

## About *Memory Now I Can't Recall*

Ten years ago, I had concocted a quixotic scheme to mark the 50th anniversary of Dylan Thomas's notorious last night of drinking at the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village (November 4, 1954) where, according to most but not all accounts he boasted just before he left, "Seventeen whiskeys, a record I think" – some folks claimed he said eighteen, others sixteen, a few nineteen. I set five of his poems to music – one with seventeen beats per measure, others with sixteen, eighteen, nineteen, and the last with twenty, for the whiskey he never had. I scored it for two singers (male and female) and a consort of early music instruments since Thomas's poetry has always struck me as somewhat antiquated and, as I kept digging into the story, I learned that one of his drinking buddies in New York City was Noah Greenberg whom just two years earlier (in 1952) had founded the Pro Musica Antiqua (later the New York Pro Musica), one of the first American ensembles dedicated to the performance of medieval and renaissance music. I attempted to arrange a performance of this song cycle, which I called *as long as forever is*, in what is now called the Dylan Thomas Room at the White Horse on November 4, 2004 at 2:00 A.M., which is allegedly when he left there and wandered into the Manhattan night, never to return. (The whiskey misadventure led to his death a few days later.) But the staff at the bar thought I was out of my mind (as if any other state would have been appropriate) and my conversations with them led to naught.

About a month after that failed anniversary tribute, Gilda Lyons and her husband Daron Hagen were visiting my wife Trudy Chan and I at our home for dinner and we told them the whole story. Intrigued, they said they would find a way to make a performance of the piece happen later in the season as part of a concert series that Gilda had just launched called The Phoenix Concerts. Undeterred by the impracticalities of *as long as forever is* (in addition to those crazy rhythms, the vocal parts – in emulation of the Welsh poet's often effusive lines – sometimes stray outside a comfortable tessitura, plus the score features parts for crumhorn – though luckily I had one – and tuned handbells – these I did not have, alas, so they rented a set), The Phoenix Concerts presented the world premiere on December 16, 2005 with Gilda singing and Daron conducting. The other singer was Robert Frankenberry, his life partner Roger Zahab played the handbells, and we even tracked down some of the surviving members of the New York Pro Musica for some of the other instrumental parts.

So when Gilda asked if I'd want to accept a commission to compose a short work for piano trio honoring the 10th anniversary of The Phoenix Concerts, for which Robert would play piano and Roger would play violin, it was an offer I could not refuse. But, the whole story of the genesis of *Memory Now I Can't Recall* goes a bit deeper than that. Gilda's plan was to commission a group of composers whose works had been premiered by The Phoenix Concerts over the past decade – the others who were asked to write pieces for this commemoration were Kathryn Alexander, Juhi Bansal, Robert Carl, Katarina Leyman, Jorge Martín, Glen Roven, Dan Sonenberg, and Barbara White, plus she would write a piece herself. Since the commissioned works would be performed alongside a series of folksongs sung by Gilda, she asked that we use one of four folksongs as the basis for our trios – "The Parting Glass," "Can ye sew cushions," "Red is the Rose," or "A Media Luz" – but we were free to choose whichever one we wanted. I, however, knew I was not free to choose as soon as I listened to a recording she had uploaded of "The Parting Glass," a Celtic drinking song that has been popular since the beginning of the 17th century. Aside from the song's lyrics seeming so appropriate for my honoring Gilda and the

anniversary of The Phoenix Concerts given the piece of mine premiered on the series, the melody of the song was also irresistible to my own musical conceits; it's almost exclusively pentatonic with just one strange, stray additional pitch, sung to the word "memory." That lone divergence from pentatonicism seems such a fitting sonic metaphor for the imperfection and elusiveness of memory and it immediately triggered my own musical thoughts, hence the title *Memory Now I Can't Recall* which is taken directly from a line in the lyric of the folksong.

Oh, all the mo-ney that e'er I had, I spent it in good com-pa-ry. And all the harm that e'er I've done, A - las it was to none but me, And  
 all I've done for want of wit, to mem-ry now I can't re-call. So fill to me the parting glass, Good - night and joy be with you all.

The original melody for the folksong "The Parting Glass" notated in the key of G major/e minor.  
 The sole pitch outside the pentatonic scale is highlighted with an arrow.

Although "The Parting Glass" has been performed and printed in numerous keys over the centuries, it is frequently in modal G major/e minor which seemed the most fitting key to use here since G is the letter that begins the name Gilda. As the name Gilda has five letters, as does Lyons and Daron and Hagen as well as Roger and Zahab, adhering to the pentatonic scale throughout also felt mandatory as did quintuple meter, a divergence from the common time of the original tune but a nod to the odd meters of mine they all had previously navigated. Throughout the piano plays one or two identical five-note phrases, which are descending collections of the entire scale. These ten notes, the only ones the piano ever plays, also reflect Gilda, Daron, and Roger whose five letter first and last names obviously add up to ten; they are also a very audible way of honoring the 10th anniversary of the series and the fact that this piece's premiere occurs on October 10, 2014—the 10th day of the tenth month. Robert, of course, has six letters, but that extra letter is represented by that stray additional pitch in the folksong which here also occurs once, played by Robert's partner Roger on the violin during the only point in the score where just the two of them are playing. Frankenberg has twelve letters, but I uncharacteristically resisted the temptation to acknowledge that through some kind of panchromatic incursion. As for the cellist, David Russell, his first name also has five letters, though his last name has seven and I didn't reference them in any way. Instead I chose to call attention to the cello by writing for it the one recognizable shard of the original folktune melody in the entire piece, which appears at the onset. Following that phrase, the violin plays what seems like the beginning of a melody but it dissolves into a long held tone; for the remainder of the piece, the strings simply intone long held tones from the folksong's pentatonic scale, as if trying to remember the tune, eventually crossing each other's ranges (as the two singers also did at one point in *as long as forever is*) and culminating in double-stops which brashly cry out the most dissonant pitch combinations possible in the scale, as if giving up trying to remember in frustration. Following that outburst is a measure of silence after which the strings begin a two-part counterpoint hinting at the earlier violin melody but it quickly unravels at the moment when that stray pitch is finally voiced, leading to a long drawn out violin melody, which is actually the melody of the folksong to the words "memory now I.." at which point it ends.

