PLAYING HAYDN FOR THE ANGEL OF DEATH

SONG CYCLE FOR BASS/BARITONE AND PIANO

POETRY BY BILL HOLM

MARTHA HELEN SCHMIDT



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Verse 1 to be read aloud while Bill Holm's piano composition, *The Bug Listens to Slow Sad Birdsongs in the Autumn Maple* from the *Boxelder Bug Variations* is played.

The piano tells things to your hands you never let yourself hear from others: Calm down, do your work, laugh, love reason more, your mask less. God exists, though not as church said. To understand this language, you must sometimes patiently play the same piece over and over for years, then when you expect nothing, the music lets go its wisdom.

Play Haydn. First, when I was young, he seemed simple, even simpleminded; too easy, too thin, too cheerful, gaiety and dancing in a powdered wig; no hammer blows at unjust fate, no typhoons of passion dropping tears, only laughter, order, invention, the simple pleasure of ingenuity, of making something from next to nothing.

3 All the geniuses have their own feel inside the fingers. Mozart steps to center stage, takes a long breath, then sings his aria, but Haydn is skinny under the hands; all the fat lives in the spaces between the lines.

But O, the mystery of Haydn is the great reason for not dying young, for living through rage and ambition without quite forgetting their pleasures. Suicide, craziness, the bottle, warall rob you of what is inside Haydn. Take this advice: toughen up and live.

5
My death sits in a straight-back chair under a lilac bush in the garden behind my house, reading my old letters, waiting. He is in no hurry to come knock on the back door, he has no intention of going elsewhere, just wants to make sure I notice him, every day, alert in his straight-back chair.

Open the windows. Go to the piano. Play a Haydn sonata for him. Begin with an easy, simpleminded one: Allegretto Innocente, just a tune and a few variations, all in G, the key of lessons for little fingers. Haydn stays in it endlessly to see what can be said with almost nothing. Thirty years ago, I thought this a trifle; now here I am playing it for Death sitting in a straight-back chair.

7
You think he wanted Wagner maybe?
Or Schoenberg? Some dark, thick Brahms?
What kind of idiot do you think Death?
If he can't hear what's inside Haydn,
how will he manage to throttle your heart?
That takes power, craftiness, patience.

Years ago, I wrote about Bach:
"Whoever loves G major loves God."
Truer than I knew, but I didn't say
quite enough: G major is one
of God's eyes through which he watches
hair go gray, or an ear that hears
the cracks in your own singing.
Remember, God and you have two of each
that watch and listen in two directions.

Has the angel heard enough G now?
G sings to life only half the earth
or half the truth. Go as far
away from G major as can be gone;
C# minor, the shadow, the nether tone,
but neither Ludwig's moonlight horsefeathers
nor Rachmaninov's gloomy thumping.
Too many wet sleeves and drooping heads.

Play Haydn where two gods have a civil talk while they put the world together. Haydn gives you two of everything: two hands, two staves, two keys, two tunes, two answers to all your questions. What sits in the garden knows this.

11

For God is the imagination. God made you up entirely, and you have returned him the favor. God imagined G major, C# minor. Now, like Haydn, go and do likewise. Make a surprise that stays a surprise to please the ears and spirit of the one who sits alert in the straight-back chair under the lilac bush in the garden.

12

Having put the halves of the universe back in order, it's time to dance-a minuet, old-fashioned, but a dance is a dance after all. You used to do the minuet yourself, didn't you, a few hundred years ago? Remember the steps? Here's a good one: *Minuetto Giacoso in C.* You'll like the tune. Careful on the upbeat. Put a lilac in your buttonhole.

19

When Haydn's own angel of death came calling in Vienna, he found the old man with worn-out wits, almost ready to answer the door. But Death listened: Then Haydn played, slowly, Gott! Erhalte Franz den Kaiser.

**(Unsern Guten Kaiser Franz.)
His wet, rheumy eyes glistened.
"I must play this song every day.
I feel well while I'm playing it, and for a while afterward, too."

14

The world, though shriveled, remained in order, so Death stayed away for years, sat on his street-corner stool and listened. Even Haydn could do no better than playing Haydn to keep his guest amused.

15

As music drifts out the open windows, Death is dancing around his straight-back chair under the lilac bush in the garden, trying to make the left foot move in time. Soon he will be tired out but happy; he will nap a while and stay away.

That's the idea. I got it from Haydn.

Bill Holm

1943 - 2009

Epilogue: Last movement can be added to the end of the song cycle or omitted.

Letting Go of What Cannot be Held Back (known as Epilogue in the cycle)

Let go of the dead now.
The rope in the water,
the cleat on the cliff,
do them no good anymore.
Let them fall, sink, go away,
become invisible as they tried
so hard to do in their own dying.
We needed to bother them
with what we called help.

We were the needy ones. The dying do their own work with tidiness, just the right speed, sometimes even a little satisfaction. So quiet down. Let them go. Practice your own song. Now.

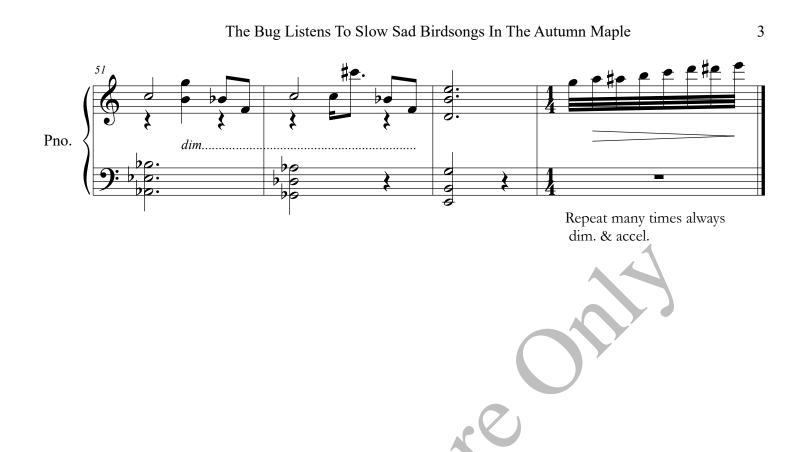
Bill Holm

^{**}Line added to original poem for musical purposes. Permission given to include in this song cycle.

The Bug Listens To Slow Sad Birdsongs In The Autumn Maple From the Boxelder Bug Variations









^{*} Sonata in D Major, 3rd movement, HOB. XVI: 19, Haydn



To see full score, please purchase.



^{**} Singer continues to take big exaggerated breaths while pianist keeps shaking his/her head indicating it's not time to sing yet. Finally at the end of the trill the exasperated pianist has to visually cue the singer that it is now time to sing.



^{*} Deh, vieni alla finestra fr. Don Giovanni - Mozart

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^{*} Pedal every two beats and as indicated.



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^{*} Pedal on all downbeats and as indicated.

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^{*} Prelude to Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg - Wagner

^{**} Mondestrunken from Pierrot Lunaire - Schoenberg







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^{*} Sonata in G minor, 2nd movement, Hob XVI: 44, Hadyn



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^{*} Sonata Op. 27, No. 2, Moonlight, Beethoven

^{**} Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini, Rachmaninoff





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Performance notes for verse 11

Ornaments



Suggestions for trills starting in m. 9 Haydn piano sonata 46, 2nd movement

Dejan Romih on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1p7YJDkX12M

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjQrMmBGm-E

Mordents and trills should be delicate like twinkling stars. All trills start on the given note unless they have an * in which case they start on the note from above. All mordents start on the note from above.

Playing Hadyn for the Angel of Death



an * then start on the note from above.



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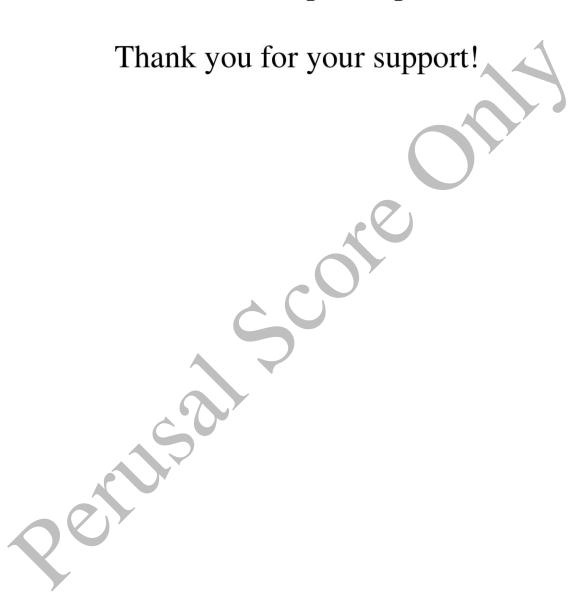




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Verse 14



^{*} Sonata in E Major, 2nd movement, Hob. XVI: 31, Haydn



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^{*} Trills start on given note to a half step above.



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Epilogue

Letting Go of What Cannot be Held Back



^{*} Sonata in Ab Major, 2nd movement, Hob. XVI: 46, Haydn



^{**} All trills start on given note.

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