

Tres Canciones Españolas

I have always found the task of selecting a text to set to music to be one of the most difficult. Therefore, I was quite relieved when Ms. Hersh contacted me with a new project in mind, and provided me with Mr. Oses' *Balada*, a poem she recently heard recited for a faculty showcase at Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, where they both currently teach. As I studied the poem it became clear to me that a traditional setting would never do justice to the poetic content, and so I began searching for the appropriate musical language and form to best suit the material. Some years ago I fell under the spell of *Erwartung*, Arnold Schoenberg's monodrama, and in preparation for composing *Balada* I retrieved my score from the shelf and began to study it once again. I soon realized that the expressive language of *Balada* mirrored the interior monologue found in *Erwartung*, and from that example I felt it necessary to exaggerate the paratactic syntax of the poem and to allow it to dictate both (musical) form and language of the setting.

Balada contains three highly expressive musical gestures: a bent note motif, the quotation of the chant tune *Dies Irea*, and the vocal technique called *sprechstimme*, a half spoken, half sung delivery used for expressionistic purposes. The bent note motif is derived from the first two lines that depict weeping clouds: "En la casa que duerme hay nubes desnudas, azules, llorando", and symbolic of how we all become 'bent' in the process of living, loving, and losing. In the fourth stanza the phrase: "de tierra sagrada, seca" (dry, sacred ground) is used to complete the imagery. The vocalist is directed to 'speak' the words, almost in a whisper. Shortly after the phrase is delivered the guitarist plays the incipit to *Dies Irea*, the ancient chant tune used to intone the requiem mass. *Balada* remains a cryptic poem, but at its core is biography.

Canción Felina continues along biographical lines, serving as a poetic depiction of the poet's grandmother and her sister. The setting is capricious, reflecting the temperaments of the characters portrayed. The vocal line lilts above the perpetual motion of the guitar accompaniment creating a whimsical effect.

The song cycle ends with a poem about transformation: *La Mariposa*. The song opens with harmonics on the guitar which function not as 'true' notes, but rather as echoes of notes once sounded, acoustic memories of forgotten tunes. The opening words: "Algo a pasado o ya pasó;" (Something has happened or has passed) suggest both a present and a past, an impressionistic conflation of time. Butterflies are the symbols of metamorphosis. The word is set to a rising melodic line, "following the light" (persiguiendo la luz). The song ends ambivalently, not unlike that continual, inevitable process of change we resist and embrace—often at the same time.

Thomas Schuttenhelm © 2008