

About *The Other Side Of The Window*

If poetry has always been the most confessional of art forms, music has always been the most elusive. The seven poems by contemporary Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, which serve as the departure point for *The Other Side Of The Window*, frequently allude to sensory perception – a subject seeming to beg for larger meanings which are impossible in music because of its abstract nature.

The perceptual ramification of gender differences is a recurring theme in Atwood's poetry and prose works. (Her most famous novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is an apocalyptic allegory of a world where women have been rendered completely powerless and submissive.) While the question of a "feminist aesthetic" in music has been one of the hot debates in musicological circles in recent years, a male composer could only hope to bridge the gap (or open the window) in any attempt to address these gender differences musically. Hence the overall title of the series—*The Other Side Of The Window*—which is a line that occurs in the first poem.

Although the seven poems were written by Margaret Atwood over a period of almost twenty years, they have been re-assembled in a non-chronological order to create a connected narrative. Individually, most of the poems confront the sexual struggle with a startling, yet tender intensity. Cumulatively, the series confirms the inevitable and irrefutable power of romantic love. The seven movements of the cycle are named after the seven Margaret Atwood poems. The first two poems—"(Window)" and "(Movie)"—do not have titles, hence the parentheses. The fourth, "(The Magic Fork)", originally named "They eat out", was retitled to better convey the musical juxtapositions which the text inspired.

The words and rhythms of the poems determine the structure and content of all the vocal lines as well as the instrumental accompaniments. In this way, the meaning of the music is conveyed through the poem, and vice versa. The poems offer many musical clues: "(Movie)"'s "waltz in slow motion" determines rhythm and tempo while "(The Magic Fork)"'s "a voice sings Love Is A Many Splendoured Thing" has only one possible solution. The repetition of the word "fall" throughout "Keep" suggested the descending flute lines. "No Name"'s "warm and offering everything" is accompanied by a sweeping tonal resolution which comes after the accumulation of many layers of polytonal complexity. The perpetuum mobile accompanying "More and More" disintegrates at "edges of me dissolve."

Musically, *The Other Side Of The Window* is a departure from much of the music I had written previously as well as most of the music I have written since. If there has been a unifying theme in all of my work it has been the obsession with perceptible pattern and structure, whether through minimalistic repetition of short motivic cells, creating ostinatos based on rhythmic cycles of prime numbers or overlapping meters, using serialism as an anchor for an ever-modulating tonality, or the formation of new scales and harmonic progressions from microtonal tunings. Many of these devices appear here—"(Window)" pits rhythmic cycles of two against three and "Axiom" is in quintuple meter—but ultimately, *The Other Side Of The Window* exists beyond analysis. "Beautiful" and "ugly" sounds co-exist. Sometimes it is hard to tell which is which, e.g. the tone clusters in "No Name" which are at first harmonically ambiguous and dissonant, become functional and consonant, and wind up being somehow neither. Throughout the cycle, expectations are thwarted for seemingly no apparent reason beyond intuition. It is an approach that the poetry demanded.

The poetry of Margaret Atwood © 1987, found in her collections *Selected Poems* and *Selected Poems II* published in the U.S. by Houghton Mifflin, is used with permission of the author.

- FJO