

## **About *the nurturing river***

Though now 30 years old, *the nurturing river*, a song-cycle based on 14 sonnets by James R. Murphy for high male voice and piano composed between 1981 and 1982, is very much like the music that I still write. It is the earliest of the 10 cycles I have composed thus far which takes the words of a single poet and transforms them through music structured to mirror the meanings of the poems and cadenced to match the rhythmic inflections of the spoken English of the texts. But it is the only one of these works in which I actually worked closely with the poet. Murphy was originally a high school teacher of mine and has served as a mentor to me throughout my life. The “nurturing” of this process of collaboration gave me the confidence to subsequently embark on indirect collaboration with poets from other places and times such as Richard Brautigan, E. E. Cummings, Margaret Atwood, William Butler Yeats, Kenneth Patchen, Dylan Thomas, and—most recently—Stephen Crane.

But *the nurturing river* has had a somewhat unusual history. I began composing the music, with no particular singer, pianist or performance in mind, jotting down various mnemonic ciphers (rather than completely worked out musical notation) during my senior year at the High School of Music and Art (subsequently consolidated into the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music and the Arts). I completed a fully notated musical score during my freshman year in college, at Columbia University, while studying composition with Max Lifchitz who was extremely supportive despite warning me of its impracticalities. But it remained unperformed for decades. From time to time I would show my handwritten manuscript to singers in the hopes of engendering a performance, but invariably would be told that the vocal range I wanted was humanly impossible. So after a while I stopped actively advocating for it, chalking up the fate of *the nurturing river* to its being a by-product of the idealistic and unrealistic musings of youth.

However, in 2009, my wife, keyboardist Trudy Chan, began collaborating with an extraordinary singer named Phillip Cheah who performs as both a baritone and male soprano, effortlessly maneuvering between the two ranges. Hearing him rekindled my interest in *the nurturing river* and when I spoke about the piece to him he was intrigued. But when I looked around for the manuscript of the score I could not find it. James Murphy unearthed among his papers a tattered 8 ½”x14” photocopy I made for him back in the early 1980s, but since the original was written on 9”x12” paper, some pages were cut off (my music frequently spilled over the margins); worse still, other pages were missing entirely. I nevertheless began re-engraving it on my computer hoping that by refamiliarizing myself with this music I would be able to reconstruct the passages that were now gone. Then, before it had to come to that, I discovered, much to my surprise and delight, that I had deposited a copy of *the nurturing river* in the American Music Center score library which had since become a part of the American Music Collection at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Thanks to George Boziwick, Chief of the NYPL’s Music Division, and Jonathan Hiam, the Curator of the American Music Collection, I was able to obtain everything that had been lost and therefore was able to complete the digitally-engraved score exclusively from what I had originally written.

Apart from some very minor alterations, most of which were fixing clear mistakes in the score (e.g. missing rests, accidentals, incomplete dynamic markings, etc.), everything is how I had originally conceived it back when I was 17 years old. Admittedly there are a few things that I'd probably be less inclined to compose now, but I still stand by it. And eventually this music has finally found its ideal performers. Phillip can easily navigate the extremes of these vocal lines and actually make them sound not only perfectly natural but beautiful. (Several listeners who have heard him perform these songs initially assumed they were actually written for him.) Plus Phillip and Trudy's ongoing musical partnership has allowed them to fully internalize the various chance elements and extended techniques scattered throughout the score and bring to them exciting interpretive nuances. The three final songs of the cycle were first performed, by Phillip and Trudy, at the Church of St. Luke in the Fields as part of a program of American art songs called "American Dim-Sum" on July 3, 2010. They performed these three songs again as well as the first, second, and fourth songs as part of Symphony Space's 2011 Music Now marathon at the Leonard Nimoy Thalia Symphony Space on February 21, 2011. (An audio recording of that performance is available for streaming at [www.symphonyspace.org/live/musicnow2011](http://www.symphonyspace.org/live/musicnow2011).) And now Phillip and Trudy have worked through all of the 14 songs and will give the first complete performance of *the nurturing river* at the Tenri Cultural Institute as part of a program that will exclusively feature my music on February 23, 2013.

Aside from being my earliest song cycle, *the nurturing river* is also the earliest piece of music I composed which I feel represents my own compositional voice. It is my first in-depth exploration of a new type of modular tonality that is informed as much by the motivic development of minimalism as it is by the procedural concepts of serialism and the unpredictable serendipity of indeterminacy. Basically, the vocal melodies for the 14 songs of *the nurturing river* are all variations of the same basic phrase. Each piano accompaniment is constructed from a single interval which changes for each song, initially expanding to larger intervals and then contracting back to smaller ones. (E.g. the harmonies of the first song are all derived from the interval of a second [both major and minor]; the second song uses only major thirds; the eighth song uses thirteenthths; the final song uses only minor thirds; etc.) For contrast, these intervals are treated in a variety of ways: vertically as chords, horizontally as countermelodies, as tremolos, etc. Each song ends with a hint of the interval contained in the following song with the last song ending with hints of the very beginning, making a full circle. This structure seemed an appropriate musical device to convey the structural manipulations of James R. Murphy's 14 sonnets, each of which is a Petrarchan sonnet divided into two quartets and two tercets, and each of which has the identical acrostic "To Maxine Deseta" with the "x" of Maxine represented by the word "cross." Though this may all appear to be highly formal both verbally and musically, the poems often break the traditional iambic pentameter of classical sonnets in favor of modern American prosody. The rhythmic irregularities of the poems are reflected in metrical devices in the music which contains a great deal of indeterminate rhythms so that ideally no two performances would ever be identical.

—Frank J. Oteri (October 18, 2012)