unrelenting nature of the grief experienced by the speaker. Also noteworthy is the

outpouring of passionate melodic material produced by the violin and cello in mm. 42-45 to underscore the text “I love you so.”

Higdon’s setting of “A Fixed Idea” is an emotionally charged song that brings to life the anguish of a lover in mourning. It closes with a final heart-breaking plea to the Beloved. Beginning in m. 51 the cello plays two drawn-out, descending melodic lines that depict the weight of the final line of text sung by the soprano, “In mercy lift your drooping wings and go.” The line begins in the middle voice and then concludes with a leap down into the low range of the voice, from F4 to C4, in m. 56 (Figure 26). At this point the repeated violin motive mentioned above ceases. This final descending leap and the halting of the violin motion produce a quality of desperation and hopelessness to bring the set to a close. The journey of love that the speaker has taken over the span of *Love Sweet* is completed and she is left alone with her grief.

Figure 26. "A Fixed Idea," mm. 56-60.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef, starting at measure 56 with a dynamic marking of *p*. The vocal line features a long note in the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes and quarter notes, with a fermata over the final note. The middle staff is a piano accompaniment in treble clef, featuring a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, and a bass line with quarter notes. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef, featuring a bass line with quarter notes and a dynamic marking of *pp*. A dashed line labeled *(8<sup>th</sup>)* is positioned below the bottom staff. The score concludes with a double bar line.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Jennifer Higdon constructs a compelling musical journey through the span of a romantic relationship in her chamber work for soprano, violin, cello, and piano, *Love Sweet*. The composer sets out to “trace a love relationship through various stages,”<sup>65</sup> and in doing so she creates a narrative that provides an intriguing account of an expansive amorous entanglement. Within her choice of five poems by American Imagist poet Amy Lowell there are moments of joy, passion, excitement, vulnerability, loss, and despair.

The work begins with “Apology”, wherein the lovers experience the thrill of new love. The couple then grows closer during “The Giver of Stars”, finding inspiration within their deepening bond, and the desire to share the beauty of their love with the world. This bond is tested in “Absence” as the lovers experience the loneliness of separation. “A Gift” explores the complicated feelings of intimacy that arise as the lovers devote themselves to each other completely. Finally, the set closes with the devastating loss of the Beloved in “A Fixed Idea.” The set should always be performed as a whole in order to preserve the integrity of this narrative.

The impetus for the creation of this document was to provide information and insight into the ways in which Higdon successfully sets these five poems. The performance analysis is intended to contribute to the understanding of this chamber

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<sup>65</sup> Jennifer Higdon, email message to author, October 24, 2016.

work in order to enhance future performances. Through the careful study and understanding of Lowell's poetry and Higdon's musical setting, a more informed and ultimately artistic performance can occur.

The five songs of *Love Sweet* are musically connected by a number of Higdon's identifiable compositional techniques and come together to form a poignant work. Each song is crafted to capture the mood of the respective poem, communicating its essence through the evocative vocal and instrumental writing. Higdon's text setting promotes comprehension of the language through the use of speech-like rhythms and employs effective text painting at times. Textural variance creates distinct sections within the music that aid in communicating the shifts in character found in each poem and in creating formal structure. Melodic and rhythmic motives are also used in creating form. Additionally, this motivic writing provides cohesion within each song as well as descriptive text painting. The composer explores the full palate of musical colors available to the four performers in order to thoroughly portray the emotional range of the text through the use of extended techniques in the instrumental writing and a large range in the vocal writing.

*Love Sweet* is a valuable, thought-provoking addition to the soprano chamber music repertoire due to Higdon's expert treatment of Lowell's vibrant poetry and her illustration of this language through the creation of captivating soundscapes. The composer achieves her goal of creating an intriguing narrative by weaving together this progression of five poems by Amy Lowell, exploring many of the dimensions of a romantic relationship in her musical setting.



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APPENDIX A

PERMISSION OF USE OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

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Gmail - PDF score of Love Sweet



Evangelia Sophia Leontis <eleontis@gmail.com>

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**PDF score of Love Sweet**

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Evan,  
Please allow this email to serve as formal permission to use the listed sections in your dissertation.

Good luck!

Regards,  
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[Quoted text hidden]

MUSICAL EXAMPLES FROM *LOVE SWEET*

“Apology”:

Measures 1-3

Measure 5

Measures 22-24

Measures 36-37

“The Giver of Stars”:

Measures 1-3

Measures 11-13

Measures 25-28

“Absence”:

Measures 1-3

Measures 17-20

Measures 22-24

Measures 28-32

Measures 46-50

Measures 51-53

“A Gift”:

Measures 1-2

Measures 4-7

Measures 10-12

Measures 16-17

“A Fixed Idea”

Measures 1-4

Measures 8-9

Measures 14-19

Measures 21-23

Measures 35-40

Measures 56-60